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The American Dream: Illusion of Individualism and Self-Help in *Oprah's Book Club*

A thesis presented

by

Ashley Jean Hight

Submitted to the College of Arts, Media and Design

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

Master of Arts

in Communication, Media and Cultural Studies

Department of Communication Studies
Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
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Ashley Jean Hight

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

Submitted In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
of Master of Arts in Communication, Media and Cultural Studies
in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of
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Boston, Massachusetts
April 2011

ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I argue the complex nature of *Oprah's Book Club* in American culture with special focus on Oprah Winfrey's self-help philosophy. As a financially and independently successful African American woman in a predominantly white patriarchal society, Winfrey is an ideal proponent of the American dream, having garnered celebrity and fame through an individualistic and neoliberal rhetoric. By analyzing the evolution of the American dream and how it relates to a coherent and unified American identity, I demonstrate how Winfrey's empire of self-improvement transcends into the literary world. By utilizing qualitative textual and historical analysis, I employ a cultural studies approach by constructing a connection between the American dream's emphasis on rugged individualism to themes and ideas presented in the context of *Oprah's Book Club,* with special focus on ideology and values within the American dream. I examine how book clubs formed, their implications and importance in the lives of women, and how the communal aspect of book clubs forces reading—a solitary and private act—into the public realm. I relate the American dream, Winfrey's narrative and self-help discourse, and book clubs in order to analyze *Oprah's Book Club* and the effects it has had on women and literacy in world dominated by technology. By highlighting its impractical nature and its ability to undermine personal experiences, I propose contradictions to the American dream and show how even though Winfrey's self-help philosophy fails to account for individual systemic and institutionalized boundaries and restrictions, literacy and discussing literature is a critical component of American life.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction: The American Dream and *Oprah's Book Club*

Once a form of distraction and comfort while awaiting the implacable hand of fate, becoming healthy, wealthy, and wise had gone beyond an instrument of salvation into being a practical end in its own right. This emphasis—some might say mania—for self-improvement, cut loose from its original Calvinist moorings, remains a recognizable trait in the American character and is considered an indispensable means for the achievement of an American Dream.

—Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation,* 30

A lot of people see my fame and wealth, but they don't realize that what created it all is a value system that operates in the principle of cause and effect: What you put out comes back. Do the emotional and spiritual work required to develop authentic power…and you will always be rewarded.

—Oprah Winfrey, "What I know for sure," *O, The Oprah Magazine*, January 2007

The crux of a U.S. national identity, the American dream highlights the importance of individualism, struggle, and success over tribulations. With an emphasis on overcoming victimization, the dream demonstrates that one can accomplish any task with determinism and hard work. As life in the United States evolves, the dream constantly changes, especially, the means and ways that this success can be achieved. While numerous celebrities and other popular figures act as symbols of the American dream, Oprah Winfrey is perhaps one of its most controversial and popular representatives. Winfrey's popularity in the media and society positions her as the epitome of success in America: her upbringing in rural poverty morphed into a lucrative television career that not only made her a national star, but garnered her the wealth and power to influence society. Her stardom bases itself in an empire that advocates self-help and transformation, one that encourages makeovers—

internal and external—and individualism. Positioned within this larger context, this thesis addresses the American dream and Winfrey's influence and power over individuals by exploring media and culture through traditions of media and cultural studies via *Oprah's Book Club*. The goal is to demonstrate how *Oprah's Book Club* acts as an extension of the American dream, perpetuating reading and literature as methods that catalyze transformation and follow Winfrey's teachings of self-help.

Context

Not just a media mogul and independent woman with global renown, Winfrey evolved into a cultural icon whose magazine, website, syndicated television talk show, book club, and charities influence social and political areas of the lives of millions of Americans. Arguably the most recognized woman in America, Winfrey knows no boundaries when it comes to spreading her "gospel," wisdom, and celebrity. Her fame surpasses that of many politicians, movie stars, musicians, and social activists. She graces the lists of Forbes magazine, making appearances on a variety of compilations, such as "The 400 Richest Americans of 2009" where she ranked 141; number one on their annual "The World's Most Powerful Celebrities;" 400 on "The World's Billionaires;" and 35 of 67 on "The World's Most Powerful People" (Forbes.com). Winfrey appeared on *Time*'s most influential people in the world annual poll an impressive six times and continues to make a lasting impression on society (Time.com). However, not simply a media personality, Winfrey possesses qualities of a cultural icon, triumphing over the publishing industry, media, and society.

From diets, style advice, new age medical treatments, infidelity, celebrity scandal, and financial advice, Winfrey covers virtually every sphere of social entertainment on her syndicated talk show and in her magazine, solidifying her place as a global phenomenon.

Before becoming a global wonder, Winfrey started out as a local talk show host in 1980s Chicago with her show quickly increasing from thirty minutes to an hour and remains the number one talk show after 23 seasons ("Americas"). Her projects form an empire—the Winfrey Empire—consisting of a magazine, radio show, afternoon talk show, and, most recently, an entire cable network. Not only does she endorse products, people, and companies, she also recommends books. The recommendations eventually became the premise for her famous, *Oprah's Book Club*. Winfrey's book club—a cultural revolution—changed how and, most importantly, why America reads. Through *Oprah's Book Club*, Winfrey presents an idealized philosophy to her audience and book club members. Her adolescent hardships, extreme poverty, and her drive to break economic and social boundaries makes her relatable to virtually every individual, whether they realize her power or not. Henry Lewis Gates Jr. states, "I think that Oprah somehow is as close to an Everyperson as any human being has ever been—she appeals to white people and black people and just about every other shade of people, males as well as females. She has an uncanny capacity to name the zeitgeist, the spirit of the time, to identify the key issues that most concern us as human beings at any given moment" (200). Indeed, the spirit of the current time lies in the arena of self-help, self-determination, and an every-man-for-himself philosophy on which Winfrey continues to build her empire, as exemplified by an American consensus of the American Dream. She dubs her television show a spiritual ministry that

demonstrates how lives can change and how one can inspire this change in their life. She is modest and humble, not associating wealth with happiness, and claims that her financial achievements do not define who she is as an individual. "Although I'm grateful for the blessings of wealth," she says, "it hasn't changed who I am. My feet are still on the ground. I'm just wearing better shoes" (Gates 202). Her down-to-earth demeanor—situated within a narrative of hard work, self-sacrifice, and positive attitude—makes her story compelling to the audience: she is the mythological American dream success story.

Through her transformation from a struggling teen to a successful media personality, Winfrey's life reflects a self-help theory that she demonstrates and markets through her book club. By encouraging people to read—as a method of self-improvement and transformation—she implicitly and explicitly states that we can change and take control of our lives. While *Oprah's Book Club* composes only one aspect of the Winfrey Empire, how Winfrey utilizes her celebrity and status as a cultural icon is the main focus of this study, vis-à-vis analysis of *Oprah's Book Club* and its articulation with the American dream. Her unparalleled presence on television, in magazines, and on bookshelves around the world introduces fundamental aspects of the relationship between power and culture. This is especially contextualized in *Oprah's Book Club*, where Winfrey gains a stronghold over her audience because the book club is one of the most accessible attributes of her empire. For example, viewing *The Oprah Winfrey Show* or OWN (the Oprah Winfrey Network) requires a television, while the latter requires a cable subscription. Dependent on the Internet, only those with Internet access and a computer can use her website, and library computers are only available for patrons with a library card. Her magazine and book club picks, however,

are available in bookstores and other retailers open to the public without needing extra commodities. But whereas her magazine contains articles with a purpose, arguing a main point to get the reader thinking about applying specific tips to their life, books do not tell readers what to think. Interpreting literature depends on the reader, each coming to a different conclusion based on various characteristics, such as socioeconomic status, race, gender, marital status, education, and even geographic location.

However, the philosophy that Winfrey projects in her book club conflicts with realities of life in America. Her new age positive proposal benefits individuals, but it does not recreate probable living situations. It does not relieve poverty, unemployment, or medical catastrophes. It does not pay the bills or college tuition. The American dream fails to address the complex situation of Americans today and believing in a hard work ethic, as exemplified by Winfrey, only perpetuates the myths of and reaffirms an idealized rhetoric of success. The self-transformation Winfrey advocates in her teachings intends to translate to various aspect of one's life, not just the spiritual, mental, or emotional realm. In 2007, Winfrey opened the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls in South Africa near Johannesburg. The school offers leadership classes, high-tech and modern amenities, and teachers to a select few girls, adolescents from "deprived backgrounds" who were selected by Winfrey (Peck, *The Age of Oprah* 211). The racial and ethnic atrocities that occurred in South Africa become irrelevant to the lives of these girls and are not excuses to achieving greatness, at least, according to Winfrey. "You cannot blame apartheid," she writes in *O*, *The Oprah Magazine*, about the school's induction, "your parents, your circumstances, because you are not your circumstances. You are your possibilities. If you know that, you

can do anything" (212). Winfrey's message to these young girls mirrors the personal struggles Winfrey endured as a child. She did not let racism in the South define her, nor did she accept her poverty as definitive. Her positive enterprising citizenship focuses on an idealized reality of upward mobility, eventually leading to her social, economic, and media successes. This creates controversy with regards to what one can feasibly alter in their lives, as the rags-to-riches narrative is not typical to the everyday; it ignores the economic and sociological implications of citizens and undermines their experiences.

Barbara Ehrenreich, a frequent writer for *The New York Times Magazine*, *TIME*, *Harper's*, and *The New Republic*, underwent an undercover project in the late 1990s and early 2000s to investigate the reality of working for and living off of minimum wage in the United States, which she chronicles in her book *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*. She held various positions as a hotel restaurant waitress, a worker at Wal-Mart, and a maid service employee, all working for the offered minimum wage of $6-$7 an hour rate. She worked full-time, living in motels, rundown one-room apartments, and even trailer parks, rationing her wages to buy food, gas, and other necessities. What was Ehrenreich's conclusion about making minimum wage in poverty-stricken America? She bluntly states:

> ...the real question is not how well I did at work but how well I did at life in general, which includes eating and having a place to stay. The fact that these two separate questions needs to be underscored right away. In the rhetorical buildup to welfare reform, it was uniformly assumed that a job was the ticket out of poverty and that the only thing holding back welfare recipients was their reluctance to get out and get one. I got one and sometimes more than one, but my track record in the survival department is far less admirable than my performance as a jobholder (196).

Her evaluation demonstrates the improbable outcome of obtaining riches or—at least—happiness and transformation when there are other systemic boundaries restricting those

achievements. Ehrenreich's experience differs from the average individual: she has a Ph.D. in cell biology, is a white, English-speaking woman, and has a savings account for emergencies, which she uses in the event of medical urgencies or to eat (she will not go a day without eating). Based on these characteristics, Ehrenreich possesses an advantage over her poverty-stricken counterparts and she recognizes the unrealistic nature of her experience. "So the problem goes beyond my personal failings and miscalculations," she states. "Something is wrong, very wrong, when a single person in good health, a person who in addition possesses a working car, can barely support herself by the sweat of her brow. You don't need a degree in economics to see that wages are too low and rents too high" (199). Far from being achievable, the American dream keeps getting further away from the average American, with citizens having to hold multiple jobs to afford decent, yet affordable housing, and many of them do not have health care because they either do not qualify due to existing medical conditions or because their income does not meet qualification. Americans are living with the illusion that wealth equates happiness and success.

"If there seems to be general complacency about the low-income housing crisis, this is partly because it is in no way reflected in the official poverty rate," Ehrenreich observes. "When the market fails to distribute some vital commodity, such as housing, to all who require it, the usual liberal-to-moderate expectation is that the government will step in and help. We accept this principle—at least in a halfhearted and faltering way—in the case of health care, where government offers Medicare to the elderly, Medicaid to the desperately poor, and various state programs to the children of the merely very poor" (200). The self-help philosophy of the American dream favors the self-made individual, one who relies only

on his/herself for support; thus, the need for government assistance is eliminated. With any amount of hard work, whether spiritual, emotional, or economic, one can sufficiently survive without assistance, and Winfrey's viewers are expected to transform their lives inside and out without governmental or systemic support. Brenda Weber makes the same observation, stating that "…makeovers teach people that they cannot lean on a government agency for help. Incredibly, makeovers claim to offer a bigger and better form of advice, guidance, and 'public assistance' than the state possibly could" (64). The makeover mimics the rags-to-riches discourse and, as the leader, Winfrey wants her viewers to have the same access to success as she did.

Methodology

This thesis employs qualitative research methods to answer the following two questions: How does *Oprah's Book Club* reflect individualism and self-actualization as the American dream? And how does the book club aim to transform participants and readers to become ideal self-enterprising citizens? "A situated activity that locates the observer in the world," qualitative research aims to observe the effects of the American dream and Winfrey on the literary world and readers (Denzin and Lincoln 3). From a cultural studies perspective, this research creates a connection between literacy and active self-enterprising citizenship within the American dream, a concept crucial to the construction of a unified American identity. Unlike quantitative research which positions statistical analysis within a larger context and is typically restricted to sciences, qualitative research employs a deeper

analysis that interprets and engages in a discussion of archives, texts, interviews, and observations. Such a research method highlights the importance of the individual and aesthetics behind the researcher's findings, making it a crucial component to cultural studies. I apply qualitative research methods to demonstrate the didactic impact of the American dream, as displayed by Winfrey and *Oprah's Book Club*. This requires analysis of the books discussed, reader response, and the cultural significance of the American dream to American national consciousness.

The American Dream

Here, I define the American dream as an ethos of American identity, one that stipulates free will and the chance to achieve great opportunities regardless of socioeconomic status and other variants. James Truslow Adams first coined the term, stating that the American dream is a "dream of a better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank, which is the greatest contribution we have made to the thought and welfare of the world. That dream or hope has been present from the start. Ever since we became an independent nation, each generation has seen an uprising of ordinary Americans to save that dream from the forces which appeared to be overwhelming it" (Cullen 4).

Since the second question seeks to understand how *Oprah's Book Club* represents the American dream, it is necessary to examine and review the historical account of the dream, with special emphasis on individualism and how it relates to Americans today. Knowledge of the American dream, fame, and celebrity enhance the understanding of Winfrey's philosophy and needs to be thoroughly discussed in order to answer essential

questions about her self-help aesthetic. Since the majority of this thesis revolves around Winfrey and her ideas, a review of her life is also required, permitting a further examination of celebrity, fame, and self-discipline. Textual analysis provides a base for discussing what happened in Winfrey's life that makes her story powerful and how her transformation from farm girl to entrepreneur produces a cultural and influential icon, not just in the media industry. It demonstrates how her self-improvement narrative is relevant to the American dream and how she advocates a self-sufficient lifestyle to her audience.

Oprah Winfrey and her Audience

But why Winfrey? Her likeable demeanor and constant invitations to her readers and audience members into her home via her syndicated television show creates a pseudo-intimate experience, allowing viewers to identity with her as an everyday and average individual. Analysis of communication methods and how Winfrey projects herself aim to answer this question, and why readers trust Winfrey's philosophy and example. Her image in the media is crucial and how she depicts herself is important to the success of *Oprah's Book Club*. As the quintessential American dream success story, Winfrey's power to rejuvenate reading as a social practice is apparent in national book sale statistics, which illustrate the power the Winfrey name has over authorship and publishers.

In accordance with analysis of Winfrey and the American dream, this study relies on reading, the readers, and, specifically, how readers discuss and respond to texts. By examining reader and participant responses to *Oprah's Book Club*, this study aims to demonstrate the transformative properties of reading and how literature encourages

confession, transference of emotions and experiences, and how reading becomes a method of self-help. I study how people communicate about literature in a group setting and how the private to public shift of reading repositions literacy in an era of information technology and commensurate social isolation. The reader plays an important role in the success of the book club and how it relates to the American dream. I examine the books chosen for *Oprah's Book Club* and how the readers talk about and relate to the texts. This research positions the various lived experiences of the readers within the larger context of reading and book clubs. How readers communicate reflects the role of literacy in America and how it defines cultural attributes of the American identity. Through exploratory methodological research methods that investigate reader communication and textual analysis, articles and other forms of print media facilitate a discussion in determining how Winfrey's identity as a cultural icon drives publisher profits, book sales, and emotional responses with readers.

In partnership with a contemporary historical analysis of the book club, looking further into *Oprah's Book Club*, its picks, and its participants connect Winfrey, the American dream, and self-help into a coherent discovery about American identity. More distinctively, how does participating empower, motivate, or affect the participants and provide access to Winfrey's philosophy? How does the book club encourage individualism and promote the American dream? Not every book Winfrey chooses qualifies as great literature, but good literature is not what Winfrey intends for her readers. By analyzing who participates in the book club and by examining literacy trends, one understands the claim to authority of Winfrey makes over her followers and society, and how literacy can lead towards transformation.

This research aims not to produce an opinion or result that generalizes reading, book clubs, or whether Winfrey possesses exquisite literary taste. The central idea creates a description of Winfrey that establishes her as a self-made citizen, the most successful American dream advocate since Abraham Lincoln, and shows how her authority and power affects readers via *Oprah's Book Club*. She directly influences publishing houses, individuals, academics, libraries, and writers, making the importance of books clubs and literacy in 21st century America crucial to the discussion of self-improvement and the American dream.

Literature Review

A literature review on the history of the American dream is essential for a discussion of the book club, as well as historical research on book clubs, their intentions, assumptions, and participants. Here, I compare national book club rankings; analyzing which *Oprah's Book Club* picks were more financially successful than others provides insight to the message of the book club, particularly if the most successful books relate to the personal achievement and struggle of the protagonist. I discuss literacy rates and its importance for personal transformation, in what Mark Hall calls "literacy for liberation" (662). Because Winfrey is one of a select few successful African American women in popular culture today, analyzing her influence and authority from a feminist perspective is relevant. The majority of her audience members and book club participants are females, as are many of the authors she chooses to discuss. Particularly interested in self-help, friendship and family, and

makeover, *Oprah's Book Club* draws in women specifically as proprietors of literacy and the American dream.

American Dream

An historical account of the American dream begins analysis of why Winfrey becomes the ultimate American success story and how it relates to the book club. Jim Cullen, author of *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation*, describes the birth of the American dream and how it transformed and evolved over the centuries since its beginning. According to Cullen, popular culture simplifies the dream to a single goal of obtaining success, but the idea consists of several dreams. He supports his claim with discussion on the Puritans, the Declaration of Independence, racial equality, home ownership, and the current obsession with Hollywood and celebrity culture, which relies on luck, risk, and fame in the journey to accomplishing an authentic American dream lifestyle. Despite vast differences, each American dream shares one quality: belief in human agency as "the very core of the America dream, the bedrock premise upon which all else depends" (10).

Today, Americans are more apt to strive for personal fulfillment by way of fame and fortune as expressed and embodied through celebrity culture, a connection that directly links Winfrey with the American dream. Leo Braudy's *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History* chronicles the historical notion of fame, discussing some of the first famous individuals, such as Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar. He demonstrates the cultural relevance of fame and the important role the audience has in the creation of fame. He also

argues for the importance of an individual's image with regards to fame and its influence over an audience. Winfrey's audience feeds her success and fame. She epitomizes feminine ambition and self-determination that parallels the politics of the popular makeover scenario—as Weber argues in her discourse on Makeover Nation—with a focus on minimalist government and an emphasis on personal responsibility.

Book Clubs

Book clubs provide another context for this argument. How did book clubs start and why? Elizabeth Long, a prominent scholar on book clubs and readership in America, examines book clubs in the Houston, Texas area and her research yields data that supports the arguments about the structure of the Oprah phenomenon. She discovers that book clubs are thriving environments for sisterhood and literacy, providing an education required for self-transformation. She uncovers why women choose certain books, join the club, and implement meetings; though she does not come to a single conclusion, she argues that the process for choosing books is mysterious and a constantly sustained debate. The book selection process places less significance on the individual and more on collective opinions—though in Winfrey's case, the selection for *Oprah's Book Club* is *her* choice and audience opinion becomes irrelevant. The books analyze everyday obstacles that group members experience in order for clubs to develop a distinct character, a voice that generally includes only one type of book (non-fiction, science fiction, mystery and horror, memoir, romance, etc.). Though not stated explicitly, Long hints that most successful reading circles encourage self-improvement and a makeover scenario. These groups become a commentary on an individual's life and not necessarily on the book being discussed.

During the first years of *Oprah's Book Club (OBC),* every book Winfrey promotes becomes a national bestseller, unknown authors become known celebrities, and relatively known authors become more popular. More and more books come with "book club guides" in the back, whether or not they are *OBC* picks, attesting to the popularity of the book club trend. The main appeal of *OBC* is that anyone can join. Simply logging in at Oprah.com opens the book club world to a reader. It is free to sign up and members also receive a 10% discount on Amazon.com for *OBC* picks and many libraries keep logs and updates on *OBC.* The premise behind the discussion group invites viewers—mainly women—to read what Winfrey recommends and to engage in an on-air discussion about the book's themes, characters, and the emotional responses of the reader. Other segments are included on-air, such as essay contests for high school students and, occasionally, an interview with the author. As a new book is released approximately every six weeks on her show, readers pump out letters about the chosen novel and a few are read on-air. Viewers also have the option of posting questions and bulletins online at Oprah.com to formulate a community discussion. On her website, there are links for video lectures by professors and question and answer links with the author (Oprah.com).

Cecilia Konchar Farr delves into every detail of *OBC*, examining how reading, a solitary act, becomes public through book clubs and television talk shows, and argues that communal reading practices challenge readers to think differently. Kathryn Lofton asserts that reading encourages connections within a community and that despite differences, many individuals share the same story and challenges. The individuals emerge from the book spiritually enlightened and, ultimately, take responsibility for their lives. During book club

episodes on her talk show, Winfrey invites a few readers and—most often—the author to discuss the book. The author who is not viewed as a hero or elite individual, has the same struggles as Winfrey and viewers, being presented as a "gentle-hearted chum" (Lofton 60). Ritually, reading in a community setting drives the book club and advocates the philosophy of Winfrey's aesthetic of transformation and individualism.

There is a direct connection between Winfrey's rise to fame, notoriety, being self-made, and an idea of self-help in a country that prizes itself on democracy and freedom of the people. Her life and philosophy is not simply culture, but blends into the political and economic spheres of everyday life. Followers of Winfrey translate her success as a celebrity into ramifications of social, political, economic, and psychological trends of living, despite the reality that this cannot be achieved. Through analysis of celebrity, fame, and the ever-prominent American dream, Winfrey's rise to fame and global notoriety contextualizes to reflect a trend between power, culture, and selfhood, one that stipulates a reinvention of the self towards self-consciousness and individual aspiration through reading.

Chapter Overview

Chapter two, "Construction of the American Dream: Celebrity, Fame, and Individualism" discusses the evolution of the American dream, beginning with the Puritans and continuing on to examine the lives of Abraham Lincoln and Winfrey as quintessential American proponents. I examine Lincoln as the first self-made individual and then present Winfrey as his modern-day equivalent. Cullen provides an extensive account of the

American dream's evolution and argues that a single dream does not exist. Rather, multiple dreams emerged over the course of hundreds of years, continuing to change with each decade and new generations. The current dream revolves around fame, fortune, and luck, making the dream conducive and relevant to the lives of Americans today. Dialogues of fame, heroism, transformation and makeovers, and celebrity are crucial for this dialogue, and analysis of Winfrey's victimization-to-celebrity narrative drive the basis for the construction of her empire, which eventually creates *OBC*.

Chapter three, "Literacy, Book Clubs, and Transformation," begins with a focus on the history of book clubs in the United States. I highlight participants, why the clubs were created, what they accomplished, and how book clubs changed since their origination. Next, I place *OBC* in the discussion, situating the group as an extension of the American dream vis-à-vis Winfrey's makeover and self-transformation philosophy. I discuss the broader context of *OBC*, including its creation, what constitutes a Winfrey book pick, and how readers discuss the books. This includes addressing common themes in the books and how the readers respond to situations within the text. The manner in which readers communicate is vital; how women talk about the books, why they join the clubs, and why women constitute the majority of *OBC* members is important to Winfrey's message of individualism. I conclude by engaging in a examination of literacy and its importance for transformation and opportunity.

Chapter four, "Failures of Self-Help: The James Frey Controversy," reviews *OBC*'s October 2005 pick, *A Million Little Pieces* by James Frey, and how Winfrey's book choice rocks the self-made philosophy of her empire. Winfrey's empire thrives on demonstrating

tribulation over struggles and her book club picks reflect this experience. Frey fabricates his experience with drugs and alcohol, depicting him as an individual who makes over his life after many challenges. However, the falseness of his experience undermines and creates controversy within the sphere of self-help and questions the validity of the American dream and its probability. I explain contradictions within the self-help industry and how rugged individualism cannot feasibly alter one's life for the better in normal conditions.

And finally, chapter five, "Conclusion," reviews arguments of the American dream with relation to Winfrey and *OBC*. I briefly provide an overview of the thesis's goals and assertions, and provide discussion for other areas to be researched further as this subject constantly evolves and adapts to reflect a changing American lifestyle. I return to Winfrey's impact on the literary world and the lives of women, and how she revives reading as a transformative and social activity, despite being immersed in the current technological era.

CHAPTER II

The American Dream: Celebrity, Fame, and Individualism

The term [American dream] seems like the most lofty as well as the most immediate component of an American identity, a birthright far more meaningful and compelling than terms like "democracy," "Constitution," or even "the United States."

—Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation,* 5

A dream is a vision of truth, or what can be and ought to be; it shapes our fundamental intention and purpose; it calls us to the life we are meant to serve…And a dream is a deception, a night creature of mere seeming; or a daylight phantom that draws us away from the reality of the present moment, idling the engines of our psyche and spirit in imagined pleasures or terrors. Worse yet, a dream is an illusion masquerading as a vision, as when we say of someone that his or her girls are "only a dream."

—Jacob Needleman, "Two Dreams of America," 23

Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, an exploration on American culture from the observant perspective of the Frenchman, provides insight into the booming tradition of democracy and individualism in 17th century America. In fact, Tocqueville first coined the term individualism, which he described as "a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends; with this little society formed to his taste, he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself" (104). These citizens:

> owe nothing to any man, they expect nothing from any man; they acquire the habit of always considering themselves as standing alone, and they are apt to imagine that their whole destiny is in their hands. Thus not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but hides his descendants, and separates his contemporaries, from him; it throws him back for ever upon himself alone, and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart (106).

Out of this newly individualistic notion sparked the beginning of the American dream, which became a crucial component of a collective American identity. The American dream—as defined by Cullen—is a belief specific to the United States that says "anything is possible if you want it badly enough" (5). At least, this is the most commonly asserted definition American culture credits. Average Americans describe the dream as the ability to set goals and achieve them, regardless of racial or financial restrictions. Most commonly, the ability to garner success out of poverty becomes the quintessential marker of the American dream, forging a better life on one's own, using little or no outside help. According to Cullen, the American dream is a national motto. He argues, "Jubilant athletes declaim it following championship games. Aspiring politicians invoke it as the basis of their candidacies. Otherwise sober businessmen cite achieving it as the ultimate goal of their enterprises. The term seems like the most lofty as well as the most immediate component of an American identity, a birthright far more meaningful and compelling than terms like 'democracy,' 'Constitution,' or even 'the United States'" (5). It appears that the American dream requires a sense of power and recognition of selfhood in order to reinvent the self toward obtaining this new consciousness and identity.

Of course, based on Cullen's examples of politicians and athletes, success typically attaches to the American dream, whether this success is in the shape of happiness, fortune, or celebrity. All three of these components are present in Winfrey's persona; her effortless transformation from poor, sexually abused farm girl to international self-help mogul has brought her fame and wealth, catapulting her to international celebrity status. Winfrey—as the embodiment of the humble and modest modern-day American success story—becomes

the blueprint example for others to follow. Starting with the Puritans settling in the New World and the drafting of the Declaration of Independence, the vague future of the current American dream revolves around luck and celebrity, and one sees through this evolutionary process how self-determination, individualism, and a makeover nation transforms and composes the current American dream as defined by Winfrey's life and philosophy.

The Puritans and Declaration of Independence

In *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation,* Cullen pens the American dream's history and argues that "you'll never really understand what it means to be an American of any creed, color, or gender if you don't try to imagine the shape of that dream" (13). He encourages educating oneself about its progression in order to fully realize why the American dream comprises an important aspect of the American identity. Popular culture and mass media simplify the American dream, but the belief is actually "a complex idea with manifold implications that can cut different ways" (10). There is no single American dream, Cullen argues, but several that overlap throughout history. Cullen discusses the Puritans, who are the basis for the first American dream as they flee Europe for religious freedom. The drafting and construction of the Declaration of Independence, which paves the way for the infamous hunt for life, liberty, and a pursuit of happiness, becomes the official "charter of the American Dream" (38). Though he concludes his analysis of the various dreams with the desire for home ownership in the 1980s with the emergence of suburban sprawl and ending racial inequality—what Cullen considers the most unsuccessful

American dream—it is his discussion on Abraham Lincoln, the most famous successful dream story, a narrative that illustrates Lincoln as being one of the first self-made men. Cullen concludes the dream sequence with the current American goal, a limbo-like dream of celebrity and fame that acquires the most clout in the connection between the American dream and Winfrey's narrative and empire. The dreams encompass American identity because the United States is not based in religion, language, bloodline, or a shared history. Rather, a set of ideas and aspirations written out in the Declaration of Independence and expressed in the Constitution unites Americans, spawning from goals of equality for life, liberty, and happiness.

The American dream originally encompasses ideas not of an entire nation, but of one group: the Puritans, religious dissenters, who fled Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries for religious freedom. The origins and characteristics of the Puritans are debated—such as when they officially arrived in America, their practices, and ways of life—yet the goal of escaping the repressive and conflicting Church of England is universally understood, as Puritanical beliefs grow from Protestantism, a determinism belief system that goes against the Roman Catholic church. Cullen states, "And all the various abstruse concepts that complicate discussions of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Puritanism…the irreducible foundation of all varieties of Protestantism was this: a belief that the world was a corrupt place, but one that could be reformed" (15). This reformation becomes a central component of the American dream, asserting that any life or model can be replaced with a more efficient or liberating one. Because Puritans, Calvinists, and Protestants believe in predestination, whatever they accomplish in their Earthly life merely provides and fulfills

bodily and communal satisfaction for not only themselves, but for the community because Puritans were very community oriented individuals. Despite the Puritans' personal freedom in being the masters of their own destiny, they strongly desired the luxury of a community, "not a philosophical or legal framework so much as a series of deep and emotional and affective bonds that connected people who had a shared sense of what their lives were about" (22). The first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop, shares the same observation as Cullen: "We must delight in each other, make other's condition our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, our community as members of the same body" (23). Able to balance self-discipline with a communal consciousness, Puritans created the foundation for the first American dream experience, one that comprised a combination of rugged individualism and community.

Mark Nepo fosters the same ideals of community in the creation of the American dream. He states:

> It is interesting that while the Founding Fathers were crafting the magnificent Declaration of Independence, our native fathers were practicing their own magnificent sense of community. In the Iroquois nation, in particular, there is a custom known as *dream-walking*, in which each person's individual dreams and sufferings are interpreted to find communal meaning, and those meanings, woven together, are then used to blueprint the dream for the community. It is no accident that these two sensibilities, independence and community flourished at the same time (4).

The Declaration of Independence—what Cullen dubs the official charter of the American dream—becomes central to American consciousness, advocating similar individualism and unity as the Puritans, which eventually led to the American Revolutionary War. The

American Revolution began as an American response to the British needing to pay off large war debts accrued by the Seven Years' War of 1755-1763 and the global war they started in order to control North America entirely. The colonists rebelled, furious at being subjected to increased British taxes on goods and various commodities, despite Great Britain's lax and seemingly absent supervision in current affairs. Out of this conflict sprouted the Declaration of Independence, a document that inspired thought, equality, and, obviously, independence. The Puritan community was not the first to have a dream of freedom and equality, but the Declaration became the first to be written out as an official contract of the new Americas. Despite its importance—most all grade school children memorize significant phrases—its centrality in the construction of American identity has been lost. By far, the memorable portions and most often quoted occur at the beginning of the text: "We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness" (Cullen 37). The meaning of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness differ greatly from its induction in 1776 to the 2000s. Once concrete, the meanings of these freedoms are altered due to recent developments and basic life changes. *Life*, Cullen argues, "once seemed clear enough, at least until debates about abortion, genetic engineering, and cloning muddied those waters." *Liberty*, on the other hand, is slightly more definitive, as "a celebration of the right to buy—if you've got the cash or credit" to do so. And finally, *the pursuit of happiness*, perhaps the most convoluted of the three: "It is simply the acquisition of creature comforts?...We Americans often act as if we believe there really isn't anything money can't buy," referring to the idea that money buys happiness (39). The market economy and

capitalism are to blame for material wealth and possessions becoming synonymous with happiness. Current capitalistic trends transform a community that once strove for happiness and liberty, into a society whose dream no longer resembles or even represents an altered replica of the original model.

With slavery being a prominent aspect of life in the original colonies and growing Confederate states, defining equality and who the American dream includes needs to be addressed. Elaine H. Pagels, a religious historian, takes a historically religious stance in analyzing the modification of the American dream as presented in the Declaration of Independence. Pagels argues that even though the Declaration claims equality for all citizens ("We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights"), many of the men who signed the document lived in a land controlled by a British monarchy and owned slaves (85). So how then is equality defined? Considered to be property, as they could be purchased and sold, slaves did not possess the same unalienable rights as men or even women. Pagels claims that some historians give the rise of Christianity in the New World to changing the status of slaves from property to people. Unfortunately, this distinction is an illusion, as many of the men who signed the Declaration of Independence were Christians and raised as such, taking "for granted that slaves (and perhaps non-Caucasians as well) were not included among those 'created equal'" (86). The origination of the American dream equality argument cannot be based in the Declaration since slaves were not considered equals to white men. Pagels argues:

> We cannot, then, take for granted an inclusive understanding of the American dream. On the contrary, maintaining one requires us to contend against a natural human preference to associate with "people like ourselves"—a tendency that, when embodied in our politics, often leads people, consciously or not, to carve out exclusive groups and set them against others—a tendency certainly as alive today as it has ever been (97).

Obtaining equality as a slave or a woman became difficult to establish since the terms *man* and *individuals*—as the Declaration states—refers to white males; this means that the Founding Fathers were not denying the right of equality to slaves because they were not considered to be men as their definition stipulates.

The argument of defining equality is similar to that of freedom in 1776 America. Freedom for the Founding Fathers does not equate to the eighteenth- and later centuries definitions, but, rather, as the opposite of slavery. "When they used the term 'slavery,'" Cullen explains, "they weren't referring to the peculiar institution whereby many of the Founding Fathers themselves bought and sold African Americans as property; they referred to what they felt Great Britain was doing to their lives and livelihoods" (47). Regardless of the gaps and contradictions within the Declaration and the standards it sets for equality and freedom, it still holds power and has a profound effect on Americans, and, eventually, paves the way for the future dreams that take place, that is, racial equality, home ownership, upward mobility, and fame.

That being stated, Cullen notes that in terms of revolutions and rebellion, the American Revolution does not hold much weight or memory in the minds of Americans, but rather, the Civil War possesses more nostalgia for the average American. This reminiscence occurs most likely because the Civil War fostered an internal change, a battle within, while

the Revolution was a conflict with Britain. The United States, created from a need for independence, desired the experience of surviving as a separate nation from the governing and restrictive actions of Great Britain, so it is of no surprise that the American dream relies on adopting self-making and individualism. Leo Braudy emphasizes the desire for rugged individualism in the newly developed Americas, of "building a whole new society," in which individuals are bold and assertive of their well-being and desires. This society is "a land that fed and was fed by the eighteenth-century fascination with origins and originality, islands and primitive peoples, where the roots of true individuality might be found" (393). Whereas European nations attempted to redefine themselves, America started fresh within a solely self-generated and free environment. The Revolution is critical in the understanding of the American dream, not simply as the birth period of the Declaration, but because it asserts the self-determinism central to the dream. Braudy further highlights the American desire to break away from European rule, stating, "Like so many public aspects of America itself, the concept of the self-made man was an attack against aristocratic privilege. The self-made man owed nothing to influences, especially European ones, and received no help from family connections" (512). Like the foundations of America, the self-made individual undergoes a complete transformation into a new being, not simply improved, but going beyond to obtain the ultimate destiny. America's quest for freedom from Britain mimics the journey for freedom and success for individuals, as both inherently connect to the concept of individual struggle and self-assertion. American society's preoccupation with the self-made man and its obsessive drive for fame is internally driven, admiring and fixating on

celebrities, modern heroes, and—for some—heroes of the past, the most famous of the American dream success accounts being that of President Abraham Lincoln.

Lincoln, arguably the most famous self-made product of individualism, represents the next dream in the American dream sequence: upward mobility and the art of being self-made. Henry Clay says, "We are a nation of self-made men," ultimately being credited as coining the stereotypically American trademark, and there is no other man as great or victoriously self-made as Lincoln (Cullen 69). Despite the tremendously successful lives of Andrew Carnegie, Benjamin Franklin, and Andrew Jackson, their traditional narratives of upward mobility do not resonate with the nostalgia and infamy of Lincoln's rugged early life before he became a praised and adored president. Winfrey's rags-to-riches narrative acts as the modern equivalent to Lincoln's tale, even though Lincoln obtained a presidency while Winfrey becomes the Queen of Daytime television. "And while you may consider it a matter of wishful thinking on my part," Cullen confesses, "I find it hard to believe that Lincoln would have been all that upset to learn that one of the most vivid exponents of the American Dream a century and a half later is Oprah Winfrey, who built a media empire largely on puck and the force of her own mythology as a self-made woman" (101). Their complimentary stories, though distinctly different given the changing times, present three significant attributes: the self-made man, celebrity, and fame, all of which Winfrey and Lincoln seize in their lifetime.

Extensive research from Braudy, who examines celebrity and fame within cultural studies, indicates the transformation of celebrity and fame through historical events and interventions. With the rise and fall of greats such as Napoleon Bonaparte, Julius Caesar,

and Alexander the Great, Braudy pinpoints one crucial aspect of fame: the self-made man. "Virtue, character, and integrity were the hallmarks of being self-made," Braudy states, "and the self-made man…was the cynosure of every journalist intent on bringing the news of America to itself. In the self-made country, who had not the potential to be self-made himself, with the help of an equally self-made audience?" (509). The influence Winfrey and Lincoln have over the public depends on the magnitude of their success: if they did not have followers or admirers, their rags-to-riches stories would not be retold or idolized as ideal. Lincoln's followers and Winfrey's audience members are responsible for deeming their self-made stories as lucrative and victorious, acting as children of American ideals of self-determination and feeding Winfrey and Lincoln's success, resulting in their fame. "Fame had ceased to be the possession of particular individuals or classes and had become instead a potential attribute of every human being that needed only to be brought out in the open for all to applaud its presence," Braudy argues. "The audience was no longer the servant of the visually powerful, but becoming at least their equal partner in the creation of such fame" (461). Without Winfrey's audience and Lincoln's devotees, it would be difficult to measure their fame and success, altering the magnitude of their influence; however, their positive transitions from farm life to wealth and fame is enough to garner at least some public recognition.

Abraham Lincoln: First Successful Dream

I happen temporarily to occupy this big White House. I am a living witness that any one of your children may look to come here as my father's child has. It is in order that each of you

may have through this free government which we have enjoyed, an open field and a fair chance for your industry, enterprise, and intelligence; that you may all have equal privileges in the race of life, with all its desirable human aspirations. It is for this the struggle should be maintained, that we may not lose our birthright—not only for one, but for two or three years. The notion is worth fighting for, to secure such an inestimable jewel.

–Abraham Lincoln, speech to the 166th Ohio Regiment, Washington DC. August 22, 1864, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation,* 74

Born February 12, 1809 in Hardin County, Kentucky, notoriously in a log cabin, Lincoln was the only child to survive his parents. Raised by his stepmother and father, Thomas Lincoln, Lincoln was no stranger to hard manual labor. According to his father, Lincoln "though very young was large of age, and had an axe put into his hands at once and from that till within this twenty-third year, he was almost constantly handling that most useful instrument—less, of course, plowing and harvesting seasons" (Cullen 77). Because his upbringing consisted of a strict farm life, skilled in extensive manual labor, Lincoln did not possess a formal education, riddling his speech with everyday colloquial idioms. There was "absolutely nothing to excite ambition for education," he once said, as the primary obligation was the farm's productivity (ibid). At nineteen, Lincoln left the rural Midwest and headed to New Orleans, holding a variety of jobs, such as a dry goods merchant, a hired hand, a surveyor, and a local postmaster, all unsuccessful (though he became captain in the Illinois militia during the Black Hawk War during this sporadic career spree). His experience as a captain paved the way for his political career, bidding for public office in 1832 (and losing), but he continued to follow a political calling that eventually resulted in his legendary presidency.

Representing the Whig Party, Lincoln lost various elections for public office, but finally won a spot in the state legislature. He studied law and obtained a practicing license in 1836, married Mary Todd in 1842, and established a flourishing law career. By his early thirties, Lincoln embarked on a compelling and positive path towards achieving the American dream. "Lincoln had already transformed himself from a poor country boy to the epitome of the Successful Young Man," Cullen states. "His self-image, in turn, shaped his politics. Lincoln was a classic exponent of self-interest rightly understood: the system was working for him, as well it should—and he could support it in good conscience as long as it could work for others, too" (78). Lincoln recognized that success was not dependent on outside intervention and that endless possibilities existed for everyone. He said, "Also bear in mind that your own resolution to succeed, is more important than any other one thing" (79). His determination and confidence in upward mobility allowed his election to the U.S. Congress in 1846. He supported strong military funding for American troops in the Mexican War, but it was the events that followed that catapulted him into the territory of fame, reemerging as a self-made man who possessed the "means to articulate the parameters of a powerful, though not omnipotent, American Dream" (80). Slavery was slowly becoming a heated issue and, beginning in 1854, became the crux of his bid for presidency and, ultimately, his success.

Lincoln did not approve of slavery, viewing it "as a necessary evil," but with the rising belief that slavery was "being affirmed as a positive good," his decisions as a congressman became more important and controversial (83). Cullen makes a slightly lucrative conclusion about Lincoln's views on slavery, claiming Lincoln's loyalty to only

whites. Lincoln's repugnance for slavery was not relevant to racial equality, but rather, he viewed slavery as a grave threat to whites, as he cared deeply about all whites. "Slavery was bad for them [whites]," Cullen argues, "and it was bad because it contaminated and, if left unchecked, would eventually destroy the American Dream in which he believed so deeply" (84). Lincoln even stated that he was "in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race," even though he actively opposed slavery in his politics (91). Economically and psychologically, ending slavery would benefit whites in the long run, enabling them to create their own American dream and achieve a similar upward mobile quest. Economically, men who hired workers as opposed to men who owned slaves—and thus, did not have to pay for their work—were at a disadvantage, hindering their ability to profit and shift their circumstances. Psychologically, what was it that gave white men the right to enslave blacks? Lincoln argued, "If A. can prove, however conclusively, that he may, of right, enslave B.—why not B snatch the same argument, and prove equally that he may enslave A.?" (86). Skin color becomes the obvious and most sought after response, but this answer troubled Lincoln, as it presupposes anyone of a lighter skin color, regardless of their "whiteness," in becoming a slave using this argument. American identity was historically a white identity, and Lincoln's political beliefs and understandings focused on changing this identity by ending slavery.

Lincoln lost a senate spot to Stephen Douglas in 1858 after heated debates on the validity of slavery, but people began to talk of a possible presidential run. "I must, in all candor, say I do not think myself fit for the Presidency," Lincoln said in 1859, and after continuously stating there were other great men who acquired more experience and were

more appropriate for the title, he embarked on a presidential campaign in 1860 after becoming the Republican nominee for president (93). This nomination launched his succession from farm boy to president, further demonstrating the possibilities and likelihood of the American dream. But with slavery steadily gaining attention from both parties, a war emerged, a civil war that became important in upholding the dream of individual destiny. Lincoln traveled across the country, making speeches about his commitment to an American identity and its dream. In Cincinnati, he said, "I hold that while man exists, it is his duty to improve not only his own condition, but to assist in ameliorating man kind" (94). In Philadelphia, he repeated a similar message:

> I have often inquired of myself, what great principle or idea it was that kept this Confederacy together. It was not the mere matter of the separation of the colonies from the mother land; but something in the Declaration giving liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but hope to the world for all future time. It was that which gave promise that in due time the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men, and that *all* should have an equal chance (ibid).

His presidency saved the Union, ended slavery with the enactment of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862, and gave freedom and more options of mobility to Americans. Even after Lincoln's assassination in 1865, his unified dream for the American people was still concrete. "If Franklin, Emerson, Clay and others were its [American Dream] Old Testament prophets," Cullen argues, "then Lincoln was its Jesus Christ" (100). Lincoln aimed to save the dreams of Americans by handing their destiny back into their own hands. "They have the right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of men who wrote that Declaration," he said of immigrants and Americans alike in 1858 (101). Lincoln's strong individualism encouraged Americans to become masters of their own destiny, and his fame and heroic status further perpetuated the American dream's mantra of self-

improvement. As the first self-made American, his life becomes the outline for the dream, supporting hard work and individualism, and his heroism and celebrity foreshadows Winfrey's own narrative of rugged individualism.

Oprah's Story: A Narrative of Suffering and Achievement

A prophet walks among us and her name is Oprah. You know her as a television talk show host, one of the most popular, successful and recognizable women of our time. But make no mistake, she also is a teacher, sent to Earth to spread the word. Perhaps it is only fitting that a 21st century wise man is a woman and that her chief medium is electronic…Gifted with profound moral insight and exceptional rapport with her followers, Oprah Winfrey has grown from a masterful communicator into an inspirational phenomenon.

—Mimi Avins, "Flocking to the church of Oprah"

My ability to get people to open up is only attributed, I think, to the fact that there is a common bond in the human spirit. We all want the same things. And I know that. I really do know that I am no different than anybody else. One of my greatest struggles in life has been to recognize that I'm as worthy as the next guy. And I think the moment you start thinking that you are better than somebody else, you've lost sight of who you are. Because the truth of the matter is, we are all the same. And I know that. I really know that.

—Oprah Winfrey, "America's Beloved Best Friend"

Winfrey's struggle as an abandoned and sexually abused poverty-stricken teenage mother to become a multi-billionaire media tycoon makes Winfrey's narrative compellingly individualistic. After being sent away by her mother, she struggled to complete difficult and tiring physical labor on her grandmother's—Hattie Mae Lee—Mississippi farm. Winfrey constantly mentions her life of poverty on her television show and magazine, reminiscing about the hardships of basic survival in the 1960's Jim Crow South. "There was no running

water," she says. "My job in the morning was to go to the well and bring water, then to take one cow out to pasture. Then my job was to do whatever my grandmother wanted me to do—get the eggs from the chicken without breaking the eggs. When it was hog-killing time, I was the one picking up all the intestines, and I would flick things off here and there. I had all the worst jobs" (Gates 208). Despite the do-it-yourself attitude her grandmother employed, which Winfrey still advocates today, Winfrey understood she did not want to live a life of poverty and she had the desire, but not necessarily the means, to become something better. Once the farm labor was completed, Winfrey began reading lessons with her grandmother, reciting Bible verses and poems by the time she was three years of age. Her grandmother made lye soaps and sewed all of her clothes, even making her own shoes. "It was a really big deal to get store-bough clothes or patent-leather shoes," she says. "It was a rural life. There was no indoor plumbing, no bathrooms. I bathed only on Saturdays. And it was my job to empty the slop jar in the morning. We had the slop jar under the bed…I was a busy little girl" (ibid).

However, emotional distress and trauma entered Winfrey's life soon after leaving her grandmother's farm. At six years old, she reunited with her mother only to endure sexual and physical abuse for years from male relatives, mainly the boyfriend of her mother's cousin. "He became a constant sexual molester of mine," she says. "I thought it was my fault. I thought I was the only person that had ever happened to, that it would not be safe for me to tell" (204). Winfrey never told her family about the abuse though many people close to her knew of the molestation. The abuse lasted for years, ending only when Winfrey attempted to run away. However, her attempt was foiled because the juvenile detention

center could not accommodate another runaway and turned her away to the streets. (This refusal of institutional aid and intervention spawns just one of the problems with individualism and the American dream model. In taking control of her situation and running away, Winfrey fulfilled her desire for a better life, one without poverty, abuse, and racism; however, her feat proved unsuccessful, as the most determination cannot save or benefit everyone. These contradictions prove to be detrimental to the self-made rhetoric, as will be discussed later).

Out in the world, alone and at age 14, Winfrey engaged in promiscuous behavior, ("I became a sexually promiscuous teenager…I was out of control") and gave birth to a boy who later died (206). The death of her son added to her already tattered emotional state leftover from her sexual abuse and she fell into a deep depression, constantly visited by suicidal thoughts and despair. After the death of her son, she moved with her father, Vernon Winfrey, and his new wife in Tennessee. Though strict and disciplined, her father gave Winfrey the stability her life had lacked up to this point by promoting education and literacy. She says, "As strict as he was, he had some concerns about me making the best of my life, and would not accept anything less than what he thought was my best" ("America's"). Moving in with her father perhaps lead to Winfrey's future transformation and her realization that her own failures and successes are solely products of herself and her actions alone. Her father claimed God gave her a second change with her son's death and she morphed her misery and trauma into a philosophical life renovation (Gates 207). Being shifted from home to home, parent to family member, and experiencing sexual abuse and mistrust in men, Winfrey learned to depend only on herself. After living with her father for

several years, she graduated high school with honors and flourished in dramatic stage productions in college.

By age 17, Winfrey presented a radio show in Nashville, Tennessee. She credits her access to the broadcasting industry to her involvement in various beauty pageants and contests. As a participant in the Miss Fire Prevention Contest, she says:

> I was the only Negro in a pageant of all red-haired girls…So the Lord knows, I'm not going to win…All you had to do was walk, parade around in an evening gown, answer some questions about your life. You know, it was one of those little teeny, tiny beauty pageants. Well, nobody expected me to win the pageant because we were still Negroes at the time—I've been colored, Negro, black, now I'm African-American ("America's").

Winfrey's Miss Fire Prevention Contest victory brought more beauty related opportunities, later winning Miss Black Tennessee at age 18. "The end-goal is not beauty itself but more desirable, abstract outcomes that beauty can ostensibly purchase: positive self-esteem, confidence, and selfhood," Brenda Weber argues, as these contests not only offered scholarship opportunities for the contestants, but certain constructed images of beauty and image based citizenship in American culture, especially as highlighted in the lives of celebrities (55). Winfrey's success over the white normative red-haired girls emphasized her battle to achieve acceptance—both societal and internal—and demonstrated her campaign for responsible selfhood. She triumphs over these girls and when asked what she expected to do with her life, she expressed interest in broadcast journalism because she was "interested in proclaiming the truth to the world" and this truth eventually lead to and is based out of hard-fought success and determination ("America's").

Her Miss Black Tennessee win awarded her a scholarship to Tennessee State University, where she studied speech, drama, and English. At 19 years old, Winfrey successfully made the transition from radio host to television news anchor, despite previously turning down the offer to work in television three times. She became the new host of *AM Chicago*, a 30-minute local talk show that struggled with faltering ratings. Winfrey laments, "I only came to co-host a talk show because I had failed at news and I was going to be fired…I was devastated because up until that point, I had sort of cruised. I really hadn't thought a lot about my life, or the direction it was taking…I was 22 and embarrassed by the whole thing because I had never failed before" ("America's"). At the risk of failure, the ideal self-made subject will improvise, refusing to accept failure, and this process is hidden, invisible to observers as the rise to fame seems almost effortless and natural.

With the fear of being fired, Winfrey took control of her interviewing skills, creating a screen presence and charm that caused a spike in viewership. In 1985, this revelation lead producers to rename the show, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, less than a year later, and increased the show's slot to 60 minutes. After being on-air for only a year, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* became the number one talk show in the United States. As a nationally syndicated program, the show reached an audience of 10 million viewers on over 120 channels. By the end of its first full year on air, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* grossed approximately $125 million; Winfrey received $30 million of that sum. The first year of the show continued positive buzz, receiving three Daytime Emmy Awards for Outstanding Host, Outstanding Talk/Service Program, and Outstanding Direction. The next year, it claimed the Daytime Emmy Award for Outstanding Talk/Service Program again and

Winfrey captured the International Radio and Television Society's "Broadcaster of the Year" Award ("America's").

The popular success of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* allowed Winfrey to gain control over the program from ABC (American Broadcasting Company). In gaining ownership of the program, Winfrey started HARPO Entertainment Group—Oprah spelled backwards—that now includes HARPO Productions Inc., HARPO Films, and HARPO Video. In 1988, Winfrey became the first woman to ever own her own production company and television talk show. With the birth of her own production company, Winfrey's empire began to form and take over the media world. *The Oprah Winfrey Show* continues to air on ABC at 4:00 PM Monday through Friday and hails as the highest-rated talk show in American television history. Despite the show's success and 24 flourishing and admired seasons, Winfrey opts to end her talk show in 2011. Her announcement of the cancellation to Larry King in 2009 causes remorse and sadness for her viewers. Regardless of the show's termination, Winfrey's presence in culture still thrives as one that represents the American consciousness of advocating self-made citizenship and associating this individualism with celebrity and fame.

The Self-Made Man, Fame, Celebrity, and the Hero

However, the self-made individual, the celebrity, and the hero must not be interchangeable in conversation. Would Lincoln be considered a celebrity due to his increased admiration and fame, despite holding such an esteemed title as President of the

United States? Is Winfrey a celebrity and a self-made woman? Most definitely, but is she a hero? This query is debatable though Winfrey does embody many aspects of a hero. As defined by Daniel J. Boorstin, in the past, a hero was "a man 'admired for his courage, nobility, or exploits.' The war hero was the prototype, because the battle tested the character and offered a stage for daring deeds" (73). He engages in a conversation that differentiates the celebrity and the hero; that the two are not synonymous. "Of course we do not like to believe that our admiration is focused on a largely synthetic product," Boorstin argues. "Having manufactured our celebrities, having willy-nilly made them our cynosures—the guiding stars of our interest—we are tempted to believe that they are not synthetic at all, that they are someone still God-made heroes who now abound with a marvelous modern prodigality" (ibid). Society creates a celebrity, but a hero is self-made. Based on this assertion, Winfrey is considered a hero since she established her fortune from rural poverty on her own. Modern-day heroes are rare and most do not deem Winfrey a hero, but her self-determination and lack of government or organizational funding makes her a model of heroism. As maintained by Boorstin:

> In a now-almost-forgotten sense, all heroes are self-made. Celebrity-worship and hero-worship should not be confused. Yet we confuse them every day, and by doing so we come dangerously close to depriving ourselves of real models. we lose sight of the men and women who do not simply seem great because they are famous but who are famous because they are great. We come closer and closer to degrading all fame into notoriety (74).

Though there is a stark contrast between a hero and a celebrity, these two phenomena can occur simultaneously. Winfrey's qualities invoke heroism with her self-created identity and success, yet her trademark and image are marked dramatically by media interpretation,

signaling a celebrity achievement. “The hero was a big man; the celebrity is a big name,” Boorstin argues, and, indeed, Winfrey is a big woman and an even bigger name (81).

As stated earlier by Braudy, the public reception plays a roll in the success of a self-made man, both in Lincoln and Winfrey’s cases. Richard Sennett argues a similar idea to Braudy on audience reaction, stating, “People come to depend on others for a sense of self. One manipulates one’s appearance in the eyes of others so as to win their approval, and thus feel good about oneself” (29). This statement stipulates the lack of a truly authentic individual, that the authentic self is a myth with regards to fame because an individual constantly acts in a way that reinforces the expectations of others. Boorstin calls this inauthentic individual “the human pseudo-event,” one who is “fabricated on purpose to satisfy our exaggerated expectations of human greatness” (79). The lack of an authentic selfhood creates a new self-consciousness that is determined, by an observer (either passively or directly) creating a mutually dependent relationship. Despite the audience’s participation in one’s fame or attributed fame, the ability to be self-made in America requires some assistance from others, support that is not given accurate recognition, as this would negate the myth of being self-made. “Self-made achievement may seem to be defined by its unwillingness to give credit to any force but the dynamic individual,” Braudy argues, and through this unabashed lack of credit to institutions or people who helped an individual, an illusion forms, one that states any person can achieve a truly independent life without any assistance (512).

Adding to the discussion of an authentic selfhood, Weber advocates a makeover nation psychology, maintaining a connection between celebrity, being self-made, and the makeover:

> In its ties to celebrity, the makeover often works according to a series of ideals that it links to identity-work, including self-awareness, deliberate image-production, and semiotic modification through visual consumer choices. Such values, however, also link both the makeover and celebrity to narcissism, falsity, and commodification. Makeover discourses seem fully aware of the cultural stigma attached to celebrity. They neutralize such negative connotations by setting their sights not on fame itself, but on a form of selfhood made intelligible through fame. Consequently, the makeover does not create the star but crafts a form of celebrated selfhood, an image-based, visually confirmed embodiment of confidence, allure, glamour, and success that can attach to the makeover subject because of the reclamation and the revitalization of that subject's inner self, a self-marked by celebrity (216).

This "form of celebrated selfhood" via the makeover creates a pseudo-celebrity figure, which goes back to Boorstin's concept of an inauthentic citizen. By not using fame or celebrities to obtain an improved self, subjects can then make themselves appear to be morally benevolent individuals who are rewarded for their selfless potential as it relates to cultural standards of being authentic and real.

Winfrey's shift from impoverished child in racist Jim Crow South to wealthy global cultural icon bases itself in a spiritual and emotional makeover sphere. Winfrey, inspired by her father who valued literacy and education, takes control of her situation and starts a new life chapter. This new self becomes a new product—new *and* improved—in, what Weber describes as "Makeover Nation." Though Winfrey advocates a spiritual, mental, emotional, and economic makeover as opposed to Weber's predominantly descriptive physical transformations, the underlying goals remain the same. The after-product must "be self-aware, self-cultivating, and self-sufficient, able to ascertain the flow of the market and to

participate without governmental assistance" (Weber 51). Winfrey convincingly projects this lifestyle shift onto her viewers because she is the ultimate self-aware, self-sufficient, and independent individual in mainstream media. Her show and life utilize the main components of the American dream and governmentality's process of self-improvement, decision-making, and privatization.

First developed by the French philosopher, Michel Foucault, governmentality describes the situation of how individuals govern themselves. Specifically, the concept blends governing and modes of thought or mentality; however, one must not confuse governmentality with the act of governing since governmentality includes the *manner* in which individuals govern/conduct themselves. It encompasses Foucault's notion of the "conduct of conduct," which Mitchell Dean expands on:

> Government is any more or less calculated and rational activity, undertaken by a multiplicity of authorities and agencies, employing a variety of techniques and forms of knowledge, that seeks to shape conduct by working through the desires, aspirations, interests and beliefs of various actors, for definite but shifting ends and with a diverse set of relatively unpredictable consequences, effects and outcomes (18).

This "conduct of conduct" demonstrates that the individual being governed actively conducts oneself as well as referring to behaviors and actions required for such an individual. People are free agents and can behave in a variety of manners of their choosing. Through this organization of conduct, viewers of Winfrey's show and readers of her book club become empowered through self-government and a shift from public assistance to private and personal methods of government. Reality television and talk shows, specifically, offer the illusion of real individuals and their constant struggles. Laurie Ouellette states:

> reality programming is one site where neoliberal approaches to citizenship have in fact materialized on television. From makeover programs…that enlist friends, neighbors, and experts in their quest to teach people how to make 'better' fashion and decorating choices, to gamedocs…that construct community relations in terms of individual competition and self-enterprising—in all of these, neoliberal constructions of 'good citizenship' have cut across much popular reality television (224).

Much like reality show participants divulge in life struggles, Winfrey also consistently relates her past to her audience, revealing her challenging upbringing on a farm in Mississippi. Her working class family struggled with finances and her mother eventually sent her away to live with her grandmother because—as an unwed teenager—she could not afford to care for Winfrey. Similar to any other celebrity persona or American dream story, Winfrey highlights the importance of self-governing the everyday life, using her celebrity power and influence to educate her viewers with ideal behaviors, morals, aspirations, and guidelines that are needed to empower ourselves as enterprising citizens. In turn, her advice presents a scenario in which the individual becomes marketable, able to be managed, controlled, and refashioned into an ideal, self-sufficient citizen, mirroring the personal transformation Winfrey endured during her adolescence. She presents an idealized self-made philosophy to her audience based on her experiences that emphasize Foucault's concept of self-care in that one can transcend race, economic restrictions, and cultural and social barriers by taking care of and getting to know one's self in order to achieve happiness and success. By embodying aspects of governmentality and the "conduct of conduct," Winfrey instigates notions of a post-race society as seen through the lenses of the American dream that reconstitutes the centrality of whiteness, classlessness, and the rhetoric of individualism.

In order to fully understand the context of Winfrey and the idea of a raceless and classless society, within the American dream projects, one needs to comprehend the basics

of neoliberalism, a vital element in the rhetoric of the American dream. Not simply trivial entertainment, Ouellette argues that reality television occupies aspects self-government that incorporates "cultural training," a process of governing "indirectly in the name of 'lifestyle maximization,' 'free choice,' and 'personal responsibility'" (233). Neoliberalism privileges the individual over society, advocating self-care, self-improvement, and self-motivation. Dean defines a form of neoliberalism as:

> modes of problematization of the welfare state and its features such as bureaucracy, rigidity and dependency formation. They recommend the reform of individual and institutional conduct so that it becomes more competitive and efficient. They seek to effect this reform by the extension of market rationality to all spheres, by the focus on choices of individuals and collectives, and by the establishment of a culture of enterprise and responsible autonomy (269).

Social mobility, empowerment, and stability are important components of neoliberalism, which are needed for the enhancement of the personal makeover narrative. Essentially, Winfrey trains her audience to function and live their lives without government assistance, depending on themselves for the support they need to be functional citizens. Citizenship is defined in neoliberalism as a private sphere, completely devoid of public assistance, and acts as a private identity. Individuals who have struggled with life-altering experiences must pick up the pieces and continue alone, reinventing the self out of organization and hard work. This self-help makeover acts as a cultural dimension, and discourses of entrepreneurship and improvement are apparent in various aspects of Winfrey's teachings and philosophy as viewed on her television talk show and through *Oprah's Book Club*. Winfrey advocates a society of fair competition and personal responsibility, which reinforces a world in which hard work and merit are rewarded. Amy Adele Hasinoff asserts that the:

> rhetorics of neoliberalism become particularly visible in representations of young women, who are produced as ideal neoliberal laborers because of their presumed work ethic, flexibility, and willingness to reinvent themselves for the labor market…this ideal citizen, the 'can-do girl' who is successful and career-oriented, is held up as an attainable norm for all young women, while the failed subject, the 'at-risk girl,' is depicted as a victim of poor choices, insufficient effort, irresponsible families, bad neighborhoods, and lazy communities (7).

This argument keeps in line the idea that an individual must overcome economic suffering, whether it be lack of education, unemployment, or low economic standing in order to be molded into the ideal citizen and to adapt his/her identity to fit the current labor market. Free will, personal choice, and the importance of maintaining these factors in order to succeed are elements of Winfrey's self-made teaching ethic, which are strongly projected specifically onto women. If an individual cannot overcome these obstacles, race, class, and gender are not at fault, nor are state institutions or economic systems; the individual is solely responsible for his/her failure. The American dream depends on a citizen being self-made in order to become a true story of upward mobility. (Here, governmentality and neoliberalism are only briefly discussed as the topics require a longer discussion that this project cannot devote enough space to).

Another critical aspect of neoliberalism, Makeover Nation, and how Winfrey embodies these complex notions is the rags-to-riches narrative. "For hundreds of years," Cullen argues, "American readers and writers have had tireless appetites for tales of poor boys (and, later, girls) who, with nothing but pluck and ingenuity, created financial empires that towered over the national imagination…" (60). Braudy stresses this importance with regards to fame: "Self-making implied an open-ended world in which there were enough materials for everyone. So long as there were examples of individual success around like

Carnegie or Rockefeller or other giants of the late nineteenth century, it was possible to believe that the self-made businessman might be the central model personal energy and integrity for the entire society" (513). Anyone can achieve greatness with vicious, self-driven, ruthless determination, and the ability to project themselves as marketable products. The accomplishments of citizens who come from the utmost dire situation drive others to improve, expressing the "If they can do it, why can't I?" mentality. American readers are obsessed with rags-to-riches stories, staring great men and women who achieve success and fame after beginning with nothing, including Lincoln and Winfrey as the pinnacle of being exceptional. Weber stresses that a Makeover Nation does not glorify the normative, instead, it projects an idea that normal is not good enough and that exceptionalism becomes the new average. An individual's capacity for self-care determines and measures a new-you; if one cannot achieve an adequate level of self-care, this individual is insufficient and lacks the necessary means of actualizing not only the new connotation of average, but also of greatness.

Even if an individual has never experienced poverty, homelessness, racial or ethnic persecution, life can still be improved enough to fall under the "riches" category. American citizens are more apt for personal fulfillment by perfecting and achieving more than what they have, by way of fame and fortune as expressed and embodied through celebrity culture and the American dream. In his essay, "The Quest for Fame," David Giles cites prominent psychological researcher, D. Keith Simonton, and his theories about what personality traits are crucial for fame seekers. "He [D. Keith Simonton] concludes," Giles says, "that the personality characteristics most likely to produce fame are the drive to succeed…and the

tendency to take risks" (474). Braudy supports this assertion to fame, stating, "It may be the nature of those who achieve the greatest fame that they can do both, subsuming the standards of the past and showing their insufficiency, yet at the same time responding in a spontaneous and instinctive way to the crisis of the moment, doing naturally and immediately what is necessary" (84). Winfrey reveals this same notion of nature and instinct: "I think the thing, the one thing that has allowed me to certainly achieve both material success and spiritual success, is the ability to listen to my instinct. I call it my inner voice. It doesn't matter what you call it—nature, instinct, higher power. It's the ability to understand the difference between what your heart is saying and what your head is saying" ("America's"). Meaning, the self-made individual understands that risks result in the possibility of failure, but if the act of taking risks and enduring dangerous situations result in prosperity, the improvisation proved beneficial and almost heroic.

The American Dream and Race

It is interesting to note, however, that no forum or discussion mentions Winfrey's race as relevant to her success, which adds to the promotion of colorblindness and a look into a post-race/raceless environment that the American dream relies on. The representation of race not being a contributing or hindering factor in Winfrey's success sets the tone for equality in the workplace; that Winfrey's African American identity does not affect her standing in a patriarchal white society. Her television show, image, and representation in the media act as methods that ascribe to colorblindness, racial apathy, and post-race in a society,

ironically, taunted by constant racist trauma. Race, then, simply becomes a costume for Winfrey. The American dream only functions successfully if everyone, regardless of race or gender, has an equal chance of obtaining the dream. Tocqueville noticed this sense of equality:

> In America I saw the freest and most enlightened men placed in the happiest circumstances the world affords; and it seemed to me a cloud habitually hung on their brow…the social equality among those with access to the Dream…When all the privileges of birth and fortune are abolished, when all professions are accessible to all, and a man's own energies may place him at the top of any one of them, an easy and unbounded career seems open to his ambition and he will readily persuade himself that he is born to no common destinies. But this is an erroneous notion, which is corrected by daily experience. The same equality that allows every citizen to conceive these lofty hopes renders all the citizens less able to realize them; it circumscribes their powers on every side, while it gives freer scope to their desires. Not only are they themselves powerless, but they are met at every step by immense obstacles, which they did not at first perceive (Cullen 71).

These obstacles and an equal chance for a better life, by way of making gender and race irrelevant, are needed for the dream to have validity. However, constantly mentioning how Winfrey's race does not affect her success becomes the largest contradiction to the American dream and the post-race society. The model undermines the irrelevance of race, which ironically ends up highlighting race over other factors. Consistently labeled the richest African American of the 20th century, her race is emphasized despite the theory that everyone has an equal opportunity at succeeding with rugged individualism and positive thinking, as preached by Makeover Nation and the American dream. Winfrey's individual transformation and determination makes her the most successful media personality. Her adolescent hardships and—ironically—race in a racist society allows her to demonstrate an accurate portrayal of self-help principles: that anyone can accomplish anything through discipline, regardless of race. Race in this context can be defined as strictly the color of

one's skin or the cultural and socioeconomic identity within the individual. In this scenario, race does not need to be challenged or altered in order to succeed in the labor market; the model favors racial blindness to racism and racial injustices. Winfrey "transcends race by denying institutional racism and embraces race by transforming racial difference into lucrative marketable commodities" (Hasinoff 332).

Through this conflicting idea, the dream fails to completely disregard race as a determining factor for success and failure. Despite this contradiction, Winfrey is presented as the epitome of a self-made individual through her efforts to climb the ladder in the entertainment industry. She demonstrates that her race is ignored—that her being black is extraneous, neither helping nor obstructing her career objectives. Society pretends that race does not matter and that all individuals (and women in a male-dominated world) have an equal chance at acquiring career and personal success through personal achievement, hard work, and self-improvement, while simultaneously denying structural determinants of race and embracing racial differences. C.L. Cole and David L. Andrews examine the context in which color-blind celebrations and trepidations define the future of race in America, as "racially-coded celebrations, which deny social problems and promote the idea that America has achieved its multicultural ideal. At the same time, racially thematized crises related to sexuality, family, crime, welfare, and moral depravity, normalize the policing and punishment of already vulnerable populations" (345). Winfrey's narrative, television programs, and entrepreneurial endeavors argue that racial differences are no longer relevant and that people of color must be able to demonstrate that they can transcend race—yet embrace it at the same time—offering an all inclusive interpretation of non-white

racialization. She fosters this raceless ideal, exhibiting the superficiality of race, with citizens becoming prosperous with equal consideration, relying only on a little empowerment and self-determination. This dialogue of race, however, does not argue that racism does not exist. It is not an institutional construction, which becomes dangerously problematic. Rather, individuals may have racist thoughts, but the political, economic, and academic worlds do not inherently sustain racism, as they perceive race as superfluous. By focusing on her class status and not her race, the media world undermines the lifestyles and cultural upbringings of many non-white citizens, forcing their experiences to be ignored and making them irrelevant to their identity.

Winfrey's willingness to change her life, coupled with her strong work ethic, and responsibility promotes her to a self-governing citizen, one that does not overcome her racial identity, but rather, simply alters her socioeconomic status in order to prosper in the high-stress mass media labor market. In escaping poverty, Winfrey becomes not only the recipient of the American dream, but embodies a post-race subject of individualism, one that demonstrates the marketability and ever-changing nature of racial presentation. However, race is actively exploited while simultaneously claiming to be frivolous. Despite this contradiction, race and the demand for workers to overcome personal challenges and obstacles is constantly a part of self-improvement in Winfrey's life philosophy. Her philosophical projections via her television show, book club, and magazine enforces a solitary method of conduct, a method of governmentality that forces individuals to act within certain self-governing regimes. Her followers must conduct and evaluate themselves to act according to the objectives of Winfrey's citizenship ideals. And in an attempt to

succeed within the constraints of a strong-willed labor market, the "normal" citizens can learn from Winfrey's accomplishments, maximizing on their own capital by reshaping themselves, re-identifying their goals, and developing a responsibility within the boundaries of societal cultural norms and expectations. The subjects must be able to function within Winfrey's confines by taking liability and converting their supposed weakness—normativity—into a positive spin of self-preservation, regardless of race, class, or gender stereotypes and to emerge as exceptional.

The Puritans were not the first people to dream of having a better life, but they were the first to enact what would later evolve into the current American dream. And though Lincoln was a white man in nineteenth-century America, his rags-to-riches story paves the way for Winfrey's future success. Her effortless transformation from poor, sexually abused farm girl to international self-help media representation appeals more to an audience than a difficult, time consuming journey of mistakes and risks that do not result in prosperity, both of the spiritual and financial variety. Viewers recognize that Winfrey's early life is anything but ideal; however, they view her transformation as fluid, almost invisible to separate the processes she underwent to become the celebrity she is today. The ease of the transformation makes the desire to self-improve only more ideal and seems extremely authentic, when striving to become a self-made citizen. Despite a few contradictory concepts in the American dream, people are encouraged to find universal humanity in every situation, revolving around self-discovery and empowerment that coincides with Winfrey and Lincoln's personal narratives. The American dream evolves through many transformations

before settling in a sphere of celebrity and fame, with Winfrey translating the dream in every forte of her empire, the most accessible outlet being her book club, *Oprah's Book Club*.

CHAPTER III

Literacy, Book Clubs, and Transformation

Book groups are to early twenty-first America what salons were to eighteenth-century Paris, and what improvement societies were to the Victorians…Book groups are the graduate seminar, the encounter group, and the good old-fashioned village-pump gossip session, all rolled up into one.

–Margaret Atwood, foreword of *The Book Group Book: A Thoughtful Guide to Forming and Enjoying a Stimulating Book Discussion Group*

Oprah's Book Club maintains a paradox in which reading, figured as an act of self-definition, turns nonetheless on the defining stamp of one reader, Oprah herself. To tell this tale of subject formation is to insist on yoking the promise of improved selfhood with reading. Self-help manuals beckon readers with the assurance of a remade self; Oprah's Book Club asserts that the reading of literature will have already accomplished that makeover. In the meantime, the club also suggests a role for reading that is not simply instrumental, but self-perpetuating.

—Yuing-Hsing Wu, "The Romance of Reading Like Oprah," 81

Whether called reading groups, book clubs, literature circles, or—according to Brian Stock—"textual communities," the premise is the same: pick a book, read, and discuss with peers (qtd. in Long 32). But the history of the book club tells an intricate and elaborate story, evolving from being a method of social reform and gender empowerment to an idea of self-improvement, self-help, and escape. Though book clubs have emerged as a popular social activity in recent decades, the gatherings are not relatively new, having developed by women as early as the Civil War. Elizabeth Long's book, *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life*, examines the highly visible, but vaguely understood world of book circles. Through historical analysis, discussion, and modern conversations and events,

Long discloses how and why each book club began and how these clubs become critical players in the cultural understanding of reading and women's social groups. She notes that despite a culture that emphasizes work over leisure, book groups actively thrive and open a spiritual realm of self-improvement for the women who participate.

Book Clubs: 1800-1920

Beginning in the mid-1800s, social clubs and literary circles were immensely popular, particularly for women. Long maintains that because women were searching for more independence, "women generally barred men from membership, feeling that they might be silenced by the men's presence" (Long 40). Many of these societies were kept hidden from husbands, and based, on the different manner in which men and women communicate, it could be said that these groups would not have made the same impact had there been an equal men-to-women ratio. Prominent feminist scholar, Dale Spencer makes a comparable statement to Long, stating, "Women's speech is generally restricted and restrained when men are around. This is why women need women-only places where they can say what they think without fear of harassment or intimidation" (235). In these female-centered environments, women forged strong friendships with other members. Literary circles became a way to create an "education for identity" and allowed women to build strong bonds of sisterhood and a sense of self, adding a "dimension to 'true womanhood'" (Long 46, 36). Since medieval times and around the twelfth century, reading as a social activity flourished throughout Europe and later in America, predominantly focusing on the

Bible and other religious texts. The beginning of the women's book club movement started as a progressive society, mimicking religious organizations and practices, and encouraged freethinking for women. This revolution sparked what Megan Seaholm calls a "necessary step in the evolution of women" (qtd. in Long cited 35). Though at the time there were multiple women's associations and organizations, reading and discussing books did not evolve until the mid-1800s when education became more available and middle and upper class women had ample leisure time. Despite an increase in higher education for women, many did not have the option to attend university; therefore, literary clubs filled the void for those who were unable to receive a college education. One book club member from Dubuque, Iowa stated, "Our university must be in our homes. This country is too large to go to a place or a professor. The learned, inspiring minds must come to us" (Long 36). These newly developed literary communities aimed to spread self-expression, social and cultural advancement, and familial ties.

Unlike modern day book clubs, the original communities did not focus strictly on novels and stories, but rather subjects of geography, art, history, and music. Many clubs focused on specific cultural regions for a year, highlighting art, history, and social life in that area. One group—Current Events Club in El Paso, Texas—delved into Roman history for a year; others focused on Egypt, Japan, and American literature. By stressing culturally geographic regions as the topic of discussion, women engaged in a self-education that the formal education system could not provide. This source of knowledge empowered women with confidence, enabling them to cultivate their self-expression with other women (Long 43). They also read the classics of Emily and Charlotte Bronte, Charles Dickens, George

Eliot, Robert Browning, and Jane Austen; however, much focus was placed upon the writings of William Shakespeare. Megan Seaholm estimated that of Texan reading groups in 1902 and 1903, book clubs dedicated half of their book rosters to Shakespeare (233). His influence so prevalent, with one woman of the Houston's Ladies Reading Club praising him almost as a God-like figure: "we knelt humbly, hesitatingly, with more womanly reluctance, before the shrine of the inimitable, the incomparable, the greatest, the mightiest of all, William Shakespeare, poet by the grace of God" (as cited in Long 45/Seaholm 233). Most of the time, members discussed the presence and representation of women in Shakespeare's plays, namely *Macbeth* and *The Taming of the Shrew*, discussing womanhood, wifehood, obedience, and independence. The discussion on heroines and what it means to be a modern woman in Shakespeare's writings sparked a debate as to the immensely powerful influence of reading groups on women. Individually, women increased their world knowledge of art, history, literature, and other cultures; as a sex, women were inspired to "embrace a broad mission of social betterment that transcended their own self-development" (46).

In addition to reading and discussing literature and different cultures, reading groups concentrated on using their unification and organizational skills to establish public resources. This became what Long dubs the "woman movement," a "loose conglomeration of groups that held common the assumption that women had something special to offer society" (51). Historically speaking, the first literary groups formed three-quarters of public libraries in America, built kindergartens, developed anti-child labor laws, and offered college scholarships and dorms for women. In Texas, they advocated for safer playgrounds and the inclusion of art, music, and culture in educational programs. They also fought for

clean food and water, beginning a campaign that would investigate, publicize, and document current conditions in the food industry (54). Cecilia Konchar Farr—professor of English and Women's Studies as well as Chair of the English Department at the College of St. Catherine—makes a similar observation, declaring that women's clubs were infinitely widespread, claiming "a key place in U.S. history as initiators of social and religious reform, political action and cultural change, of abolition, prohibition, and women's suffrage" (56). In a related analysis, Andrea Adair states that women joined book clubs for the "intellectual stimulation, chance to socialize and share experiences" and that these experiences acted as a "catalyst for political activism" (Adair). This Progressive Era sparked a revolution for women, despite their inability to vote, and encouraged their intellectual and public aspirations.

However, as progressive and innovative as this women's movement seemed, it still suffered from discrimination and prejudice. Many black women were refused memberships in reading groups and The General Federation of Women's Clubs did not endorse the women's suffrage movement until the early 1900s (Long 54). Elizabeth McHenry's work focuses predominantly on the importance of book clubs to the unification of the black community. According to McHenry, African-American reading societies in the late-1800s and early-1900s aided in the creation of a black press, encouraged literary practices across the community, and solidified a black public sphere (25). Most white groups supported political action that was overtly racist (such as poll taxes and the creation of a segregated women's college) and sponsored libraries that only catered to white individuals. In spite of the fairly conservative agenda women's groups followed, their philanthropy for the

community proved to be a positive influence in the future formation of America and created stronger ties of sisterhood, ties that had vague but feminist overtones because of their cultivation without the influence of men.

The original members of reading circles of the 1800s share similar traits current book club members possess. Historically, women would seek out different circles of women that have different characteristics—economic, social, and political—than themselves. While it is true that most women were white (and as stated earlier, rejected membership to black women), there were a few clubs for African American women, existing on the national level in 1896 through the National Association of Colored Women (Long 49). Despite the need for diversity, many clubs still maintained some level of similar background, mainly religion, education, neighborhood, or the occupation of their husbands. Long asserts that a "social hierarchy of clubs" existed in larger communities, ranging from wealthy married housewives or socialites to other clubs "dominated by single women—clerks, teachers, bookkeepers, and dressmakers—that met in the evenings because so many members worked" (ibid). But regardless of their economic or marital status, members of reading circles united for the sole purpose of amplifying their cultural capital, gaining knowledge of other cultures via books, and engaging in social reform.

Book Clubs: 1920-Present

Megan McArdle, Manager for Collection Development and Technical Services at the Berkeley Public Library, compiled a profile of the average modern-day book club member

in California. She concludes that the average member is: female (94 percent of groups are mostly female); a Baby Boomer (70 percent are between 40-65 years of age); a library user (more than 50 percent visit a library more than once a week); surrounded by friends (60 percent said groups consist of close friends); an avid reader (54 percent read three or more books a month); loyal (45 percent have stayed at the same book group for more than five years); committed (83 percent said most members always finish the book selection); and hungry (60 percent serve food while discussing the books) (125). Though these characteristics seem futile, today book clubs are more inclusive of different members, including a variety of occupations, ethnicities, genders, and ages. However, the magnitude of differences within a single group is limited. "Nineteenth-century white women's reading groups provided their members with knowledge, solidarity, and skills in self-expression and group organization that empowered them to reimagine themselves both individually and collectively and then to embark upon a series of substantial social form," Long argues. She observes that modern-day groups lack the organization of earlier communities and, more importantly, "are not geared toward collective social action or politics" (59). Most Canadian and American book clubs consist of white, middle-class women with college degrees, as discovered by Long, Jane Missner Barstow, who researched New England book clubs, and DeNel Rehberg Sedo, who observed clubs in Vancouver, British Columbia (Burwell 285).

Current reading circles differ mostly in the ways in which the lives of women have changed in the past two hundred years. Education plays a crucial role in this distinction: the majority of members hold a college degree and some, master or doctoral degrees, achievements that would have been difficult, if not impossible for women of the 1800s.

Long emphasizes the rarity of having a member who has never attended college. "Higher education for women, once a reform that reading groups supported fund-raising for scholarships and other social agitation, is now commonplace," Long argues. "In fact, since 1982 women have graduated from college at an even higher rate than have men, which makes contemporary women's reading groups seem like an endeavor in continuing or lifelong education rather than a compensatory activity" (62). The homogenous characteristics of the members is due in part because these literary societies are created via friends, neighbors, and family members, who tend to be drawn to individuals with related ages, education level, and economic status. However, having similar socioeconomic and educational characteristics does not guarantee the same interpretation of a text amongst members as distinct women interpret texts differently than other members regardless of their similar nature.

Constants in book club members' lives from the nineteenth-century to today include creating strong emotional bonds with other members, fostering a sisterhood outside of a woman's home life, challenging each other to examine their own lives within the context of the texts, and offering the chance to discuss personal experiences that would never be discussed otherwise. Long argues:

> When groups of women get together to discuss books they are often searching for intellectual companionship they cannot find in other areas of their lives. They may be extending their knowledge of literature or of literary interpretation. They may also be distinguishing themselves as especially cultured and literary people. Most interestingly, as they read and talk, they are supporting each other in a collective working-out of their relationship to the contemporary historical moment and the particular social conditions that characterize it. This activity is quite literally productive in that it enables women not merely to reflect on identities they already have but also to bring new aspects of subjectivity into being. By looking at women's

> reading groups…one can see people in the process of creating new connections, new meanings, and new relationships—to the characters in books or their authors, to themselves, to the other members of the group, to the society and culture in which they live. In other words, they are in the process of remaking themselves in dialogue with others and with literary texts (22).

Observations consistently demonstrate that women join book clubs for the familial ties. Though members start out wanting to read more and discuss with others, eventually, members stick with the clubs because their desire to create new friendships and to form close connections with old friends overpowers the book. By connecting personal experiences with characters, members connect on a subversive level. One club member from Michigan in 1889 supports the friendship over novels, stating that instead of being solely in the club for the books, she was more interested "in the sight of the dear, familiar, new-old-faces" (Farr 57). But the books still play an important role in these communities; the member continues, "It seemed to me that we as a club have benefited from our association, in the matter of conversations—of being able to think aloud with less timidity and with more directness…The intellectual food proffered…has had often the effect to send me home ready to read and think like a philosopher" (ibid). Book clubs are not strictly for the intellectual challenges that emerge from reading books, but they become a starting point to discuss aspects of members' lives that are lacking and need improvement. These book clubs become outlets not otherwise available to women, allowing them to openly discuss conflict in their lives in an attempt to find solace and solutions to difficult situations.

Studies show that the purpose of book clubs is not simply to read books, discuss the text and search for literary meaning, symbolism, and experimenting with reading different styles of writing. Instead, most book clubs focus on the characters, their actions, their drive

and relations these experiences have to the readers' lives (Burwell 285). They use the motivation of the characters to analyze and, perhaps, make sense of their hardships and challenges. If a character can overcome trauma or tragedy, the hope translates to the reader. "In these conversations, people can use books and each other's responses to books to promote insight and empathy in an integrative process of collective self-reflection," Long argues. "In that sense, reading group discussions perform creative cultural work, for they enable participants to articulate or even discover who they are: their values, their aspirations, and their stance toward the dilemmas of their worlds" (145). Though reading groups are sometimes dubbed simply pseudo-academic gatherings, these meetings are not exemplary of college lecture halls, but rather, are engaging conversations that originally start with the book of choice. Conversations drift, leaving the restricted topic of the book and migrating to the personal experiences and hardships of the readers. Both Long and Barstow conclude that this is the best kind of conversation, as it provides a transformation within the readers.

In "Reading in Groups: Women's Clubs and College Literature Classes," Barstow advocates a shift from focusing solely on the text as art and recommends that readers reevaluate what they are reading in a personal context. By putting the text to use in a different method other than a grade for a college course or simply crossing books off the list as they are discussed, the texts can not only entertain the readers, but enlighten them as well (4). When comparing book club conversations to college lecture discussions, Barstow analyzes how they differ in reading the text, whether for symbolism analysis, self-improvement, and diction. "Reading groups rarely return to discussion of a book, partly because of the four-to-six week time lapse between sessions," she argues. "Apparently, the

point of reading, even so literary a novel as *Song of Solomon*, has less to do with literary appreciation and more to do with 'using' the text for whatever emotional gratification and identification it may bring and perhaps for achieving familiarity with the cultural icons of one's time" (9). Unlike college courses, reading groups interpret the text in whatever way they see fit without having to back up their claim with textual evidence as required in academic environments. Instead, book club members "often expand on an opinion by discussing their personal reasons for making a certain interpretation, using the book for self-understanding and revelation of the self to other participants rather than for discovery of meaning within the book" (Long 146). The pleasure, enlightenment, and solace that readers gain from the books are directly proportional to the sense of sisterhood women garner from their groups, as well as the personal reflection they gain. Most people have misconceptions about book clubs, claiming they are gossip fests with snacks. One book club member states:

> It's interesting to sense people's reactions when you mention that you belong to a book club. By their tone of voice or expressions you know they are imagining a stuffy group of pseudo intellectuals discussing a dry piece of classic literature. Or they're flashing back to their English lit class in high school and wondering why any sane person would willingly re-create that experience as an adult.
>
> Well, anyone attending one of our group meetings would very quickly have all of those stereotypes and images shattered. Our meetings are characterized by lively conversations (sometimes two or three going on simultaneously and almost always quite loud), food and drink (the more, the better), and laughter (lots and lots of it) (Thelen and Vick 55).

Typically, books involve analysis of issues that come into play as groups develop their own identity and demonstrate that book clubs are not beneath the world of academia, nor are they gatherings reliant on rumors and gossip. Emotional and spiritual improvement coupled with

the bond of sisterhood becomes an imperative link, perhaps more so than the books discussed.

Oprah's Book Club

I'm on a mission. My mission is to make this the biggest book club in the world and get people reading again; not just reading, but reading great books.

—Oprah Winfrey, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, June 2003

Oprah's Book Club—*OBC*—started in 1996 and immediately had a global impact. Authors become instant best-selling writers, publishers profit immensely from the increase in book printing and sales but more compellingly, these books seem to revive reading in America. During the first six years of *OBC*'s existence, every book Winfrey promoted became a national bestseller, unknown authors became known celebrities, and relatively known authors garnered more popularity and fame. The "Oprah Effect," the phenomenon of having something (a book, movie, product, actor, diet) mentioned by Winfrey as being spectacular and noteworthy suddenly transforms into being desired and wanted by her audience and gives Winfrey the authority over multiple media genres. Christ Bohjalian's fifth novel, *Midwives*, sold only 100,000 copies in a year before it became *OBC*'s October 1998 pick, which catapulted sales to over 1.4 million (Farr 18). *She's Come Undone* by Wally Lamb—*OBC*'s pick in January 1997—became a bestseller after only a few weeks; even the popular Toni Morrison novel, *Song of Solomon* (first published in 1977), did not become a bestseller until chosen for *OBC* in September 1996 (14, 12). "The Oprah Effect" also has the ability to shift mediums. According to Oprah.com, eight of *OBC* picks have

been translated into movie adaptations, while three more are waiting to hit the big screen. Attesting to the popularity of the book club trend, more books are coming with "book club guides" in the back, whether or not they are *OBC* picks. The popularity of *OBC* is no different than other book clubs: Winfrey's book club and book club episodes on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* are not actually about the novel, but rather, the episodes engage with reader response and the messages and stories they project in relation to their lives.

Kathryn Lofton argues this transition from one level of awareness (the novel) to another (personal experience). The temporary relief that books provide the reader and the connection readers gain with other readers drives and keeps the book club alive. Book club members read in a manner Loften calls "the Oprah Way," meaning they read *OBC* picks with their own problems "being negotiated alongside the problems of the characters" (70). This ritual reading practice drives the book club, as it embodies the philosophy of Winfrey's entire empire of individual awareness and self-help. The type of reading Winfrey advocates helps the reader feel better about themselves by creating connections with characters, and in this method, reading for literary artistry, social change, and other forms of literary analysis comes second.

Winfrey's book club becomes a cultural phenomenon that changed how and—most importantly—why America reads. Through *OBC*, Winfrey presents an idealized American dream to her audience and book club members: by encouraging people to read—as a method of self-improvement and transformation—she implicitly and explicitly states that citizens can change and take control of their lives. The social elements presented in *OBC* are paramount, connecting reading with self-improvement and encouraging regulatory behaviors

and rituals. A construction of power, authority, and makeover, *OBC* presents books and ideas that support a modern-day American dream success story. This discourse of individualism aims at creating an authentic individual, one that recognizes conflict and attempts to deal with the challenges that accompany it.

OBC began in 1996 with Jacquelyn Mitchard's recently published novel, *The Deep End of the Ocean*. The novel is a story about a mentally ill mother, Beth, and how she copes with the kidnapping of her youngest son, Ben, and his eventual return to his biological family. The novel documents the depression, helplessness, and grief that integrates into Beth's life, ultimately resulting in Ben's suicidal thoughts and Beth's husband's difficulty with loving his two sons; the eldest, who retreats to teenage rebellion and the youngest, who was raised by strangers. The majority of the books chosen contain similar elements, themes, and morals as Mitchard's bestselling novel, i.e. depression, grief, despair, isolation. These themes of struggle often present a protagonist with a challenge he or she—but most often "she"—must overcome. The protagonist must solve her problems on her own, typically without the help of family members, friends, or her community, and strictly for her own benefit. *OBC* picks drive the need and desire for spiritual enlightenment, showing that individuals can take responsibility for them and conquer their sense of victimization. The connection between readers, viewers, Winfrey, and the author is made through recognition: when readers identify with a novel and its characters, they achieve a reformation. Connecting with fictional accounts, women can become more comfortable disclosing their own trauma, allowing them therapeutic closure.

But revealing secrets and trauma does not come easily and one typically needs the support of an individual they trust in order for this transformation to take place. Winfrey fulfills this support system and consistently divulges her struggles to her television audience and viewers about her weight issues, sexual abuse, drug use, and poverty, which formulates the basis of the book club and acts as a catalyst for the transformation. Her presentation in the television show mimics this intimate setting, as well as in the *OBC*, and the intimacy between Winfrey and readers allows the book club to grow and thrive. Much like the original literary circles, which prospered with engaging and friendly conversation, the book club's success rests in Winfrey's ability to relate to her audience, to come across as down to earth and personable despite her wealth and celebrity. It also gives Winfrey authority to choose books and to tell viewers that these books specifically will enrich lives. However, *OBC* is a hybrid of aesthetic authority and personal choice: Winfrey has the authority and power of choosing the books, which the reader must succumb, yet the reader has the responsibility and choice to transform their own lives and imagine an American dream lifestyle change. Confessionals and the divulging of challenges are linked and necessary to obtain this revelation. For example, in her work on how women and men interact with each other and why they choose to disclose personal struggles, Laura Haag argues that women choose to confess more than men. An example of self-disclosure for Winfrey is revealing her sexual abuse, incest, weight issues, and relationships. Same-sex female friendships disclose intimate struggles more often than mixed-sex or same-sex male friendships, which tend to reveal more fact and statistical based data. This distinction highlights why Winfrey's influences on her audience members are immeasurable and persuasive; her friendly

demeanor trumps her celebrity status, allowing her viewers to be inadvertently pulled into a friendship with her. Speaking to this, Nellie Bly quotes the *Washington Post*, which writes, "If Jane Pauley is the prom queen, Oprah Winfrey is the dorm counselor…People want to hold Barbara Walter's hand. They want to crawl into Winfrey's lap" (52). Winfrey's ability to disclose the most intimate details of her life, her struggles and victimization, and how she hopes to overcome them creates the familiarity with her audience, teaching her readers that transformation needs to occur.

"Viewers recognize the serious Oprah, the playful Oprah, the empathetic Oprah, the angry Oprah, the 'just folks' Oprah," Laura Haag argues (119). Each Oprah-character has a distinct voice; the 'just folks' Oprah uses more slang, while the serious Oprah employs sophistication and class. However, her nonverbal communication hits a soft spot with viewers. She constantly touches audience members, sustains eye contact with guests and viewers to show her interest, and she laughs, cries, and even screams to show her enthusiasm and excitement. Her verbal and nonverbal communication patterns directly relate to the construction of the intimate relationship between Winfrey and her audience. Because women are more emotionally oriented, more supportive, and noncritical in their listening behaviors than men, Winfrey establishes a pseudo-friendship with her audience, both with the book club and her television show (Haag). Her stage is typically decorated in comfortable plush chairs and when she conducts book club episodes, many meetings occur in her home, welcoming the audience into her personal space, much like the viewers allow Winfrey into their home when her television show airs. The link between Winfrey and her viewers creates the closeness needed to make the book club grow, by depicting Winfrey as

"one of the girls" in her home and in the studio. As many women participated in book clubs prior to *OBC*'s creation, it cannot be said that Winfrey creates a new kind of reader or book club; however, she produces a new way in which readers read, forming a new self, one that strives for self-awareness and self-improvement. By revealing secrets to her audience and book club followers, she gains their trust, their friendship, and their respect.

The environment in which women forge connections with other women and discuss their lives is necessary for the emotional makeover to occur. "Women today may or may not find more emotional support in their marriages and more self-esteem in public arenas than did their nineteenth-century counterparts," Barstow argues, "yet they still desire the opportunity to bond with other women. Literature provides a coded language, then, that allows them to get at personal traumas and especially their experiences and roles as wives, mothers, daughters" (11). Perhaps this is why the majority *OBC* book picks are written by female authors and have predominantly female protagonists with the connection between female character and female reader more emotionally driven than any other combination. Of the 70 books chosen by Winfrey since 1996, men wrote 33 selections, but there were only 25 different authors, with Bill Cosby, Wally Lamb, William Faulkner, Charles Dickens, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and Jonathan Franzen having multiple books on the *OBC* list. Farr also cites that women purchase more than 75 percent of novels that sell in the United States (23). Though *OBC* acquires a strong female presence, it does not exclude or attempt to hinder the involvement or inclusion of men. The outcome and progression of *OBC* would be drastically different had her book club contained equal or more texts with a main female

character, as the majority of her television audience is female and better identify with female protagonists.

Because of the female-centered texts—much like the original women's clubs of the 1800s—women join, participate, or follow *OBC* for the unity and the sense of community among other women, not simply Winfrey herself. Despite the act of reading being a historically solitary activity, book clubs are community oriented and, as stated previously, book clubs are seldom about the book. Members desire the relationship with other readers as they can transform their life outside of work and family. Yuing-Hsing Wu examines dialogues and other online discussion forums for the book club and concludes that these outlets are essential for an optimal communal experience. Farr arrives at the same conclusion, stating that personal "experience threatened to trump intellect and insight altogether when discussing on-air" (Farr 18). The dinners with Winfrey at her home or in the studio turn into story telling about their experiences and not about the book. The books "definitely played second fiddle to these women and their stories" (62). This brings up whether or not women in *OBC* value aesthetics of novel writing or simply the effect the novel has on the reader and the chance to talk with other women. Does it even matter, as long as a positive message is being projected, mainly claiming victory of transformation over adversity? Toni Morrison does not appear to think so, stressing the importance of self-improvement and gaining a deeper understanding within literature:

> It's a dream a writer who really wants to connect and you see it in small ways. And people compliment you or flatter you. But to have something important, truly meaningful, happen to a person who's ready for the happening and the key to it is the experience of reading a book…It's not a lesson that said do this and don't do this and this is the solution, but to actually engage in the emotions, the actions and the

> company—the company of the characters who come alive if you're lucky. That experience is what will always be special in my life…(Farr 50).

Many members love the possibility of connecting with Winfrey, despite her contention that she is just another reader and not a cultural icon or celebrity, and some consider the book club like a family. "These readers go on to cite reading for it's capacity to abstract self-consciousness, to create an identification by which they can claim new terms for selfhood, that is, for making self-generation possible," Wu writes. "This gesture of course coincides with the show's discourse of self-improvement…as well as those devoted to 'raising your spirit.' Reading contributes to the self-awareness Oprah touts on her show; the Book Club makes the case that self-improvement occurs specifically through a literary communion with Oprah and her fellow reader-disciples" (80). Not only has Winfrey revived reading as a social activity, she did so in an approach that highlights the importance of female ties and sisterhood, and the way in which one evaluates their self-worth.

Power of Reading

I strongly believe that, no matter who are you, reading opens doors and provides, in your own personal sanctuary, an opportunity to explore and feel things, the way other forms of media cannot. I want books to become part of my audience's lifestyle, for reading to become a natural phenomenon with them, so that it is no longer a big deal.

—Oprah Winfrey, *Publishers Weekly*, "The Oprah Effect," 20 January 1997

The reawakening of reading attributes to "magical power" (Long 204). Books have power, the power of knowledge and the power to spark individual change, which book clubs

amplify. Instead of discussing texts in a formal, literary, or academic fashion, Winfrey makes it personal: how does this character or book make you feel? "Books took you into yourself and offered you a healing insight about your life," Long argues. "Books offered moral instruction, the potential for seeing oneself anew or for exploring faraway worlds imaginatively, and the possibility of becoming part of an Oprah-centered community of readers" (205). Women need to know that they are not alone in their struggles and that other individuals are experiencing a similar or much worse trauma. The message of book clubs demonstrates that through reading, readers transcend the suffering in order to conquer their victimization. In *Oprah Winfrey and the Glamour of Misery*, Eva Illouz argues that the entire Winfrey phenomenon rests on the assertion that one must overcome misery, pain, and suffering by a variety of holistic healings. The themes of *OBC* picks are similar at the base level, with different variations on the surface:

> On the surface, no common thread unites the books chosen by Oprah Winfrey; each novel has a unique and distinctive plot line: 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 of whom becomes schizophrenic; the ordeals of a mother whose child is born mentally retarded; a young woman with the memory of her drowned sister; a young woman who tests positive to HIV and finds meaning in helping others; and on and on (103).

It is interesting to note that the themes and issues present in *OBC* are typically stories of loss, death, depression, alcoholism, and abuse, experiences that are generally culturally accepted as one that an individual can overcome. Barstow notes that hardly any issues of sexual orientation, alternative lifestyles, or sources of poverty, abuse, and neglect are confronted, stating there is "rarely anything subversive or transgressive in these books" (14). The ability to cope with these difficult trials is never introduced because, unlike emotional

change, these problems require deeper support that is more systemic or, even something that cannot be changed and must be accepted. The point of Winfrey's philosophy is to pinpoint areas of the self that are suffering and to transform these areas, resulting in a new self. However, many issues cannot be constructed in a new way due to institutional restrictions, biology, or economics. Neither Winfrey nor *OBC* picks have the solution to solving problems and, instead, provide encouragement and resources to help cope and manage conflict.

OBC manages to progress after almost 15 years in existence and consistently holds a strong participant record. Winfrey's advocacy of fair competition, individualism, and self-transformation via literacy and reading reinforces values of her teachings and philosophy. Whereas *The Oprah Winfrey Show* might contain guest speakers and segments that passively inform her audience, *OBC* requires the active participation of the members; they must read the book and relate its contents to their own lives in order to achieve the makeover Winfrey endorses. Women must "not only identify with the emotional content of novels but also literally appropriate and rework the text through *and in* their lives to understand themselves and to make changes" (Illouz 148). But not only are readers expected to look at their life through the text's lens, they do so in a way that mimics Winfrey's suffering narrative. Winfrey divulges secrets and hardships on-air, which encourages her audience and viewers to do the same. This admission and declaration is what Farr calls "Oprahfication," a public confession to mentally empower oneself. "Oprahfication" is:

> not about celebrity or power as we usually integrate it into language, the nouns and adjectives about what someone represents for us. This is about action, about what Oprah is doing—and getting us to do…In fact, the word "oprahfication" was coined

> to describe the titillating public discussion of the personal, the disclosure of private emotion for mass consumption on national TV (53).

Members of *OBC* are indirectly expected to read the book in the same self-help way Winfrey reads the books. "Literature is powerful. It has the ability to change people, to change people's thoughts…Books expand your vision of yourself and your world," Winfrey says (60). Thoughts change within the sphere of *OBC* and require women to take private struggles into the public. This sense of selfhood is a central discourse in American culture, a society driven by the myth of obtaining the American dream by hard work and individualism.

Changes in Literacy

Book clubs are notoriously bashed and given a bad reputation for avoiding provocative or challenging books. In keeping with this, critics question the types of books Winfrey chooses to endorse and present in *OBC*, noting their 'chick-lit' and pulp fiction demeanor (with the exception of the occasional classic). But in an era reliant on the Internet, social networking, and other online or televised media outlets, any reading is good reading, and Winfrey encourages reading of any kind as having the potential to be therapeutic. Martha Bayles agrees, claiming that reading, regardless of what it entails, uplifts the reader. She argues:

> I use the word 'uplifting' advisedly, knowing that it carries a load of condescension. But that is precisely my point. The secret of Winfrey's golden touch is her willingness to shoulder the mantle of cultural authority—which, ironically, most literary people seem desperate to shrug off. She can do this because her appeal to viewers has never been based on the exploitation of their social and emotional

> problems (in the manner of Jerry Springer) but on self-help: a trendy term that nonetheless subsumes older and more deeply ingrained notions of self-improvement and (yes) moral uplift.
>
> Winfrey's selections reflect a coherent sensibility: she favors novels about people, mostly women but some men, who are up against hard circumstances but who manage to endure, if not prevail, in the spirit of what Ralph Ellison called heroic optimism (35).

This kind of reading is not academic or gossipy, but rather, a healing and therapeutic session that asks the reader to reevaluate their lives, using literature as a catalyst. Regardless of education level, socioeconomic status, gender, age, religion, or ethnic differences, all readers can read *OBC* picks and join the book club in order to obtain the same level of self-help in a New Age world of technology. Historically, much has changed since the beginning of reading circles, as people rely on technology and other recent developments to function day-to-day. However, *OBC* reinforces a social practice that challenges these current technological trends through immersion in books, forcing the individual to take responsibility and conquer their victimization.

Simply stated, *OBC* changes the way Americans read, but Winfrey's sponsorship of reading may prove to have a greater influence on the field of education and literacy levels. Winfrey does not set out to improve literacy rates in the country, but she indirectly improves the quality of literacy. According to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), literacy in the United States is defined as being able to read and write over the age of 15 and is approximately 99 percent (CIA.gov). However, there are discrepancies, such as distinguishing an individual at a third-grade reading level and someone at a college reading level. Winfrey's intimate relationship with her audience and followers closes the gap between competing qualities of literacy. Her audience listens to her choices and check out

the books she reads, even if they had not read a book in years. (Ironically, in a model that defends self-sufficiency and individual transformation, readers rely on Winfrey as a leader to choose the books intended to catalyze the change). The Jenkins Group, Inc., a leading publishing firm, offering assistance for custom book projects and post-publication marketing, conducted a survey on reading in the United States. The survey shows that one-third of high school graduates never read a book after graduating, compared to 42 percent of college graduates. These findings do not speak directly to the number of citizens who can read, but why they read, with many surveys discovering that the majority of people read only because it is required in elementary and secondary school. Winfrey repositions reading as a strong point and highly valued aspect of one's life in terms of cultural capital—that is, intellectual and social assets that transcend material acquisitions and economic capital. Reading transcends the world of academia and must be continued later in life for optimal fulfillment.

However, Winfrey hardly ever mentions school, lectures, or universities with regards to her reading advocacy. Rona Kaufman claims this is because Winfrey alters the space in which books occupy: "the purpose of the club [*OBC*] was to reunite literature (or literary fiction and nonfiction) with those who can read it but have not chosen to, that lack of reference points to the failure of a kind of academic reading for these club members" (Kaufman 225). In fact, the academic world fails to praise much of what *OBC* has done for readers and the club receives little to no attention. Nonetheless, many educators and critics notice the positive effects of OBC and have incorporated tools from other book club meetings into their classrooms. Michael Smith takes book club analysis to a new level,

examining how adults talk about literature in book club settings. His findings mimic aspects of *OBC*, mostly the social and communal attributes, equality amongst members, and a spirit of cooperation and transformation. He observes that book clubs provide more personal experiences than the classroom environment and include additional moral insights that are typically not disclosed in friendly conversations with acquaintances. In terms of equality, book club members never have to worry about impressing a professor or alienating other members; everyone participates equally and on their own terms and they are not shy or afraid to express opinions. Smith also describes a "cooperative turn," or when several speakers work together to make a single point, a collective thinking that is dramatically absent from classrooms (Smith). Smith's observation demonstrates the differences between university discussions of literature and book club conversations in order to facilitate fruition between the two areas of study. He suggests creating more personal-based writing programs to spark a more social environment and though it is difficult to eliminate the professor-student authority boundary, he proposes reading new texts with students together to resemble an equal relationship.

Instead of focusing on the lowbrow or highbrow literature choices in *OBC*, one ought to examine the methods of communication; in fact, to recognize that communication is central to reading in *OBC* as an important component in creating a larger examination of culture and language. Kaufman notes, "In Oprah's Book Club, a successful text was one that sent a reader back into his or her own life, a text that made a reader rethink his or her life and that led to some type of change on the reader's part" (228). The book club not only teaches readers to read for personal fulfillment, but also to taste a little of the powerful life

of Winfrey and her self-made discourse. The illusion of intimacy *The Oprah Winfrey Show* creates makes Winfrey appear sensible and almost average. She often exclaims how books changed her life and become an escape from the severe challenges of reality and positions this at the height of her reading advocacy. Simply put, reading changes lives.

During the book discussion on Ernest Gaine's *A Lesson Before Dying— OBC* September 1997 pick—Winfrey incorporates a glimpse into the life of a maximum-prison inmate at Angola Prison in Louisiana. This insight provides evidence to the beneficial components of reading on even the worst criminal offenders. Wilbert Rideau, a black man serving a life sentence for the murder of a white woman in 1962, tells Winfrey: "Reading and books can do something that the entire criminal justice system can't—that is, really change a human being. If I'm going to die here, I don't want to be what I used to be. I want to be a better person…the man that I am today is not the me who—who existed thirty-six years ago, and all of that is due to reading and the power of reading" (Hall 661). By interviewing prison inmates, Winfrey determines the social and cultural implications of reading. Leah Price makes a similar conclusion with regards to prisons and reading: "Reading has always provided a lifeline for prisoners, whether for utilitarian purposes (law books are the most tattered in prison libraries) or for spiritual searching. During the Bush administration, faith-based charities and even megachurches have rushed to fill the vacuum left by the drop in federal education funds, stocking chapel libraries with bibles and Christian self-help books" (Price 4). Reading in prisons allows the incarcerated to focus on past and future, to devise an alternative narrative, and to recognize the difference between their former self to the new and improved citizen.

Winfrey's book club not only sparks a stronger bond in community interaction and made reading fashionable, but also highlights the importance of a personal metamorphosis through books and literacy. As past studies and observations show, reading declines after one finishes school, with the need to read no longer present in adult life. However, Winfrey's television presence, and the overpowering significance and domination of television over American culture, repositions reading as life changing. Specifically, reading encourages and mirrors an American dream objective of individualism and self-actualization. As the informal spokesperson for the American dream, Winfrey's reading endorsement encourages this journey for self-made success. New editions of Winfrey book picks are stamped with the official *OBC* seal and an original ISBN number in order to track the sealed books from the original editions. The revamping of book covers to project this new image mirrors the effects of self-improvement, separating the old from the new and demonstrates the positivity of a refashioned selfhood. In a 1997 *Time* magazine, Richard Lacayo states, that Winfrey's stamp of approval "practically saved the alphabet" (Hall 647). By utilizing her power and celebrity, Winfrey successfully rejuvenates a social practice slowly succumbing to a technological era of machines and lethargy.

CHAPTER IV

Failures of Self-Help: The James Frey Controversy

I am guided by the vision of what I believe this show can be. Originally our goal was to uplift, enlighten, encourage and entertain through the medium of television. Now, our mission statement for "The Oprah Winfrey Show" is to use television to transform people's lives, to make viewers see themselves differently and to bring happiness and a sense of fulfillment into every home.

—*The Oprah Winfrey Show* mission statement

All is not well with the devotees in Winfrey's rose-colored world of the New Age. People fail to change. They frustrate themselves attempting to maintain the constant joy and happiness that is so sought after in the New Age universe. They're told it is completely their own fault they cannot achieve this state of bliss; but they should be gentle with themselves, since the emotion of frustration has such low 'vibrational energy.' Obviously, they have more to learn. Why not buy another book?

—Kate Maver, "Oprah Winfrey and Her Self-Help Saviors," 5

When Winfrey announced James Frey's vulgar addiction memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*, as her October 2005 book pick, no one predicted the debacle or controversy that followed. In the memoir, Frey discloses details about his decade-long abuse of alcohol, meth, cocaine, nitrous oxide, PCP, mushrooms, crack-binges, and arrests, which ultimately results with him checking into an inpatient treatment facility, Hazelden, in Minnesota. When Winfrey bestows her seal of approval on Frey's memoir on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, she expresses excitement over choosing her first non-fiction book pick, "a gut-wrenching memoir that is raw and it's so real." "*A Million Little Pieces*, is an experience," she says, "and when you finally reluctantly turn the last page, you want to meet the man who lived to tell this tale" ("A Million Little Lies"). She continues, "I know that, like many of us who

have read this book, I kept turning to the back of the book to remind myself, 'He's alive. He's ok." Surviving his troubled addiction—and miraculously—avoiding a relapse since leaving rehab, Frey overcomes his victimization, taking control and responsibility for his life even at his lowest point, and conquering addiction.

After appearing on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, his book—published three years before—catapults to mega-hit, earning Frey "millions of dollars and allowed for the kind of luxuries that few young authors ever see—a $2.55 million Manhattan apartment, an Amagansett summer house, and first-class travel" and becoming "something of a literary rock star, attracting crowds at book signings that jam stores to capacity and prompt comparisons to established draws like David Sedaris and Dave Eggers" ("A Million Little Lies"). Despite the graphic material and vulgar language, Frey's narrative falls in line with other Winfrey picks; he "writes about his own experience brutally, and he never hesitates to place himself in a negative light," Jaime Harker argues. "His willingness to write about himself this way—throwing up 'chucks of flesh' every morning, beating up queers, breaking his parents' hearts—matches the other kinds of emotional nakedness that Oprah's talk show—and Book Club—values" (325). However, the marketed memoir contains elements not becoming of a non-fiction story: Frey exaggerates, fabricates, and manipulates the entire story.

The Smoking Gun, a website that discloses shocking, controversial, and otherwise hidden documents, records, and news, unveiled Frey's lies and exaggerations in January 2006, in a lengthy article that chronicles their attempt to find truth and validity in Frey's narrative (Peele and McCarley). *The Smoking Gun* investigated various claims made by Frey

and found many to be creatively amplified to make him appear more troubled and victimized. Journalists and book critics reject many of Frey's claims since the book's publication in 2003. Famously refuted passages include: Frey's lack of anesthesia while undergoing a root-canal surgery on an airplane; a suicide mission temporary delayed by a visit to a church, resulting in Frey kicking the priest multiple times in the groin; and the supposed vicious run-in with a cop, in which Frey—on a crack high—hit an officer with his car, started a fight with passerby's, and spent three months in jail. He also alters an event, in which a train accident kills two high school students; he added himself to that scenario, in what *The Smoking Gun* calls "his book's most crass flight from reality," appropriating and manipulating "details of the incident so he can falsely portray himself as the tragedy's third victim." Frey claims to have been arrested and in jail multiple times throughout the drug and alcohol-induced period of his life, when in reality, "the closest Frey has ever come to a jail cell was the few unshackled hours he once spent in a small Ohio police headquarters waiting for a buddy to post $733 cash bond" for the altercation with the police officer, when he supposedly hit him with his car ("A Million Little Lies").

Why did Frey deceive his audience? How did a fabricated story become published as a memoir? Why was the book not published or marketed as a novel? Rejected by 17 publishers before being picked up by Nan Talese at Random House, Frey told Larry King on *Larry King Live* that he originally attempted to publish the book as a novel, but Talese "declined to publish it as such" (ibid). After this confession, Winfrey claims she was deceived and cheated by Frey. She accepts partial responsibility for conning her readers into sympathizing and identifying with Frey, whose fabricated story, though fake, was a good

read (Kincaid). An argument between what constitutes memoir and fiction ensued. In an article for *The New York Times* about the controversy, Edward Wyatt noted that many nonfiction books contain embellishments or alterations, but the changes are disclosed in a disclaimer to the reader, "saying the author has altered the time sequence of events, created composite characters, changed names or otherwise made up details of a memoir" (Wyatt). However, Frey's book did not contain this additional clause.

News of Frey's fabricated story stuns the literary world and the woman who handed the writer fame. After *The Smoking Gun* published the investigation, Winfrey immediately pulls her endorsement of the book. Her discovery of the book's fraudulent nature encourages her to call out Frey on live television. "I have to say it is—it is difficult for me to talk to you," Winfrey exclaims, "because I really feel duped. But more importantly, I feel that you betrayed millions of readers. And I think, you know, it's such a gift to have millions of people to read your work, and that bothers me greatly. And so now as I sit here today, I—I don't know what is truth and I don't know what isn't" ("James Frey"). Frey's publisher, Random House, paid readers over two million dollars. But Winfrey does not stay mad at him and, nearly two years after the televised backlash, she calls Frey and apologizes for the potential humiliation Frey may have felt ("Winfrey").

Failures within the American Dream

True stories of degradation and despair, which pave a path to enlightenment and success are popular and sell. They provide the self-help and self-made attributes Winfrey

searches for in her book club picks and Frey's memoir seems to hit every point she looks for; specifically, since rehab focuses on inner awareness as the source of change. The controversy becomes more than simply concocting an epic and artificial story to sell a book. It questions the entire notion of transformation, the American dream, and the empire of self-help. Frey's inability to fashion a new and improved self the way his book describes demonstrates the potential improbability and falsity in changing one's life. He markets his book as nonfiction, fully aware of its embellishments, in an attempt to accommodate and produce an ideal success story about overcoming his addiction. It is not simply the end result and its contrast to the beginning that makes a successful American dream story, but the behavior and manner in which one transcends their victimization to construct a new selfhood possesses equal validity. Frey embarks on a mission for sobriety through alcohol rehabilitation, a journey that encourages fixing and making over one's toxic lifestyle. Like Cullen argues in his historical account of the American dream and Braudy in his examination of fame, people want to read about rags-to-riches, the addicted to the sober, and the depressed to the happy (Cullen 60, Braudy 512). These transformations become daily conversation starters as it assumes that one can become prosperous—spiritually, emotionally, financially—just as their counterparts have.

Frey's story, no longer true, goes against the rags-to-riches narrative structure and becomes nothing more than a feel-good book with a fairy tale ending. The supposed truthfulness of *A Million Little Pieces* gives hope to others who struggle with substance abuse and addiction, placing Frey "on a pedestal as an inspiration, his personal struggles shared with millions though the media" (Leddy 8). With much of the story's details being

embellished, the challenge and triumph become equally false and misleading to everyone. Frey supposedly beats the odds set against him to create an uplifting story for readers everywhere, but his lies end up sabotaging his tale. If his success story is a lie, what does that say about the probability of achieving an American dream?

Frey originally appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* on October 26, 2005 to discuss his memoir being chosen as the next book club pick. She praised his triumph over addiction and expressed difficulty in putting his book down (as described in the episode's title, "The Man Who Kept Oprah Awake At Night"). Ironically, seeing Frey's appearance on Winfrey's show prompted *The Smoking Gun* to track down a mug shot of the author for their website ("Winfrey"). However, more than a little lie in Frey's account appears. Even when questions about Frey's story begin to surface, Winfrey initially stands by the author and proclaims her loyalty in a phone call to *Larry King Live*. She says:

> I am disappointing by this controversy surrounding *A Million Little Pieces*, because I rely on the publishers to define the category that a book falls within, and also the authenticity of the work. But the underlying message of redemption in James Frey's memoir still resonates with me, and I know it resonates with millions of other people who have read this book. What is relevant is that he was a drug addict who spent years in turmoil from the time he was 10 years old drinking and tormenting himself and his parents, and stepped out of that history to be the man that he is today and to take that message to save other people and allow them to save themselves (ibid).

With the investigation gaining more attention and unearthing more contradictions, Winfrey's opinion changes from support to disapproval. She invites Frey to come on her show to discuss his reasons for altering his story. In a pivotal episode on her television show, Winfrey calls out Frey's deceit and how it affected many readers:

> *Winfrey*: I acted in defense of you and as I said, my judgment was clouded because so many people seemed to have gotten so much out of it. But now I feel that you conned us all. Do you?
>
> *Frey*: I don't feel like I conned everyone.
>
> *Winfrey*: You don't.
>
> *Frey*: No.
>
> *Winfrey*: Why?
>
> *Frey*: Because I still think the book is about drug addiction and alcoholism and nobody's disputing that I was a drug addict and an alcoholic. And it's about the battle to overcome that.
>
> *Winfrey*: No, but I remember when you were here the last time in the after show a woman stood up and said, "You know, after reading this book and seeing you coming through what you came through, the way you did, and you having the attitude that you did makes me feel that I can do it too." I think you presented a false person ("James Frey").

The squabble between Frey and Winfrey showcases a crucial observation. Frey does not fabricate his addiction, but he does change the discourse of his recovery. His false image as a heroic figure denounces the accuracy and ability to obtain redemption and success: important aspects of the American dream. It seems that Frey does not become more self-aware as his book makes him appear. The falsity of his claims creates false hope for readers as he does not battle the recovery process in the manner he describes; self-awareness requires an individual to be accountable for their actions and had Frey taken full responsibility, he would not have marketed the book as non-fiction or, had he still written a memoir, would not have fabricated his tale to appear more appealing.

But Frey represents only a portion of the deception. The final American dream in Cullen's chronology is the Dream of the Coast, an era represented by celebrities, gambling, risk, and—most importantly—the illusion of success. *The New York Times* columnist, Frank

Rich, notes this illusion and fictionalization of reality. He cites the term "truthiness," a word made popular by comedian Stephen Colbert, in explaining the Frey discussion:

> I mean we live in this world now where this is just sort of the tip of the iceberg, this memoir, where anyone can sort of put out something that sort of looks true, smells a little bit like truth but, in fact, is in some way fictionalized. You look at anything from Enron fooling people and creating this aura of a great business making huge profits when it was an empty shell, or people in the government telling us that mushroom clouds are going to come our way if we don't invade Iraq for months when it was on faulty and possibly suspect intelligence. Or even things we label "reality" in entertainment like reality television. It's case. It's somewhat scripted. You see Jessica Simpson and Nick Lachey as happy newlyweds. The reality show is over, they get divorced and split the profits ("James Frey")

Up until Winfrey selected Frey's book, all of the book club picks have been works of fiction, not claiming to be realistic or truthful, but containing elements that would create the desire for change in the readers. If *A Million Little Pieces* sold as fiction, the debacle most likely would not have occurred, Winfrey would have kept her endorsement for Frey's book, and the examples Frey describes in the text would be taken lightly by readers; fiction is not read literally, but metaphorically and figuratively. "As a kid I read about addicted writer and rock stars and I thought they were cool," Frey explains. "I wanted to be one when I grew up" (Downton 78). His story depicts the deception of the American dream and the need to create a false story to be deemed a successful self-enterprising citizen.

Difficulties and Contradictions of Makeover and Self-Help

Through her discussion of Makeover Nation, Weber predominantly focuses on the appearance and physicality of makeovers; however, the makeover for Winfrey—as in Frey's case—is an inward awareness to change. Weber argues, "TV makeovers, overall, are fueled

by what defines the imagined American citizen: autonomy, free will, upward-mobility, self-determination, self-construction, and meritocracy," and a similar observation occurs in *OBC*, as well as the basic elements that construct the American dream (79). Work hard, accept defeat, take risks, strive to overcome the shortcomings, and emerge a happier and more efficient individual. Transgressions and failures fall upon the individual, not society, institutions, or other systemic boundaries. If finances are limited, get a better job. If you struggle with addiction, go to rehab. If your car is broke, fix it or buy a new one. Ehrenreich reflects on this distinction:

> I was baffled, initially, by what seemed like a certain lack of get-up-and-go on the part of my fellow workers. Why didn't they just leave for a better-paying job, as I did when I moved from the Hearthside to Jerry's? Part of the answer is that actual humans experience a little more 'friction' than marbles do, and the poorer they are, they more constrained their mobility usually is. Low-wage people who don't have cars are often dependent on a relative who is willing to drop them off and pick them up again each day, sometimes on a route that includes the babysitter's house or the child care center. Change your place of work and you may be confronted with an impossible topographical problem to solve, or at least a reluctant driver to persuade. Some of my coworkers…rode bikes to work, and this clearly limited their geographical range. For those who do possess cars, there is still the problem of gas prices…I have mentioned, too, the general reluctance to exchange the devil you know for the one that you don't know, even when the latter is tempting you with a better wage-benefit package (205).

No matter how powerful or determined the desire to transform or construct a more efficient self, the means to change may not exist; American makeover television only reveals successful and positive transformations. Book club picks might not always have a happy ending, but the themes and morals always project a positive message. The impracticality of obtaining the ideal American dream causes stress and a never-ending journey to grasp the myth of upward mobility and successful transformation. American culture thrives on survival of the fittest, working hard, and garnering a comfortable level of wealth.

Occupations that are deemed degrading or lower class are for those who refuse responsibility of the self and who are not diligent workers. Ehrenreich notes this cultural discrepancy:

> When poor single mothers had the option of remaining out of the labor force on welfare, the middle and upper class tended to view them with a certain impatience, if not disgust. The welfare poor were excoriated for their laziness, their persistence in reproducing in unfavorable circumstances, their presumed addictions, and above all for their "dependency." Here they were, content to live off "government handouts" instead of seeking "self-sufficiency," like everyone else, through a job. They needed to get their act together, learn how to wind an alarm clock, get out there and get to work (220).

Richard Roeper, prominent film critic for *The Chicago Sun-Times* notes a similar disillusionment. In response to a personal growth advertisement made by Winfrey ("You only have to believe that you can succeed, that you can be whatever your heart desires, be willing to work for it, and you can have it"), Roeper declares:

> Only if you live in Tinkerbell's world. In the real world, of course, there are millions upon millions of people who have tried the believe-desire-work portion of that equation and yet will NEVER have what they want. They will experience an entire life arc without escaping from poverty or despair, without ever finding love or happiness or wealth of material things and-or spirit (Roeper).

Winfrey projects the perception of success to being a "spiritual concept," coming "entirely from within the self and is built from the ground up, both financially and psychically" (Braudy 512). This means that, according to Braudy, an "individual's prime resource [is] 'character,' which itself [is] not innate so much as self-controlled and self-created" (ibid). Winfrey advocates individuals to follow her example and to take responsibility of one's life, regardless of the economic and social institutions that may hinder upward mobility. James Hay assets a similar argument with regards to makeover television and self-improvement modes:

> [are] not simply about the idea of freedom, citizenship, and self-governance, it is about demonstrating the specific techniques and technologies for acting and behaving as independent, self-governing citizens, about the performance of citizenship by applying these techniques in daily life, about recognizing our entrepreneurial skills and resources, and about empowering citizens in these ways (Hay).

And despite the differences between Winfrey's narrative and makeover television, the same emphasis on personal responsibility, reinvention of the self, and a breakaway from dependence is revealed in the various ways Winfrey projects her teachings (*The Oprah Winfrey Show, Oprah's Book Club*, *O* Magazine, etc.).

This does not mean, however, that all of Winfrey's viewers agree with her self-conscious, hard-work driven mantra of self-improvement in achieving the American dream. In fact, few probably realize that her race is exploited, that socioeconomic standings of citizens is eliminated, ignored, or seen as irrelevant, and that a little positive thinking and perhaps some makeup and organics will birth a new individual. Weber argues that this makeover fails "to account for difference…which eschews practical and material politics in favor of idealized bodies that can compete in a global marketplace" (132). Even Winfrey demonstrates contradictions within the makeover model, stating that she does not take credit for all her hard work, but attributes it to others. She also claims that her work puts her in the position to change her viewers' lives, providing the support and inspiration for her viewers to change their own situations, which negates the personal responsibility of being self-made. Winfrey, taking the role as leader and teacher, says:

> The greatest thing about what I do, for me, is that I'm in a position to change people's lives. It is the most incredible platform for influence that you could imagine, and it's something that I hold in great esteem and take full responsibility for…so my intention is always, regardless of what the show is—whether it's about

> sibling rivalry or wife battering or children of divorce—for people to see within each show that you are responsible for your life, that although there may be tragedy in your life, there's always a possibility to triumph. It doesn't matter who you are, where you come from. The ability to triumph begins with you. Always ("America's").

This statement negates the socioeconomic situations of individuals and seems to focus on short-term events or lifelong trauma that can be overcome with determination and hard work. Her philosophy—though simple, rational, and achievable—is only possible if all components are ideal. But Winfrey's viewers see her success and establish themselves as her students. By divulging and confessing her struggles and past trauma, Winfrey connects with her viewers, as they see an engaging, approachable, and likeable persona, despite her celebrity. Audience members feel intimate with her in spite of her wealth and television celebrity status; her verbal and nonverbal communication patterns are directly related in the construction of the personal and positive persona her audience assigns to her. For her viewers, the fan defines what matters and how it relates to their life, that the discourse of this popular cultural narrative provides influence and structure that one ought to construct to guide their journey to optimal, celebrated selfhood.

CHAPTER V

Conclusion

What were once moral principles, considered as ultimate ends, for which material security was but a means have turned around to become tools of the American illusion of materialist happiness.

—Jacob Needleman, "Two Dreams of America," 25

The Oprah Winfrey phenomenon is a symptom of the decades-old search for meaning in self-obsessed American culture.

—Kate Maver, "Oprah Winfrey and Her Self-Help Saviors," 2

This thesis has looked at the impact of the changing reading practices in the United States and how women are now discussing literature to reflect the self-help philosophy of media mogul Oprah Winfrey. It has specifically focused on how *OBC* depicts and presents the American dream as an achievable experience that can be accomplished through hard work and tough individualism. Throughout this thesis, I approach book clubs not simply as organizations and groups devoted to books, but as communities that encourage fashioning a new and improved self by altering one's psychological and physical circumstances. By arranging the discussion around two questions—how Winfrey reflects self-actualization and individualism as the American dream and how the book club aims to transform readers and participants by altering the way in which readers read and discuss books—this thesis demonstrates how reading and literacy are used as catalysts in achieving the American dream and how victimization can be overcome through literature.

Chapter one set the context of Winfrey's empire and the American dream, stating the research methods to be applied and supplies a brief literature review of the American dream and book clubs. In chapter two, I chronicled the evolution of the American dream, with special emphasis on the two most epitomized rags-to-riches stories: the narratives of Abraham Lincoln and Winfrey. I created a dialogue between celebrity, fame, and individualism, which encompass core components of Winfrey's empire. As one of the most respected and true self-made individuals, Winfrey uses this power to project her philosophy and worldview onto her audience and, eventually, onto readers of *OBC*. Chapter three delves deeper into the book club, illustrating differences and similarities between book clubs of the 1800s and contemporary literary circles. I focused specifically on *OBC* as the most widely accessible book club and how it depicts transformation and self-help. With a concentration on communication, I discuss how readers talk about books and how this confessional setting is not only crucial to the success of the book club, but to the success and makeovers of readers.

Chapter four concludes the book club discussion by entering contractions to the industry of self-help, the illusion of the American dream, and the impracticality of Winfrey's enlightenment teachings in creating an opportunity to triumph over victimization. To come to this conclusion, I examined the controversy around the *OBC* October 2005 memoir, *A Million Little Pieces* by James Frey. Frey's vivid concoction about drug and alcohol abuse provides a false hope for readers. The falsity of his aptitude to conquer addiction demonstrates the desire for perfection and reformation, and illustrates the impracticality of achieving an effortless transformation. Collectively, these chapters provide an overview to

the cultural significance of celebrity, fame, and individualism to the American dream, and how this power is projected onto readers via *OBC* and Winfrey's immense cultural power. Despite Winfrey's positive message and successful rags-to-riches narrative, her advocacy for self-help undermines and eliminates the lived experiences of Americans and ignores the impracticality of fulfilling transformation by relying only on the individual. However, this thesis not only examines the importance of literacy in makeovers, but how Winfrey changed the approach in which readers discuss and read literature.

Future Research

While this thesis has looked in depth at the relationship between the American dream, Winfrey, and the *OBC*, it also provides several areas for further research. Book clubs receive little attention from the media and academia, and further research in the area can create a thorough understanding of literacy and reading practices in the United States. While self-improvement is critical to the success of *OBC* picks, other book clubs that focus on mysteries, science fiction, and history do not necessarily provide the same theme of transformation. Analysis of these other types of book clubs would benefit this discussion, focusing on the differences in how they read and discuss in relation to *OBC*. Because Winfrey is the leader of *OBC*, picking the books and indirectly influencing the way in which her readers read, it is interesting to examine how members of book clubs with a more democratic approach read and talk about books. With *The Oprah Winfrey Show* ending in May 2011, *OBC* may also come to an end. New picks may not emerge, but readers may

continue to participate in *OBC* forums and dialogues; it would be important to analyze its influence and presence in the literary world after it ends and whether or not reading will continue to have the same push and popularity it garnered when *OBC* began. Further connection between governmentality, neoliberalism, and makeovers would benefit the association between celebrity, literacy, and self-help I make in this thesis.

Winfrey's Impact: Summary

Regardless of the impracticality of altering one's economic, social, racial, or geographical traits, Winfrey succeeds in transforming the mental and spiritual realm. Her practices may not relieve racism, economic restrictions, or education level, but the optimistic stories of triumph over victimization in *OBC* encourages a New Age era of positive thinking. Her readers fall in love with the characters in literature, which not only creates a sense of catharsis but also heightens literacy in an age slowly consumed by technology (which is ironic since *OBC* first garnered fame on Winfrey's talk show and much of the participant involvement occurs online). She repositions a focus towards the community, as exemplified through the bonds women form in their reading circles. Book gatherings have been around for centuries and there has always been a simultaneous public and privatization of reading as a social activity. Jane Barstow argues that when discussing books, "the major motivation to read seems less the pleasure of losing oneself in the pages of a text, and more the pleasure of meeting some friends to talk about something other than work or children" (10). Winfrey transfers emphasis from academic and literary advantages in reading to a

communal notion of self-care as exemplified by Winfrey's own American dream tale. The individualism instigated by core values of the American dream aim to perpetuate and transform a troubled, dysfunctional, unhappy victim into competing for autonomy and, ultimately, a celebrated, newer version of the self.

Winfrey reaffirms core American values, using "culture as a form of therapy…as a set of resources to make sense of our suffering and to build a coherent self reflexively" (Illouz 239). She stresses the American dream as the quintessential essence of being American as exhibited in *OBC*, a circle comprised mostly of women who read books Winfrey chooses that often do not challenge the limits or restrictions in American culture. Instead, books chosen for *OBC* veer toward affirming notions of individualism and self-sufficiency.

In spite of Winfrey's critiqued middlebrow and low-grade reading choices, self-made mantra, and its contradictions, *OBC* makes reading fashionable, if not for self-help and spirituality, then for the sake of preserving literacy. Janice Peck notes a series of events that transpire with reading: "reading=knowledge=freedom=individual advancement=proper citizenship=democracy" ("Literacy" 236). Books provide not only a temporary escape from the harsh elements of reality, but increases knowledge, opens up a variety of resources, and excites personal growth. For Winfrey to get Americans reading again in a society controlled by television, the Internet, and other media outlets, takes a great deal of clout and speaks greatly of her influence. Though first introduced on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *OBC* focuses on serious fiction and not pulp or trash fiction, receiving praise from all other forms of media—print and technological—since the classics and more highly esteemed novels

require more interpretive skills and knowledge than chick lit. Winfrey confesses many times to her audience about the difficult language, organization, and density of the books she chooses. For example, when first introducing *Stones from the River* by Ursula Hegi in February 1997, she states, "OK, so let's admit it's not an easy book, especially first getting into it…That, my dear, is called reading" (Farr 40). She inspires *OBC* participants to not only read, but to become better readers: "'Come prepared or not at all,' because reading [Toni Morrison's] books is like savoring a gourmet dining experience. This is not like a fast-food read. It's not like a take-out read. When you finish this book, you will know that you have really accomplished something because it is a great journey…Once you accomplish reading this book, they you are a bona fide certified reader" (41).

But whether an internal or external metamorphosis occurs, an enhanced reader emerges. Winfrey teaches society how to use books as a therapeutic outlet to cope with everyday obstacles: the emphasis she places on books remains on the characters' struggles to beat the odds set against them to develop an improved selfhood, not necessarily on literary technique and tone. Reading helped Winfrey make sense of her childhood and she propels that aesthetic to her audience and followers: "Books were my pass to personal freedom," she says. "I learned to read at age three, and soon discovered there was a whole world to conquer that went beyond our farm in Mississippi" (Williams 63). A media personality, self-made success story, and perpetrator of culture, Winfrey also claims title to literary agent. Reading provides a vision, not necessarily the means, of upward mobility and the ease of accessing books make *OBC* wildly successful and influential. Winfrey caters to a self-obsessed culture—one that has been taught and coerced to focus on selfhood and individual

identity—as presented through her attainment of celebrity and fame by adhering to an idea of the American dream. With *The Oprah Winfrey Show* ending its 25-year run May 25, 2011, the future of *OBC* remains uncertain, but followers of her philosophy—as well as the rest of America—will continue to craft an improved self through the pages of a book.

APPENDIX A

Oprah's Book Club List

Chronological by Date Announced on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*

1996

Mitchard, Jacquelyn. *The Deep End of the Ocean*. (1996). Announced on September 17, 1996.

Morrison, Toni. *Song of Solomon*. (1977). Announced on November 18, 1996.

Hamilton, Jane. *The Book of Ruth*. (1988). Announced on November 18, 1996.

1997

Lamb, Wally. *She's Come Undone*. (1992). Announced on 22 January 1997.

Hegi, Ursula. *Stones from the River*. (1994). Announced on February 28, 1997.

Reynolds, Sheri. *The Rapture of Canaan*. (1995). Announced on April 8, 1997.

Angelou, Maya. *The Heart of a Woman*. (1981). Announced on May 9, 1997.

Morris, Mary McGarry. *Songs in Ordinary Time*. (1995). Announced on June 18, 1997.

Gaines, Ernest. *A Lesson Before Dying*. (1993). Announced on September 22, 1997.

Gibbons, Kaye. *Ellen Foster*. (1987). Announced on October 27, 1997.

—*A Virtuous Woman*. (1989). Announced on October 27, 1997.

Cosby, Bill. *The Treasure Hunt*. (1997). Announced on December 8, 1997.

—*The Best Way to Play*. (1997). Announced on December 8, 1997.

—*The Meanest Thing to Say*. (1997). Announced on December 8, 1997.

1998

Morrison, Toni. *Paradise*. (1997). Announced on January 16, 1998.

Hoffman, Alice. *Here on Earth*. (1997). Announced on March 6, 1998.

Quindlen, Anna. *Black and Blue*. (1998). Announce on April 9, 1998.

Danticat, Edwidge. *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. (1994). Announced on May 22, 1998.

Lamb, Wally. *I Know This Much Is True*. (1998). Announced on June 18, 1998.

Cleage, Pearl. *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day*. (1997). Announced on September 25, 1998.

Bohjalian, Chris. *Midwives*. (1997). Announced on October 20, 1998.

Letts, Billie. *Where the Heart Is*. (1995). Announced on December 7, 1998.

1999

Lott, Bret. *Jewel*. (1991). Announced on January 19, 1999.

Schlink, Bernhard. *The Reader*. (1995). Announced on February 26, 1999.

Shreve, Anita. *The Pilot's Wife*. (1998). Announced on March 31, 1999.

Fitch, Janet. *White Oleander*. (1999). Announced on May 6, 1999.

Haynes, Melinda. *Mother of Pearl*. (1999). Announced on June 15, 1999.

Binchy, Maeve. *Tara Road*. (1998). Announced on June 15, 1999.

Clarke, Breena. *River, Cross My Heart*. (1999). Announced on October 14, 1999.

Ansay, A. Manette. *Vinegar Hill*. (1994). Announced on November 10, 1999.

Hamilton, Jane. *A Map of the World*. (1994). Announced on December 3, 1999.

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Morgan, Robert. *Gap Creek*. (1999). Announced on January 18, 2000.

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Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. (1970). Announced on April 27, 2000.

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Kingsolver, Barbara. *The Poisonwood Bible*. (1998). Announced on June 23, 2000.

Berg, Elizabeth. *Open House*. (2000). Announced on August 23, 2000.

Schwarz, Christina. *Drowning Ruth*. (2000). Announced on September 27, 2000.

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2001

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Oufkir, Malika. *Stolen Lives: Twenty Years in a Desert Jail*. (1999). Announced on May 16, 2001.

Tademy, Lalita. *Cane River*. (2001). Announced on June 20, 2001.

Franzen, Jonathan. *The Corrections*. (2001). Announced on September 24, 2001.

Mistry, Rohinton. *A Fine Balance*. (1995). Announced on November 30, 2001.

2002

MacDonald, Ann-Marie. *Fall on Your Knees*. (1996). Announced on January 24, 2002.

Morrison, Toni. *Sula*. (1973). Announced on April 5, 2002.

2003

Steinbeck, John. *East of Eden*. (1952). Announced on June 18, 2003.

Paton, Alan. *Cry, The Beloved Country*. (1948). Announced on September 29, 2003.

2004

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2005

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2006

Wiesel, Elie. *Night*. (1955). Announced on January 16, 2006.

2007

Poitier, Sidney. *The Measure of a Man: A Spiritual Autobiography*. (2000). Announced on January 26, 2007.

McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. (2006). Announced on March 28, 2007.

Eugenides, Jeffrey. *Middlesex*. (2002). Announced on June 5, 2007.

Marquez, Gabriel Garcia. *Love in the Time of Cholera*. (1985). Announced on October 5, 2007.

Follet, Ken. *The Pillars of the Earth*. (1989). Announced on November 14, 2007.

2008

Tolle, Eckhart. *A New Earth*. (2005). Announced on January 30, 2008.

Wroblewski, David. *The Story of Edgar Sawtelle*. (2008). Announced on September 19, 2008.

2009

Akpan, Uwen. *Say You're One of Them*. (2008). Announced on September 18, 2009.

2010

Franzen, Jonathon. *Freedom*. (2010). Announced on September 17, 2010.

Dickens, Charles. *A Tale of Two Cities*. (1859). Announced on December 6, 2010.

— *Great Expectations*. (1860). Announced on December 6, 2010.

APPENDIX B

Oprah's Book Club List

Alphabetical

Akpan, Uwen. *Say You're One of Them*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2008.

Allende, Isabelle. *Daughter of Fortune.* New York: HarperCollins, 1999.

Angelou, Maya. *The Heart of a Woman*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1981.

Ansay, A. Manette. *Vinegar Hills*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1994.

Berg, Elizabeth. *Open House*. New York: Random House, Inc., 2000.

Binchy, Maeve. *Tara Road*. London: Orion Publishing Group, 1999.

Bohjalian, Chris. *Midwives*. New York: Harmony, 1997.

Buck, Pearl S. *The Good Earth*. New York: Washington Square Press, 2004.

Clarke, Breena. *River, Cross My Heart*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1999.

Cleage, Pearl. *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day*. New York: William Morrow, 1997.

Cosby, Bill. *The Treasure Hunt*. New York: Cartwheel Books, 1997.

——*The Best Way to Play*. New York: Cartwheel Books, 1997.

——*The Meanest Thing to Say.* New York: Cartwheel Books, 1997.

Danticat, Edwidge. *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. New York: Soho Press, Inc., 1994.

Dickens, Charles. *A Tale of Two Cities*. London: Puffin Books, 1996.

——*Great Expectations.* London: Puffin Books, 1995.

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Eugenides, Jeffrey. *Middlesex*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002.

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——*Light in August*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1985.

——*The Sound and the Fury.* New York: Random House, Inc., 1984.

Fitch, Janet. *White Oleander*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1999.

Follet, Ken. *The Pillars of the Earth*. New York: William Morrow, 1989.

Franzen, Jonathan. *The Corrections*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001.

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Frey, James. *A Million Little Pieces*. New York: Random House, Inc., 2003.

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

Gibbons, Kaye. *Ellen Foster.* Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 1987.

——*A Virtuous Woman.* Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 1989.

Hamilton, Jane. *The Book of Ruth*. New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1988.

——*A Map of the World*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1994.

Haynes, Melinda. *Mother of Pearl*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999.

Hegi, Ursula. *Stones from the River*. New York: Poseidon Press, 1994.

Hoffman, Alice. *Here on Earth*. New York: Berkley Publishing Group, 1999.

Kingsolver, Barbara. *The Poisonwood Bible*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2008.

Lamb, Wally. *I Know This Much Is True*. New York: HarperCollins, 1998.

——*She's Come Undone*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1996.

Letts, Billie. *Where the Heart Is*. New York: Warner Books, 1998.

Lott, Bret. *Jewel*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1999.

MacDonald, Ann-Marie. *Fall on Your Knees*. New York: Touchstone Books, 2002.

Marquez, Gabriel Garcia. *Love in the Time of Cholera*. New York: Vintage, 2007.

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McCarthy, Cormac. *The Road*. New York: Vintage, 2009.

McCullers, Carson. *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. Boston: Mariner Books, 2004.

Miller, Sue. *While I Was Gone*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2000.

Mistry, Rohinton. *A Fine Balance*. New York: Vintage, 2001.

Mitchard, Jacquelyn. *The Deep End of the Ocean*. New York: Penguin Books, 1999.

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——*Paradise*. New York: Knopf Publishing Group, 1997.

——*Song of Solomon*. New York: Knopf Publishing Group, 1977.

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Oates, Joyce Carol. *We Were the Mulvaneys*. New York: Plume Books, 2001.

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