

I ANGELES REVIEW OF BOOKS

[SUPPORT LARB](#)
[r](#) [ssays](#) [interviews](#) [sections](#) [shorts](#) [blurb](#) [quarterly](#) [books](#) [a/v](#) [events](#) [get involved](#) [signals](#) [about](#)
[MENU](#)

The Convenient Villain

By Khanya Khondlo Mtshali

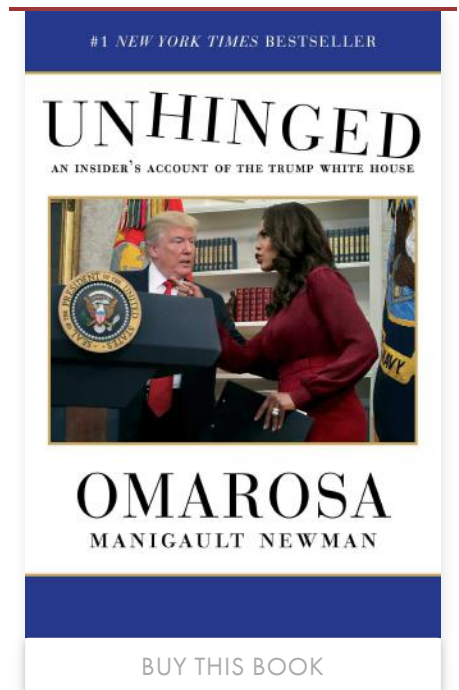


JANUARY 10, 2019

NEARLY A MONTH after her firing from the White House, Omarosa Manigault Newman **appeared** on *Celebrity Big Brother* to embark on a “total Trump detox.” In the two and a half weeks she was on the CBS spinoff show, the former reality TV star discussed her time working for President Trump, a man she once considered a friend, mentor, and fellow trafficker in showmanship.

She recounted being “haunted by [his] tweets every single day,” insisted Vice President Mike Pence was the person to keep an eye on, and claimed she joined the Trump Administration because she “felt like she was serving [her] country, not him.”

But Omarosa’s tell-all *Unhinged: An Insider’s Account of the Trump White House* offers less patriotic reasons for her decision to join the “Trump Train” in July 2016. She writes that the former businessman “had asked [her] to support” his presidential campaign, an offer she couldn’t refuse because of the gratitude she felt toward him for casting her on the NBC reality TV show, *The Apprentice*, in 2003. The relationship, she says, was “symbiotic.” When the first season premiered, it launched both of their careers as national shock jocks, eager



◀ POLITICS

◀ MEMOIR & ESSAY

RECOMMENDED

The Black Girl Looks at Other Black Girls: On “This Will Be My Undoing” by Morgan Jerkins

By Khanya Khondlo Mtshali

t high ratings at any cost on the reality TV circuit.
 \ reputation as a straight-talking “real estate
 r from New York, and her status as an eccentric
 \ o could get him “attention and headlines,” the duo,
 \ guidance of reality TV producer Mark Burnett,
 l onald Trump go from being a failed real-estate
 mogul representing the worst of the ’80s, to a legitimate
 businessman equipped with marketable catchphrases and a
 brazen charisma which would later capture the hearts of
 American voters.

When she lays out her journey from the Westlake projects in Youngstown, Ohio, to college, the Clinton White House, reality television, and finally the Trump White House, you can’t help but marvel at the sheer variety of her life experiences, and her relentless determination to realize the “American Dream” on her own terms. While the idea of achieving immense wealth through sweat and grit is possibly the most harmful of America’s founding lies, it doesn’t stop Omarosa from talking about her hardships with bootstraps language. It’s both an extraordinary and gloomy testament to what marginalized people are forced to survive, notwithstanding depression, poverty, and prejudice.

Grief takes center stage in several passages of *Unhinged*. In Omarosa’s world, mourning is messy, compassionate, callous, selfish, and self-serving. At her brother’s funeral in October 2011, she writes that the *National Enquirer* sent a black woman journalist to pose as a griever, only for her to take Omarosa’s eulogy, and present it as a reported article. It’s an immoral stunt which Omarosa acknowledges and responds to with a lawsuit against the tabloid. The only problem was David Pecker, the owner of the *National Enquirer*, had a cozy relationship with her then-former boss, Donald Trump. In a move that could only exist in Trump-Omarosaland, the self-styled mogul negotiates for his protégé to be the West Coast editor of the tabloid, in exchange for the lawsuit being dropped. What would seem an unforgivable breach of trust to most becomes another business deal for Trump, and a résumé-builder for Omarosa.

Before *The Apprentice* began shooting in the fall of 2003, Omarosa states that she read “every Trump magazine profile and interview,” and watched “videos of his TV interviews” with the purpose of turning herself into “a female version of him.” She uses the same disciplined mimicry in *Unhinged*,

Banking Against (Black) Capitalism: On “The Color of Money”

By Armond Towns

Ideologies of Boring Things: The Internet and Infrastructures of Race

By Emily Drabinski

Breaking the Habit of Whiteness

By De Witt Douglas Kilgore

The Neoliberal Feminist Subject

By Catherine Rottenberg

In the playground insults both used by and lobbed at her former boss. She calls the president “Twitter” and brings up his obsession with daily tanning sessions, as his love of “Big Macs and fried chicken” have left him notoriously obese.” She also alludes to the diagnoses of Trump’s mental health by **professionals** and **non-professionals** alike, often highlighting her concern for his sanity.

These remarks may be truthful and humorous to some, depending on how many times you can laugh at “orange-in-chief” or “cheeto dust” appearing on your timeline. But they don’t present the reader with the sort of confidential information you’d assume close proximity to the most powerful man in the world would yield. For all Omarosa’s methodical scheming, her attempts to solicit support from the same liberal media she was more than happy to antagonize are sloppy and desperate. After finding herself exiled from Trumplandia, she appears to be on a mission to find a sympathetic ear she can use for her elaborate public redemption.

When Omarosa writes that the discovery of the alleged N-word tape would be the “last straw” for her, you feel insulted at how brazenly she’s willing to undermine the reader’s intelligence to salvage her own image. By the time she claims to have heard the tape, there’s been too much said and done for her to pretend that Trump’s bigotry was her “blind spot.” She’s also proven that she doesn’t mind leveraging her unique relationship with the commander-in-chief to rebuff evidence of his prejudice. When six alumni of color from *The Apprentice* speak out against the then-presidential hopeful right before the New York primaries, she goes on the offensive. She books several interviews on cable news channels, writing that her “strategy was to say how much Trump had supported” her. So in other words, *he had black friends*. This just goes to show that if there’s anything Omarosa knows how to invoke or minimize when it’s convenient for her, it’s race.

Omarosa isn’t convincing anyone of her supposed naïveté and ignorance about Trump’s racism either. We find her stumbling her way through a litany of Trump’s “racially charged” offenses, some of which include birthing the birther movement, pitting races against each other on *The Apprentice*, referring to Haiti as a “shithole country,” hiring

l Bannon and Jeff Sessions, calling Mexicans “drug
c and “rapists,” and claiming there were “fine people
c sides” in the wake of Charlottesville. She gives
r an array of spicy euphemisms like “provocative,”
“tory,” “controversial,” and “inappropriate,”
s is preferring its academic, elegant cousin, “racial,”
when Trump’s remarks veer too far even from the type of
prejudice white people can tolerate from drunk relatives
during the holidays.

When she does go into detail about her day-to-day activities at the White House, she can’t resist portraying herself as a humble servant of the American people, looking to advance “diversity” in a government **adored** by the likes of Klu Klux Klan grand wizard David Duke. There’s no question Omarosa took her position in the administration seriously, a reflection of her own self-seriousness to be sure, but this account doesn’t seem like an honest recollection of what she actually did on the job. If she’s not telling inflated tales about putting out fires, she’s either anticipating or creating them. And when she mentions being worried about Trump’s ability to process complex information, or the establishment vultures encircling the Oval Office, it doesn’t conjure up any of the shock or concern she seems to want from the reader. Perhaps these statements are so in line with what we expect from the Trump administration, we can only greet Omarosa’s list of complaints with an eye roll and a told-you-so.

In the prologue and epilogue, she goes back to her unceremonious sacking by Trump’s chief of staff, General John Kelly, in the Situation Room. The ordeal is admittedly disturbing to read as she recounts being held in the top-secret room without access to her belongings, or any counsel. Yet it’s difficult to pity her or feel surprised. This is an administration led by a narcissist who’d already set the terms of engagement, long before Omarosa decided to join his cast of villains, liars, and corporate titans treating the planet’s future like a game of truth or dare.

Unhinged fails to depict its author as a brave whistleblower revealing impeachment-worthy secrets on the Trump presidency. She doesn’t provide us with a persuasive enough reason for her decision to remain loyal to him, nor does she reckon with how much damage her support of a morally bankrupt administration has inflicted on the communities she professes to care about. And when it’s finally convenient

f
 call Trump a bigot, she’s already dug up her own
 ξ
 well, she might as well officiate the rest of her
 f

√
 nged does reveal is Omarosa’s knack for making her
 ε
 however ugly or severe, as exhilarating to watch as
 a horror movie. Like her former colleagues who went on
 mea culpa tours after being voted off the White House, she’s
 managed to capture the attention of the public, albeit briefly,
 through a dedicated performance of whatever version of
 herself she’s playing that day.

α

Khanya Khondlo Mtshali is a freelance writer and critic. Follow her
 @kublakhanya.

0 Comments

Los Angeles Review of Books

1 Login ▾

❤ Recommend
 🐦 Tweet
 📌 Share

Sort by Best ▾



Start the discussion...

LOG IN WITH

OR SIGN UP WITH DISQUS ?

Name

Be the first to comment.