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Oprah Winfrey: Rescuing, Rewriting, and Wrecking Cultural Ideology

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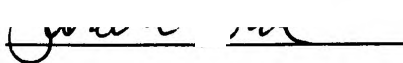
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**Oprah Winfrey:
Rescuing, Rewriting, and Wrecking Cultural Ideology**

By

Sarah Rowe

June 1999

Oprah Winfrey: Rescuing, Rewriting, and Wrecking Cultural Ideology

My mother has a room of her own, a small mildewing room on the far side of the basement. It contains a heater, a sewing machine, an ironing board, a rocking chair, and a television with a VCR. Every Sunday my mother enters this room, shuts the door, turns on the heater and settles back in her rocking chair and watches *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. To my mother, Oprah has become a religion. The ceremonies of repentance, confession, and contrition are performed every Sunday in front of that television. Has Oprah become the postmodern opiate of the masses?

While some people maintain that books and television exist simply to entertain the populace, we have known for a long time there are messages within the stories that the media transmits. On the surface these media may look as if they are simply telling an engaging story, yet that story is inevitably political. The media's messages are a part of everyone's acculturation. Sociologists tell us that the media influence modern human's socialization into cultural and identity formations. Feminists, who also recognize this fact, have often pointed to the anti-woman sentiments couched in everyday entertainment. Oprah Winfrey, a widely influential American talk show "hostess," claims to challenge these racial and patriarchal messages, mixing social commentary with entertainment. However, a few recent articles discuss how she actually does the opposite, rescuing a damaged cultural ideology.¹ One instance of this

¹ Cultural ideology is a complex term with many meanings that are all interrelated, yet sometimes contradictory. I use it in a somewhat Marxian manner as "a false consciousness that fails to recognize the true motives underlying its view of the world." I agree with Gramsci in that it is a critical part of hegemony. In my own words it is a set of beliefs, myths, constructions, by which a culture operates, maintain the current order. I will mainly examine the gender and race ideologies of dominant American culture.

is found in Debbie Epstein and Deborah Lynn Steinberg's article "All Het Up!: Rescuing Heterosexuality on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*." They state that "the twin frameworks of therapy and presumed heterosexuality have all but ruled out the possibility for questions to be raised about power relationships and patterns of social inequality" (Epstein and Steinberg 110). Epstein and Steinberg are a part of a group of writers who believe that the Oprah phenomenon reinforces the dominant cultural ideology, rather than challenging it. This paper will explore both sides of this argument (whether the Oprah phenomenon rescues or wrecks cultural ideology) through an examination of the entire Oprah phenomenon. After close readings of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, Oprah's public persona, and *Oprah's Book Club*, I found that the Oprah phenomenon both problematizes racist and patriarchal ideologies and normalizes them, (what I describe as "endorsement/problematization"). I theorize that the tension between these two views creates a space for viewers to become active auditors of popular culture.

When I use the term "Oprah phenomenon," I am referring to a triad, which together constitutes the public manifestations of Oprah Winfrey's influence. What I term the Oprah phenomenon consists of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, Oprah as a constructed public persona, and *Oprah's Book Club*. To simplify matters, when I use the term Oprah, I am referring to the public construction. Research has already been done on both *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and elements of Oprah's constructed self, but I have not been able to locate any work about the *Oprah's Book Club* books. Although I will give my own reading of her the show and her persona, I will concentrate on the books, since they are the least studied.

For those who may not be familiar with the Oprah phenomenon, I will start with a brief history. Rather than going back to the beginnings of the Oprah story, I will begin with the creation of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. It started as a local talk show in Chicago about sixteen years ago. The show was in the same time slot as Phil Donahue, by this

time a nationally televised innovator of the talk show format in America. Donahue is the person credited with making issues previously deemed private a matter of public concern and debate. Issues such as domestic violence were suddenly discussed openly. This talk show “host” is also credited with making the audience’s response as valuable as the expert’s theories; he allowed the audience to talk back. Phil Donahue credited women’s conscious raising groups with providing the structure and ideology behind his show (Masciarotte 90), which brought a feminist aspect to the talk show genre.

To begin to examine generally the American talk show we should look at the structure of the show as aired. A talk show has a “host” who frames the show and holds the microphone. There is also a large in-studio audience, over which the camera frequently pans. This audience is constantly addressed and allowed to speak back. The shows generally revolve around a single issue. Talk show participants, whose main claim to expertise is personal experience, are brought on the show and set on stage. The host encourages them to tell their stories and gives the audience “facts” about the issue. Occasionally, a guest expert, normally someone who has some sort of formal training, is brought on either to give background on the issue or to “help” those on stage and in the audience. The general set of the show is a stage with several chairs and in front of this stage is the audience. The camera switches back and forth between close-ups of the host, pans over the audience, and focus shots on the guests.

Oprah Winfrey’s local Chicago show grew in popularity until she not only gained more viewers than Donahue but was also offered a national contract, which she accepted. As a host Oprah employs a much more personal style than Donahue. This helped to further erode the general distinction between public and private life. Oprah does this primarily through sharing personal stories with the audience. Masciarotte discusses how this distinguished Oprah from Donahue: “Oprah’s storytelling is a

significant difference between her and Donahue. Donahue constantly refuses to discuss his 'personal' life and looks embarrassed when ever the audience or featured discussants bring it up" (Masciarotte 94). Critics point to this deconstruction of the public/private binary as either a positive or negative feature. The critics who believe this deconstruction is negative often state how the deconstruction of the private/public binary will destroy society as we know it. However, a few critics with historical perspective point out the erosion between public/private is nothing new: the novel, the film, the radio, and many other media have all been accused of deconstructing the fabric of society.

It is through the medium of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* that Oprah was born. Oprah herself is an important component of the show. She constructs herself as the personal friend of all viewers. The way she reveals information about herself follows the unique manner in which females build female-female friendships, as Laurie L. Haag in her article "Oprah Winfrey: The constructions of Intimacy in the Talk Show Setting," discusses. Haag maintains that female-female friendships are different in that women tend to discuss intimate personal details about who they are, while men tend to talk about what they do. Also the way in which Oprah touches her guests and audience members is a part of female-female intimacy. Later in the paper I will examine how Oprah functions in terms of the endorsement/problematization of cultural ideology.

The Oprah Winfrey Show has changed since the days it first premiered on television. The openly proclaimed manifesto of the show is no longer just to entertain the masses with spectacle. In the last three years Oprah has crusaded to "uplift" and "improve" all the viewers, while entertaining them. Generally, what she means by this is she will now attempt to eliminate the cultural inequalities which she perceives as needing "fixing" (racism, sexism, lookism² etc.) improve economic conditions, and bring

² Lookism is defined as discrimination based on physical appearance. People who are said to be over weight or to be "ugly" are being discriminated against on the basis of looks.

a little “high” culture (i.e. literature, arts, and so on) to her audience through her show. It sounds very similar to notions expressed in nineteenth century Women’s Club Movements and Black Rights movements. Nowhere was this new agenda more apparent than in *The Oprah Winfrey Show’s* creation of a new feature, *Oprah’s Book Club*. In September of 1996 Oprah announced that she was founding a book club designed to “start America reading.” For this book club, she selects fictional books, which she believes fit within her show’s framework of “education, enlightenment and entertainment.”

Oprah’s Book Club continues to operate as a segment of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. At intervals ranging from one to four months Oprah selects a book, such as December of 1998’s selection, *Where the Heart Is*, by Billie Letts. She announces the selection on her show, which features a discussion of the previous book club selection. Oprah then encourages her audience to read the new book and to write the show about their personal experience with the text. Six of those who write in are selected to attend a special dinner with the author that is aired as a segment of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. At the end of that segment, Oprah announces the next book to be read by her book club. Every *Oprah’s Book Club* selection has made the *New York Times Best Seller’s* list after it was announced. Obviously her opinion carries a lot of economic weight.

Now that we have the necessary background on just what the Oprah phenomenon is and its structure let’s examine the endorsement/problematization patterns of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Several researchers have critiqued *The Oprah Winfrey Show* for its cultural content, the first of whom is Gloria-Jean Masciarotte in her article “C’mon Girl: Oprah Winfrey and the Discourse of Feminine Talk.” Masciarotte theorizes that the show operates under a continuous string of narratives and debates, which means that with the issue under consideration there is not a possibility for conclusion: the issue is “scattered.” Corinne Squire attempts to find a few controlling

ideas of those narrative strings in her article, "Empowering Women? *The Oprah Winfrey Show*." In her analysis of the show she finds that the show does present some feminist arguments about "women's lower economic and social status, men's difficulties in close relationships, women's difficulties in combining paid work and parenting, the suppression of women's sexuality, and men's physical and sexual abuse" (Squire 66). She also feels that, in the context of the larger media, which rarely tells affirming African-American stories, Oprah's featuring of a broad range of different African-Americans (i.e. African-Americans from all classes, family structures, and social backgrounds) is a step toward problematizing dominant African-American stereotypes (Squire 71). But Squire has a problem with too many accounts of powerless women. She states, "the show's repeated accounts of victimization often seem to overwhelm them [other non-victim stories]" (Squire 67). She also acknowledges the privileging of heterosexism as a large flaw in the show (Squire 71). It is this emphasis on heterosexism that Debbie Epstein and Deborah Lynn Steinberg pick up on in their articles, the first of which is "Twelve Steps to Heterosexuality? Common-Sensibilities on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*." In this article they respond directly to Corinne Squire's article. They state that the framing of the show, the presumption of heterosexuality, and the "discourse of therapy" undermine the show's potential toward critique of the status quo and ultimately leads to endorsement of cultural ideology.

There is never any questioning of the presumptions either that (virtually) everyone is heterosexual or that heterosexuality is 'normal,' 'benign' and 'desirable'. Thus, while the programme could be said to provide a critique of modes of heterosexual relating, it does so without problematizing the institution of heterosexuality. (Epstein and Steinberg 277)

They also find that the discourse of therapy, the idea that one should try to "heal" or "fix" whatever is "wrong" in the relationship they are in, or "heal oneself" so one can create a new relationship, reinforces the inequalities in heterosexual relationships. We can see it

as a part of an American ideology in which women are told they are responsible for all emotional work. They contend that the individual is forced to resolve her problem within the current system, rather than challenge the system itself. Epstein and Steinberg find that on the show, where there are specific abusers present, such as with domestic abuse, the abusers are never critiqued, nor is the system of power that enables such abuse.

After watching a number of *The Oprah Winfrey Show's* episodes, including five I read closely, and reading television theory, I have found that the space for deconstruction of cultural ideologies is made in the tension between an endorsement of and challenges to dominant ideologies. My analysis is based on a far smaller sample than these studies; still I think we can begin to see how Squire's endorsement and problematization ideas more accurately reflect the content of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.

Debbie Epstein and Deborah Lynn Steinberg, in order to reach their conclusions, set up a binary: the show must either endorse the dominant hegemony or it problematizes it. They allow for no middle ground. When we deconstruct binaries, we tear down power relationships. Patricia Mellencamp in her book *High Anxiety: Catastrophe, Scandal, Age, and Comedy* proposes that television uses both sides of an argument, "Television embodies contradictions—rather than an "either/or" logic, one of "both/and," an inclusive logic of creation/cancellation." Or as she says later "inconsistent and equivocal rather than direct and clear" (Mellencamp 5). She sites Lucille Ball as an example of this: "Lucy spent the majority of her show attempting to escape her domestic situation and the final moments of the show being happily reconciled to it" (Mellencamp 6). The nature of Oprah's talk show means she will never reach an ultimate conclusion, as Masciarotte reveals. At the end of each show Oprah wraps things up, promises us salvation of *self*, but we know tomorrow is another show, another problem. Her wrap up does not negate the discussion, which featured a number of voices; rather, those voices

are left to rattle around on their own. It is the nature of the medium; it is a never-ending narrative. There may be moments when the show does endorse the dominant culture's ideology, but there are moments when it is challenged as well. Epstein and Steinberg's categorical statement that the show is unfailingly heterosexist, and as a result of this, endorses the power structures of dominant culture, is overly simplistic. Epstein and Steinberg seem to be ignoring all other facets of our cultural ideology. Even if the show is generally heterosexist, it may still challenge the power systems and ideologies surrounding racism, and to a degree, sexism. After all the host of the show is an African-American woman who grew up poor in America, not the most likely candidate to unequivocally endorse cultural ideology.

The way *The Oprah Winfrey Show* deals with racial matters alone is enough to undermine Epstein and Steinberg's thesis, as I found out when I watched one of my episodes. The November 11, 1998 episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* was on the "black" descendants of Thomas Jefferson. This show completely deconstructed the race binary, revealing that race is actually a social construction rather than a biological fact. On stage were two sides of Thomas Jefferson's descendants. On one side of the stage were the "black " descendants of Sally Hemmings, Thomas Jefferson's slave-mistress. On the other side of the stage were the "white" descendants of Martha Jefferson. At one point in the show Oprah focused on another group of Jefferson's descendants in the audience. All who looked at this group assumed they were descendants of Martha and Thomas Jefferson because this family appeared "white." Oprah revealed that they were actually from the Sally Hemmings' side. Then a discussion ensued about the construction of race, which included a reference to both appearance and the one-drop rule, which states if you have one drop of African-American blood (one ancestor no matter how far back) then you are "black." Oprah closed the discussion by saying, "How do you know I'm not in the family?" and the answer by then was that no one did.

Another racial issue raised on the show dealt with power issues in racial discrimination. The white side has always been accepted as actual descendants of Thomas Jefferson, while the black side has been denied. The white descendants pointed out that no one had ever questioned whether they were descendants of Thomas Jefferson, yet they had only oral history to back up their story, the same exact evidence the black side had until the descendants of Sally Hemmings did DNA testing. Ironically, now the "black side" of the family has more "scientific" proof of their ancestry than the "white side."

Through the topic of Jefferson's descendants this show also dealt with how the romanticization of Jefferson and Hemming's relationship distorts power issues. Many people pointed out that the relationship between any black woman and her master was inherently coercive. She never had free will in choosing that relationship, so those that romanticize it as a love match are uninformed about the power relationships of slavery. We witness numerous intelligent discussions of power relationships, racism, and *The Oprah Winfrey Show's* challenge to dominate culture's ideologies in this episode, explicitly contradicting Epstein and Steinberg's thesis.

Another place we see the gender cultural ideology problematized and Epstein and Steinberg's thesis undermined is in one of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* episode's on spousal abuse. Debbie Epstein and Deborah Lynn Steinberg, to back up their thesis, use an example of an *Oprah Winfrey Show* episode that centered on spousal abuse. In their example, the person who suffered the spousal abuse was blamed for their victimization, while the power issues of Abuse were completely ignored. I witnessed an episode, which aired on the 22 of May in 1998 that also dealt with domestic abuse. Yet on the show I witnessed, this did not occur. Instead they deconstructed the notion of blaming the victim entirely. In the context of a discussion surrounding one of the *Oprah's Book Club* books, the show examined the issue of blaming the victim. In that discussion they demonstrated how abuse is never the victim's fault and problematized

the question "why didn't you just leave," and discussed issues of power. First the power of blame inherent in that question was demonstrated. The women in abusive situations feared that if they divorced their husbands their private abuse would be made public and they would be blamed through the question, "Why didn't you leave sooner?" As one of the women says, "REGINA: 'I felt judged. And I think what I had to do was get beyond...' OPRAH: 'Because people do judge you. Right.' REGINA: 'Yes, they do'"(Oprah's Book Club 5-22-98). This blame contributes to the system of domination. Regina continued to explain how she internalized that blame and tried to "just be a better person." But she discovered she was not the problem: "I thought it was gonna get better, but it didn't matter" (Oprah's Book Club 5-22-98). Oprah immediately problematizes blaming the woman for the abuse. The show demonstrated that in many instances the women do not do anything to provoke their husbands, and the show also demonstrates that society's blaming the women for abuse reinforces the system of abuse.

After demonstrating that the question itself contributes to the abuse, *Oprah's Book Club* guests show us the internal power structures of abuse, again through addressing the question "why didn't you leave" directly. First, Oprah framed the discussion with that stereotypical question: "Why didn't you leave after the first time he hit you, after the fourth, after the first year of beatings?" As she does on other shows, Oprah is setting up the question to be torn down, which it is by the survivors of domestic violence. "SYDNEY: 'That is why the question is so significant---'Why don't you just leave?' Who are you to—to judge me why I stay'...REGINA: 'They make it so simplistic, like just leave, just do it.' SYDNEY: 'Yeah....'" Then the guests discuss the emotional damage that occurs in domestic abuse:

DONNA: they have manipulated you so badly emotionally that you just don't believe that you deserve any better. I said that I spent the first 10 years of my marriage believing it was my fault, the next five convincing

myself that it wasn't and the next five convincing myself to leave.
(*Oprah's Book Club* 5-22-98)

They also discussed financial reasons women must stay, which included a critique of the gender inequalities in the American economic system. Additionally, they commented on dominant cultural ideology which states children should be raised in a two parent home and constructs women as responsible for keeping that home together. And they sum it up by saying, "You leave an entire life." This discussion that insisted abuse is not the victim's fault nor is it their fault that they did not leave earlier. The show exposed a number of power systems in our society, all of which began with the destruction of the question "why didn't you leave?"

Oprah, on another occasion, did blame the victim. On a show that aired March 16, 1999 the main theme was how fear keeps one from being wealthy. Oprah categorically stated that fear and shame alone keep poor people from being "financially healthy." That argument completely denies all the capitalist power structures that surround poverty. It made poverty a sign of fear and shame, rather than fear and shame a product of a society which bases personal worth on material possessions and monetary income. Oprah did allow this side a voice. Oprah frequently spots disbelievers or believers in her audience and asks them to share their experience or view with everyone. Not only does this deconstruct the power of the featured expert, it allows for just the kind of contradiction Mellencamp applauds, where television is a continuous dialogue of conflicting voices. In this case the woman in the red sweater stood up and said the expert should "get real." She said when you only have so much money from a paycheck, that is all the money you have. Fear and shame are not keeping you poor, the size of your paycheck is. While she did not bring up the power issues of poverty, she did successfully challenge the expert's analysis.

The Oprah Winfrey Show's selection of random in-studio audience members is important in their construction of dialogue. It is through these people's comments that a multiplicity of perspectives enters into the show, deconstructing the binaries and adding a whole range of contradictions, cancellations, and confabulations. Although I point out two shows in which cultural ideology is primarily challenged and only one show in which it is endorsed, the endorsement/problematic pattern is always happening. We can see it occurring between different shows. Take for instance the show on abuse that Epstein and Steinberg viewed as opposed to the show I witnessed. Both are on domestic abuse, yet it is dealt with in vastly different ways. The show they watched, without trying to, ended up endorsing the sexist ideologies that enable abuse, while the show I viewed challenges those same ideologies. This pattern also occurs from moment to moment within a show. We can see an example in the last show I reviewed on the "fear and shame" of poverty. In that show, the expert endorses the cultural ideology of poverty and wealth in America, and a random woman in the audience, given a chance to speak, problematizes it. The very structure of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, the fact that is a multiplicity of voices and views with no end means that there is never one conclusion reached. If it is reached at the end of one show, it may be negated in the very next show. Ideology is always going to be both problematized and endorsed, sometimes in the same breath.

This pattern is continued in the persona at the center of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, Oprah. It was interesting to note the number of times one could visibly see Oprah censoring herself on the show. At one moment after saying something that was not on the teleprompter, Oprah asked people not to write letters about the issue, demonstrating the fear of audience response. This reveals the extent to which it is not a one-woman show. Oprah must deal with public response and criticism to whatever she says on the

air. She must carefully monitor her image. At times Oprah is the constructor of Oprah, but at other times public opinion constructs her. It is impossible to separate the two.

Oprah is a personality constructed to promote both her show and to function as the centerpiece within it. Despite the egalitarian deconstruction of the experts who appear on the show, the audience must rely on Oprah to structure the show; in fact they often view her as a role model. The audience must both identify with Oprah and give Oprah the power of their voice. Oprah constantly speaks for the entire audience, employing the universal "We" when saying such things as "we were wondering."

As Masciarotte points out, the I/You binary is constantly shifting; she concludes this by stating that the binary is deconstructed and shifted to an I/I. While I would not say the I/You completely deconstructs into I/I (where there is never a *You*), the I/You binary is continuously deconstructing and shifting. In the context of a singular episode, which aired on November 10, 1998, Oprah used "we" in reference to at least three different groups. She used "you" in reference to the same number. *The Oprah Winfrey Show* production staff, the audience of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and people in her private life were all referred to at one point as a part of "We." Because from moment to moment "We" shifts categories and this shifting subject deconstructs the us/them binary. Oprah is the one who is the frame of reference for all the groups. The viewers are aware she is calling the shots, but that acknowledgement is hidden within the idea that she is acting for many groups of "Us." She is a friend, a therapist, and an entertainer.

In looking at Oprah's public persona, one cannot ignore the implications of Oprah's race. It raises a myriad of complex issues. In order to understand Oprah's place in the dominant stereotypes of African-American women we should look at the history of stereotypes of the black woman. In slavery times there were two main stereotypes, the "mammy" and "Sapphire." The white culture constructed the "mammy" as a completely asexual (obese and visually undesirable) individual whose only ambition was to raise the

white children of her master (Morton 9). "Mammy" was constructed in binary opposition to "Sapphire," the overly sexual, unkind black woman (hooks 84-5, 1981). As Michele Wallace explores in her book *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, the "mammy" figure underwent a shift away from the obese, white-serving, unmotivated black woman to the super-woman. The "Amazonian superwoman" is supposed to be a woman of inordinate strength, an embodiment of mother earth, infinitely sexual, life-giving, nurturing, (Wallace 107) and takes care of everybody (hooks 91).

Oprah may serve as a person(a) who helped change dominant white culture's view from one stereotype (mammy) to another (superwoman). In her book *Yearning*, bell hooks, while identifying the superwoman/bad bitch binary, defines Oprah as the modern "mammy," the "superwoman." One possibility is that Oprah is bridging these two stereotypes.

Basically in white culture black women get to play two roles. We are either the bad girls, the "bitches,"...seen as threatening and treated badly, or we are the supermama's, telling it like it is and taking care of everybody, spreading our special magic wherever we go. Certainly the most outstanding contemporary example of the way this particular image is codified in popular culture and commodified is in the construction of Oprah Winfrey as beloved black "mammy" icon. (hooks 91)

At times Oprah seems to exemplify both stereotypes, the old mammy and the new superwoman. As this superwoman Oprah rose from the depths of poverty to rule a media empire, all on her own, or so her narrative is constructed. She can do anything, as she herself states on many episodes. Yet, Oprah, in her role as a sympathetic listener, and given her original weight problems and childlessness, may be another instance of the media's racist stereotype of the "mammy." After all, Oprah's function as talk show guest is very nurturing.

Yet if we look a little closer at the construction of Oprah we find the Oprah that exists today does not fit neatly into either of these stereotypes; she is neither "mammy,"

nor "superwoman." Oprah challenges the mammy stereotype's lack of ambition by owning her production company, which would make her a "superwoman," except that she reveals in her storytelling the daily struggles she goes through. As a "mammy" Oprah is supposed to care only for us, not for herself. Yet, her storytelling lets us know she has a life outside of the show, which she lives for her own pleasure. Oprah negates the visually undesirable part of the "mammy" stereotype by striving to fit into the dominant American culture's definition of beauty, which means being bone thin, having straight hair, and dressing in the latest fashions. Her ultimate "success" in this struggle came when she appeared on the cover of *Vogue*, where she lays in a prone position, her hair straightened, her waist cinched, and her breasts thrust upward. Yet, in dominant white culture the only black women who are sexually desirable are supposed to be "Sapphires" or "bad bitches." Oprah certainly does not fit into either of those stereotypes. Oprah chooses not to construct herself as either "mammy" or "Sapphire." Instead, employing elements from both and elements which are found in neither image, she deconstructs the mammy/Sapphire binary. Through her persona, Oprah delivers a message. She problematizes white stereotypes of the black woman.

Yet, in her construction of her life story, Oprah does endorse some cultural ideologies. The way she constructs the narrative of her life story makes her one of the standard American success stories. In these stories an individual from a poor background, through grit and talent, manages to make herself a success. Oprah has all the dominant culture's markers of success. She is rich and powerful, owning her own production studio. She is popular, starring in the most watched talk show. As discussed above, she is viewed as beautiful and glamorous by dominant white American society. Many black women may see her as an example of how they could find success in the dominant culture, feeding the American myth that anyone can make it in America if one is willing to work hard enough. Additionally, Oprah seems to be buying into white

capitalist culture's definition of success. She never directly problematizes the capitalist system of wealth.

Nor does Oprah problematize the sexist ideology of how women "should" look. For the entire span of her fourteen years on television Oprah has "battled" her weight. Oprah does not possess the build of a runway glamour model. Her body type, as constructed through the mass media, is considered "obese" or at the very least too large, and therefore undesirable. For the majority of her fourteen years on national television Oprah has fought her own body rather than the ideology of fat in our society. Through her example, Oprah endorses the dominant culture's construction of beautiful.

In Oprah's persona we can again see the endorsement/problematization pattern. Although Oprah problematizes stereotypes of black women, she endorses the dominant ideology surrounding success. This may open up a space for active viewing. Since Oprah has constructed herself as an individual and not a stereotype, viewers may see the many struggles that Oprah has put herself through as evidence of how the dominant white culture undermines the black female self. Witnessing this painful struggle from the outside may help women see the abusive nature of the fashion industry. Oprah's appearance on the cover of *Vogue* could certainly be an opening for deconstructing "beauty" in our society. I found it incredibly sad that she was proud of that cover. She dieted for weeks, wore a corset, heavy make-up, and was airbrushed. The end result is not even recognizable as Oprah. Oprah revealed that cover model beauty is a construction through her discussion of the cover, stating that that was not what she looked like. Thus, she creates a contradiction, she is proud of a cover that looks nothing like her and which caused her a great deal of suffering to produce. We care that it caused her suffering because she has deconstructed the stereotypes. We know she is an individual because she has deconstructed the black woman stereotypes. And as an

individual we can see what the cultural construction of beauty has done to her. In these gaps the viewers may be able to begin to audit popular culture for themselves.

The final place I wish to look for endorsement/problematic patterns that may create gaps is in *Oprah's Book Club* books. The number of *Oprah's Book Club* books is multiplying rapidly. When I began researching this paper in late September 1998, there were fifteen Oprah books. Seven months later, in May of 1999, there are 23 Oprah books. I have examined nine of those books. I selected the books at random with some consideration for availability. I tried to read books from across the two-year *Oprah's Book Club* history. In looking at these books I found some interesting patterns. The pattern I want to talk about has to do with general plot structure.

Three of the nine *Oprah's Book Club* books I read were what I term "Mama Drama's": *Midwives* by Chris Bohjalian, *The Deep End of the Ocean* by Jacquelyn Mitchard, and *Black and Blue* by Anna Quindlen. In these books the protagonist is a mother of older children. She is in her thirties and generally a part of a heterosexual, white, nuclear family. In all three cases she is a working mother. Somehow this family is disrupted; that is generally where the plot of the story takes off. In two of the three books a good female friend comes into the picture at the point where the disruption occurs. Looking at the wider *Oprah's Book Club* books sample, only three of the nine have urban settings. Two of those urban set books are "Mama Dramas." In all three "Mama Dramas" the tension in the family causes the husband to be dislocated, which generally results in the woman protagonist's contemplation of or participation in an affair with another man. At the end of all three of these novels the nuclear family is reconstructed.

The perfect example of this pattern is the book *The Deep End of the Ocean* by Jacquelyn Mitchard. At the opening of the novel, the protagonist, Beth is attending her ten-year class reunion. She is so proud of her children she decides to take them with

her and show them off. As she checks in at the motel she turns her back “for just one second” and her middle child is kidnapped. Despite a massive nationwide search, he is not found. Ten years slip by in a few chapters. Beth and her husband have remained together, but he spends most of his time at the restaurant he owns and manages and sleeps on the couch. Beth also has a one-night stand with another man. Meanwhile, Beth has become a best friend with the female police detective who was investigating her case. One day the lost son shows up on Beth’s doorstep, offering to cut the family’s lawn. The rest of the book deals with the recovery of family. The lost child, Ben, has no memory of his life before he was kidnapped. The woman who kidnapped him passed Ben off as her own son and married a man she said was the child’s father. They renamed the boy Sam. The woman who kidnapped Ben/Sam died five years ago, so, Ben/Sam lives with the man he believes is his natural father, with no knowledge of his birth family. Beth and her husband try to recover the family they had before the kidnapping, but they find that this does not work. Ben/Sam goes back to live with his “father” and occasionally visits Beth and her family. Beth decides to divorce her husband and go to graduate school.

At this point there is a significant problematizing of the nuclear family structure occurring in the novel. Jacquelyn Mitchard problematizes the biological parenthood by showing us a strongly bonded non-biological father-son relationship. Mitchard also demonstrates that the nuclear family may not be the best place to raise a child by painting George, the foster-father, as a wonderful, almost perfect parent. Mitchard also has a great couple of scenes about the impossible standards of motherhood. They basically show how the husband, Robert, blamed Beth for not being a “good enough” mother even though he has been often absent.

What about you, Pat? You were in the restaurant business, for God’s sake, a twenty-four-seven job...was that okay, just because you were the

father? And that was how your father was? Because when you were home, you were naturally sweet, not like me. (384)

Mitchard brings up the double standard many parents face: the mother is regarded as morally responsible for the rearing of the children, while the father is constructed as more distant, with little responsibility in the day to day care of a family. Mitchard not only reveals this double standard, but also deconstructs it, through her writing. Mitchard also problematizes “natural” and “perfect motherhood.” In this same conversation as before Beth discusses the ideology which suggests that mothers should to be perfect, and if they are not, they are the reason children “go wrong.” Beth problematizes this by pointing out how centuries of families have produced fine children with mothers and fathers who were not perfect (Mitchard 386). Additionally, Robert, by being the fabulous single father wrecks the idea that a two-parent household is always the best way to raise children. At the end of the book Beth is ready to leave her husband and her children and rediscover her vision and herself through studying photography. As constructed in the novel, her art is a sign of her selfhood. When she chooses to leave the family and pursue her masters of fine arts, she is claiming her right to be “selfish.”

The novel did not even presume heterosexuality, featuring two homosexuals, one of whom was Beth’s best friend. This woman has a friend, a man, who is also a homosexual. They decide to get married to start a family, which can be seen as either endorsing the cultural ideology of the family or problematizing it. The idea that the two feel a need to construct the semblance of the two-parent household endorses the ideology that assumes a nuclear family is the only place to raise a “healthy” child. At the same time, the relationship between these homosexuals, as entering into a “marriage” subverts the ideology of heterosexual marriage. In the novel we can see the dominant cultural ideology surrounding the nuclear family consistently problematized.

Unfortunately, eight pages from the end Ben/Sam returns home, engages in “positive” interaction with his otherwise troubled older brother, decides to sleep there and it is hinted there this might not be a one night thing. Even though Beth’s suitcases are lined up by the door, Robert is no longer sleeping on the couch. Their sharing of the bed has always been a measure of their relationship. Thus, there is a strong suggestion they may get back together and Beth may not pursue her photography after all. (In order to pursue the artistic part of her photography Mitchard suggests she would need to get away from her family and attend the university across the state.) When it is suggested she will not attend the university, one is left to wonder what will become of this artistic self.

The happy nuclear family seems to be recovered from its demise. The same thing that happens in the construction of the rest of the Oprah phenomenon seems to be happening here. First we see the problematization, perhaps even the deconstruction of the dominant cultural ideals, then we see them rescued at the very end. *Black and Blue* by Anna Quindlen, another “Mama Drama” employs the same rescue technique. This novel centers on a woman, Fran, who is escaping with her son from her abusive husband, Bobby. Two-hundred-and-eight pages deal with Fran’s abusive marriage and her attempt to reestablish a sense of self after it, and thirteen pages deal with her establishing a new nuclear family.

However, in “Mama Dramas” the structure and space given to each (rescuing and wrecking) is key to seeing how “rescuing” at least in these books actually functions against the cultural ideology. Four-hundred-and-twenty-six pages are given to problematizing the nuclear family in Mitchard’s novel. Eight pages are given to its rescue. Furthermore, no reason is given for the rescue. We have no resources to know why Beth and Robert would suddenly reconcile or why Ben/Sam would suddenly want to join his biological family. The entire novel is spent showing and telling why the exact

opposite would happen, so there is no sound basis for this occurring. Therefore, not only is the problematization privileged, the ending simply seems “unrealistic.” Yet, the idea that the “happy” ending (as it is implied that this ending is good) is still one in which the nuclear family is rescued, undermining the problematization. The binary is again constructed; cultural ideology is again endorsed.

Yet, the reestablishment of heterosexual relationships at the end of the novels reveals something about the cultural ideology of “healthy personhood.” There is a tendency in these books to associate “healthy personhood” with a good heterosexual relationship. Even though the heterosexual relationship is problematized, the fact remains that the majority of *Oprah’s Book Club* books end by reestablishing it. The heterosexual relationship serves as a sign that the protagonist has healed herself and is ready to form a “good relationship.” This makes heterosexuality mandatory if one wishes to be viewed as a completely “healthy” individual. This construction rescues and rewards heterosexuality. In an examination of the endings we can see how an event can both problematize and endorse dominant ideologies. It is the same pattern again forming problematization/ endorsement. The overall plot structures follow same pattern, as I will discuss after I critique the other plot type, the “Oprah bildungsroman.”

The second type of *Oprah’s Book Club* book, what I term the “Oprah bildungsroman,” comprises five of the nine novels: *Breath, Eyes, Memory* by Edwidge Danticat, *A Virtuous Woman* by Kaye Gibbons, *The Book of Ruth* by Jane Hamilton, *Where the Heart is* by Billie Letts, and the *Rapture of Canaan* by Sheri Reynolds. These novels’ protagonists are generally teen-age females. They all come from what would be termed on the Oprah show as “disadvantaged” circumstances. The term “disadvantaged” refers both to economic and emotional circumstances. They are all poor and generally raised by people who are not nurturing. Additionally, all but one of these novels takes place in a rural setting. These are *Oprah’s Book Club’s*

bildungsroman. As a literary term "bildungsroman" is defined as a novel which follows a protagonist from adolescence to adulthood and her quest for identity. In each of these novels a woman grows from teenage uncertainty into a fully actualized twenty-something woman. Of the nine novels I read, five novels fit into this pattern, three of these novels fit completely into the pattern (I will now call them "classic Oprah bildungsroman"). The other two offer a slight variation (I will call them "alternative Oprah bildungsroman"). In the "alternative Oprah bildungsroman" the protagonists are "grown-up" women in stable heterosexual relationships, who reflect back on their coming of age in order to understand where they are now. At the end of their novels, two of the three "classic Oprah bildungsroman" protagonists do not end up in heterosexual relationships. The one who does fits into the recuperation pattern talked about in terms of *Black and Blue* and the *Deep End of the Ocean* (where the majority of the book is given to problematizing and the final few pages given to rescuing).

The primary example of the "classic Oprah bildungsroman" is *The Book of Ruth*, by Jane Hamilton. The protagonist, Ruth, is around ten when we begin the novel; she is somewhere around twenty-three when the novel closes. Ruth grows up in poverty on the edge of Honey Creek, a small town in Illinois. Ruth's mother, May, is emotionally abusive to Ruth, constantly telling Ruth that she is mentally retarded, that no one could love her.

Jane Hamilton lets us know that Ruth is intelligent by the comments that Ruth makes. We also see how intelligent Ruth is through her interactions with the few characters she occasionally runs into. These helper-nurturers are all female and present in all three of the "classic Oprah bildungsroman" novels.³ They are generally independent older women with some sort of familial relation to the protagonist, except in the case of Billie Letts' *Where the Heart Is*. In that novel the helper-nurturer is of no

relation to the protagonist, but interestingly, her name is Sister Husband. Biologically there may not be a connection here, but obviously Billie Letts is hinting at some sort of alternate family structure. Except for in *The Rapture of Canaan*, these women live alone, until the protagonist moves in. Even though these women are not the protagonists of the novels, their valorization suggests an alternative life style for women. However, they may play into the stereotypes of women as the “natural” nurturers. No men are portrayed in this role and the nurturing seems to be a “natural” part of who the nurturer-helpers are. Thus, they seem to be endorsing a gendered view of nurturing. However, the helper-nurturers are allowed other lives outside of nurturing the protagonist. In *The Book of Ruth*, Ruth’s helper-nurturer is her Aunt Sid who conducts a “world famous” high school choir. She has a full life, even without being a part of a nuclear family, and without her nurturing function. Although the fact that these helper-nurturers are all women seems to endorse the cultural construction that women are naturally nurturing, they also provide alternative examples of how women can live their lives. This undermines the cultural ideology which suggest that women are only fulfilled when they are wives and mothers.

Ruth continually writes to her helper-nurturer and eventually she graduates from high school. She gets a job at the dry cleaners where her mother works. She has one female friend, Daisy, also a troubled young woman. Daisy is valued only for her face, which we are told is beautiful. One day Daisy decides to play matchmaker and sets Ruth up with one of her friends, a man named Ruby. At the age of nineteen Ruth ends up marrying Ruby. They live with her mother May, because they do not have the money to live on their own. Ruby has a problem holding down a job, so Ruth and May support the family. Ruth ends up spending all her selfhood trying to keep May and Ruby from fighting. Eventually, she gets pregnant. All the while May and Ruby fight, until one day

³ These helper-nurturers function in many the same ways as Other-mothers in African-American fiction.

Ruby goes insane and kills May and beats Ruth with a fire-poker. Ruby is imprisoned, and Ruth spends a great deal of time in the hospital recovering from her beating.

The “normalcy” of the nuclear family is again challenged in this novel. Ruth marries Ruby because that is what she believes people in relationships do when they are in love. “I didn’t think too hard about what it meant to get married. I figured I wanted to be a wife because I loved Ruby, and I could tell he need a girl to cook him good food and buy him clean undershirts” (128). She expresses many of the idea(l)s of the hegemony surrounding marriage. Later Jane Hamilton explicitly demonstrates the idealized nature of Ruth’s image of marriage: “I could picture Ruby and me, the father and the mother. I conjured up Ruby coming home from work, singing. I’d be feeding our baby something delicious from a jar” (129). Ruth obviously had no conception of the “reality” of marriage. She was using cultural ideology to (in)form her life. Ruby, from the very start, had no job; Ruth knew she was the more financially stable of the two. She wanted to form her life into the ideal, but it turned out very different. In this way, Jane Hamilton problematizes the nuclear family ideology; she sets it up to tear it down.

An alternative family arrangement is offered at the end of *The Book of Ruth*, as Ruth moves in with her Aunt Sid, her nurturer-helper. In all of these “classic Oprah bildungsroman” we find alternative family arrangements. Billie Letts also has her protagonist, Novalee, live with her nurturer-helper. Yet, Billie Letts’ novel has the strongest instances of nuclear family rescuing, a concept I discussed earlier. Both the protagonist of Letts’ novel and the protagonist’s female friend end the book in “good” heterosexual relationships. They find good men now that they are healed. Especially apparent in this novel is the idea that a completely healthy person, in order to show they are completely healthy must enter into a heterosexual relationship. This establishes the necessity for women to enter these relationships, if they wish to be regarded as healthy. This is not a prevalent pattern in the “classic Oprah bildungsroman.” On the whole, two

of the “classic Oprah bildungsroman” end with the protagonists being “healthy” without being in a romantic relationship. These are the only two instances of this ending in all of the *Oprah’s Book Club Books*.

The two “alternative Oprah bildungsromans” differ from the “classic Oprah bildungsroman” in a few ways. The main difficulty of the protagonist in *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, is her relationship with her mother. The protagonist, Sophie’s, relationship with her husband is only important as it relates to that relationship. In the “classic Oprah bildungsroman” one of the many factors in keeping the protagonist from becoming fully actualized is her relationship with her mother, but it is only one factor, and not the central issue to be resolved. Additionally, even “damaged” Sophie can form a relationship with a “healthy” man. In the other “alternative Oprah bildungsroman,” *A Virtuous Woman*, the character is also able to form relationship with a “good” man, even though the protagonist herself is “damaged.”

My use of “damaged” reveals the most troubling aspects of the “Oprah bildungsroman.” There is the idea that when we see the protagonists at the beginning of the novels, somehow, something is wrong with them. Usually (with the exception of Gibbon’s novel) the “damage” is due to circumstance rather than personal failure. The personal “growth” comes into play with the protagonist’s ability to deal with the circumstances, which have caused “damage.” If they are able to escape from the system, the promise is they will become “healthy” or at least improve in a marked fashion. We can look at this in terms of *The Book of Ruth*. Ruth is “damaged” through her mother’s abuse. In order to have a good life, she must “heal” from this damage. If she fails to do this, her “self” will be lost. At the end of *The Book of Ruth*, when Ruth is “recovering,” we can see this happening: “I heard Aunt Sid calling my name from upstairs yesterday. I heard my name when she sang it out so beautifully. It seemed brand-new” (Hamilton 324). In the novel, Ruth has undergone a transformation. She is

able to evaluate her *self*: "I didn't know how to tell her that May and I were the same: ugly and mean and down with our luck" (326, emphasis mine). Jane Hamilton seems to suggest, since Ruth can reflect back on that previous part of herself, and since she phrases it in the past tense, that something must have changed; Ruth is "healing." To tell people who have lived in "disadvantaged circumstances" that they must be "damaged," and that if they look hard enough they can "heal" themselves, seems to ignore the socio-political realities of America. This idea is implying that money is the root of disadvantage, instead of the way American cultural ideology constructs wealth. We are told to fix the individual, rather than the system. Jane Hamilton does begin to problematize the stigma of poverty in the United States' capitalist system, but, when it comes to the protagonist's recovery, the issue disappears. The cultural ideology that one needs money to be "healthy" and that people should "heal" the "damaged self" rather than the damaged system endorses the ideology of capitalism.

The only novel not to imply that "dysfunction" is a function of poverty is Kaye Gibbon's *A Virtuous Woman*, which explores how a middle class girl can also have problems as a result of her middle class upbringing. The protagonist, Ruby, is raised in a virtually flawless middle-class nuclear family, but she still runs into problems and "slips down" into the lower classes, where she remains. However, she does manage to find happiness there, which may help mitigate the popular belief about the stigma and happiness levels of the lower classes.⁴

The only *Oprah's Book Club* book I found did not fit into either the "Mama Drama" or "Oprah bildungsroman" category is *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day...* by Pearl Cleage. It features a thirty-something woman who is not married and never has been. She also does not have children and never mentions a regret at not having any.

Therefore, she does not fit into the “Mama Dramas.” She is already a fully actualized woman; therefore, she does not belong in the “Oprah bildungsroman.” She does have some relationship to those novels, however. The protagonist, Ava, has recently discovered she has HIV, yet, through her relationship with her sister and a heterosexual romantic involvement she discovers she is not “damaged.” So, again there is the recovery of *self aspect* to this novel. Additionally, it has the same heterosexist emphasis as *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.

The abusive male is a large part of these books. It is either his abuse or outside interference that causes the otherwise stable nuclear family to break-up/down. The abusive husband occurs in Gibbons’, Hamilton’s, Letts’, and Quindlen’s novels. In three of four of these novels the now emotionally healthy women acquire life-partners who are “good” men. Jane Hamilton’s Ruth is the only one to end up without a “good” man.

The two general plot structures offer a few endorsements of women’s stereotypical functioning in society. She is always in a family unit, always “damaged,” and always trying to recover *self*. Too many times this recovery of self becomes synonymous with a recovery of a “good” heterosexual relationship, which endorses the cultural ideology of heterosexism. Many of the novels problematize the fact that women are always placed in the family through problematizing the ideology of that role within the family. The helper-nurturers also offer alternative role-models. It is the endorsement/problematization pattern all over again, as is present throughout the novels. They problematized women’s place within the family, and society and offered alternative life styles. Yet they also forced women back into the place from which they started. What are viewers to make of this contradiction? Let’s look at the ways women read in order to attempt to understand how contradiction enables active reading.

⁴ I am referring to the notion in society that those in poverty are desperately unhappy for want of money. There are also contained in this notion that the poor are in some way less intelligent and emotionally

The way that people read various media has long been a contentious issue in many academic fields. Yet, it is key to understanding how the endorsement/problematization of ideologies in the media is read. If readers are active and audit what they receive, then they rewrite and audit every message they receive (Webster 194). In television theory the binary to this “active reading” is “passive watching,” which generally means that the readers just take the message of the media at “fact” value (Livingstone 33). As Press said, we can never truly know how the media affects us, we can never know what goes on in our subconscious (Press 173) and how much we passively accept. Few critics go as far as to say we passively accept everything we read. Many critics believe the truth lies somewhere between passive acceptance and active auditing. As we have seen, the media gives us certain puzzle pieces which readers accept, audit, or rewrite (Livingstone 43). I believe *Oprah's Book Club* readers are mostly active auditors. As proof of this we will see through the work of two scholars, Elizabeth Long and Press, how other women actively read both television and books. They take parts of the story and reflect on it and rewrite it to fit their own lives.

The theories of *self* formation are closely tied to the ideas of audience theory. Self theorists further expand how we use the pieces we glean from the text we read. There are many theories about “*self*” formation, which Chris Barker outlines nicely in his article “Television and the Reflexive Project of the Self.” There is the western regime of the *self*, which I would identify as Oprah(ian) therapy (how most people conceptualize their “*self*”). In this theory the person perceives herself as fully aware of *self* and able to shape and organize it. The *self* is a unified whole, understood in terms of her own life story (Barker 614). This kind of reflection takes place both in Oprah’s telling personal stories on her show and in the minds of the main characters of the books. Most of them

traumatized by their poverty.

discover the parts of themselves or rediscover the whole self in the course of the books. However, it is hard to find a scholar who would support this theory.

A more current theory on self-construction is called the reflexive project of the self. In this theory, the *self* is not perceived as one unified whole, but as a multiplicity of different *selves* (Barker 614). In this theory *selves* are a product of social relationships; the *selves* develop in relationship to community. They are products of shared language and social ritual. We are constantly (re)constructing these *selves* based on our social knowledge. One facet of that knowledge is the information we glean from the media that surround us. Based on our previous social knowledge we accept and incorporate into our social selves, reject, and rewrite part of the media's messages (Barker 613). Chris Barker undertook a study of British teen-age Soap viewers and looked at how they incorporate what they see on soaps operas into their identity. In his study he found strong evidence supporting the reflexive project of the self. His examples of teenagers reflecting on British soap operas use a reality/fiction principle I will examine in terms of its larger significance later. For the moment let's look at it in this specific occurrence. Barker's minorities judged television on its "realism" of representations. On one occasion Barker describes how they judged the British soap opera *EastEnders* by this standard:

Speakers C and B assert that *EastEnders* is realistic because it is about 'us'. The group 'us' is constituted in terms of shared identifications with being Black and women. However, Sandra dissents on the grounds of class. She identifies with being working class and considers the representations of working-class people as being inadequate. (Barker 621.)

The women critique the "reality" of the show based on their group identification and their lived experiences. Each woman in that quote is actively interpreting what she is seeing and evaluating it for herself. However, despite the realism, or lack thereof, the readers are able to identify with the characters of the shows and also reflect on them: "Helen

from *Neighbours*, is critiqued for her commitment to domesticity, 'All Helen does is sit there baking casseroles, giving advice' (Barker 620). These teens did not passively accept what they saw on television, they actively interpreted it. This does not mean their interpretations always undermine dominant cultural ideology, just that they are actively auditing.

Studies of how women read both novels and television discuss how women employ this same style of reflection. Many studies center on how women view the "reality" of the media (novel and television). Elizabeth Long undertook a study of women's book clubs in order to understand how women read books. The women reading books generally perceived several layers of "reality." In the women's use of the term "reality" there was not simply one "reality" (the lived experience) and all else was "fictional." Long found the women in these book clubs did not read the characters in the books as fictional constructions of the author. The women would refer to the characters as if they were "real people" and without reference to "how or why the authors may have constructed such characters" (Long 606). Yet, if directly asked many of these women would never state that the characters were real living and breathing people. The women's awareness of the fictionality of character came when the women were criticizing the authors' failures to create an aura of "realness." At those times the women would discuss why or how authors could not or had failed to build "real" characters.

Andrea L. Press undertook a similar study in her book *Women Watching Television*. She studied how women understood the television show *Dynasty*. What she found is that middle class women labeled middle class life as presented on TV as "realistic," while working class women were more critical of the "realism" of the depictions of the working class on television (Press 99). But both would discuss the "realistic" and simultaneously the "fictive." Women, when viewing both television and

reading novels have knowledge of the fictionality of the medium and yet can believe in its "realness."

In this reflection on the "reality" of the text, we can see how the readers wreck the preconceived binary between reality and fiction and create a space for themselves. They are not subscribing to the dominant ideology surrounding the strict separation of reality and fiction. Press's and Long's readers are using some of the same terminology as Barker's subjects. Through the term "real" the women are engaging in the reflexive project of the self. They are using the term "real" as an evaluative term. They are auditing popular culture for its "realness." If the work is "real" then it is actually speaking to issues in their lives, which it has constructed in a such a way that the viewers perceive as an accurate reflection of their lives. They are actively auditing what they see based on their lived knowledge. A hypothetical use of this could be the heterosexual relationships formed at the end of the majority of *Oprah's Book Club* books. I would theorize that sudden perfect relationships are not likely to appear "real" to these women. Instead it may be viewed as a fantasy, a false construction, when viewed against the back drop of the rest of the novel. In any case, the women are not passively accepting media constructions, they are actively evaluating them.

Andrea Press in her book *Women Watching Television*, finds that women also audit the texts through identification with a single character. She finds that women, both when they watched television as when they read books, express a tendency to identify with characters (rather than plot or setting, etc.) (Press 101). In both of these media the readers pick out parts of the character that they feel resemble themselves in some way or that can teach them a "lesson." They use these characters to "critically self-reflect" and "explore the meaning of their own life situations" (Long 607).

We see this happening on *The Oprah Winfrey Show's Oprah's Book Club* segments. Oprah merges her television guests with the characters of the books. She

explicitly asks viewers to use the characters in the books to examine their own lives “it’s easier to receive it through Fran and Bobby [characters in Anna Quindlen’s novel *Black and Blue*]. That helps you open the door to begin to look at your own life...” (The Oprah Winfrey Show 5-22-98). *The Oprah Winfrey Show’s* discussion of the novel, *Black and Blue*, featured six women who had survived spousal abuse and who read the book *Black and Blue*. The women came from a variety of backgrounds and they ranged in age from under thirty to over fifty, but they all had one thing in common: they had all had an abusive husband. The discussion mixed the story of the guests’ lives with that of Anna Quindlen’s characters from *Black and Blue* and dealt with public and personal issues surrounding spousal abuse. Through personal identification, each woman took what the novel said and made it her own. We can see an example of this in the testimony of one of the guests on that episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. She told how reading the fictional account of abuse helped her to leave her own abusive situation. Through identification with the story of *Black and Blue* she was motivated leave. She “dialed 911 while holding the book” (The Oprah Winfrey Show 5-22-98). The guests’ identification with characters from the book informs how they choose to view and live their lives. Again women are actively reading the texts, accepting, adapting, and auditing what they read. The entirety of the text is of little consequence; the readers actively choose which part to identify with. Then they use these parts creatively, to examine themselves in new ways, to reflect on their *selves* and to audit other media. We can see the gap; the space in which these “consumers” become active auditors of popular culture.

Women, when reading books and watching television do not necessarily accept the messages given. In fact we can see a great deal of evidence pointing to how often women are active auditors of all that they read. The Oprah phenomenon does endorse the dominant gender and race ideologies. However, it also problematizes the same ideologies. Because it does both, there is a space there for the women readers to make

up their own minds, to see the ideology and to either accept, reject, or rewrite it. There is no assurance that they will choose to wreck the ideologies rather than accept them, but at the very least we know that there is this possibility. So when I think of my mother, in her room watching Oprah, I need not worry that Oprah is merely an opiate of the masses. In fact one of these days I just might ask her what she has learned from Oprah and begin a new study.

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