To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Susan Hilderbrand entitled "Oprahfication: A Study of Oprah's Book Club." I am examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Kenneth Mostern, Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:

Accepted for the Council:

Associate Vice Chancellor and
Dean of the Graduate School

Oprahfication: A Study of Oprah's Book Club

A thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Susan Noel Hilderbrand
December 1999

This thesis is dedicated to Oprah Winfrey, the person, the image, the representation who has always been a source of fascination, frustration and complexity.

This thesis is also dedicated to Bernard Schlink, the most patient man who ever lived.

Finally, this thesis is dedicated to the not-so-zealous Oprah viewer, who, after much consideration, finally decides it might be a good idea to turn off the tube.

Acknowledgements

I would like to particularly thank my advisor and chair of my thesis committee, Dr. Kenneth Mostern. Without his help, I would never have completed this project. Kenny took the time to help me sort out my ideas concerning Oprah's Book Club with much needed positive feedback, patience, and enthusiasm. Thank you, Kenny for all of your help!

I would also like to thank Dr. Misty Anderson and Dr. Janet Atwill, both of whom sat on my thesis committee and also gave me a great deal of encouragement and feedback as I was working on the final draft.

Thanks to the members of the Knoxville Davis-Kidd Oprah Book Club for their willingness to take part in my questionnaire.

Finally, I would like to thank my fiance, Jon, for his patience and encouragement while I worked on this thesis. Thanks for being there for me while I worked on such a challenging project.

Abstract

In this study, I seek to understand the constellation of behaviors and practices that have gone into bringing reading to the American public from 1996 to the present by situating Oprah's Book Club within a particular historical moment which defines itself, ironically, by obscuring and denying its own historicity. In the Introduction, I argue that this phenomenon happens by the influence of the Book-of-the-Month Club, the middle-class movement that preceded it. I then describe how this particular relationship to history produces the Oprah Book Club show methodology, which then produces the cult of personality on the show, including the parasocial relationship between Winfrey and the viewer. This parasocial relationship, which is controlled by the dominant ideology, cements the entire process and keeps readings simple and personal, rather than complex and structural.

In chapter 2, I describe the structure of a typical Oprah Book Club show, focusing on how the methodology of the show encourages the cultural and subjective blindness of viewers and participants. In chapter 3, I study the book club show over Bernard Schlink's *The Reader*, using it as the quintessential example of how the problem of history manifests itself on a Book Club show. In subsequent chapters, I study shows which deal explicitly with race and gender, showing how these topics too, become areas of misreading.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction 1
Chapter 2: The Structure of an Oprah Book Club Show 14
Chapter 3: *The Reader*, the Process 23
Chapter 4: Race: The Non-Conversation 35
Chapter 5: Gender: The Non-Helpful Conversation 49
Conclusion 65
Bibliography 72
Appendix: Davis-Kidd Oprah Book Club Questionnaire 75
Vita 77

Chapter 1: Introduction

People do not acquire and read books in the absence of some kind of ideological and commercial mediation. This mediation serves to channel the vast universe of cultural choices into a pre-selected array that is acceptable to particular demographic, and therefore ideologically distinct, audiences. The first part of this study of Oprah's Book Club, therefore, begins with the question of how *The Oprah Winfrey Show* mediates books to a largely middle-class, female audience. I seek to understand the constellation of behaviors and practices that have gone into bringing reading to the American public from 1996 to the present by situating Oprah's Book Club within a particular historical moment which defines itself, ironically, by obscuring and denying its own historicity. A typical Oprah Winfrey Show viewer, for example, is white, middle to lower class, and female. Marketers use highly specialized techniques to single her out as specific consumer who will develop certain desires and needs based on her position in 1999. Remarkably, what she remains unaware of is the fact that *the way she thinks* is directly contingent on this very particular historical moment in 1999 late capitalist America. The result is a kind of cultural blindness, a simplicity of reading, and an inability to conceive of problems as structural or social, but only as personal ones that are all equal in severity.

At first glance, one might ascribe the cause of this phenomenon to the talk show culture in which the Book Club is situated. Certainly, an Oprah Book Club show follows in the pattern of the regular Oprah Winfrey shows as well as other talk shows that have gone before it. And it is true that talk shows personalize problems and assign each "problem" as belonging to each individual person rather than to social collectivities. This

way of structuring talk, then, could produce the problem of historical awareness. However, it is my contention that the lack of awareness runs deeper and can be traced historically, beginning with the Book-of-the-Month Club, the highly successful middle-class movement that preceded Oprah's Book Club, for while the Oprah's Book Club deviates strongly from this movement, the Book-of-the-Month Club established the paradigm for cultural mediation in the book market.

Begun in the 1920's by Bernard Scherman, the Book-of-the-Month Club distributed books to national subscribers through the mail every month. As Janice Radway notes in her study, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste and Middle Class Desire*, Scherman's marketing strategy capitalized on a particular historical moment when people's ideas about culture and its relationship to consumer society were in flux:

> Scherman's strategies threatened to rework the very notion of culture itself as a thing autonomous and transcendent, set apart and timeless, defined by its very difference and distance from the market. Scherman's distribution operation, as its much-imitated name suggests, instead envisioned culture as a material, time-bound commodity, topical, ephemeral, and above all, destined for circulation. (128)

Scherman and his associates were able to "rework" the idea of what a book represents by developing marketing strategies which worked by helping people negotiate between their desire for books and an increasingly consumer-oriented society which encouraged them

to acquire books for the sake of ownership. In the process of mediating books to white middle-class America, the Book-of-the-Month Club set in motion a pattern which permeates Oprah's Book Club: a problematic understanding of and relationship to history.

This process occurred first via the Book-of-the-Month Club because of its highly developed and sophisticated marketing strategies. By treating books as commodities with time-bound messages that can be retrieved from its pages, the Book-of-the-Month Club encouraged readers to approach buying and acquiring from a new (ideological) perspective:

> By suppressing its status as the product of a complex set of social actions associated with a determining act of authorship, this consumerist approach to the book foregrounded its capacity to bring about certain ends by virtue of its circulation in the market and its adoption and application by readers in the realm of everyday life. At the same time, it illuminated its status as an animate object endowed with a vitality and life of its own and hence with an agency capable of doing things both to and for readers. (150)

The new middle-class readership wanted to feel well-read and knowledgeable and was attracted to the club for its promise of "cultural mastery." At the same time, however, this desire drew their attention away from what the club already tried to obscure: the marketing and distribution plans which situate the club in a particular context and historical moment when it became possible to capitalize upon the new middle-class

readership, and the fact that the promise of cultural mastery is a limited concept which demands certain ideological assumptions. In other words, rather than becoming more aware of how selections are chosen and how their perspectives are limited, readers are encouraged to read the present conditions and situations as external to history in return for the satisfaction of meeting what they perceive to be their more immediate cultural needs.

It is my assumption that this process has produced a kind of misrecognition of books. However, how does this misrecognition happen and how can we study it? It is possible to do a more comprehensive study of this process of misrecognition by studying Oprah's Book Club. In many ways, the basic process or assumption that characterized the Book-of-the-Month club can also be found in Oprah's Book Club: books exist in surplus in a market in which people are encouraged to buy. Readers buy books and adopt them to their own needs and interests and use them as a way of reinforcing and improving their understanding of their daily lives. Moreover, it is evident that Oprah Winfrey Show viewers follow the pattern established by previous Book-of-the-Month Club subscribers in ascribing agency and meaning to a commodity. Unlike the Book-of-the-Month Club, however, because each show is televised, it is possible to chart and identify the methodology that produces misreadings of books by studying each show as it appears on television as well as local Oprah Book Club groups who meet separately from the show to discuss the month's selection.

While the Book-of-the-Month Club was able to capitalize on white middle-class needs and plant the seeds for the process of misrecognition by the sheer numbers and

nature of their complex marketing schemes and distribution processes, the Oprah Book Club show methodology extends and solidifies this process by demanding a simplistic reading of each book club selection.

By identifying the existence of a particular kind of methodology on an Oprah Book Club show, a methodology which produces simplistic readings which promise that one will "get" one thing out of a book, an approach which requires Oprah to handle history in a certain way which inevitably causes a misreading, one can then identify the cult of personality on the show which is produced by this methodology and cements the entire process. One of the first ways to identify how the cult of personality works on the show is to think about the biggest difference between the Book-of-the-Month Club and Oprah's Book Club. For what makes Oprah's Book Club markedly different from the Book-of-the-Month Club is that rather than trusting in the process by which these books are mediated to them, Oprah viewers trust in the person who (seems to) mediate the books directly to them: "Oprah" herself.[1]

Viewers trust in the person who mediates the books to them, Oprah, by engaging in a specific kind of relationship which communications and media studies scholars term a parasocial relationship. In a parasocial relationship, producers as well as Winfrey herself are able to create the illusion of a one-to-one close friendship in which viewers feel like they know Winfrey as a real person. Hence, Winfrey becomes "Oprah." This

[1] Throughout this paper, I will refer to Oprah Winfrey, the televised persona as "Oprah." This is in keeping with the close relationship she has with her viewers, all of whom think of and refer to her as "Oprah," and thus construct their ideas about the show based on this level of closeness. When quoting from Burrelle's transcripts, however, I will follow the established procedure and describe her as "Winfrey." Whenever I refer to Oprah Winfrey herself, the individual and not the televisual persona, the person of whom the television viewer knows little, I will refer to her as "Winfrey."

illusion of intimacy is created by creating a close intimate atmosphere on the set, and by strategic choices Winfrey makes in order to appear approachable and emotionally available both on the show and in interviews in which she provides intimate details of her life to magazines and newspapers. (See Haag, "Oprah Winfrey: The Construction of Intimacy in the Talk Show Setting.")

What is obscured in this process is the fact that the only "Oprah" viewers know is a carefully constructed persona, and that we are only given selected details about her life or her feelings on any given subject. "The interaction, characteristically, is one-sided, non-dialectical, controlled by the performer, and not susceptible to mutual development" (qtd. in Peck 137). However, Oprah show viewers readily comply with this construction, for even if they notice elements of it, there are many reasons that keep the parasocial bond strong. As one local Oprah book club member put it: "Oprah seems real — a person anyone could talk to." Another Oprah book club member commented on her dissatisfaction with another aspect of the show, in the process revealing an important aspect of how the parasocial bond works on Oprah Book Club shows. "I really hate it when the book discussion is only half the show or even less!! I have e-mailed Oprah several times to express this, but nothing has changed." This woman believes that she can communicate directly with "Oprah" forgetting that her e-mail will most certainly by mediated through different Harpo employers, never even coming close to reaching Winfrey.

Viewers believe that Oprah is addressing them personally and that they have the ability to engage with her on a personal level, even though she is one of the most

powerful women on television and addresses millions of people each day. As one Oprah show revealed when the receptionist was interviewed, the majority of women who call in to Harpo Studios, Winfrey's production studio, expect and demand to speak to Oprah, ignoring the fact that she cannot possibly answer the amount of calls received each day at the studio. The idea that it would be possible for her to do, however, is reinforced both by the fact that Oprah addresses the world as if she were talking to an individual person ("Now I know you may be cooking in the kitchen, but come on in here and listen to this right now!") and the fact that the show come to us in our homes, the intimate space where we typically have one-on-one conversations.

As I will show in subsequent chapters, the parasocial relationship between Winfrey and the viewer is erected to keep simple readings in place. The parasocial bond places viewers in an already mapped out subject position in which they are not asked to examine the otherness of the text they are reading or any other subject positions it introduces. This happens because of the subject position via the parasocial relationship which seeks to contain and control the nature of people's responses to the various social dilemmas that are presented in the books that have been selected and during the shows in which the books are discussed.[2] Thus, issues of class, race and gender, though they continue to be obscured and contained by the structure of the show, can be studied by examining the very real issues and varying subject positions within the texts in question and the discourse that occurs on each Book Club show.

---

[2] See Peck "The Mediated Talking Cure: Therapeutic Framing of Autobiography on TV Talk Shows," 134.

Another way of thinking about the parasocial relationship between Winfrey and the viewer is to think of it as related to Winfrey's hyperreality.[3] For example, when a person passes away whose image saturates the media, the general public feels real grief and loss, not necessarily for the person, but for the hyperreal sense of connection, closeness, and essence of the person that they received through a highly specialized, sophisticated media apparatus. As Nancy Franklin noted in *The New Yorker* following the death of John F. Kennedy Jr., "...but TV gave us images of him at every stage of his life, and these are what made many people feel that they had a relationship with him that was, as Jeff Greenfield put it, 'realer than real' (78). The same is true for Winfrey. Viewers have a great investment in the overevident, overrepresented image of Winfrey on magazine and book covers, on television, and in other media they interact with daily, and it is this representation itself which becomes the new sense of real. As Fiske states in *Media Matters*, "we can no longer work with the idea that the 'real' is more important, significant, or even 'true' than the representation. [. . .] hyperreality implodes the binary concepts of reality and representation into a single concept, and the simulacrum similarly merges the 'copy' with the 'original,' the 'image' with its 'referent'" (2).

An Oprah Book Club show is positioned within this context of hyperreality, the implosion of Winfrey's image with her reality. It is also very much in keeping with the simplistic misrecognition of historical change and process that produces the book club methodology and the cult of personality. Viewers look to their sense of "Oprah" and

---

[3] Jean Baudrillard defined both the concept of "hyperreality" and the "simulacrum." See "The Ecstasy of Communication" in the anthology *The Anti-Aesthetic*, and "La precession des simulacres," which appears in translation in *Simulations*.

what "Oprah" means to them as a way of guiding their understanding, and this substitutes for real thinking or reflection. They receive a simulated, pseudo "tour" through the past, (such as during the shows covering Bernard Schlink's *The Reader*, or Ernest Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying*) and accept the simulation as true or real, thus creating a false understanding and recognition of history and other contexts of truth in general, such as the reality of other classes, races, nationalities, and political viewpoints.

As the host who has come to mean all things to all people, Oprah has taken on a new role as that of the master "guide" who leads her subjects through a reading of a book by giving them a series of questions or quizzes. But as the nature of the parasocial bond demands, only the master guide knows the master code — all the answers to which we as viewers need only wait until she gives "it" to us by the end of the hour. In this guiding process, studio audience members and Oprah herself, as well as those who have been selected to discuss with the author of the book, enter into a dialogue in which they seek solutions to these social problems.

Not only is it the particular guiding nature of the parasocial bond that seeks to limit or prohibit an exploration of these social issues, but this bond and sense of hyperreality become the way through which feeling can *replace* history or methodology. For example, when discussing the current state of race relations in this country in the show covering *A Lesson Before Dying*, a white middle-class woman remarks that it is good that "people who don't know Oprah feel like they do" ("Oprah's Book Club Goes to Louisiana" 27 Oct. 1997). This statement is lauded by Winfrey who then receives

confirmation from Gaines and the discussion is closed. In this way, problems are always personal and never structural.

Gender can also become another area of misreading. When "what every woman needs to know" is discussed on the show covering Pearl Cleage's *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day*, the show interviews white middle-class women and show clips of them jokingly commenting on such things as "knowing one's true hair color," "knowing the correct bra size," etc., all without a discussion of the structural category "woman" and what that might mean for all different kinds of women, indeed what it means to place all women within a category at all and the problematics of doing that. ("Oprah's Book Club: Things Every Woman Should Know" 28 Oct. 1998). Because the show is structured around personal feeling, closeness and simplicity, these more complex discussions and categories can be elided.

The parasocial relationship between Winfrey and the viewer highlights the limitations of middle-class discourse which the show's methodology produces. Because the show's audience is primarily middle-class white women who respond positively to the parasocial bond, we can chart the struggle of the middle-classes to articulate their understanding of the world through a medium that largely seeks to silence them or neutralize the class struggle that they seek to articulate. We can observe this "neutralization" in the way the Book Club shows are structured and titled. For example, the possibilities of a different kind of discourse for the show on *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day* would be quite different if it were entitled, "What Every Woman Needs to Know to Live in a Patriarchal Society" instead of "What Every Woman Needs

to Know." Because this book club show is structured around the generic latter, any suggestion from the former would be considered a deviant reading, outside the realm of the legitimated discourse. As Stuart Hall states, "Topical framing in talk shows organizes the production and promotion of each episode, is used to solicit guests, and creates an interpretive framework for viewers. By establishing the definition of the day's problem, how it is to be talked about, by whom, and to what ends, topicality is a strategy of selection that draws a line between legitimate and deviant meanings" (qtd. in Peck "The Mediated Talking Cure").

The already mapped-out subject position that is produced on the show thus caters to the dominant ideology. I have already discussed the characteristics of the larger ideological problem of history. What are the more local characteristics of the dominant ideology as it manifests itself on an Oprah Book Club show? First, the dominant ideology provides the viewer or audience member with the illusion that all of her needs are met or will be met. On an Oprah Book Club show, this sense is provided by the show's structure which figures in Oprah as the meta-encoder who is ready to meet all of their needs by the end of the show. When this type of structure is applied to the reading of a particular book, what is produced is an audience which has been placed within a subject position that offers them the immediate gratification of knowing that they have "mastered" a particular book by simply following along with the flow of the show. This is the method through which the dominant ideology acts upon the viewers and audience members.

Viewers and audience members also take a more active role in perpetuating the dominant ideology by embracing the idea that voicing individual concerns about political issues over the course of an hour is sufficient and helpful and increases overall understanding. Keeping in mind Peck's assertion that talk shows are fueled by tensions that exist outside the show (134), issues concerning race and gender are imported into the show where they become the object of the talk. While political discussion concerning race or gender erupt on the show as the discussion develops, the show never allows these alternative and controversial discourses a chance to develop without subsuming them within the already mapped out middle-class white *male* position.

The televisual apparatus exerts great influence on the free flow of ideas and discussion concerning social issues. By eliminating the element of struggle and thus making alternative discourses impotent or invisible, the show produces "packaged" solutions for individual viewers and audience members. In the following chapters, I will describe how this process works, beginning with the structure of the show itself, and then moving on to the various discursive strategies guest, host, author and audience use to articulate solutions to social problems or issues, and how these strategies are neutralized and made ineffectual.

Though the techniques of the media system appear to overwhelm the viewer and appear to silence alternative readings, alternatives do exist. In the case of an Oprah Book Club show, the alternatives exist as "gaps" or times when coherence does not flow as easily, times when discussions are not as easily tied up or packaged, as they are identified by viewers more attuned to being critical of the show. "Gaps" can also be understood as

moments on the show when the discourse does not follow easily from one person to the next, when peoples' statements seem to erupt onto the screen, or when the discourse feels strained or excessive in some way. It is these moments that serve as the basis for ideology critique. As Hennessy explains in *Materialist Feminism*,

> The dominating ideology never dominates without contradiction. Therefore it cannot exhaust all social experience. It potentially contains space for alternative discourses which are not yet articulated as a social institution or even project. As a result of the articulatedness of the hegemonic ideology, there will never exist any hegemonic discourse without slips or cracks in its coherence. And it is the potentially subversive force of these slips that constitutes the epistemological basis or the authority of ideology critique. (76-77)

In the last chapter, I will discuss in more detail the brief moments on a Book Club show when there is a break or gap in the parasocial bond between viewer, audience member, book club participant, and host. I will show how these moments can be understood as sites of resistance, thus demonstrating how an Oprah Book Club show has the potential to be subversive and revolutionary rather than controlled by the dominant ideology.

Chapter 2: The Structure of an Oprah Book Club Show

There are several things to note when discussing the book club show's basic format. First, a book club reading[4] is different depending on one's position relative to the show. The people who were selected to participate in the book club dinner and meet the author as well as Winfrey have a different reading than those in the studio audience. Similarly, the members of the studio audience participate in a slightly different reading than those who watch the show at home because the former are present during the commercial breaks as well as after the show when Winfrey and the audience often continue the discussion. For this project, I did not have time to interview Winfrey, any individual who had appeared on the show to participate in the dinnertable conversation, or anyone who was a member of the studio audience. My argument then, only takes into account this latter group: the people who watch the show from their televisions at home. However, what is and is not said by everyone throughout the show, no matter what their relative position within it, is important because the outside at-home viewers receive the entire reading and are asked to make sense of its logic and constructions.

My study takes into account one additional group: a local Oprah's Book Club in which local people meet once a month to discuss the latest Oprah Book Club selection after having viewed the show on television. This group adds another

[4] I am defining an "Oprah Book Club reading" as a particular person's experience of sharing what they've learned about the book with others, or participating in an environment in which they feel as if they are participating in a discussion of the book (such as by watching the book club show on television.) Thus, an "Oprah Book Club reading" occurs in community and should be understood as different from an isolated, individual "reading" of a book. An Oprah Book club reading involves the production of a "reading" in which the individual reader is just one part in that production.

dimension to my study. I am now in a position to ask: What constitutes an "Oprah book club" reading? From the perspective of the at-home viewer, how can the "reading" which is produced on the show best be defined and understood? "Can local groups, after viewing an Oprah book club reading make different constructions and seek different possibilities from that which viewers consume via television, and if so, how?" (see appendix for the questionnaire I used to come to my conclusions)

When the Oprah Winfrey Show began Oprah's Book Club in September 1996 with *The Deep End of the Ocean* as its first selection, the show followed the same basic format. Winfrey would introduce the show in the first five minutes of televised viewing, and then refer the studio audience to the large monitor behind her in which the first segment from the "book club dinner" is shown. Viewers at home, of course, see this segment full-screen.

During this first book club dinner segment, the selected participants are introduced with a voiceover and are shown seated around a dinner table (or other comfortable setting) with Oprah and the author.[5] This voiceover identifies each participant according to a specific subject position. For example, in the book club show for *The Reader*, each participant is introduced by their first name, their state of residence, and either their age or their profession: "Cassandra, who's 44 years old from New York City" ("Oprah's Book Club" 9). Sometimes, the voiceover is replaced by Oprah herself who is shown initiating a conversation with a guest and elicits their own description of a particular subject position:

> Winfrey: And Linda is from right here in Illinois.
>
> Linda: OK. I am a young, spirited 51 year old mother of three children, two of whom are sons. Their ages are 17 and 19. I feel very guarded about expressing my opinion on this book because I know that I am a good mother with high standards and morals...
>
> Winfrey: Lynn from Connecticut is the mother of two young boys.
>
> Lynn: I devoured this book in less than 24 hours. I am a Jew, a lawyer, a mother, a daughter, a victim of an abusive relationship.
>
> ("Oprah's Book Club" 9)

Less frequently, guests are shown reading lengthier excerpts from their letters, which always begin with "Dear Oprah."

What is important about these segments, which always begin the book-related part of the Oprah Book Club shows is how each subject position is "hailed" according to certain labels.[6] Oprah elicits this construction. Each participant reveals their reading and is then hailed and fitted into the master framework by the master encoder: Oprah — the person they address.

There is also another implication that develops as the show progresses: the idea that the individuals on the show are only contributing "fragments" from which

---

[5] This format differs slightly from show to show. Sometimes Oprah herself identifies them in the segment without the voiceover.

[6] Althusser elaborated on ideas about self-recognition with reference to ideology: "...ideology is seen to function as a system that *interpellates* individuals, or hails them. That is to say, ideology asks us to recognize ourselves within its terms of reference. Ideology, like the character Ernestine in a Lily Tomlin sketch, asks, 'Is this the party to whom I am speaking?' Once the question is heard, it is hard to say, 'no.' In other words, ideology functions as a system of address, and individuals are positioned as social subjects through their responses in this system" (White 169).

Oprah picks to fit into the master whole in her own way. Only Oprah has the power to make sense of the narrative of the show — not anyone else. This agency is evidenced by the initiative Oprah takes to flit from one participant to the next, interrupt a reading of one letter, and turn to the next participant, only getting the information that seems needed to fit into her larger scheme. Thus, each participant's power to construct her own subject position is already limited by the constraints of the show's structure.

Next, we return to the studio audience in which Oprah provides the viewer with a glimpse of what will be discussed next during the taped dinnertable conversation. For example, "Oh, it was great. Well, I already told you how good the food was. We also had great conversation about race and life. Our dinner in the big house — in the big house when we return." She uses a similar technique once we return from the commercial. For example, upon the return from the above commercial break, Winfrey states as a means of introducing the segment which introduces the selected participants, "...They were from all over who we brought together at one table and in the big house, which was really a big deal to me. Did I mention it was a good meal? Here's a taste for yourself." This pattern continues until the end of the show when Oprah concludes by announcing the next Oprah Book Club selection and distributing copies to members of the studio audience. Before she personally hands each studio audience member a copy of the new selection (along with the help of her staff), Oprah describes the new selection in order to make the choice seem interesting to the audience. She also repeats the name of the new book

numerous times to impress the title upon the audience's memory: So when you go into the bookstore or to the library, think breath, eyes, memory — "Breath, Eyes, Memory," OK? "Breath Eyes, Memory." Can you say it?

Audience: (in unison) "Breath, Eyes, Memory" ("Oprah's Book Club" 19)

Winfrey will spend more or less time describing the new selection, depending on how much time is left in the show. She usually comments on how long she thinks it will take the viewer to read it, and also mentions the themes of the book if there is time left on the show.

When thinking about the entire structure of the basic book club show as I have sketched out above, it is important to note that any segments we see of actual dinnertable conversation between Winfrey, the author and the selected participants has already been edited by Harpo. Both the members of the studio audience as well as viewers at home hear only selected parts of the entire conversation, yet with Oprah as guide and labeler of each person's subject position and explainer of each person's experience as they reflect upon it, all of these separate fragments (indeed, the viewer at home can be understood as watching fragments of fragments!) are made to appear as a concrete, coherent whole.

By giving copies to members of her studio audience at the end of the show, Winfrey completes her role as "guide." Oprah literally goes out into the studio audience and hand delivers a new copy directly to each audience member. This act encourages the idea that the book is mediated directly from her to the audience member (and by extension the home viewer). One need only wait to receive the

enlightenment it will bring the participant through this direct mediation. The publisher's role is usually completely marginalized. In one book club show, Oprah mentions Anchor publishers, and what a good job they did preparing once Oprah called them to tell them she had selected *She's Come Undone* as a selection. Then a brief taped segment showed the publishers stacking books in a huge warehouse, putting the books in boxes. These types of clips are rare, however. Oprah usually emphasizes how this publishing and behind-the-scenes communication is very much a human endeavor. She mentions in one book club show, for example, how she had so much trouble getting a human voice to talk to her so she could tell the publishers about her latest selection. She said that she "finally called the mail room" in order to talk to a human voice.

Oprah also emphasizes that the "criteria for the book club" have nothing to do with the publishers or any external advice, but only with her own preferences. At the end of the *Black and Blue* book club show, Oprah addresses Dawn, a member of the studio audience who asks her if she reads the books before she recommends them:

> Dawn, I read all the books. And even if I've read them before, then I read them again now to make sure that I liked them as much as I thought I liked them when I read them before. So I don't recommend a book that I haven't read. And that is really the criteria for the book club. I have to like the book. And so that's why the book is "Breath, Eyes, Memory" Ok? by Edwidge Danticat. It is a powerful look at how mothers can influence the lives of their daughters — don't we

know? Especially how we feel about our own bodies. ("Oprah's Book Club" 20)

Oprah also never admits having anything to do with the success of a book club selection. She will usually mention the fact that the book has topped the bestseller list (about 90% of her selections reach the top of the bestseller list) in passing: "So begins the voice of Ava Johnson, a 34-year old beauty salon operator who is HIV-positive and the main character in *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day*, a book which has also gone a little crazy on best-seller lists" (9).

All of these strategies contribute to Oprah's role as "master encoder" within the parasocial relationship between viewer and host. Oprah reinforces the viewers' trust in her by assuring them that she "has to like the book" before recommending it. This approach capitalizes on Oprah's role as guide, discourages any outside thought or consideration concerning the book club selection, and encourages people to view their participation in the process as that of receiver in a direct-mediation process from Oprah to viewer. By not emphasizing her role in making each selection a best seller, Oprah makes it seem as if each individual viewer has created the best-seller situation through their own active choice and participation. This strategy distances Oprah from her more threatening economic role as a powerful figure who affects millions of people not only by making books bestsellers instantly but by getting millions to buy the books she recommends, and moves her closer to her less threatening role as a guide to individual persons who then choose to go buy the book for themselves as a means of participating more strongly in the parasocial bond.

Since the inception of the book club show, there have been many "variations" on this basic format, thus shortening the length of time devoted to the actual dinnertable conversation. For example, some book club show variations" have included such additions as a "recipe" segment in which Art, Oprah's personal chef, appears toward the end of a Book Club show for a cooking demonstration. In the *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day* book club show, a montage sequence of housewives giving their opinions on what every woman needs to know to get along in the world as well as statements from Ivana Trump, Susan Lucci, and two doctors who discuss women's health, appear before Oprah even introduces the actual taped book club conversation. This particular show also concludes with Art, who describes a recipe for punch. In another book club segment, because her book club selection, *Midwives* is set in Vermont, Oprah quizzes the audience on facts about the state of Vermont, and then shows a taped segment of her "tour" the state which culminates in a tour of Ben and Jerry's ice cream factory.

The shows for *A Lesson Before Dying* and *Paradise* also vary from the original format due to the addition of extra clips, but these additional clips are much more in keeping with the actual themes and images presented in the texts themselves. For the *A Lesson Before Dying* show, the first quarter of the show features an interview between Winfrey and Gaines in which Gaines shows Winfrey the real-life setting for the book: the plantation in Louisiana where Gaines lived as a child. In this segment Gaines shows Winfrey the cemetery where his ancestors are buried and the building where he attended school and church. In the *Paradise* show we are shown

clips of the "real-life history" behind the all-black towns that were settled in the West as well as a one-on-one interview between Winfrey and Morrison — all before the actual conversation that takes place between Morrison, Winfrey and 22 participants at Princeton University.

Because they can offer such an array of differing responses to social problems that go beyond individualist discourses such as therapeutic discourse, discourses dealing with race and gender threaten the already mapped-out subject position that a typical Oprah book club show produces. As described above, shows such as the show for *A Lesson Before Dying* and *Paradise* deviate from the original format as a means of compensating for the fact that they have the potential to threaten the parasocial relationship. Thus, I have chosen to study shows in the subsequent chapters that deal with race and gender as a means of studying both how the show compensates for the change in discourse (by diverting the show, showing extra clips) and how the discourse erupts and highlights where and how resistance to the dominant reading or structure of the show becomes possible.

Chapter 3: *The Reader*, the Process

One of the primary assumptions of this study is that the Oprah Book Club show facilitates and even creates misreadings of books. I will elaborate on how this process works by studying the book club show which covers *The Reader* by Bernard Schlink. In this case, the show facilities a reading of the novel which fails to capitalize on its potential to educate its audience about a particular historical situation (World War II and the holocaust) and its particular implications for a group of people (what the author refers to as "second generation Germans.") The way a poor reading can occur is by limiting the number of factors that go into the creation of a particular historical situation to one. This occurs not only because of the show's need for closure and simple, personalized solutions to complex problems or situations, but also because of the inability to historicize one's own (1990's) subjectivity. By suggesting that one can insert oneself into a particular past event, that one can easily suggest ways of improving or changing social conditions, misreadings fail to account for the capability books have of communicating the complexity of social change, historical conditions, subordination, and the nature and mystery of our own subjectivity.

The Reader, set in post-war Germany, begins with the story of a love affair between a 15 year-old boy named Michael and a 36 year-old woman named Hanna. The novel is told from the point of view of Michael, who is laid up for months with hepatitis. One day he faints on the street and a woman named Hanna pulls him into her apartment and calls for help. Michael's mother suggests that Michael go see Hanna to thank her. They begin a sexual relationship which does not involve abuse.

Hanna, who is 36, works as a ticket collector on a bus. Michael and Hanna have a fairly long affair, which includes a weekend at a country hotel, a scene which especially emphasizes the intergenerational aspect of their relationship. She is likened to a mother. Michael's own parents are not terribly threatening or even interesting. His father is an aloof philosopher who relates to ideas but not to people. Eventually Hanna learns that she is being considered for a higher position. Michael goes to see her one day and finds her apartment empty.

The next time Michael sees Hanna, he is a law student. His professor has sent him and some other students to watch and study a war crimes trial. Once inside the courtroom, he learns that Hanna is one of the accused and is on trial for war crimes committed during World War II when she was a death camp guard. As the war was ending, she and the other guards were forced to march a group of female prisoners away from the camp to territory still safely held by German troops. They are forced to lock the prisoners in a church at night. The church catches fire and all but three of the prisoners die. None of the female guards or their superiors unlock the doors. Hanna has a chance to escape having most of the blame put on herself, but she is credited with being the worst of the guards. Michael now realizes that she cannot read and that she could escape more severe punishment if she would admit that she cannot. He finds out later that she was very embarrassed at her illiteracy. (Thus her flight when offered a better job, because it would have required a written test). But her main explanation is that she simply was tired of covering up her past and was ready to take whatever punishment came. She is sentenced to a long term.

Later in the novel, Michael goes to see if his father can help him with the moral complexities of the Holocaust and the different generations, but his father is too distant to be of any help. Michael gets married but his marriage fails. Left alone, he thinks again of Hanna and begins sending her tapes of himself reading to her. He is too disgusted on the one hand with her Nazi past to make the correspondence any more personal, but he feels enough pity to send her something that will entertain her and keep her going. Many years later, Michael learns that Hanna is being released from prison. He goes to see her. She is old and worn down. He agrees to see her the next day when she is released, but she kills herself that night in prison. He learns from the prison warden that Hanna learned to read and spent her time reading about the Holocaust. She had treasured the tapes Michael had sent her but was heartbroken that he would not include anything personal in the tapes.

The story then revolves around Michael's complex relationship with Hanna and can be understood, as Schlink tells us himself on the Oprah Book Club show, as a "metaphor for the relationship between the second generation and the first generation." The first generation refers of course to Hanna and the World War II generation, and the second generation refers to people like Michael who are sons and daughters of that generation. Schlink is able to elaborate on his views concerning the book and his intention in writing it at the beginning of the Oprah Book Club show:

Winfrey: You first thought it was a book just about and for Germans.

> Schlink: Yeah. That's what I first thought. And I was even afraid to publish it in Germany because I thought maybe people might misunderstand it as apologetic, sort of a whitewashing book.
>
> Winfrey: And what were you talking about?
>
> Schlink: Oh, about the experience of my — the second generation.
>
> Winfrey: Second generation German.
>
> Schlink: Yeah, yeah.
>
> Winfrey: After the war.
>
> Schlink: After the war. And about what it meant for us to grow up in post-war Germany, to love parents, teachers, professors, figures of authority and then finding out what they had done and coping with that. ("Oprah's Book Club" 8)

For a discussion of the novel to take on any significant meaning, this metaphor needs to be understood in all of its complexity. Michael's relationship to Hanna mirrors the complexity of the relationship between first and second generation Germans. Their life experiences are different, and they are part of different historical situations. Yet Michael loved Hanna, and as another human being who shares the country's horrific past (only one generation removed), he must now figure out how to cope with the new knowledge he has about her past. Should he condemn her? How is he in a position to judge her? For an American audience in the 1990's, it is even more important to keep in mind the specific context of the book, particularly when discussing what "one would have done." A white, middle-class male who reads the

book in 1999, can generalize that he, too, is a human being and then use the text as a means of helping him recreate the historical situation of the novel, but this process must not be short-circuited. If it is, it wrongly suggests that 1999 is the default or generic time through which one can mediate directly to another time. Moreover, events, according to this flawed model, occur in exactly the same way as before. The person then assumes that he or she can know immediately what they would have done to ameliorate the situation. In the following passage for example, Winfrey appears to understand the need for mediation by framing it in terms of a kind of historical relativism:

> Winfrey: The you that you come — become based upon the way you were loved, the way your environment — with the way your society told you who you were about yourself. So you don't know what you would have done in a different time, in a different space. That's — that's...
>
> Woman #19: Exactly. And it had to be within this context. ("Oprah's Book Club" 19)

Yet, at other times during the show, Winfrey insists on narcissistically inserting herself directly into a past historical situation without really honoring the complex question "what would you have done?":

> Winfrey: *The Reader*. It's *The Reader*. What about the question about what would you have done?

Unidentified woman #18: Reading the book, you would au—you would automatically think 'Well, I'd try to save those people.'

Winfrey: That's right.

Woman #18: You'd automatically — but then, being in that situation, you're thinking 'It's me or them,' and I think when I was reading the book...

Winfrey: I do think I would have saved the women in the church.

Woman #18: Yeah.

Audience: (in unison) Yeah.

Winfrey: I do — yeah. ("Oprah's Book Club" 18)

This emphasis on the idea that Winfrey would have saved the women in the church completely overwrites the very real historical situation and the role of the event in Schlink's fictional novel. Winfrey's assertion then, that one would not know what one would do has been completely unraveled and discarded.

The amount of knowledge and power differs throughout the novel, and an understanding of these different levels is important to keep in mind. One learns for example that Hanna cannot read and is thus less empowered than Michael and those who judge her. An important rhetorical tool for making Hanna illiterate is thus to complicate her position in the novel. On the show however, Winfrey insists on making her plight a pathetic one and uses the situation in the novel as a means of promoting her final segment in "Remembering Your Spirit" which covered people who had spoken out and taken steps to become literate:

Winfrey: You don't think he should have gone to the judge?

Noelle: That was her decision.

Unidentified book club reader: I do.

Noelle: That was her decision to make. It was her life. Because she was making the conscious decision not to tell him that she couldn't read.

Prof. Schlink: Well...

Noelle: It's not like she didn't know she couldn't read. She knew that she couldn't read those transcripts.

Winfrey: But she did — and you're going to see in "Remembering Your Spirit" today, I mean, I — we deal with people all the time who live with the shame of not being able to read...

Cassandra: To read.

Winfrey: ...because they think it's the worst thing in the world...

Cassandra: Thing that could happen.

Winfrey: ...but once they're outed, so to speak, once they claim or are willing to proclaim that I didn't know but now I'm willing to know, it--it—it—it frees them. It frees them. ("Oprah's Book Club" 15)

Winfrey's comment is completely removed from the context of the book and seems to suggest that people can change their lot in life with their own effort, regardless of the fact that they may not have the resources to do so. This line of discussion turns the tide away from the reason why Hanna is illiterate in the novel and towards a liberal

self-help philosophy about illiteracy in general in 1999 (rather than postwar Germany).

In the novel, Hanna has more knowledge about her involvement in the past than Michael and has a kind of power over him through their sexual relationship which she controls, at least at the beginning of the novel. This mirrors the relationship second generation Germans have or had with their parents who were first generation Germans. On the show, the sexual aspect of their relationship is continually dramatized by Winfrey for sensational effect: "And our book club meeting this month got a little heated when we tackled their sexual relationship. Take a look " (8) and participants dispute whether or not they consider the relationship "abuse." When Linda, reads from her letter to Oprah in which she "admits" that if her sons "were to have an early sexual experience" she "would not be terribly upset if they encountered someone like Hanna," Winfrey interrupts her and encourages Cassandra to voice her concerns about Hanna's "abuse" of Michael:

> Cassandra: I disagree with you. When Oprah had said we were going to read a book about a 13-15 year old boy...
>
> Winfrey: Fifteen year old boy.
>
> Cassandra: And a 30 something, I...
>
> Winfrey: Seduced by a 36 year old woman.
>
> Cassandra: ...I was taken back at first and then I said, 'Well, I don't really know.' And as I got into it, she was really a classic abuser to me. Because she — he really never knew where he stood. He even toward

> — to the end, he really never knew. He was always somehow trying to turn himself inside out to please her. ("Oprah's Book Club" 9)

The discussion of "abuse" continues for several minutes more, in which Cassandra is allowed to dominate the conversation. At one point, Schlink tries to defuse the onslaught by remarking that he this discussion is "certainly in American discussions" and that he has "never had a discussion like that with readers in Germany or France," stating that "sexual-emotional abuse" is a "very fuzzy concept" but his point never creates a moment for the rest of the participants to realize that their own perspective about the novel is colored by 1999's American culture to such an extent that they cannot seem to think abstractly about the book.

At one point, Schlink tries to convey why Michael needed to be 15 and Hanna 36 — to show the connection between first and second generation Germans.

> Winfrey: Ok, then why not make him — OK, if this wasn't an issue, this wasn't — you say you only have this discussion in America, then why wasn't he 21 already? Why wasn't he 18? Why wasn't he 30? Why wasn't he — that's just a question. Yeah.
>
> Prof. Schlink: Well, he was 15. I mean, you can say...
>
> Winfrey: Was — was there — was there not a particular reason why he was 15?
>
> Prof. Schlink: Yes, of course, because in — in a way, among other things, the story is a metaphor for the relationship between the second generation and the first generation...

Unidentified book club reader. Generation.

Prof. Schlink: ...and to be a metaphor for that to be done, you want a relationship among equals, but...

Winfrey: OK.

John: My question is how autobiographical is this?

Prof. Schlink. Yeah. Well...

Winfrey: Yeah, that's all of our questions really.

Prof. Schlink: Well, Oprah, I mean — of course, in such a book, there go autobiographical elements, but I wrote a novel. That means it's not an autobiographical tale that I wrote. And it's a book...

Winfrey: So there was no Hanna in your life? ("Oprah's Book Club 12)

Here, Schlink is able to make his point, but it is lost because of Winfrey's need to interject and the participants desire to find out whether or not the book is autobiographical. The book's main trust and meaning, that it is a metaphor for the relationship between the first and second generation, remains obscured and deflated. Indeed, there are several instances like this one when either the author or a participants hits on a complex, profound statement, yet Winfrey steers the conversation toward what is most emotionally charged, or "popular" for the majority of her 1990's readership. At the beginning of the show for example, Winfrey encounters what ought to be considered the ideal reader for the novel: a second generation German. This woman admits that reading *The Reader* changed her life

and helped her begin to question her family's past, more so than any other book or film such as Schindler's List:

> Woman #17: I didn't want to watch it. I didn't want to think about it.
>
> Winfrey: You didn't want to, right. But you pick up this book, that's what's beautiful about a great story...
>
> Woman #17: Right.
>
> Winfrey: ...is it makes you think about them as real people.
>
> Woman #17: Every line, especially in the second half of the book, makes me think about it. He questions, he questions, questions. And I just spent hours really looking back and thinking about what I had not asked and what I need to ask.
>
> Winfrey: Well, there you have it. There you have it. My God!
>
> Next, the dinner discussion where the author gives his views on the relationship and explains why he doesn't consider it abuse — We'll be back in a moment. Well, now! (The show then breaks for a commercial). ("Oprah's Book Club" 7)

The break-up of Woman #17's important observation by a commercial is not surprising, nor is Winfrey's promise of a discussion of "abuse" which figures no where in what Woman #17 had stated. It is obvious that the show's goal is for success and popularity rather than meaning or complexity. The fact that woman #17 made a significant discovery only lends power to the show, and it is this that Winfrey hopes to capitalize on, not understanding.

The overall effect of the Book Club show covering *The Reader* is incomprehension. The dizzying array of subject positions from each of the participants, in which each struggles to make his or her point, lead us closest to a debate about "abuse" (which is only a red herring) and farthest from an accurate reading of the novel. This loss is regrettable. By encouraging mis-readings by staging faulty arguments among participants, the show makes a certain aspect of the book ("what one would have done" or "abuse") the object of the talk thus missing the larger implications — the very material people would need to become more self-conscious about their own subordination and (limited) 1999 subjectivity. Furthermore, by limiting the number or events or circumstances that can affect an historical moment to one by simplifying the event or one's role in it (if one could indeed go back in time!) the show suggests people can "even the score" without any thought or reflection. This should only sound warning signals. Books can provide a reader with wisdom, as long as they are historicized. As one can see after studying this Book Club show, if one is mediated a book with the purpose of providing entertainment, increasing its popular appeal and ignoring the historical moment in which the book is being mediated to the public, mediators blatantly misrecognize the issues presented in the book and produce naive readers who then develop and help sustain cultural and subjective blindness.

Chapter 4: Race: The Non-Conversation

Four shows have aired during the course of this study that could have engaged in some kind of discourse concerning race: *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day, Song of Solomon, Paradise* and *A Lesson Before Dying.* Of these four shows, only one show, the show covering *A Lesson Before Dying*, engages in a detailed discussion concerning race in the U.S. This fact alone is significant, given the fact that *Song of Solomon* deals explicitly with the experience of a black family over the course of many years, *Paradise* deals with an all-black town in the Mid-West, and *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day* has been characterized by even the popular press as a book which "pays attention to problems that face young African Americans, including AIDS, teenage motherhood, joblessness, crack, low self-esteem and lack of sex education" (qtd. in Cleage ii).

A Lesson Before Dying depicts the complexity of the experience of a black community in a small Louisiana town in the 1930's. The book deals explicitly with the effect racism has on two black characters: Jefferson, who has been falsely accused of murdering a white man, and Grant, the local school teacher who visits Jefferson in his prison cell on a weekly basis. The story is told from Grant's point-of-view, but we learn a great deal about the other characters (Jefferson, Miss Emma, Aunt Lou, Rev. Ambrose, Henri Pichot, Sam Guidry, Paul) all of whom are very different from one another. These differences can be understood as highlighting different people's responses to living in an extremely oppressive racist community. Religion plays an important role for Rev. Ambrose and the people of his congregation. Grant, on the

other hand, is not religious and is unsatisfied with the way the church's teachings explain away or resolve racial conflict. He wishes to effect change on a more concrete level, but feels powerless to do so. Miss Emma, Jefferson's mother, implores Grant to teach Jefferson that he is "a man and not a hog."

The show in which *A Lesson Before Dying* is discussed varies somewhat from her previous book club segments. Rather than interviewing Gaines in the studio, Winfrey interviews Gaines on location at Riverlake Plantation, Louisiana, the setting out of which he created the fictional setting in *A Lesson Before Dying.* These interviews consist of two segments which are shown both before and after the actual taped dinner-table discussion between Winfrey, Gaines, and the four selected participants. Each of these taped segments is also framed by initial discussion by Winfrey in the studio both at the beginning of the show and before and after each commercial, and the show ends with a discussion of other book clubs, in which *A Lesson Before Dying* is also brought into the discussion at the studio one final time.

After a commercial break, two taped segments of Winfrey and Gaines alone are shown, in which they are talking and visiting various cites on the plantation in the first taped segment, and visiting the graveyard of former slaves in the final taped segment. This footage reveals background information about Gaines' life growing up in Louisiana and the connections between his life and the novel. We learn, for instance, that he modeled the church in *A Lesson Before Dying* after the one he went to school in, and we are taken on a tour of this church by Winfrey and Gaines. Winfrey remarks how they "grew up similarly," but the overall effect of these

segments is in keeping with Oprah's role as personal guide. There is also a sense of sentimentality which is encouraged by the twangy, nondiegetic music played in the background while they walk on the grounds and sit on the house porch.

The selected participants for the actual dinner discussion, the order in which they initially spoke to read portions of their "letter to Oprah," and the amount of information we learn about them during the dinner discussion are Juan, a black man in his 30's, Susan, a white woman in her 50's who reveals that she "did not meet a black person until she was in college," Barbara, a black woman who is the mother of a 13 year-old son, and Kevin, a white man who lives in Chicago and is a "foster parent for African-American children."

One of the most important aspects of the discussion on race, is that while the participants brought up important issues when they read their letters, these issues were never elaborated upon in the discussion that followed. For example, Juan reads from his letter:

> Juan: When I first started reading this book, I assumed that Grant would ultimately be the one imparting wisdom. Not so. I think we all run into Jeffersons on a daily basis. We assume them to be less than. And every now and then they will say or do something that is so chalked full of profundity that we are amazed. I consider myself to be a Grant, but I always take time to listen to the Jeffersons of the world. Some of my most valuable lessons have come at their hands. ("Oprah's Book Club Goes to Louisiana" 10)

Some of the kinds of questions that would seem logical as a response to this statement would be, "what exactly it was it that Jefferson did or said in the novel, that was so profound?" What do you think about Jefferson's conscious decision to act like, and call himself a "hog" while in jail? What kinds of "lessons" did you learn? What kinds of lessons did Grant learn from Jefferson in the novel?" On the show, however, Winfrey does not ask these follow-up kinds of questions, (or at least we do not hear them if they *are* asked), as the structure of the show requires that she move immediately on to the next letter writer.

The implications of this inability to elaborate on one's own views and perspective cannot be underestimated. Even though the transition seems smooth because it is Oprah, the guide, who provides the transition, it must be recognized that the discussion on race is already made to be fragmented and undeveloped. The result is the implication that while we as viewers are asked to think about race, that thinking is expected to stop or go nowhere beyond what one *feels* as an individual. This is the result of introducing topics and then disrupting them or switching to a new topic too quickly and it is inadequate to the needs of people who wish to think critically about race relations and race problems in this country.

In the show over the novel *Paradise*, a similar interruption occurs, this time by Winfrey herself. As Morrison seeks to explain part of her philosophy on deliberately obscuring or making ambiguous racial information about the characters in her book, Winfrey diverts the discussion to a different topic:

Morrison: But the point is when you—you're right, but the point is you do have to know them as individuals. That was why the racial information was withheld, because when you know their race, what do you know?

Several Members of Group: Nothing.

Morrison: You don't know anything.

Winfrey: One at a time. One at a time. The question is, are they dead or alive? OK. What is it?

Woman #1: I'd say they're both. They're neither dead nor alive and they're dead and alive. They're somewhere in between. Not purgatory, but—yes, I think they're spirits—they're like spirits.

Winfrey: All right, we just—we've got to get the answer to this question.

Morrison: What is it? What question?

Winfrey: Are they dead or alive? ("Book Club" 16)

This interruption is extremely unfortunate because Morrison's assertion could have been an opening for an important discussion about race. When one knows a person's race, one does not know anything about that person. Yet, at the same time, one does know how that person can expect to be treated by a dominant (white) consciousness that distrusts, silences, or exploits blackness. Black people have consequences for their actions that white people need not think twice about. Either line of discussion could have been contested and could have revealed a more complex dialectic

surrounding race. Morrison's assertion could also have been explored. Did she have a political agenda for withholding racial information in the novel? If so, what is it? However, none of these lines of discussion are ever allowed to develop.

In the following statement by Barbara on the *A Lesson Before Dying* show, Barbara seeks to steer the conversation toward the idea that black people have distinctly different problems from those of white people and she gives a concrete example in her 8-year old son. Her comments, however, also receive only minimal follow-up by Winfrey:

> Barbara: ...what made the book so poignant for me was that I think most people recognize that Jefferson is a black mother's worst nightmare — you would never want that to happen to your child. But what I *don't* think they realize is that *Grant* is where most of us *are*. And for me, when I read that passage with Grant standing in Mr. Henri's kitchen, and wondering, "am I supposed to be the teacher that I am, or the nigger that he wants me to be?," then I know that that's what my son has to go through. And that's what made it so hard for me.
>
> Winfrey: Your 13 year old son?
>
> Barbara: My 13 year-old son.
>
> Winfrey: Yeah, you talked in your letter about how people used to pat him on the head...

> Barbara: Yeah, he's a sweet little guy — he loves to draw...and he's just a quiet, soft-spoken young man. And when he was little, everyone loved him, and people would pat him on the head, and now that he's 13, and he's 5'6, and he's lanky, then he's suddenly frightening. (11-12) (Winfrey then moves on to the next topic)

Barbara's comments are important in that she brings up the idea that young black men in 1997 might be experiencing the same kinds of issues and problems that Grant confronted in *A Lesson Before Dying*. Though the connection is never overtly stated, that is, that her son feels the way he does *because* he lives in a racist society, her comments do seem to lead us to ask: What is the experience of black people today as individuals? As a group? How does the experience of the black community in *A Lesson Before Dying* shed light on these questions? Her comments are also important in that they are the first and only time where black women are identified as a group, and one of the few times, other than when Winfrey addresses Kevin as a "white male," that people are placed in racial categories. Most of the time, throughout the conversation, groups are referred to as nebulous "we's" and "they's," obscuring who it is they (we) are talking about and who they (we) are addressing. This phenomenon is also true in Barbara's case because even though she identifies "us" as black mothers, it becomes obscured as she continues to speak because she is continually approached as a single individual, speaking only for herself, rather than about a problem facing black women.

The exchange that occurs between Winfrey and Kevin attempts to offer a means of approaching the issue of race relations in this country in 1997:

> Winfrey: (to Kevin) I was moved by your letter in particular, because I think it raised questions for you as a white male, that you might want to share with us...Because you consider yourself *not* to be a racist —
>
> Kevin: Oh, yeah. Well, I have African American children in my home. I'm a foster parent for *African American* children. I mean, I can say, I'm not a racist, Look, they're in my home! But then I thought, if Mr. Pinchot would have said, I'm not racist, I've got a colored woman in my kitchen cooking on my food! Which raises the other question of, you know, I live in Chicago, I get on the L-train, if four African American teenagers enter in one door, and four white teenagers enter the other, why do I assume that the whites are just friends hanging out, and the African Americans are gang members?
>
> Winfrey: (interrupting) Oh, the hairs raise on my head when you say that because that is the step, that is the step, that is the step that America has to take! (to Gaines) Do you agree?
>
> Gaines: I agree. ("Oprah's Book Club Goes to Louisiana" 12-13)

There are many important things to discuss about this passage. First, any discussion about what a "gang" is and who gets to label who with that term is completely blocked by Oprah's interruption. However, a discussion about this would have led the way to how the use of the term "gang" supports the dominant ideology because it

places black people within a discursive system controlled by whites. As Fiske explains in *Media Matters*, "The power to produce a category system and the power to determine which category fits which event is a material power that results from the social institutions that give it strength" (135). Black people who are defined as gang members have no control over or access to the discourse which labels them as members of a gang. Thus, the category "gang" is a white construct, not one by which a black person makes sense out of his or her own experience (136).

Secondly, it is never made clear what the "step" is that Winfrey refers to, nor how to achieve it. It does seem that consciously recognizing where one might be racist is a good first step, particularly for today where racism is more often insidious than overt, but it is not the *only* step, and it may or may not fight other ways racism is entrenched in our culture. By suggesting that something as complex as the current state of race relations in this country be approached by espousing a single "step," Oprah simplifies and de-politicizes what is actually a very charged and important national issue and debate.

Introducing a white guest such as Kevin, who either admits occasional racism or admits that he or she has lived a relatively sheltered life but has now realized important truths about race, is a familiar pattern on Oprah Book Club shows and deserves analysis. In Kevin's case, Kevin is praised for his worry that he may be racist by thinking that blacks are "gang members." In the only segment on *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day* when race is mentioned, the participant Sue, is encouraged by Winfrey to explain her confrontation or "discovery" of race:

> Winfrey: Now, Sue, wasn't it you who wrote about this - you- you wanted to read this book because your world is so white and so middle-class and so...
>
> Sue: Yes. Most of my friends are exactly like me. And that's the same way with every different, you know, category of people, usually. And so this is the only way I can find out about — I mean, Ava wouldn't want to be my friend. She'd be so bored in my life. And I there's no way I could go to Atlanta and, you know, hang around in the bars with Ava.
>
> Winfrey: And hook up with Ava.
>
> Sue: There's no way. We would not make a pair. So this is the only way you can really understand somebody and what they're going through and their background that got them to this point. ("Oprah's Book Club — Things Every Woman Should Know" 11)

This line of thought has potential for development if Sue is allowed to elaborate on Ava's "background." How is Sue both similar to and different from the character, Ava? In what ways? What is she basing her judgment on? How is reading helping her understand other perspectives? Instead, the effect of this interaction is self-serving. Sue is absolved by Oprah for her lack of knowledge about other races without any exploration of what a lack of knowledge about people from other classes or races means in this context.

Other times, such as in the following instance on the *Song of Solomon* show, a white person's own personal struggles are legitimized over the main topic of discussion (a black family's experience) simply because whites are willing to admit their awareness of their difference from blacks:

> Winfrey: And we fondly called Celeste Messer 'the rich white woman from Dallas. She's the mother of four girls who told us...
>
> Ms. Celeste Messer: "I've never been black; I've never been poor; I've never been abused. So what could I have in common with this group of odd characters? Too much, way too much. ("Behind the Scenes at Oprah's Dinner Party" 4)

What is striking about these kind of exchanges is that on every book club show in which race is discussed there is a white participant who is "absolved" in some way, either by finding too much in common with the characters or not enough, and who then is somehow able to speak more than any of the other participants (this is particularly true in Sue's case, who speaks much more than any other participant in the *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day* segment and for Celeste, who has a "breakdown" while Morrison reads a segment from *Song of Solomon* and then explains that she cried because the reading reminded her of her stillborn child.)

Once again, the overall effect of these interactions between Oprah and her white guests is that the discourse is redirected toward a discourse which benefits whites. Whites are allowed to seek their own resolutions to the issue without being

forced to examine their assumptions about race or the structural inequalities which keep blacks and other groups unequal to whites.

Immediately after the segment in which Kevin speaks about "gangs" and then Gaines agrees with Winfrey, Susan says:

> Susan: ...and it's at that personal level, I think. And I think that's what Oprah's done...that people who don't know her feel like they do — and I think that's a step — I think it's a really big step. (Oprah's Book Club Goes" 12)

Susan's statement, "that people who don't know her feel like they do" changes the issue of how white people make racist assumptions to how an unnamed group of "people who don't know" Oprah can come to "feel like they do..." This statement is important in that it reveals the extent to which the parasocial bond works: white people can be comfortable with Oprah and relieved of all of the guilt concerning racism at the same time through a kind of discourse which turns recognizable groups (i.e. white people who make racist assumptions about black people) into a generic, (seemingly) cohesive group of people who need only change their "feelings" or simply be aware of them, in order to ameliorate the "problem" of racism. This statement is thus important in revealing the ideology behind the parasocial bond when applied to race relations: As long as whites feel good about Oprah, we have no problem with race relations in this country.

Winfrey then responds to Susan:

> Winfrey: But I also think it's the reason why our show has done amazing things in terms of helping race relations in ways that people don't even recognize. But I also think it's why the whole barrier exists — because most people never come together and sit down at a table, you know, joined together, breaking bread together, and celebrate their differences and their likenesses, you know?
>
> Gaines: I agree with you. I think that's, uh, one of the things that's happening here tonight and we don't do this enough. We don't do it in our schools often enough — we don't do it in our neighborhoods often enough. ("Oprah's Book Club Goes" 12-13)

Oprah's and Gaines' response engage in a kind of therapeutic discourse based on individual change and healing: When Peck studied the discourse during the Oprah Winfrey Show's "Racism in 1992" series she found a similar phenomenon: "...the solution to racism comes from individuals choosing to understand, overcome ignorance and anger, be fair, seek healing, and love their fellow individuals — all of which are envisioned apart from questions of politics and power" (107). Susan's emphasis on the "personal level," Winfrey's desire to treat the issue in terms of community-building, along with Gaines' acquiescence are suggest change is possible through individual reform and enlightenment:

> Therapeutic discourse proposes that we change ourselves, our attitudes and behavior, without also recognizing that our identities and actions are determined by and respond to social conditions that will not change

> simply because we decide to interpret and handle them differently on an individual basis. (Peck 152)

Barbara, who insists earlier in the show that her son has to face similar problems with that of Grant in the novel suggests a means of escaping this kind of therapeutic discourse. She wants to explore the patterns that persist that enable white people to perceive her son as "frightening" in 1997. This kind of discourse would point the way for a very different discussion of race in which the very concept to be explored. Instead, by privileging white experience, absolving them of their "difficulties," praising them for their insights, and privileging therapeutic discourse over any other, the discussion of race on the show becomes largely innocuous.

Chapter 5: Gender: The Non-Helpful Conversation

After the first three book club tapings, Winfrey gave the press some general reasons for creating the club and choosing the books she had chosen so far: ...My idea is to reintroduce reading to people who've forgotten it exists...I chose these books because they are readable, poignant, thought-provoking. Our audience is predominantly female; all three books I've picked are strong stories with strong women" (qtd. in Gray 84). Judging from the books that have been chosen up to May of 1999, "strong stories with strong women" means books which contain a female protagonist who is faced with various kinds of difficulties in her life. My focus in this chapter is how these female characters make sense out of their dilemmas, and what kinds of solutions the novel provides for them, and how the corresponding Oprah Book Club show communicates a reading of the novel that fails to communicate to its audience the nature of the complex problems facing these women, thus missing its chance to help women define and articulate their own experience as a woman of particular class, race and social background.

What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day is told from the perspective of Ava Johnson, a black woman in her mid 30's who has just discovered she is HIV positive. Leaving her home in Atlanta, Ava travels to Michigan to spend some time with her older sister Joyce. During her stay there, she helps support Joyce in leading the "Sewing Circus," a group of young, black economically disadvantaged women who meet once a week in the basement of the local church.

The various tensions in the novel can be understood as a pull between hope and the ability to come to an awareness about social conditions on the one hand and despair, and a kind of disillusionment which quickly turns into a static acceptance of the "status quo" on the other. Joyce, is the most action-oriented and socially minded of all the characters:

> I looked at Joyce with her eyes shining and her voice full of urgency and passion of *the cause* and I remembered how much I liked growing up with her and Mitch. In most houses, when the kids wake up late at night and the grown folks are still up talking in low tones, the discussion is about money or trouble. In our house, it was about the design and distribution of a handbill, the best place to hold a meeting or stage a rally...I remember feeling lucky because I lived in a house where people didn't just fuss about what was wrong with the world. They tried to *fix it.* (42)

Joyce is able to cut through the forces that seek to silence her, such as the conservative right of her church through her persistence and willingness to seek other options when one door is closed to her. What guides her is a passionate conviction — an inner awareness and certainty that social problems are not going to disappear through blame or avoidance. When Ava asks her what the "Sewing Circle" is she replies,

> *TSC is you and me.* It's the wave of the future and they don't even know it. Most of the people up here think it's still 1958 and we're

> dealing with some high-spirited youngsters who are just sowing their wild oats. They can't see that this is something new. This isn't a phase they're going through. This is how they *are*. They don't know anything. They don't care about anything. They're selfish and mean and mad all the time...(37)

This kind of vision, which seeks to embrace all the members of the poor black community by the few who seek what is portrayed as honest social reform has a limitation: an inability and an unwillingness to deal with troubling black masculinity — the force that seeks to destroy everything Joyce and Ava work for and keep the community of Idlewild under black male control.

Except for Eddie, Ava's lover, the other two men in the novel, Frank and Tyrone, abuse drugs and are extremely violent and misogynistic. When Ava reaches Idlewild, one of the first things that happens involves a scene where a woman is battered by Frank, the man who has fathered their child. Frank and Tyrone continue to have an ominous presence throughout the novel, threatening Ava when they find out she is HIV positive, abusing their girlfriends, and throwing glass through Eddie and Joyce's windows. Throughout the novel, they are depicted as beyond hope, a force to be put up with because they have to, but with little hope for a solution. At one point Ava muses,

> Frank was gone. Destroyed. Tyrone probably was, too, in spite of his grandmother's grip on him. There was no place for them and they knew it at some deep level where all the bullshit messages about how

> bright their futures could be if they just applied themselves were filed away. They knew the real deal about drugs and jail and mean, unsafe sex and more death in neighborhoods than there had been in Vietnam. And they were *pissed.* Across the board *pissed.* But they're still our kids, so what the hell are we supposed to do? (180)

The desire to help these men is always overshadowed by the women's fear of their violence, as Ava herself thinks at one point, "I'd seen Frank hit that girl like he didn't care if he broke every bone in her face. I'd seen Tyrone smoking dope right behind his grandmother's back. It was tempting but foolish to focus on their vulnerability instead of your own" (75). This idea of women's powerlessness and vulnerability in the face of male violence is symbolized at the end of the novel by Frank's breaking the legs of Imani: a 2 month old "crack baby" whom Joyce has attempted to rescue from her abusive crack-addicted family.

The main site for negotiation and struggle is in the Sewing Circus, as Joyce struggles to articulate goals for the group that will be understood and accepted by them. Once the Sewing Circus is no longer allowed to meet in the church, she obtains a grant from the state to help fund it and works to articulate a statement of purpose for the group, as well as a list entitled "Ten Things Every Free Woman Should Know," a list which includes how to grow food and flowers, basic first aid/sex education and midwifery, child care, basic literary, math and computer skills, money management, spiritual practice, physical fitness, and self-defense. When Ava asks Joyce if she meant the use of a gun when she listed "self-defense," Joyce replies "no." Ava then

asks, "What are you talking about? Hand-to-hand combat?" Joyce replies, "I don't know what I'm talking about yet. I don't want to start teaching people to kill each other, but a lot of these women are involved with men who hit them as part of the regular routine. It's so ordinary, nobody even talks about it until somebody gets beaten so bad she has to go to the hospital. Then the whole discussion focuses on what she did to set him off like that" (159). This statement is important in that it illuminates more about what Joyce is up against: a community that views hitting women as normal. Thus, she is not only dealing with localized problems but an entire ideology that devalues women. It also points out the uncertainty and ambiguity that faces Joyce as she attempts to propose some kind of solution to the dilemma the young women of her community face.

The novel does not propose as many solutions as it does ask questions. How does one propose a concrete solution to such an entrenched, complex problem so that social change can be made possible? An ideal discussion, one might posit, would continue along this train of thought. However, the Oprah Book Club show on *What Look Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day* begins from an entirely different point-of-view and barely even touches on any of the issues found in the novel. Oprah begins the show by announcing that while we will soon see clips of the book discussion, she wants to begin the show with a brief "quiz" for the women in the audience. She then ask if they "know how much their spouse or significant other makes" and how many women in the audience "know how to cook a whole chicken." After a brief discussion with a woman who is willing to admit that she does not know how to cook

a whole chicken, Oprah introduces a brief montage sequence of women stating what they think "every woman should know." "Now we polled women online asking them what things they thought women should know, and we heard things funny and practical. Take a look at what y'all said every woman should know."

The poll involves a stream of responses from various women (all white) who give an array of responses such as "every woman should know the location to the deed to their house," "how to set up their VCR," "every woman needs to know her natural hair color," how to tell a real diamond from a cubic zirconia" "how to buy a proper bra and be fitted for one." Next, the audience is shown clips from "various experts" which include Susan Lucci (who stars as Erica Kane in "All My Children") who offers advice on how not to carry on a relationship, a woman in the studio audience who advises women never to dye their own hair, a woman who reminds women to be sure to put oil in a new car before driving it, and an author who advises women on the things they need to know when it comes to their sex lives. When the show returns after a commercial break, we are shown a clip of Ivana Trump who offers women advice about "getting a divorce." After this brief segment, Winfrey has an extended discussion with a woman in the studio audience concerning a the idea that "men do not change." "The man that you are dating is the man you're going to marry. Don't try to change him. Just look at it and don't think you're going to come home and change it because it's not going to fit any better when you get it home" ("Oprah's Book Club — Things" 7). Directly after this, we are shown a clip of Dr. Nancy Snyderman, who offers the viewers 10 medical facts women should know.

Throughout this dizzying array of "advice" the one important fact that is conveniently left out is *why* every woman needs to know any of it. Who is this nebulous every woman who needs to know all of this information? A closer look at this array of advice reveals that is really speaks to white middle-class interests. Not a single person who speaks in the entire sequence is non-white or refers to any kind of situation that could be perceived as "low-income."

In *Media Matters*, Fiske states, "To make sense of the world is to exhibit power over it, and to circulate that sense socially is to exert power over those who use that sense as a way of coping with their daily lives" (3). In *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day*, Joyce struggles to exert a kind of power over the young women of her community by providing them with some purpose and guidance. What is important about the novel is that Joyce is always working from a position of *struggle* — a struggle to make sense of the world in a different way from the forces of the status quo which seek to keep it the crime and violence ridden community that it is becoming. In such a situation every choice is important, particularly wording such as the wording that went into producing her list, 10 Things Every *Free* Woman Should Know. The choices made in the first 20 minutes of the Oprah Book Club show completely neutralizes this sense of struggle. By creating a generic "every woman," and by not allowing any exploration on why women feel they need to make the particular "choices" they make, they show actually caters to the dominant ideology, a system which thrives on allowing subordinate groups such as women and blacks, to

"spin their wheels" discussing topics which do nothing to help them improve their material conditions.

After these lengthy segments, Oprah introduces the taped book club discussion that we are about to watch: "For those of you not yet familiar with the book, *What Look Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day*, we should explain that the term 'sewing circus' comes from the "Crazy" book and refers to a group of low-income teen-age girls, many unwed mothers, who met in the church basement once a week, and they call themselves the sewing circus. Knowing this as you go in will help you get a better understanding of our chat this month, which we took to calling Oprah's sewing circus. Take a look."

The discussion soon turns to the list, "10 Things Every Free Woman Should Know." Sue, one of the discussion participants insists Cleage left out an important rule, but Winfrey interrupts her and insists they go through the entire list to see if everyone present "agrees" with it. When they get to the rule about midwifery, Oprah asks them, "could you deliver a baby if you had to?" They then decide to add their own rules to the list. It is at this point that Sue cuts back and adds her rule: the ability to say "no." Oprah immediately insists that she stole it from her, as it was her rule. They then discuss this rule, stating that it's "not just about sex," but "about other things."

Winfrey: Setting boundaries. I think that's key.

Unidentified guest: Oh, exactly, setting boundaries.

Unidentified guest: I just spoke to a group this morning, and the number-one thing that women - that creates stress for women is seeking approval and saying — not being able to say 'no' is because you think that you'll lose the approval.

Winfrey: That's right.

Unidentified guest: ...as opposed to holding onto your values.

Winfrey: We call it the disease to please.

This segment ends with an addition by one other participant, the second time the actual

original sewing circus is referenced:

Unidentified guest: Third one-thir-13. They should not just have basic literacy but read well and speak a foreign language. I think they have to have more than basic. It's just not enough.

Unidentified guest: Honey, this book...

Winfrey: But if you're just in the sewing circus...

Unidentified guest: Yes, if you're in the sewing circus...

Winfrey: ...you're going to try to get to basic.

Cleage: Do the first one first, then we'll get to more. It's just that first one...(Unintelligible comments from group) (Announcements)

("Oprah's Book Club — Things" 14)

There are several important things to point out about this segment. First, by not dwelling on the creation of the original sewing circus and creating her own instead,

Winfrey co-opts the novel and creates her own "sewing circus." This new group then enters into a vague discussion about how all women need to learn how to say "no" and are prevented from doing so because they need approval from others so badly. This is however, the only time when the needs of the original sewing circus are differentiated from the needs of a middle-class woman, thus drawing an important (albeit brief) distinction between different classes of women.

What is never allowed to enter into the discussion why and under what circumstances women of different backgrounds and classes need to define their problems differently. The kind of thinking Joyce would have concerning her situation within the novel is markedly different from the way the middle-class white women define their problems. This difference is never pointed out or explored. For example, when Joyce bursts into the "crack house" at the end of the novel to save Imani, she stands up to Frank, even though he points a gun at her head. She has said "no" to Frank and his values all along, but, as the novel suggest in its characterization of these young black men, they do not care and makes no difference. It is her strength, persistence and willingness to take concrete action in the face of grave danger that characterizes Joyce, not her ability to say "no." Rather than celebrate this strength, the book club show neutralizes it through a discourse which encourages "setting boundaries." The idea is thus emphasized that if *every* woman set boundaries *no* women would have problems.

In his work, *Critical Theory*, Terry Eagleton describes this way of articulating solutions to problems as the failure of liberal humanism. "What it means to be a

better person, then, must be concrete and practical — that is to say, concerned with people's political situations as a whole — rather than narrowly abstract, concerned only with the immediate interpersonal relations which can be abstracted from this concrete whole" (208). Interestingly, Joyce faces the same kind of dilemma that these women on the Oprah Book Club show face. When Joyce writes up her statement of purpose for the Sewing Circle, she struggles to articulate more of a political statement for the group:

> To create and nurture women who are strong, mentally, physically, and spiritually; free of shackles, both internal and external; independent of the control of other human beings and dogma, religious or political; women who can take care of themselves and their children financially, choose their lovers based on mutual respect, emotional honesty, and sexual responsibility; women who raise their children to be contributors, not predators or parasites. (157)

Ava looks over the draft and thinks to herself, "..the thing definitely needed a little less Karl Marx and a little more Oprah. I sat down at the kitchen table, picked up a pen, and wrote in the margin: to nurture free, independent women who can take care of themselves, choose their lovers wisely, and raise their children right" (157). Both Joyce's original draft and Ava's shortened revision lack concreteness, and it highlights both their dilemma and that of the show's participants: How does one articulate a coherent statement of purpose without falling prey to ideology? How

does one break free of this kind of liberal ideology when you enter into discourse with other people when that is what they are used to hearing and understanding?

There is one moment toward the end of the book club conversation when the discussion centers on an important problem raised in the book: male violence. The group briefly discusses the scene where Frank breaks the baby's legs and Joy quotes from the book, "I thought there was a limit we would reach...a cutoff, a damn bottom line. We almost used to brag about it. There were certain crimes we considered ourselves incapable of committing." Cleage then soon comments:

> We don't do that, as if there's some mysterious group of people that does it, and I think we do everything. We do all those horrible things that we used to say we don't do. And until we can admit that, we're at the place where we're doing those things, and we won't begin to put in place programs like the sewing circus. We won't do any of those because we'll be pretending that our daughters are okay, that all those little girls who are having babies really want to have babies; you know, that all those guys who are doing crack are just beyond us. There's nothing we can do. ("Oprah's Book Club — Things" 17)

This segment is an important change because it is the only time in the entire book club show where the "we" has changed from the nebulous "everywoman" to people who care about the problems of the black community — a "we" that puts problems of the black community at the center of the equation. In the process, the argument is transformed and made more complex: we must be aware of our assumptions, how we

think about the problems of lower-income groups, who are really at the mercy of the dominant system, who can or cannot give them aid.

Oprah then tackles the idea that "little girls who are having babies really want to have babies" by relaying her own personal experience:

> Winfrey: I remember growing up a sexually promis—promiscuous teen-ager not even understanding what was happening to me. You know?
>
> Unidentified guest: Yeah.
>
> Unidentified guest: And, actually, they've missed nurturing and to know what it is to be hugged by a man who just loves you because he's your dad.
>
> Winfrey: That's right. Because so many girls...
>
> Unidentified guest: They haven't had that, so they mistake it.
>
> Winfrey: ...have been abused by the boyfriends and the - you know...
>
> Unidentified guest: Yeah, or never had any kind of nurturing.
>
> Cleage. Yeah. Or there's nobody to help them, even when they don't mistake it, even when they know it's wrong...
>
> Unidentified guest: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.
>
> Unidentified guest: That's right.
>
> Cleage: ...even when they know that it's brutality. They don't know where to go to get some help. They don't have anybody to talk

to because everybody that they know is going through the same kind of experience, so that's part of it, too.

Winfrey: So it feels normal. ("Oprah's Book Club" 18)

This segment is perhaps the most important segment so far in that it introduces the idea that women have to fight against a system that perceives forced sex as normal. It is very similar to the discussion Joyce has with Ava, when she describes how domestic violence against women in the community of Idlewild is considered "normal." In the statements that follow, however, one participant is able to completely alter the discussion and turn what could have been a most productive conclusion into a very confusing one:

Unidentified guest: So it feels normal.

Cleage: exactly.

Winfrey: So it feels normal.

Unidentified guest: It feels ordinary on a crazy day.

Cleage: Exactly, because there isn't anybody like Joyce saying, 'This isn't how it works.'

Unidentified guest: Feels like...

Winfrey: Ord —Ordinary on a crazy day.

Unidentified guest: Ordinary on a crazy day. Yeah.

Winfrey: Every day feels crazy.

Unidentified guest: Crazy, yeah.

Winfrey: That's another book, Polly.

Unidentified guest: That's what I said. What I've been thinking was crazy is really ordinary. And I have to get crazy in order to really address the issues. I said I'm living this life that I'm — you know, the little things that we complain about. And that's why my — my letter said something about, 'I've been living this ordinary life and calling it crazy.

Winfrey: Mm-hmm. And that's what books do for us that the evening news does not...

Unidentified guest: That's right.

Unidentified guest: Right.

Winfrey: And here's to Pearl Cleage and here's to books; "What Looks Like Crazy..."

Group: (in unison) "...on an Ordinary Day." (18-19)

(Winfrey then returns to the studio audience and introduces Art, her personal chef, who is sharing a recipe for cosmopolitan punch.)

The entire book is told from the point-of-view of Ava, a young black woman who is HIV positive, yet her name is not mentioned even once throughout the entire book club conversation. By focusing on her predominantly white middle-class audience, the book club show erases any exploration of black female subjectivity that the novel so painstakingly attempts to create. Moreover, by coopting the interior terms of the novel, ideas and concepts that must be explained and explored *on their own terms*, the book club show co-opts the book in favor of a liberal humanist

ideology which offers no concrete advice for any woman regardless of race or class. Who are Ava and Joyce and what do they have to teach us? How do you accurately describe the social forces that impinge upon people so that they will listen and take heed? What concrete results are you looking for and how do you get there? What are the various kind of struggles women of varying classes face and how can we best articulate them? These are the kinds of questions that cannot be asked on an Oprah Book Club show. Rather than pointing us in the right direction, after this book club show, we are more distracted and confused than ever.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Oprah's Book Club is a manifestation of a larger cultural system that is specific to the 1990's, but has its roots in the Book-of-the-Month Club, a previous middle-class movement. Oprah's role on the show as "meta-encoder" is made possible by the specific means through which she caters to and refuses to alienate her white middle-class audience and her commercial supporters. Under this role, Oprah uses her position to interrupt participants at her leisure and channel the discourse along therapeutic lines, allowing some participants more of a chance to elaborate than others. Under this model, is resistance really possible and what form might it take?

By thinking of the discourse that is produced on the show as a process through which some minority interests struggle to be heard over other kinds of interests of the dominant or majority consciousness, we can more readily discuss when and where resistance is possible. One of the major ways resistance becomes possible on the Oprah Book Club shows is by what Peck defines as "identifying with a social collectivity rather than obeying the code of the individual" ("Talk" 111). When Cleage comments about the problems facing African-Americans in this country as a problem of "we," rather than "I"and when Barbara articulates her problem as speaking for all "black mothers" we are given a brief picture of people who have varying problems and issues depending on their place within the a system which oppresses them, rather than as simply an individual with an individual thought to share. However, unless this line of thinking is allowed space for elaboration, it is of

course swallowed up again by the dominant discourse, in which individual feeling and the personalization of problems overwhelms this promising alternative.

Occasionally, resistance comes from Oprah herself, who has the capability, though she rarely recognizes it, of challenging therapeutic discourse. The following exchange occurred during the opening segments of the *Paradise* book club show, in which Oprah addressed members of the studio audience who had trouble following Morrison's prose style:

> Woman #6: Oprah, I was lost because we'd start the book at one time and then you end at another time. You know, 19—1820 here and 1970 here. You go back and forth.
>
> Winfrey: OK, that's why you were lost. What, you were lost, too?
>
> Unidentified Woman #7: I was lost because I came into—I really wanted to read the book and love it and learn some life lessons; and when I got into it, it was so confusing I questioned the value of a book that is that hard to understand...
>
> Woman #7: ...and I just quit reading it...because I really thought I was gonna get something really big out of this book.
>
> Winfrey: OK, OK. OK, OK. I promise you that when you—if you listen to this whole show today you will go back in and it will be so much more gratifying to you 'cause it will just—because there—I have an interview coming up right now with Toni Morrison. There are two key things that she says. First of all, you have to open yourself up.

You don't read this book just with your head. You have to open your whole self up. It's a whole new way of experiencing reading and life. Second of all, what you say, she makes this point very clearly, so when you hear it—I'm just—you know, re-emphasizing what she's going to say—is that when you go into a town and you are a new person in town and you're getting to know the people in the town, do you know everything all at once?

Woman #7: No.

Winfrey: When you're standing in front of the mirror in the morning and you're brushing your teeth, are you just thinking about brushing your teeth or are you thinking about what's gonna happen later that day, or what happened six weeks ago, or what happened five years ago? The book is written the way life happens. You don't learn everything in a linear fashion. So when you open yourself up to know that, then you experience the reading a lot differently than you do other reading material, because it's about life.

Woman #7: You should have told us that. It would have been easier for me. I w...

Winfrey: But I'm telling you now.

Woman #7: OK. I'll go home and...

Winfrey: I'm telling you now, that you have to open yourself. It's like a life experience. It's getting to know people, getting to know people in a town. It's not everything laid out...

Woman #7: No, that makes sense.

Winfrey: Does that make sense?

Woman #7: Perfectly, yeah. ("Book Club — Toni Morrison" 3-4)

This passage is very striking because it highlights one way the parasocial relationship works: she expects to get something "big" out of the book because Oprah recommended it and the show has a history of communicating "life lessons" directly to its viewers. She feels that she must immediately "check-in" with Oprah because she has not gotten the reading immediately (hence, a "glitch" in the code.) Rather than re-connecting this failed link by facilitating her need to get "life lessons" out of the book, Oprah focuses on the need for an understanding of the book on its own terms. Toward the end of this show, a clip is shown in which 25 people are gathered in one room to discuss the book. The overall effect of this clip is cacophony: rather than getting one straight-forward individual reading, a multitude of confused voices interrupt one another to make their points. This particular show, thus provides the viewer with the most amount of "questions" and the least amount of "answers."

A final way in which resistance might become possible is through local Oprah's Book Clubs that have formed across the country as a result of Oprah's televised book club to develop a more counter and revolutionary type of discourse among the members. In chapter 2, I asked, "Can local groups, after viewing an

Oprah book club reading make different constructions and seek different possibilities from that which viewers consume via television? If so, how?" After attending several local Oprah Book Club meetings in the Knoxville area and distributing a questionnaire (see Appendix), I have determined that these local book club members do not deviate significantly from the dominant discourses established on the show, but do question it's structure and approach. For example, one book club participant notices the structure of the show and wants more attention placed on reader/writer discussion:

> The best Oprah shows that cover the current book are the ones that the entire show is devoted to the book discussion!!! I want to hear what the people chosen to be on the show have to say and to learn why they were chosen. I also enjoy hearing what the author has to say about why he or she wrote the book. I really hate it when the book discussion is only half the show or even less!! I have e-mailed Oprah several times to express this, but nothing changed.

A majority of the participants expressed a desire for the Oprah book clubs shows to devote more attention to the actual "text" of the book: "Sometimes, Oprah doesn't spend enough time on the book being discussed." "I don't like that she doesn't devote as much time to discussing some books as others." "Sometimes, she doesn't really cover the book but rather has people tell about their own experiences."

One participant, when asked if any of the Oprah book clubs impacted your life beyond just the pleasure of reading a good book, responded:

> I can't say they have changed my life any. They just bring knowledge about many different kinds of people in different situations at different time periods and tell a story about people's lives. From that I can sometimes relate events to something I have experienced and sometimes I compare how different people deal with their circumstances in different ways. I may have a better understanding or appreciation of how other people think and act, but no, I have not found them to be a self-help psychology as I think some people do.

These responses all reveal an awareness or dissatisfaction with the show, and can be potential sources for resistance if more attention is paid to developing alternative discourses (either by paying more attention to the text in the actual club setting, or voicing their concerns about finding individual "self-help" through books and whether that should be their purpose or not.)

However, it is not surprising that they are not more revolutionary in nature, given what they are up against. Oprah is important to her reading viewers now because they need the sense of community so much that they easily fall into a simulated version which promises not only connectedness (to Oprah) but affirms their own subject position and relationship to society in the late 1990's. As I have shown however, this relationship promises to keep everyone in a state of perpetual historical blindness, fragmentation and personal isolation.

Resistance is only possible with a strong ideological critique, a willingness to overthrow the entire model for one that is more genuinely political and democratic.

This becomes possible first by noticing the "glitches" in the transaction process from host to viewer, when one becomes aware of alternative ways of articulating solutions to problems that are social, and when one becomes aware of how our own personal lives are "framed" and mapped out for us without our complete control or consent. Dissatisfied, many people accept one's lot and opt for a pseudo community (as many Oprah Book Club members have done.) This is not surprising given that there really is not much support for any revolutionary movements on the layperson level. However, some people can still become dissatisfied with a reading and notice what things are not mentioned or explored, what groups are not allowed to speak, what narratives are not allowed to be understood. It is only then that they can think our way out of the system and be in a position to propose new and more empowering ways of understanding the individual's complex relationship to the social.

Bibliography

Bibliography

Baudrillard, Jean. "The Ecstasy of Communication." *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. Ed. Hal Foster. Port Townsend: Bay P, 1983. 126-134.

"Behind the Scenes at Oprah's Dinner Party." *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. National Broadcasting Company. 4 Dec. 1996. Transcript.

"Book Club -- Toni Morrison." *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. National Broadcasting Company. 6 Mar. 1998. Transcript.

Eagleton, Terry. *Critical Theory: An Introduction*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota P, 1983.

Fiske, John. *Media Matters: Everyday Culture and Political Change*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota P, 1996.

Franklin, Nancy. "The Picture of Grief." *The New Yorker* 2 Aug. 1999: 78-80.

Gaines, Ernest. *A Lesson Before Dying*. New York: Knopf, 1994.

Gray, Paul. "Winfrey's Winners." *Time* 2 Dec 1996: 84.

Haag, Laurie. "Oprah Winfrey: The Construction of Intimacy in the Talk Show Setting." *Journal of Popular Culture* (Spring 1993), 115-121.

Hennessy, Rosemary. *Materialist Feminism and the Politics of Discourse*. New York: Routledge, 1993.

Peck, Janice. "Talk About Racism: Framing a Popular Discourse of Race on Oprah Winfrey." *Cultural Critique* (Spring 1994), 89-126.

_____. "The Mediated Talking Cure: Therapeutic Framing of Autobiography in TV Talk Shows" *Getting A Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography*. Eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis P, 1996. 134-155.

Radway, Janice. *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle Class Desire*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina P, 1997.

"Oprah's Book Club." *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. National Broadcasting Company. 31 Mar. 1999.

"Oprah's Book Club" *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. National Broadcasting Company. 22 May 1998.

"Oprah's Book Club Goes to Louisiana." *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. National Broadcasting Company. 27 Oct. 1997. Transcript.

"Oprah's Book Club: Things Every Woman Should Know." *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. National Broadcasting Company. 28 Oct. 1998. Transcript.

Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson, eds. *Getting a Life: Everyday Uses of Autobiography*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis P, 1996.

White, Mimi. "Ideological Analysis and Television." *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled*. Ed. Robert C. Allen. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina P, 1992. 161-202.

Appendix

Appendix

Davis-Kidd Oprah Book Club Questionnaire

1. How long have you participated in the Davis-Kidd Oprah Book Club?

2. Briefly describe your reading habits. How has your involvement in Oprah's Book Club affected your reading habits?

3. Which Oprah Book Club selection have you enjoyed reading the most and why?

4. Which Oprah Book Club selection have you enjoyed reading the least and why?

5. What do you like best about the shows which cover the Oprah Book Club selection? What do you like least about them?

6. What do you like best about Oprah herself? What do you like least (if anything) about Oprah herself?

7. What do you like most about the Knoxville Davis-Kidd Oprah Book Club? Is there anything you wish could be improved about it?

8. Is there anything you wish could be discussed in the book club meetings (Davis-Kidd) that isn't?

9. Is there anything you wish could be discussed or treated in a different way during the discussion on the Oprah Winfrey show?

10. Do you find that the environment at Davis-Kidd is friendly and helpful to you? If so, in what way?

11. Have any of the Oprah Book Club books (or any of the book club shows in television) impacted your life beyond just the pleasure of reading a good book? If so, how?

Vita

Susan Noel Hilderbrand was born on December 25, 1973 in Gastonia, North Carolina. She then lived in Virginia for approximately four years before moving to Kingsport, Tennessee with her family in March of 1979. Susan graduated from Sullivan South High School in May of 1992 and attended Tennessee Technological University in Cookeville, Tennessee for five years. During this time she was very active in the TTU Honors program and Women's Center. She received the University Academic Scholarship and numerous other honors and graduated magna cum laude *in cursu honorum* with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English in 1997. Susan then received a graduate teaching assistantship at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville where she will receive her Master's degree in English in December of 1999.

Her greatest accomplishments during this time were completing her thesis on Oprah's Book Club and meeting her future husband, Jonathan Neil Wike, whom she will marry on September 11, 1999.

Upon graduation, Susan plans to further develop her writing career by publishing a book or article on Oprah's Book Club. She also hopes to find work in writing, editing or teaching and enjoy life with her friends and family.