MARGARET ATWOOD AND THE LABOUR OF LITERARY CELEBRITY

For every famous author there are many individuals working behind the scene to promote and maintain celebrity status. This timely and thoughtful book considers the particular case of internationally renowned writer Margaret Atwood and the active agents working in concert with her, including her assistants and office staff, her publicists, her literary agents, and her editors. Lorraine York explores the ways in which the careers of such writers are managed and maintained and the extent to which literary celebrity spawns a constant tension between their need for solitude for creative purposes and the give-and-take of the business of being a writer of significant public stature.

Making extensive use of unpublished material in the Margaret Atwood Papers at the University of Toronto, York demonstrates the extent to which celebrity writers must embrace, *and* at the same time protect themselves from, the demands of the literary world, including by participating in – or even inventing – new forms of technology that facilitate communication from a slight remove. This informative study points to the ways in which literary celebrity is the result not only of creativity and hard work, but also of an ongoing collaborative effort among professionals to help maintain the writer's place in the public eye.

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MARGARET ATWOOD AND THE LABOUR OF LITERARY CELEBRITY

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Introduction: The Dead Moose and the Publishing Pie

When we conceptualise celebrity as something to be professionally managed, rather than discursively deconstructed, we think about it differently.

Graeme Turner, *Understanding Celebrity*

In the summer of 2011, Margaret Atwood's visibility as a Canadian literary celebrity came under sustained and energetic public scrutiny. It all began on 21 July, when she marshalled her considerable ranks of followers – 225,302 strong (Samson) – on Twitter to fight proposed cuts to Toronto's library system. The city had just received a report from its hired consultants KPMG (whose corporate motto is, ominously, "Cutting Through Complexity" [kpmg.com]), which recommended that the system be privatized, that cuts be made to library outreach services and programs, and that some branches possibly be closed. Atwood retweeted in response: "Toronto's libraries are under threat of privatization. Tell city council to keep them public now. ourpubliclibrary.to." This was enough to crash the server of the Toronto Public Library Workers Union CUPE 4948, whose petition, "Project Rescue," was linked to the tweet (Rider). CUPE 4948 managed to remount its petition after a thirty-minute repair, and by the next day, 22 July, 17,300 people had already signed (Rider). By the following Tuesday, 26 July, that number had risen to over 24,000.

This instance of Atwood's online activism (a phenomenon I will consider in some detail in chapter 4) brought her into direct conflict with Toronto's fiscally and socially conservative mayor Rob Ford, and especially with his brother, Toronto city councillor and close adviser Doug Ford. In defending the report, Doug Ford had opined that Toronto had too many library branches, pointing to his own ward of Etobicoke, which boasted more libraries, he claimed, than Tim Hortons donut shops (that iconically "Canadian" business that trades heavily on its connections with other national emblems such as hockey … and the military ("Tim Hortons & Canadian Forces Announce Opening in Afghanistan"). Of course, he was wrong. His ward contains a grand total of thirty-nine Tim Hortons outlets and thirteen branches of the Toronto Public Library, placing the libraries at a 3:1 numerical disadvantage. Tongue planted firmly in cheek, Maureen O'Reilly, chair of local 4948, placed the visibility of Canada's premier literary celebrity up against that of the donut and coffee chain:

> It's a huge plus for our campaign to be recognized by such a prominent writer in Canada. We have other initiatives reaching out to the writer community, so her recognition of this will help us there, and the cause we're fighting for. She may not be as big an icon, to some, as Tim Hortons, but she's a huge literary hero and her support is amazing. (Rider)

This passage balances various levels of social visibility: as a "prominent writer," Atwood is cast as possessing a considerable amount of cultural capital. This capital is, in turn, set beside the national iconicity of Tim Hortons, which is positioned as a more broadly recognized popular brand. O'Reilly nods to the broader demographic sweep of Tim Hortons's fame and implicitly critiques its popular origins ("to some") but then rhetorically pumps up Atwood's cultural capital in order to suggest that, within the field of literary production, Atwood is a star: "a huge literary hero." Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital (prestige, respect) and economic capital (money)

are fairly dancing around each other in this passage, as they do in the literary celebrity of Margaret Atwood. Atwood, for her part, did a classic job of deconstructing the very opposition that Ford had divisively set up: "Twin Fordmayer [Atwood's satirical name for the Ford brothers] seems to think that those who eat Timbits (like me) don't read, can't count, & are stupid, eh?" ("Margaret Atwood Tweets to Save Toronto Libraries").

The debate over Atwood's public visibility, however, was just getting warmed up. In reaction to the massive response to Atwood's online appeals, Doug Ford made a singularly rash public comment: "Well good luck to Margaret Atwood. I don't even know her. If she walked by me, I wouldn't have a clue who she is. She's not down here, she's not dealing with the problem. Tell her to go run in the next election and get democratically elected and we'd be more than happy to sit down and listen to Margaret Atwood" (Daubs). And with that ill-advised salvo, an international news story was born: newspapers and radio stations from Montreal to New York to the UK picked up and reported the tale. The large book chain Chapters-Indigo sided with Atwood, tweeting the link to Atwood's call for petition signatures: "Know this woman? http://ow.ly/50W6K Indigo loves Canada's libraries! Thru Jul. 31 show your library card in-store for 30% off @MargaretAtwood." Canadian filmmaker Norman Jewison brought his considerable international celebrity to the cause in a CBC radio interview, wondering aloud about Doug Ford – "Where does he live – in a hole?" – and making a larger connection between this verbal contretemps and Conservative arts policy: "I felt that all Canadian artists were betrayed by a statement like that" (Rider). Even the *Toronto Sun*, known for its consistent support of Ford-ist policies, admitted that "it's probably best not to take on literary giant Margaret Atwood in a war of words" (Peat). "With a single tweet," wrote the *Globe and Mail*'s John Barber, "she rocked city hall" ("Should Writers Run for Office …?"). Faced with such overwhelmingly bad press, Doug Ford retracted his statement while retaining its divisive pitting of cultural elites against the metropolitan Everyman: "Everyone knows who Margaret

Atwood is. But if she were to come up to 98 per cent of the people, they wouldn't know who she was. But I think she's a great writer and I look forward to her input" (Rider). Ford, for all his apparent contrition, held tight to the harmful distinction between artists or consumers of art and "real" people that Atwood had handily demolished. As Atwood reiterated to Linda Nguyen of the *Ottawa Citizen*, "all this babble about being intelligentsia and elitist, that's crap. [Library users] are not people with humongously rich incomes. To start off by trying to drive a wedge between people who drink Tim Hortons and people who use the library – well it's the same people" (Nguyen).

I narrate this Canadian- and even Toronto-centric story in such detail because it sets the stage for the competing ideas about writing, celebrity, economy, labour, and visibility that are at the heart of this book. In claiming not to recognize, not to "see" Atwood, Doug Ford was, in effect, attempting to delegitimize the social power and labour of a literary celebrity. If celebrities are, as many theorists have mused, primarily involved in an economy of visibility (Rein et al.), then the most invalidating charge that can be turned against the celebrity is that of invisibility: "If she walked by me, I wouldn't have a clue who she is." And it is not only Atwood's face that Councillor Ford would not discern; he couples his non-recognition of Atwood's person with a non-recognition of her labour: "Tell her to go run in the next election and get democratically elected and we'd be more than happy to sit down and listen to Margaret Atwood." Implicit in Ford's intemperate rant is this question: What does she do that is of importance anyway, this Margaret Atwood, this artist?

In my previous book, *Literary Celebrity in Canada*, I examined the preoccupations, themes, and tensions attending the experience of literary fame as it was experienced by earlier generations of Canadian writers such as Stephen Leacock, Pauline Johnson, Mazo de la Roche, and L.M. Montgomery, as well as by three more recent writers: Michael Ondaatje, Carol Shields, and Atwood. When I turned my attention to Atwood, I readily perceived a contest between privacy and publicity, between

national and international celebrity status, but I also noted how very early in her career, she was recognized and endlessly reproduced as a visual spectacle. As early as 1973, William French wrote that "she has become something of a celebrity, a visible public figure" (28). Years later, in 1999, Roy MacSkimming, researching his valuable book on the Canadian publishing industry, *The Perilous Trade*, sat down to speak with Atwood and her partner Graeme Gibson about those very days. Recalling the publication in 1972 of her handbook to Canadian literature, MacSkimming asked Atwood what impact its publication had on her. Without blinking an eye, Atwood spoke of her celebrity: "It made me extremely well known very suddenly." "Almost more than you could manage at that point?," MacSkimming probed, to which Atwood replied "No doubt more" ("The Perilous Trade Conversations" 22). By the end of that decade, in 1979, Atwood would recount to Roslyn Nudell of the *Winnipeg Free Press* that "I've been recognized, even in places like India and Afghanistan" (35). But not in 2011, by a councillor in her own city.

Besides Atwood's swift absorption into a visual economy of celebrity, the other characteristic of her literary celebrity that I took note of was her remarkable degree of professionalization, at a time when many writers in Canada had little idea about what professionalization entailed. I was aware of earlier writers, like Leacock, adopting professional strategies and associations, but Atwood's degree of professional organization was of a greater – indeed, industrial – order: in 1976, she became the first Canadian writer, to my knowledge, to incorporate herself as a company, O.W. Toad. The implications of this move, and the expansion of Atwood's global career in the years since 1976, call out, I feel, for special study, since the growth of what Graham Huggan calls "Atwood, Inc." poses some new and intriguing questions about literary celebrity considered as an amalgamation of the visual economy of fame and industrial labour relationships. So although Atwood's career is indeed exceptional in its degree of industrial organization, at least in Canada, the complicated exchanges between art and commerce

that I discern in her career are fairly typical of the field of literary publishing in general.

Many considerations of celebrity, whether academic or popular, focus intently on the individual, or on celebrity as the public performance of subjectivities. My analysis of Atwood, by contrast, offers an occasion to shift the theoretical paradigm more towards celebrity as the product of the labour of many other agents in dialogue with a celebrated individual: in the literary field, this means editors, agents, office staff, publishers, publicists, and the like. I find that this focus on the industrial relations that enable and reproduce literary celebrity, rather than diffusing or erasing the labour of the artist, highlights that labour precisely because we witness its articulation in dialogue.

To be fair, in the midst of all of its intense – not to say obsessive – scrutiny of the individual, celebrity theory has, at moments, been attentive to collective labour. There are suggestive moments in the critical literature, threads that may usefully be pulled out and examined, the better to understand celebrity in its broader dimensions, as a phenomenon that happens not only to individuals but to a whole web of cultural workers. Richard Dyer's volumes *Stars* (1979) and *Heavenly Bodies* (1986) were fundamental to the formation of a more systemic analysis of celebrity, and while Dyer's focus on the range of meanings connected to a star text was salutary and welcome, it did tend to direct future work to a semiotic reading of particular stars (of a sort that Dyer himself performed brilliantly in the cases of Judy Garland, Paul Robeson, and Marilyn Monroe in *Heavenly Bodies*). As Su Holmes and Sean Redmond put it in their introduction to *Framing Celebrity*, Dyer's work focused on celebrity as a discourse of the self (9). If one returns to *Stars* and to *Heavenly Bodies*, though, there is also plentiful evidence that Dyer gave thought to stars as a (contested) site of labour. In the former study, commenting on a magazine spread showing the "awful factories" in which screen stars toil – that is, handsomely appointed dressing rooms – Dyer shows how the labour of stars is consistently denied, rendered as its opposite: leisure. And in *Heavenly Bodies*, he astutely observes that (cinematic) "stars

are involved in making themselves into commodities; they are both labour and the thing that labour produces" (5). Out of that duplicity, for Dyer, emerges both contradiction and tension: an alienation between labour and product. More recent critics have imported this formulation into the field of literary celebrity. Thus, Tom Mole, writing of that ultimate in literary celebrities, Lord Byron, echoes Dyer's insight: "The celebrity experiences the subjective trauma of commodity capitalism in a particularly acute fashion. He is both a producer of commodities and himself, in a sense, a commodity" (4) – a powerful internalization of the classic Marxist notion of alienated labour.

It is interesting, from my perspective, that these discussions of labour and celebrity, too, circle back to the self as the primary theatre of action. In P. David Marshall's brilliant book *Celebrity and Power*, as well, the social relations and ideological struggles endemic to celebrity play out on the battlefield of the subjective: "The term celebrity has come to embody the ambiguity of the public forms of subjectivity under capitalism" (4). And while these discussions are both crucial and perceptive, there is room for considering other types of labour involved in the social transactions that constitute celebrity: labour supplied by other agents in the social production of art. When Paul MacDonald contributed his supplementary chapter for the second edition of Richard Dyer's *Stars*, one of the main subjects that he signalled, implicitly, as supplementary to Dyer's theories was labour, but he tended to assume that the labour at issue was still that of the celebrity individual. Melding Dyer's theories with film historian Richard DeCordova's description of how, in early-twentieth-century Hollywood, a discourse of creative "acting" took over from a more passive language of "posing" for pictures, MacDonald observes how "differences in the ways work is represented will produce professional inequalities between performers; generally the work of stars enters discourse while the work of 'unknown' performers goes unrecognised" (195). I would argue that a far more glaring instance of professional inequality and silenced labour in the field of cinema involves not the supporting actors but the editors, sound

technicians, set designers, script supervisors, prop masters, and carpenters. Although these jobs are at least named and distinguished in great detail in the field of film, and although some are accorded a measure of celebrity visibility in the Hollywood system in the form of Technical Achievement Oscars, the names of their practitioners skim by our eyes rapidly at the end of a film, and the public recognition of some of them on Oscar night provokes many a yawn and complaint on the part of a bored home viewing audience waiting up late to see who wins the major acting honours.[1] In this study, located not in cinema but in the literary field, the "unknown performers" whose labour rarely enters discourse are not the fellow artists who inhabit the differentiated labour market that MacDonald describes; they are, like the cinema's technical workers, agents in allied industries – publishing, publicity, marketing.

Another way that labour has been implicated in accounts of celebrity is as an economic factor affecting the production of stars. In "Articulating Stardom," Barry King argues that the overabundance of actors on the market at any one time results in idiosyncratic personal qualities being overvalued in hiring decisions – overvalued, that is, in relation to thespian abilities. This preference for the actor as a personality over what the actor can do, King suggests, produces celebrity (178). Again, the primary assumption seems to be that the only relevant labour involved in the production of celebrity belongs, if even in an alienated form, to the celebrity.

Revisiting Dyer's work, Graeme Turner begins to pry open previous ideas about the labour of celebrity to envision additional actors; he builds upon Dyer's perception that celebrities are both "cultural workers" who "are paid for their labour" (34) and also "property" (*Heavenly Bodies* 5): "a financial asset to those who stand to gain from their commercialization

1 The current tendency to shrink credit screens at the end of television broadcasts, rendering them nearly illegible in order to accommodate longer commercial breaks, is another case in point.

– networks, radio companies, producers, agents, managers" (34–5). It is this fuller consideration of the diversity of celebrity labour that I examine in relation to the literary field: the literary celebrity labours to write; labours further to perform socially both by publishing and by appearing publicly as a celebrity writer; and, in fulfilling both roles, enlists the labour of others in turn. The complexities of these three degrees of labour, and their interactions, absorb me in the career of Margaret Atwood and, by extension, in the literary field at large.

This extended labour of celebrity is implicit in many basic definitions of the phenomenon. Richard Dyer, for instance, defines celebrity as "everything that is publicly available about stars" (*Heavenly Bodies* 2). And Tom Mole, assessing the literary celebrity phenomenon of the nineteenth century, renders some of this implicit industry – the labour of making "everything … available" – explicit; he defines celebrity as "a cultural apparatus consisting of three elements: an individual, an industry, and an audience" (1). In my study of Atwood's twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary celebrity, I focus especially on the second of these, the industry, as it acts in concert with the first and the third of Mole's elements: the individual celebrity and the audience.

It is rare to see that second element of the celebrity apparatus – industry – treated in a sustained or focused way in academic studies of celebrity. When Graeme Turner, Frances Bonner, and P. David Marshall introduced their chapter on "Producing Celebrity" in their 2000 study of Australian *Fame Games*, they hoped to mitigate this critical paucity, "to make these activities" of publicists, agents, and managers "more visible" (60). Four years later, when Graeme Turner offered a brief analysis of Hollywood film and television agents and managers in his critical guide, *Understanding Celebrity*, he could still claim that he was supplying "information that rarely finds its way into analysis of the production of celebrity, or of the wealth of texts this production process employs" (41). The significance of this inclusion goes far beyond the filling in of an informational gap, however; as Turner goes on to suggest, thinking about the

operations of publicity and promotions industries alters the ways in which we theorize about the celebrity phenomenon itself; we can potentially see "both the ambiguities and the power of celebrity as a component of our public culture … a little clearer" (136). In this study of the many industries that circulate and participate in the literary celebrity of Margaret Atwood, I do perceive many an ambiguity – particularly involving the interlaced relationship between art and the market – but I also find, as Turner promises, many a sign of the agency of celebrity, especially the agency of *this* celebrity.

The major reason why relatively little attention has been paid to the workings of the celebrity culture industries is their own complicity in silenced labour. Su Holmes and Sean Redmond, in 2007, suggest as much in their introductory comments to their *Stardom and Celebrity* reader's section on "Producing Fame": "there remains a larger drive toward concealing the labour that produces the phenomenon, and for some time, academic work seemed to replicate this structure, rendering the work of producing fame invisible" (189). A possible objection to this claim is the prevalence, from 2000 on, of representations of star-making processes, most frequently in the form of reality television shows such as *The Apprentice* and *Pop Idol* and their numerous spinoffs. After all, in their introduction to *Framing Celebrity*, Holmes and Redmond seem, initially, to contradict their own claims about the concealment of celebrity industrial labour: they observe that reality television and similar vehicles prioritize "the 'authorship' of the apparatus over the celebrities it produces, reflecting the argument that the publicity machine has become a highly visible player in the cultural fabrication of celebrity" (12). But such representations are skewed in many ways, and their representations of the labour of supporting workers in the celebrity industries are grossly overshadowed by representations of the celebrity aspirants as having particular personal qualities that qualify – or disqualify – them for star status, so it seems very doubtful to me that the "'authorship' of the apparatus" has overwhelmed the celebrity subject being produced.

Slowly, though, considerations of the celebrity industry have started to enter academic analysis, laying the groundwork for a potential theory of celebrity industrial labour. Rosemary Coombe, working from the philosopher of intellectual property, E.C. Hettinger, who warns that "simply identifying the value a laborer's labor adds to the world with the market value of the resulting product ignores the vast contributions of others," makes the parallel argument about celebrity authorship: "The star image," she concludes, "is authored by multitudes of persons engaged in diverse activities" (95).

Not always is the mention of these multitudes so value-neutral; in fact, a marked tendency is to follow in the long-standing tradition of seeing all celebrity production as the false manufacture of hollow goods – a tradition that reaches back to Horkheimer and Adorno in the mid-1940s and to historian Daniel Boorstin's book *The Image* (1962).[2] More recently, Chris Rojek, in his 2001 book *Celebrity*, has pointeds out that celebrities are mediated through "chains of attraction … cultural intermediaries who operate to stage-manage celebrity" – the agents, marketing personnel, promoters, and assistants whom Turner acknowledges. But Rojek's tone is unremittingly critical; these people "concoct the public presentation of celebrity personalities" and are therefore engaged in "cultural fabrication" (10). In some cases, of course, this is surely true, yet as an analytical observation meant to apply to "celebrity" in general, it is lacking in complexity and rigour.

As David Marshall acknowledges, celebrity is a system: "The concept of the celebrity is best defined as a system for valorizing meaning and communication" (*Celebrity and Power* x). And although the systematic emphasis here would seem to call for an industrial analysis, it is left to Graeme Turner and, especially, Joshua Gamson to supply it. Turner engages in such an

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2 Technically, it reaches much further back, to the first recorded usage of the word celebrity as a noun referring to a person: "Did you see any of those 'celebrities' as you call them?" (1849) OED.

analysis, briefly, in *Understanding Celebrity*, emphasizing, first of all, that what we are dealing with here is undoubtedly an industry: "The sum of these processes," he writes of promotion, publicity, and advertising, "constitutes a celebrity industry, and it is important that cultural studies' accounts of celebrity deal with its production" (4). Dealing primarily with the entertainment industries, Turner takes note of "especially close patterns of economic interdependencies that bind the celebrity and their representatives (agents, managers, publicists, PR people), to the entertainment industries and to the entertainment and news media" (45). Like other analysts, Turner admits that these close bonds are methodologically difficult to study, since they are "deliberately mystified so that the processes through which they work … are not visible" (45). In my study of such interdependencies in the literary field, and in particular in the public career of Margaret Atwood, I find less a bond between the celebrity and her agents and the media, and more of a pattern of interdependencies within the circle of cultural agents: between, that is, Atwood and those to whom she has entrusted the labour of managing her literary career. There is, of course, some measure of interdependency between "Atwood, Inc." and the media; outlets have been quick, for instance, to seize upon the story of Atwood's clash with Rob and Doug Ford, and they are certainly dependent, to some degree, on the labour of Atwood's interviews, statements, and online commentaries on the cause célèbre; but this dependency does not operate as intensively as it does between entertainment celebrities and media outlets, each of whom desperately needs the other. While Atwood may need media for purposes of promoting her books, she is not as consistently or deeply dependent on general and frequent media "coverage" as an entertainment celebrity aspirant is.

One area in which Turner's observations about celebrity systems ring truer for literary celebrities is that of new and integrated media. Writing of the effects of media convergence (the delivery of content from various media platforms) on celebrity production, Turner observes that "the celebrity … is a very useful way of connecting these cross-media processes" (33) and

that as a result, the commodification of the celebrity is occurring at an ever-quicker pace (34). He draws particular attention to the related phenomenon of content streaming – that is, the alteration of content to suit these various media platforms. Turner is among the first to grasp, fully, the significance of technological developments in media to the production of celebrity. In my chapter on Atwood as an increasingly enthusiastic user of 2.0 or interactive social media such as Twitter and blogs, I argue that these new media platforms constitute every bit as much of an agent of literary celebrity as editors, publishers, and assistants.

The major influence on my study of Atwood's celebrity labour is the American sociologist Joshua Gamson's examination of celebrity as an industry in his book *Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America*. Acknowledged by Turner as a pioneer in this field, Gamson has signalled a turn towards a dynamic, systemic approach to celebrity. That is, agents who produce and reproduce celebrity within an industry have variable relations of dependency and independence with one another: their networks of allegiance and competition are complex ones. He studies, for instance, the ways in which publicists and journalists do battle over information about the celebrity, with the publicist restricting access and the journalist persistently seeking new tidbits or scoops (89). Presumably, some of this competitive dependency exists in the management of public relations for literary celebrities, but the main contribution of Gamson's approach to celebrity to my own work on Margaret Atwood's career is his basic conviction that celebrity production is "a commercial industry much like other commodity-production systems" (58), and his canny sense of the tug of war between celebrity as labourer and celebrity as spectacle: "there is a good deal of commercial pressure to simply allow the actor as worker to be subsumed by the celebrity as celebrity" (58). Much of Margaret Atwood's management of her public star "text" has to do with reasserting the primacy of the writer as worker in the face of a similar pressure. In Dyer's terms, Atwood as writer is "both labour and the thing that labour