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Despair disguised as entertainment: Does Oprah Winfrey sensationalize human suffering in order to fuel her media empire and encourage other media to follow?

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The softened camera lens slowly scans the audience; women sit on the edge of their seats, faces flushed, hands clenched and tears welling in their eyes. Peach and lilac walls surround the stage fitted comfortably with a light yellow sofa. Bright theater lights illuminate center stage. Oprah Winfrey sits cross-legged; right arm perched on the back of the sofa in her usual girlfriend fashion. The filtered lens zooms closer to reveal Oprah's stylists' hair and makeup wizardry and her meticulously adorned silhouette dripping in pricey designer fashions. Oprah broadcasts the topic of the day's show and gives the audience a teaser about the next guest: Our next guest has overcome extraordinary odds. Stay tuned. Commercial break.

We're back. Oprah introduces her audience to the video, which introduces her next guest's story. The clip begins with Oprah's crafted and rhythmic voice narrating the guest's life in a God-like fashion. Consistently, the narration follows a pattern: the crisis, suffering, or obstacle is introduced first, then the guest herself is introduced in the midst of the tearful retelling of her suffering. The clip ends. Stay tuned. We'll be right back to her from the guest herself. Commercial break.

We're back. The guest is now seated next to Oprah and is asked how she feels about the clip she just viewed. She reflects on the film and upon seeing herself retell the difficult story of her struggle, and then Oprah asks how she felt at the very instant of the crisis itself bringing her voice into the present moment. Stay tuned to see how our guest has overcome and proved anything is possible. Commercial break.

We're back. Oprah's guest is now asked how she conquered her obstacle and how she overcame her suffering. The guest offers the audience her tears, her voice, her heart, and her soul. Oprah leans in, places her hand on the arm of her tearful guest and says,

“You go girl.” The crowd erupts in applause. Does Oprah Winfrey sensationalize human suffering to fuel her media empire and encourage other media to follow?

Poverty stricken and misplaced, the road to stardom wasn't easy for Oprah. She suffered through a turbulent childhood and felt a strong need to “make something of herself” as her strict father advised. Thus, young and ambitious, Oprah Winfrey began her career in broadcasting while still in high school at WVOL radio in Nashville, Tennessee. By the age of 19, she became the youngest person and first African-American woman to anchor the news at Nashville's WTVF-TV. She soon relocated to Baltimore's WJZ-TV to co-anchor the Six O'Clock News and later went to become co-host of its local talk show, *People are Talking* (Oprah.com).

In 1984, Oprah moved to Chicago, Illinois to host WLS-TV's morning talk show, *AM Chicago*, which became the number one local talk show –surpassing ratings for the most popular show at the time, *Donahue* –just one month after she began. The show earned national syndication in 1986, becoming the highest-rated talk show in television history. In 1988, Oprah established Harpo (Oprah backwards) Studios, a production facility in Chicago, making her the third woman in the American entertainment industry, after Mary Pickford and Lucille Ball, to own her own studio (Oprah.com).

AM Chicago became *The Oprah Winfrey Show* has remained the number one talk show for 20 consecutive seasons. Produced by her production company, Harpo Productions, Inc., the show is seen by an estimated 48 million viewers a week in the United States alone and it is broadcast internationally in 126 countries (Oprah.com).

Since *The Oprah Winfrey Show* first aired in 1986 the show and its host have achieved iconic status. Like Madonna, Bono and Sting, Oprah is universally recognized

by her first name alone. Vanity Fair Magazine stated “Oprah Winfrey arguably has more influence on the culture than any university president, politician, or religious leader, except perhaps the Pope.” With the success of her show and TV hits in full bloom, Oprah decided to broaden her reach with her very own magazine (Vanityfair.com).

In April 2000, Oprah and Hearst Magazines introduced *O, The Oprah Magazine*, a monthly magazine that has become one of today’s leading women’s lifestyle publications. The magazine is credited as being the most successful magazine launched in recent history and currently has a circulation of 2.3 million readers each month. In April 2002, Oprah launched the first international edition of *O, The Oprah Magazine* in South Africa, extending her “live your best life” message to another audience (Oprah.com).

To further her message, Oprah collaborates with others who utilize similar tearjerker formulas. Oprah is a producer, actress, television-programming creator of the daytime talk show *Dr. Phil*, which had the highest-rated talk show launch since *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, cable network co-founder of Oxygen Media which features *Oprah After the Show*, satellite radio programmer of *Oprah & Friends* which offers an exclusive listener call-in weekly radio show, “Talk to Me” with Oprah, Broadway producer of *The Color Purple*, which she starred in 20 years ago and most notably an online leader (Oprah.com).

Through oprah.com, Oprah extends her message to the worldwide web. Oprah.com offers advice on everything from the mind, body and spirit to food, home and relationships. The website provides comprehensive resources related to *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *O, The Oprah Magazine* and *Oprah & Friends*. In addition, the website prides itself in having, a “unique original content, including the Oprah Book Club, which

offers free in-depth reading guides for each book selection, online discussion groups and Q & A sessions with literary experts” (Oprah.com).

This little book club is no passé pastime. Within its first year, *Oprah’s Book Club* quickly became the largest book club in the world, attracting approximately one million members. In 2003, Oprah.com also launched Live Your Best Life, an interactive multimedia workshop based on her sold-out national speaking tour that features Oprah’s personal life stories and life lessons along with a workbook of thought-provoking exercises. Oprah.com averages 68 million page views and more than four million users per month and receives approximately 20,000 e-mails each week (Oprah.com).

Amidst her media accomplishments Oprah is most praised for her philanthropic work. Through her private charity, The Oprah Winfrey Foundation, Oprah has awarded hundreds of grants to organizations that support the education and empowerment of women, children and families in the United States and around the world. In a 1997 episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, Oprah encouraged viewers to use their lives to make a difference in the lives of others, which led to the creation of the public charity Oprah’s Angel Network in 1998 (Oprah.com).

Most recently in January 2007, Oprah opened a school, *The Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls* in South Africa. Oprah personally opened the doors of her \$40 million South African “leadership academy,” giving 152 improvised young women hope for a brighter future (People). Negative media coverage criticized the star-studded event. Oprah’s extravagant diamond earrings and bright pink ball gown were the least of her offences. The South African government itself declared the institution to be too extravagant and elitist. And recent media coverage declares worried parents think

Oprah's school is "too strict" because it has been difficult for them to keep in touch with their daughters (news24.com). Media coverage on the academy and Oprah herself continues. It is clear that through the power of media the Oprah persona has become an American icon; one that elicits interest, emotion and concern from the American public.

In only one short decade, Oprah has risen to the status of richest woman in the media world –accruing wealth equivalent to that of the Gross National Product of a small country –and her fame and her cultural role are unprecedented on television (Illouz 1). Oprah is commonly recognized as the "Queen of Talk" but as her hand stretches across the literature, film, magazine and philanthropic world she is clearly more than just talk. Before our very eyes she is becoming the Queen of *all* Media. As the biography page on oprah.com states, "Oprah Winfrey has left an indelible mark on the face of television...Her legacy has established her as one of the most important figures in popular culture (Oprah.com)."

This rise to fame and cultural influence has been coined the "Oprahization of culture" and it has dominated the screens of millions of white, middle-class American woman for two decades. Her dedicated audiences look to her as a life coach, a self-help guru, a fellow sufferer, a best friend. But as anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod reminds us, "The cultural forms transmitted by televisions...are produced deliberately for people (Haussite.net)."

Moreover, suffering and self-change are commonly performed on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. A typical formula for a show plays out like this: a person or a couple is introduced; a problem or conflict between them or between the participant and an absent

other is raised; the conflict is intensified; and a quasi-resolution or personal revelation is reached, usually through the intervention of an expert (Illouz 57).

For example, in December 2007 there was a show on middle-class people who have become homeless, Oprah asked a woman, "Tell me about your mental anguish. In the videotape of you we saw when you were looking at your scrapbook of your volunteer work, you started to cry. Why?" Here, Oprah co-writes this guest's story in such a way that we can reduce past and present; her tears are provoked by her memories of her previous middle-class life and by the remembered pain of becoming homeless. Biography here is commodified. Emotions are pulled and sorrows are examined, all on national TV.

Oprah artfully mixes emotional discourse and expert advice. Oprah has provided a platform for the voices of woman acknowledging the difficulties they share while at the same time exposing them. She uses and mixes storytelling, dialogue, preaching, conversation, debate, and practical wisdom and intertwines them with an array of media to affect a broad spectrum of women and confront them at all angles. This Self-help ethos resonates with American culture, especially American women (Illouz 37).

Interestingly, today white women have become the prime victims of psychological disorders such as anxiety, depression, anorexia nervosa, and bulimia. In fact, two thirds of the adult population of community mental health centers, psychiatric hospitals, and outpatient clinics are women. These numbers illustrate the need for a female role model and Oprah has come to their rescue. Oprah uses a positive, calming language that tells women they are not alone, their voices are heard, and they can overcome (Womensmentalhealth.org).

With one week's worth of Oprah, the language of suffering and pain is commonplace. In addition, Oprah has shaped her biography, publicly discussed the motivations of her cultural enterprise, and systematically blended her private self with her public persona. One of the central differences between Oprah and other stars is that while most media stars are visual icons –of beauty or talent –Oprah Winfrey is first and foremost a biographical icon, a persona we know not for her beauty or singing or acting talents but rather for the ways in which she has staged her own and others' personal lives. As an article analyzing the source of her fortune put it: "Oprah's life is the essence of her brand, and her willingness to open up about it on daytime TV helped win the enduring trust of her audience (Illouz 30)." Oprah has touched upon a variety of topics; laying her secrets on the line, personally illustrating what every woman should do. She lets go of her inhibitions when speaking about her past, and encourages women to do the same. She has talked about everything. In 2001 she even chronicles own her conception in *O, The Oprah Magazine*:

I was conceived out of wedlock to Vernon Winfrey and Vernita Lee, who happened by an oak tree one April afternoon in 1953 in rural Mississippi. Their onetime union, not at all a romance, brought about the unwanted pregnancy that was me. Relatives tell me that my mother concealed her pregnancy until the day I was born –so no one was prepared for my arrival. There were no baby showers, none of the anticipation of delight that I see in the faces of my expectant friends who rub their swollen stomachs with reverence. My birth was surrounded with regret, shame, and hiding (*O, The Oprah Magazine*).

Much is known about the hardships of Oprah's life. She has told every listening ear about growing up in a poor, broken home. Her story of suffering and the ability to broadcast that suffering to the world has proved to many, the healing power of TV. But what is interesting is that we know not only the basics of Oprah's hard childhood but we know the very intimate details. Her biography is typically written like this:

At 9, she was raped by a teenage cousin who was babysitting. He took her to the zoo and bought her ice cream so she wouldn't tell. That year, in the playground, a schoolmate told her how babies were made, and she says the worst horror of the rape was going through the entire fifth grade believing she was pregnant.... Throughout the next five years she was repeatedly abused by three other men, trusted family friends. Growing up in Milwaukee, she lied, broke curfew, stole from her mother's purse, ran away from home and tried to date everything "with pants on."... At home she is one of those anxious women who cleans before the housekeeper arrives, just to make sure the housekeeper doesn't get a bad impression (Richman 48).

Oprah's media empire has been built on herself laid bare producing an art form that imitates her own life struggles. For example, she uses her TV show as a forum to openly discuss her relationship with longtime boyfriend Stedman Graham and as confessional, such as when she admitted to using cocaine when she was in her 20's. Oprah has cast herself as the condensed version of the problems that plague the most ordinary women: lack of self-esteem, sexual abuse, over-weight, failed romantic relations. Oprah demands as much honesty from herself as she does from her guests and

viewers. This formula has been repeated with countless guests: Spill your guts and you'll get rewards; She did, so can you. She has become famous not in spite of having been abused but because she was abused and because she publicized that fact. Her success is cast as a therapeutic victory over the extraordinary shortcomings of a difficult life. As a result, an astonishing aspect of Oprah's celebrity is that the construction of her self as a star is closely intertwined with the deconstruction of her self as a star (Illouz 33).

Oprah addresses her audience and crewmembers as she does her best friend, Gayle King. She shares everything, including her personal diary blurring the line between public and private. In nearly every episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* you will hear Oprah discuss her struggles with body image, self-value, and relationships. For example, Oprah has publicly struggled with her weight for as long as she has been a TV personality. She confesses when she slips on her diet and eats bread or sweets. In an extract from her "weight" diary Oprah shares "...168lbs I'm totally disgusted with myself...where is my resolve? Every day I awaken with good intentions and then I fail." One year and half later she writes: "...Sometimes I can feel the connection between my own fears and the weight. So what am I afraid of? That's the question. The answer will set me free" (Greene 15-17).

Her confessions are regularly presented as crucial events that "liberate" something and make her surmount her inner fears. Many talk show hosts, including Oprah's very own Dr. Phil, have imitated this tactic. These "experts" try to also appear "vulnerable" and to break the barrier between themselves and their guests as Oprah does so flawlessly (Illouz 43).

The story of failures could not produce celebrity if American culture did not have a desire to transform failure into a positive experience. Oprah's failures have turned into success because she has cast her shortcomings in the cultural code of what is called a therapeutic biography. Oprah is able to capitalize on her failures by recycling them into the narrative of victory and self-overcoming (Illouz 33). The headline of the editor's note in the 2001 September issue of *O, the Oprah Magazine* reads in bold captions: **YOU ARE THE STRONGEST LINK**. Along side this headline is a picture of Oprah pointing her index finger at the reader. Beneath Oprah writes:

All the pages in this month's O are here to stimulate your thinking and encourage your own voice of success. For *me*, success is about knowing who you are, and then using who you are and what you do to serve yourself, your family, your community, our world.... You have a certain way of being in this world, and your imprint is what matters. There's never going to be another one like you. So take it to the max! (O, The Oprah Winfrey Magazine; emphasis added)

Oprah methodically interjects her own life and her own thoughts into the script, both written and verbal. Every guest, every issue, is transformed by Oprah to reflect her own feelings and need for self-improvement. In this way, the Oprah Empire softens the hard blow of suffering by wrapping it in the soothing and stimulating dialogue of self-help.

Mass media scholars concur with Eva Illouz, professor at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem and author of *Oprah Winfrey and the Glamour of Misery: An Essay on Popular Culture*, "The Oprah Winfrey Show is a popular cultural form that makes sense

of suffering at a time when spiritual and mental pain has become a permanent feature of our politics and when, simultaneously, so much in our culture presumes that well-being and happiness depend on successful self-management (Illouz 4).”

Art critic Robert Hughes suggests that “talk shows are only the most prominent symptom of an increasingly confessional culture, one in which the democracy of pain reigns supreme. Everyone may not be rich and famous but everyone has suffered.... The world of talk shows frightens the horses because it is a world of feeling, disclosure, excess, [and] purging (Moore 17).”

Themes of previous Oprah shows include: the failed self, the assaulted self, broken relations, misfortunes caused by blind fate, and social problems. Winfrey frames her guest’ stories to emphasize the merit and virtue of victims, thus eliciting compassion from the guests of her show. For example:

[Oprah:] My next guest never dreamt he might be at risk for homelessness. He once lived in one of the most affluent neighborhoods of Los Angeles, but one day found himself penniless and living by an old beach pier. Brian Zukor was a successful architect making over \$15,000 a month. Brian never thought his world would come to an end.... The road from riches to rags finally brought him here (Illouz 95).

As a professional orator, Oprah has crafted her voice to stress the language of suffering: moving her voice in a soothing, authoritative and rhythmic tradition. By framing this man’s story as one “from riches to rags” and by building his narrative around his abrupt destitution, Oprah presents this story as a tragedy and mobilizes

empathy and compassion from her audience. What she emphasizes in this story is precisely the lack of control people have over their destiny, as well as the randomness of their tragic fate.

In a 1993 *Chicago Magazine* article, Ms. Harrison, an essayist and fiction writer who in 1989 had written an in-depth profile of Oprah, was quoted as saying: “Her show...I just can’t watch it. You will forgive me, but it’s white trailer trash. It debases emotion. It provides everyone with glib psychological formulas. These people go around talking like a fortune cookie. And I think she is in very large part responsible for that (Illouz 3).

“It was a mascara runnin’ kinda day!” Oprah makes this declaration in a show dedicated to the celebration of inspirational teachers. The words are spoken in response to a clip shown of a previous program in which we see Oprah in a tearful reunion with her 4th grade teacher, a woman who had been hugely influential for her young pupil. The image of running mascara corresponds with what is commonly associated with *The Oprah Winfrey Show*: female-centeredness; emotional display; disclosure of intimate moments; a self-laid bare (Wilson 8).

For many such commentators, it is the intense revealing of private life in public that is the distinctive mark of talk shows that threatens a genuine public sphere, stereotypes women, encourages a culture of victim hood, and commercializes private life (Illouz 6).

Oprah’s rise: A formula for success

In America, as in many other countries, the daytime television talk show is an extraordinarily popular phenomenon. This trend didn’t start with Oprah alone. Phil

Donahue is credited with being the first television talk show host whose show, *Donahue*, became the classic form for those that were to follow. *Donahue* first aired in 1968, after which the number of talk shows has multiplied; by 1995 an average of fifteen such shows were being aired in the major US TV markets. The genre's format requires invited guests to disclose the most intimate aspects of their lives, recalling past and present difficulties and revealing often horrific life experiences to the camera, studio and home audiences for close scrutiny and judgment. Frequently, a guest therapist offered a diagnosis of a situation, at the same time promoting a recent publication; the show depended on the cultural acceptance of the validity of talk therapy. The conventional movement of the show was towards a resolution of emotional conflict, coinciding with the closure of the show, but with the anticipation that a new trauma, following the same conventions, will be delivered tomorrow (Wilson 11).

When Oprah came on the scene she mirrored this Donahue formula but with a unique twist of her own. She, unlike Donahue, revealed her own personal struggles and stressed a self-help mantra. The audience loved it and *The Oprah Winfrey Show* quickly surpassed her predecessor's ratings. Commonly referred to as trash TV, Oprah transformed the talk show genre by turning trash into treasure.

The show does not just produce a fortune for its host; it is a lucrative commodity for its syndication company King World, generating about half of its profits –\$180 million –in 1994. In May 1993, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* attracted a greater number of women viewers than network news programs, nighttime talk shows, morning network programs, and any single daytime soap opera. By 1997, Oprah was watched by one in ten Americans.

But Americans aren't the only one's consuming Oprah's world. *The Oprah Winfrey Show* is distributed to an array of countries including, Afghanistan, Bahrain, Botswana, China, Singapore and Thailand. The image of suffering has been intrinsic to the emergence of a global public sphere and of a global consciousness, and Oprah arrived at a time and in a space in which suffering was already a chief cultural vector connecting people across and beyond national allegiances (Illouz 157).

The Oprah Winfrey Show is about a certain form of social suffering that originates in the family and that is articulated from the experience and viewpoint of women inside the family. Ironically, while western photojournalism and the evening news regularly import nonwestern images of war, famine, and natural disasters, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* represents the first television genre that exports American forms of suffering to the rest of the world, a suffering that differs significantly from the imported kinds in that it is individual, private and concerns the self (Illouz 163).

Confessional discourse is deployed on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, and consumerism, expressions of anxiety and fragmentation, and therapy all coexist with the announcement of self-recovery and self-realization that come from narrating one's own story. Oprah operates through an interplay of 'ordinary' topics, which is her mark, as well as that of the guests, and extra-ordinariness confirmed by her celebrity status.

For example in 2002, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* hosted a series called 'Real Life Dramas.' There are eight stories told, three by men, three by women, one family consisting of a mother, father and son, and one couple (with a family member in the audience). In her opening address to this show, Oprah promises us 'stories of unbelievable fortitude' and asks 'how do people cope with life after facing death?' In

fact, most of what we hear on this show is not so much about how life after facing near death is experienced –although it is touched on- but how the narrators came to the decisions to act and what action they took in order to save themselves. The individuals on this show found themselves in perilous circumstances through accidents and awful chance happenings. The spotlight here is on the inner strength and self-reliance that can be called on in times of acute crisis, and on the external, often spiritual, resources utilized by individuals under extreme pressure (Illouz 83).

The Oprah Winfrey Show convinces its viewers that their personhood is tied to community, friendship and familial networks but more importantly, that their self is purpose-driven and capable of contesting oppressive forces. What is fascinating is that this mantra of self-betterment acts as an umbrella over the Oprah persona, which stretches across her multi-media empire. Her show, her Web Site, her magazine, her book club, her films, her made for TV movies, even her friends make up the Oprah community.

Oprah asserts that this community and everything she supports has had an impact on her life personally and that she personally handles every detail of her business. Her production company, Harpo Films, made a deal with ABC to produce six TV movies under the heading “Oprah Winfrey Presents.” All three movies so far have been based on books, notably the highly rated *Before Women Had Wings*, which centers on a young girl who is physically abused by her alcoholic mother, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which depicts a resilient woman’s quest for love, sensual excitement and spiritual fulfillment, *The Wedding*, which is a multi-layered story of wealthy, young African American lovers dealing with a multitude of complications before an elegant and threatened marriage

ceremony, and *Amy and Isabella*, which chronicles the life of Amy, a shy 15-year-old girl, and her repressed, single mother, Isabelle. They lead routine lives until Amy becomes sexually involved with her high school math teacher (Abc.com). These films reflect, in addition to her show, the recurrent theme of suffering biographies.

In 1995, Oprah launched her now-famous Book Club, which continued Oprah's theme of suffering biographies. The Book Club gave her show an aura of respectability and changed her status from entertainer to moral entrepreneur. Considering the club's breathtaking success many claim that an Oprah Book Club choice is a guaranteed financial success. Oprah's favorite books become best sellers overnight. The Oprah label has serious push; she alone has transformed the book market.

Oprah's Book Club's novels elicit identification with characters that could be Oprah's audience or guests on her show. Such plots include: how a woman escapes an abusive marriage; a woman's grief at her husband's death in the crash of a plane he was piloting; the downfall of two twin brothers, one who becomes schizophrenic; the ordeals of a mother whose child is born mentally retarded; a young woman living with the memory of her drowned sister; and a young woman who test positive to HIV and finds meaning in helping others (Illouz 104).

Oprah explains the intent of her Book Club and connects reading and pain, "It still amazes me that people who are suffering feel that they are alone in the world and no one else has ever experienced whatever pain it is they're feeling at the time (Illouz 110)."

What makes all this so appealing is that humans naturally search for meaning. Many are plagued with uncertainties and Oprah offers ways to alleviate and understand suffering. Viewers, guests, host, and web users alike can flip through various media

technologies to understand their own suffering and need for self-help. There is a definite mixture of charity, television and the consumer market.

The website, oprah.com has become a matrix standardizing biography. Oprah.com offers a variety of support groups: from 'Health Support' to 'Clutter Buddies.' The 'Women's Support Group' is just as versatile, running the gamut with groups like the 'Lesbian Lounge' and 'Home Schooling at its Best.' Many of the topics deal with emotional issues including losing a child, drug addiction, and sexual abuse. But most topics deal with depression, anxiety, and weight-gain and self-esteem issues. The group with the most messages posted is '#1-A Place to Meet' with 36,568 messages posted as of April 2, 2007. The group administrator describes this group as "a place to share and be supported, a place to discuss "what's going on in your life," to "vent or just to talk," a place to "tell your story (Oprah.com)"

'Feeling Lost' posted her message on November 9, 2002, she writes, "Hello everyone who has posted messages. I have just spent the morning reading a lot of them and truly feel like I am amongst friends...women who understand and whom I understand." She tells her story:

Two years ago (in January) I met and fell in love with my husband on the Internet. We married just this August that passed. Our relationship and marriage is wonderful. He is everything I could possibly hope for and dream of in a husband. [But] our "happy ending" has come at great personal cost. I had to leave behind the country I love, my wonderful family who I'm so close to and my treasured friends to come to live in Australia. Although I haven't had too much of a hard time adapting to the culture changes, I feel terribly lost at times, like I've lost

everything I spent my life building up... like I've lost what I knew as "my life" - my family, friends, pets, career, self-confidence and mostly my independence.

Her story is just one of thousands of woman in search of meaning and self. In response, many women write just to validate that 'Feeling Lost' is not alone. Many of them share her story of loss and insecurity. But many more women come to these support groups to offer just that, support. One adviser asks, "Do you sew? Maybe you can find something at home that you can do or make to keep yourself from being bored to death. Get a part time job if you have some means of childcare... Go get your nails done. Do something for yourself (Oprah.com)."

The women go back and forth with each other, accumulating months and even years of correspondence. Some women write every morning just to chat about the coffee they spilt or the dishes they still have to do.

Oprah.com, which reflects the show, pivots on stories of guests, generally women that, firstly, reveal examples of a self under siege to the arrows of misfortune and secondly, the struggle to triumph over this adversity. This formulaic product is central to the purpose, the program and to the Oprah Empire as a whole.

The Oprah persona is highly complex. Kathryn Lofton, author of *Practicing Oprah; Or the Prescriptive Compulsion of a Spiritual Capitalism*, say that Oprah "embodies a series of self that arise from the African American community with which she aligns herself and with the culture of anxiety and therapy. These are all bound up with the system of celebrity that operates as a manifestation of the power and mobility of capital in the interests of consumerism and profit. At the center of the show is Oprah's

persona that is tied to the practice of sharing private experience, thereby broadening the base for a power that is political (Lofton 579).”

Frequently called trash TV, talk shows are cited as representing the worst excesses of cheap television, signaling the ‘dumbing down’ of culture.’ Of course, we know *The Oprah Winfrey Show* is not the first TV talk show, but it has transformed itself by capitalizing on the formations of intimacy between Oprah and her audience. The linking of advertising and the therapeutic narrative are central to our understanding of the processes at work on *Oprah*.

In nearly every episode of her show and in every issue of her magazine Oprah advertises products for her viewers. At the end of a show she gives “gifts” to her audience courtesy of who-ever and is sure to thank them and display their product and where watching viewers might find it. Oprah has “given” many things away including cars, homes, cashmere sweaters, gourmet foods and deserts, and even destination vacations. In every issue of *O, The Oprah Winfrey Magazine*, Oprah has a shop guide and editorial called, *The O list*, which reads beneath it, “A few things I think are just great” – Oprah. In this section features an average of 10 items and each accompany a “personal” quote from Oprah on why she likes this product and what we can use it for. She utilizes the enormous consumer power of the white, female, middle-class population and consequentially frames her show in the confines of capitalism.

Consider also a 2003 episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* titled, “Princess for a Day.” As suggested by this headline, the entire episode was devoted to making four women “princesses” for a day. “I love surprising people,” Oprah said in her opening voiceover, “I love making them happy.” That day, she made four women ecstatic. This

isn't an unusual story; Oprah has made herself famous through her generous peddling of dreams and goods. This practice of her generosity resonates with the cultural observer.

According to Lofton, "through the Oprah-produced montage, each woman becomes a mini-saint in the landscape of America, deserving of some divine intervention (the world simply cannot be the sort of place where such goodness goes without reward) (Lofton 600)."

The sincerity of the donation and the honesty of the receptions are undeniable. But what is interesting is how episode after episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* is laden with repetition (repetition of advice, of personal revolution, of individual self-sacrifice, of suffering) and parceling (of luxury goods, of extravagant physical makeovers, of spiritual guides, of Oprah-prescribed books). Lofton says, "These functions serve as a corrective means to the despairs and inequalities of the world outside her kingdom. Although her shows are filled with dreams and unattainable wishes (like a new wardrobe or minivan) it closes with a clear message. *These dreams are yours for the taking*. All you need is the money, or the right family member writing the right sort of letter, and least of not all, the right martyred profile (Lofton 601).

The better or more horrific, your story is, the more attention and sympathy you seem to evoke. Take James Frey for example. Here is a man whose graphic memoir *A Million Little Pieces* was hailed by Oprah in 2005, propelling it to the top of the bestseller lists all over the country. With strikingly grotesque detail he chronicles his years as a drug-addict, alcoholic and criminal. The beginning of his story opens, as do most of Oprah's book club favorites, with a horrific scene:

I wake to the drone of an airplane engine and the feeling of something warm dripping down my chin. I lift my hand to feel my face. My front four teeth are gone, I have a hole in my cheek, my nose is broken and my eyes are swollen nearly shut. I open them and I look around and I'm in the back of a plane and there's no one near me. I look at my clothes and my clothes are covered with a colorful mixture of spit, snot, urine, vomit and blood. I reach for the call button and I find it and I push it and I wait and thirty seconds later an Attendant arrives (Frey).

In an October 26, 2005 show entitled "The Man Who Kept Oprah Awake at Night," Oprah hailed Frey's explicit and crude book says its, "like nothing you've ever read before. Everybody at Harpo is reading it. When we were staying up late at night reading it, we'd come in the next morning saying, 'what page are you on?'" In emotional filmed testimonials, employees of Oprah's Harpo Productions lauded the book as revelatory, with some choking back tears. When the camera then returned to a damp-eyed Winfrey, she said, "I'm crying 'cause these are all my Harpo family so, and we all loved the book so much (Hardy)."

But a six-week investigation by The Smoking Gun revealed that there was a lot less to love about Frey's runaway hit, which sold more than 3.5 million copies and, thanks to Winfrey, sat atop *The New York Times* nonfiction paperback best seller list for 15 weeks. Next to the latest Harry Potter title, Nielsen BookScan reported, Frey's book sold more copies in the U.S. in 2005 –1.77 million more than any other title, with the majority of that total coming after Oprah's selection (Hardy).

Between 1994 and 1998, Oprah began to slowly evolve her show into what she termed, “Change your Life Television.” Included in this change were major alterations to the show’s format. Episodes included two-minute spots titled “Remembering Your Spirit,” that included inspirational testimonials from celebrities and everyday people on how they learned to live “a more spiritual life.” Talk of spirits and souls and dreams pervaded the new programming, and alongside such talk came new name-brand programming tropes (Lofton 610).

For example in 1996, Oprah produced a video, *Make the Connection: It's all about changing your life*. Critic Ann Hurley says that this video is “for all of us who get discouraged from time to time (and who hasn't?) –Especially feeling out of control and frustrated with yo-yo dieting. But have no fear, because America’s No. 1 inspirational speaker, Oprah Winfrey, provides real hope. Winfrey, so adept at making emotional connections with others on her talk show, turns that spotlight squarely on herself in an emotional and revealing hour. Despite her incredible success, she says, for years she was deeply unhappy. But in May of 1992 she finally reached the decision that helped her move forward in clarity. As she says, “I’ve learned that time is the one thing you cannot waste.... I hope that somebody will see this and connect in a way that will save them time (amazon.com).”

One happy customer writes, “Oprah changed my life with this video! This is not a workout video. Buy this video if you are looking for practical tips on how to like yourself, get physically active and control your weight. Oprah shares personal lessons about her weight and offers ideas on how to come to terms with how we look. So inspirational, it will help change your life, I watch it over and over again (amazon.com).”

Many of Oprah's millions of viewers believe that she has, indeed, changed their lives. The power over the personal lives of her viewers is very real. Oprah simply and truthfully has changes lives.

Every book she recommends hits the tops of the best seller lists. Let's take Brett Lott for example. Lott's fourth novel, *Jewel*, had been out of print by the time Oprah came across it in 1991. The following year, a friend of Lott's called to ask him if he had seen the latest issue of *Redbook*. Inside was a two-page, photo spread of Oprah standing in front of a bookcase containing several books. One of the books was *Jewel*. Seven years later, in January of 1999, Oprah called Lott to tell him she would like to feature his book in her book club. The day she called, his book was ranked No. 1,069,713 on Amazon.com's sales ranks. By that evening, it was No. 1 (Duplechain).

Oprah's relationship to reading is perhaps her most publicized practice (Lofton 612). What is striking about Oprah's literary advocacy are her choices. Lofton says, "Nearly every one of the novels she selected for the original book club followed the same narrative trajectory: a woman, usually of eccentric yet compelling character, experiences an enormous trauma. The remainder of the novel follows the woman as she manages the psychological, material, and social aftereffects of this trauma. Usually, the stories conclude on a neutral note: the center character is wiser for her experiences, though on the whole not entirely happy with the way her life has resolved. Obviously, Oprah believes this paradigmatic plotline will not only resonate with her viewers, but also expresses a universal truth critical to her spiritual work: the suffering of women is universal, unabated, and endured only through solidarity with other women (Lofton 613)."

According to the Barnes and Noble website, best selling book titles include: *The Road* (which debuted in March 2007 and traces the odyssey of a father and his young son through a desolate landscape of devastation and danger), *The Measure of a Man* (a memoir by Sidney Poitier), *Night* (an autobiographical narrative by Elie Wiesel, in which he describes his experiences in Nazi concentration camps, watching loved ones die), *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (which tells the story of the rise and fall of the mythical town of Macondo), *A Million Little Pieces*, *A Fine Balance* (which chronicles the resiliency of the human spirit when faced with death, despair, and unconscionable suffering, and *The Poisonwood Bible* (which is the saga of the Price family, a rural Georgia family wrestling with inner demons while living in the small African village of Kilanga) (Barnesandnoble.com).

Professor Jerry S. Herron, author of *Universities and the Myth of Cultural Decline*, says that “Oprah [should] be credited for encouraging human-scale literary activity. Most people are reading more books than at any other time in the history of American society, without contact with the so-called authorities. Oprah has done a brilliant job of encouraging people to do that. Who needs literature professors? We’ve become absolutely irrelevant (Hall).”

Susan Wise Bauer, author of *Oprah’s Misery Index*, says that even a hint of interest from Oprah can make a writer’s career. This Oprah effect, she says, is a “complex mix of celebrity, media synergy, and female buying power.” She confirms that the novels are “tied together, not merely by the theme of suffering, but by a particular method of depicting all that pain” thus uniting a community with a shared desire for the pain and healing formula (Bauer).

“Oprah’s Book Club” has solidified this idea of community among Oprah lovers. This community tie has been likened to religion and the “practicing of Oprah.” Recent episodes of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* advertise ways to “awake the Spirit;” headlines in *O, The Oprah Magazine* advocate methods of meditation and prayer; and in her treatment of books from “Oprah’s Book Club,” Oprah frequently encourages her reading audience to “find truths for your revolution.”

Lofton agrees that there is something quite religious about Oprah. Lofton says, “Every product of Winfrey’s empire combines spiritual counsel with practical encouragement, inner awakening with capitalist pragmatism” (Lofton 599).

Amy Welborn, writing for *Our Sunday Visitor*, highlights the “un-religious” elements of Oprah’s spiritual work: “So, in short, here’s what Oprah’s spirituality is about: a higher power, spirit, soul, “authentic power,” meaning, healing, affirmation, helping, miracles, meditation, journaling, and angels. Here’s what Oprah’s spirituality is not about: sin, redemption, sacrifice, conversion, humility, worship, holiness and Jesus Christ” (Lofton 604). To counter this ultimately unsatisfying ‘Church of O’ irritated fans began a website in 1998 devoted to deconstructing Oprah’s spiritual power. One turned off viewer, Katherine Coble, wrote that the show was now like church, “But a bad church with no God...Instead of God, God is Oprah (Lofton 605).”

Though initially Oprah’s ratings suffered during her switch to “Change Your Life Television” she is reaping the benefits of her gamble now. In the late 1990s Oprah busied herself with the multimedia diversification of her empire. By 2000, Oprah had successfully created the most comprehensive charismatic conglomerate of the contemporary era, managing holdings that included a cable network, a magazine, a series

of made-for-television movies, and her daily television show. Along with the task of changing people's lives, she widened her hold on the national imagination from a daily hour of friendly girl talk to a full-scale spiritual occupation. Lofton confirms that, "this occupation paid, and paid big. The launching of her magazine –the most successful launch in the history of the industry –paralleled her televised therapies. If you had problems, Winfrey had answers in several different formats (Lofton 605)."

O, The Oprah Magazine is the progeny of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. The magazine encompasses all the conflicting aspects that the show does: it elicits expert advice yet encourages self-help, it offers the reader savvy ways to save and buy, it requires the reader to do something meaningful but to make sure to rest and pamper herself. According to the media kit, this publication caters to the average middle age, middle-income woman. "With this magazine we have an opportunity to make a real mark. To speak and connect to women in a way no other publication ever has. To help women see every experience and challenge as a way to grow and discover their best. To convince women that the real goal is becoming more of who they really are. To embrace their life," says Oprah.

Coeli Carr, author of *You Can Read Her Like a...Magazine*, confirms that the magazine is the "print-media offspring of Brand Oprah. In its short life, it has generated nothing but love, pleasure and a huge income stream. A true child of its mother, the magazine, published as a joint venture with Hearst, has made the number sing like a full-blown gospel choir." In the mid-90s Hearst made Oprah an offer she couldn't refuse. Gayle King, Oprah's best friend of over 30 years and *O*'s editor-at-large said, "I think the line that got to her –because this is a girl that loves reading and loves book –was

‘Imagine a book that people could read every month, and it’s sort of your words and philosophies (Carr).’

Samir Husni, director of the University of Mississippi’s magazine service journalism program, said it best, “you’re no longer watching her at a distance, but you’re holding her in your hands.” He calls *O* the “feel-good bible of the 21 century,” describing Oprah as “the drug that’s going to help you feel good about yourself (Carr).”

The stories on the cover of *O, The Oprah Magazine*, April 2007, illustrate Oprah’s classic formula. Stories include:

1. The Breast Choice, One Woman’s Decision: What Would You Do?
2. Spring into the greatest shape of your life!
3. True Stories (you’ll laugh, you’ll cry)
4. Yikes! From plunging planes to Lunging Lunatics, how to survive just about anything (Oh yes, you can!)
5. The Amazingly Cute \$50 suit.

Inside this issue you find *Close Calls*, which discuss various true stories of survival, including: *10 Years Old, Alone on a Hill; The Plane Began to Pitch, 1939; Just Before the Storm; And The Rapist in My Bedroom*. And that’s not all. The April issue also features “*We Have Walked Through Fire Together*” which discusses the hardships and consequential friendship of the wives of Bob Woodruff and David Bloom, two respected TV journalists who were casualties of the war in Iraq in which they were covering.

In every issue, on the very last page of the publication Oprah writes *What I Know for Sure*. Pulling from the themes for the April issue Oprah writes:

I've heard truly amazing stories over the years, about almost every human situation. Conflict, defeat, triumph, resilience. Recently, I heard something that left me in awe. I haven't stopped thinking about John Diaz's story. He was on my show telling of his escape six years ago from Singapore Airlines flight 006. Eighty-three people perished in the flames. John and 95 others survived.... Inside the plane, John said "looked like *Dante's Inferno* with people strapped to their seats, just burning. It seemed like an aura was leaving their bodies –some brighter than others...I thought the brightness and dimness of the auras were how one lives one's life". ...And although he still won't call his close call a miracle, he does say, "I want to live my life so my aura, when it leaves, is very bright (O)."

The power of this heart-wrenching story speaks for itself, but Oprah adds, sticking to the formula, "What I know for sure: That's a goal we all can share."

After watching an episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, leafing through *O, The Oprah Magazine*, or scanning oprah.com it seems imperative to do something with yourself. Lofton asserts, "This advocacy of action demands the sensible attentions of her viewers and they are listening, intently, while Oprah offers her prescription for success: write, read, and buy (Lofton 608)."

Journaling and heeding to the advice of Oprah's experts is an important self-help tool in the world of Oprah. Viewers are instructed to write and rewrite in an attempt to demonstrate their loyalty to this new mode of spiritual revelation. Lofton says, "The guests thus serve as confessors to priest-like spiritual counselors, who in turn defer to the

divinity (Oprah) for affirmation and the occasional confirmation (“oh, that happened to me”) anecdote (Lofton 612).”

Under the Advice, ect. Section of *O, The Oprah Magazine* after the reader reads *The Panic Button*: Martha Beck on the only rational way to weather life’s big and little snafus, *Dr. Phil* on getting along with a surly son-in-law and tips on raising a grandchild, and *Suze Orman* on an oppressive load of debt, a cramped house and a money-squandering husband, the reader finally comes to the journaling portion. Here, the reader is encouraged to write down her feelings about fear. It begins, “At times we all fear we’re not good enough. Before you can convince yourself otherwise, you have to simply admit to yourself –and no one else –what you want. Then tell yourself, *I am* good enough. Say it until you believe it.” The reader is given five questions and is asked to reflect on such things like how does your “self-talk” change when you’re fearful. We must keep in mind her who Oprah’s readers are. These are not children; these are middle-class women with families and careers.

I would argue that the childlike dialogue Oprah exploits presents her audience with a simplistic discourse on suffering. Suffering is a powerful source of “lessons” and moral knowledge and it should guide the individual. But what Oprah ends up doing is making suffering and the exploitation of your own suffering into a desirable and commonplace experience.

Dr. Arthur Frankel, psychology professor at Salve Regina University, says that what Oprah offers is plain and simple “common sense.” He affirms that *The Oprah Winfrey Show* sensationalizes suffering and notes that “sensationalism pays off because it draws an audience so that’s what’s often on TV rather than more thoughtful fare.”

Dr. Frankel says, “If we are shown people who are worse off than we think we are, then we’re likely to feel better about ourselves when we compare ourselves to those who aren’t perceived to be doing as well.” He explains, “Personally, I think much of the TV fare that is sensationalistic is a waste of time since it often gets us thinking about issues that are petty or trivial rather than important. There are lots of things we can do to benefit ourselves and/or others instead of watching lots of TV.”

Bettering yourself through learning, reading or being an active member of the community will give you a lasting prescription for self-betterment instead of the quick fix that Oprah offers. People are running their lives based around the programs they watch. People are lazier and consequentially fatter than ever before. This is the effect of media on our culture today.

How is Oprah’s own media empire affecting culture? This “inspirational capitalism” has provided an undeniable fortune for Oprah. And, like any good idea, the Kleenex factor formula she promotes is being copied. It is rare to flip through any of the major networks without finding a show that doesn’t pull at your heart and draw you to tears. Programs that delve into the personal lives of their guests and stress their personal hardships include ABC’s *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, ABC’s *Super Nanny*, Fox’s *Trading Spouses* and NBC’s *The Biggest Loser*.

For example, this season, *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* will be traveling all across America to build homes for families in the 50 states. Their website boasts, “Near or far, east or west, there’s no place the team won’t go to help a family in need. On their first stop they’re heading all the way up to North Pole, Alaska, to help Betsy Rogers, a

single mother who has spent her life caring for her 13-member family and others.” Next comes the details:

The large Rogers family are well known in their community for their selfless attitudes and strong morals. All the children excel in everything they do, whether it's sports or academics. Betsy was raised in a bi-racial family, and later married into a bi-racial marriage; as a result, she strives to teach her family and community about diversity and respect for others. A well-known and much respected figure throughout the community, Betsy is a team mother for both the football and wrestling teams and a second mom to most of the kids in the area. She has passed her selfless values on to her children; her two eldest sons, Christopher and Jonathan, went on a two-week mission trip in Honduras to help build homes for those who live in worse conditions than even they could imagine. But the Rogers family has recently fallen on hard times. Shortly after Betsy's marriage ended, leaving the family in a difficult financial situation, her brother had kidney failure and began dialysis treatments. Despite her family's already difficult living conditions, Betsy immediately invited her brother and his three children to move in with her family. The newly increased family of thirteen is crammed into the Rogers' current two-bedroom home. The tiny house is literally falling apart around them: Walls are separating from each other, windows are cracked and broken, the house has no foundation and the front door doesn't lock and can't even stay shut. Worst of all, the water heater only supplies enough heat for one warm shower and the house is without insulation - these problems can create major health threats when the temperature gets as low as minus sixty

degrees in the Alaskan winter.

There is such an overwhelming sense of exploitation and of commercializing the human condition. The camera lens zooms in closely when tears begin to fall and sobbing guests are asked to further reveal why they're crying and to give the gory details their greatest struggle. All these programs begin with exposing the explicit details of the tragedies their guests have suffered, pulling the viewer in and locking onto the emotional bonds of suffering while stroking the exciting fire of voyeurism, all neatly packaged into a one-hour episode complete with commercial breaks and consumer tips –You go girl!

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