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The Politics of Talk: The *Oprah* Interview as Narrative

Bill Clinton on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*! The prospect drew more media buzz and longer lineups than usual for the June 21, 2004 studio taping in Chicago ("Oprah Goes One-On-One"). Airing the following day, the hour-long interview with the former President focused on the topics covered in Clinton's hot-off-the-press autobiography, *My Life*: his abusive childhood, his conflicting public and private lives, his weight struggles, and, of course, his affair with Monica Lewinsky. Public reaction to the show was divided along fairly predictable lines. Oprah fans loved the way she kept Bill in the hot seat, curbing his impulse for grandstanding and continually steering the discussion back to the real issues: for this viewership, his sexual mistakes and their emotional impact on him and his family. Conversely, those who admire Clinton as a politician, initially mystified as to why he would appear on a daytime talk show in the first place, reasoned that he wanted finally to "come clean" about his personal life and "be heard" in a way he wasn't able to be in the context of more highbrow media.[1] Asked afterwards if she'd had trouble keeping the politician on topic, Oprah acknowledged, "He's a talker, he's a talker!" ("Oprah Goes One-On-One").

The irony of a comment like this from the mouth of the universally-acknowledged "Queen of Talk" gestures to the competitive atmosphere between the two celebrities on the set. As a talk show host and interviewer, Oprah is anything but a passive cipher for her guests' "truth." On the contrary, she determines the structure and emphasis of their stories even as she solicits those stories with her questions; she meets—and very often

trumps—their conclusions with her own. The interview is a genre in which the "facts" are always determined performatively, through a two-way negotiation of the terms and with some degree of struggle for rhetorical authority and power. Oprah's interviews offer an extreme case, insofar as her celebrity ethos and "message" consistently take precedence over other kinds of authority (e.g., expert, experiential) presented on her show. The Oprah interview mobilizes the rhetorical conventions of testimony, witnessing, debate, dispute, confession, and psychotherapy. Whether the interviewee is a politician, a criminal, an author or an interior decorator, what brings the various modes of discourse together is the performative persona of Oprah herself. With her recent endorsement of Democratic presidential hopeful Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois, Oprah has deliberately moved beyond the role of celebrity role model to enter into political activism. In order to understand the kind of stories offered on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, then, viewers need to be versant in Oprah's own story—both the biographical narrative that underpins her public persona and the self-help narrative that dictates both her choice of topics and her approach to them.

Oprah's Personal Legend

The story of Oprah's life comes into play in every interview she conducts, whether an "Oprah One on One" celebrity chat or a group discussion on a salient (or salacious) social issue. The widely-reported collection of anecdotes about Oprah's childhood and upbringing, supplied for the most part by Oprah herself over the years, has become so familiar that it comprises what some refer to as a "legend" (Haag 117). Beginning with her dirt-poor Mississippi girlhood on her grandmother's farm—complete with outhouse, corncob doll, and daily whippings for misbehavior—and punctuated with tales of sexual abuse, struggles with weight gain, depression, and being black in a white world, Oprah's is a classic rags-to-riches story. She has been called a modern-day Horatio Alger so often that even she worries about becoming a cliché (Haag 117).

What makes Oprah legendary is the extremes of poor and rich, lowly and powerful that characterize her narrative. Oprah isn't just rich; with a personal fortune of 1.1 billion dollars, she is the richest black woman in the world. Her talk show isn't just successful; it airs in 107 countries, and with

26 million U.S. viewers, it has held its No. 1 spot in U.S. daytime talk for 18 years despite challenges from at least fifty rivals (Sellers). Oprah also owns Harpo Inc. ("Oprah" spelled backwards), a production company that creates feature films, award-winning TV specials, and home videos. Her lifestyle magazine, launched in 2000, is the most successful startup in the industry to date, outselling *Martha Stewart Living* and *Vogue*. Add to this list of accomplishments an Academy Award nomination for her acting role in *The Color Purple*, a Global Peace Award for her inner-city charity, the Angel Network, and a TV book club so popular that Oprah's insignia on a novel's cover typically boosts sales tenfold. Everything Oprah touches, in other words, seems to turn to gold.

But why are Oprah's fans so fond of hearing her life story? Why, as we hear Oprah digress into yet another parable from her cockroaches-as-playmates childhood, doesn't this Oprah-centric universe start to feel claustrophobic and repetitive? One disgruntled ex-producer at Harpo Inc. called the company "a narcissistic workplace" (qtd. in Sellers); why doesn't the charge of narcissism get leveled at the media empress more often? The answer has to do with the way certain elements of Oprah's mythologized biography tap into a wider, collective myth of self-reliance and limitless possibility commonly referred to as the American Dream. In her 1997 Wellesley College Commencement Address, Oprah exhorted, "Create the highest, grandest vision possible for your life because you become what you believe." She invokes her personal legend by describing how, at the age of five, she watched her grandmother boil clothes in an iron pot and felt that her life could be greater than what she saw. "Anything is possible for you," Oprah concludes. "I am proof of that. I think that my life, the fact that I was born where I was born, and the time that I was and have been able to do what I have done speaks to the possibility" (Wellesley Address). Interpreting herself as proof of how America rewards those who pursue their dreams is a recurrent theme in Oprah's discourse. In *Time* magazine's 2006 *Time 100* survey, Oprah is profiled under the category "Leaders and Revolutionaries" by none other than US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who claims triumphantly that "Oprah's story is America's story."

The method of achieving success like Oprah's, of course, is hard work and determination. Oprah claims that her harsh childhood gave her the strength of character to become what she is today (Haag 117). The

fact that she embodies the ideal of the self-made woman takes the emphasis off issues of social and racial (in)justice in Oprah's personal narrative. Recently, Oprah has ventured into building schools for girls in South Africa, and in discussing this project she mentions education as a key to her escape from poverty: "Had I not had books and education in Mississippi, I would have believed that's all there was" (Sellers). However, despite her recent political involvement, her own rags-to-riches story is framed apolitically, insofar as Oprah insistently interprets her own rise to stardom as a triumph of imagination and individual will rather than an exemplum of the need for social change. This permits Oprah's viewers to regard her as "a comforting, nonthreatening bridge between the black and white cultures" and helps explain Oprah's popularity among white as well as black women.[2]

As her name has increased in recognizability over the past twenty years, Oprah has repeatedly abbreviated it. *The Oprah Winfrey Show* is commonly referred to as *Oprah*, and the magazine is entitled simply *O*. The distilling of her identity into a single initial or symbol reflects and bolsters her "superstar" status, but it also points to an ironic element of depersonalization in Oprah's rise to the top: from a business perspective, Oprah's name is also Oprah's brand. Her message, centered on the idea of living one's "authentic life," is a product for sale not only through her talk show but in her magazine and, most recently, on an interactive, multimedia website that boasts forty-five million page views per month (Allen). This emphasis on personal authenticity makes it doubtful whether Oprah's image could survive, say, a jail term. As Patricia Sellers puts it, "If she does something as Oprah the person that undermines the trust her customers have in Oprah the persona, her brand could quickly fizzle."

Anxiety over Oprah's good name reared its head, for example, in the 2007 sexual abuse allegations at the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls in Johannesburg. While Oprah kept insisting that "the buck stops with me," South African media were dutiful in distancing the scandal from the school's patroness: "The abuse scandal that has rocked Oprah Winfrey's South African school for girls does not reflect badly on the famous talk show host. It reflects badly on this nation" (qtd. In Perry). Because of the risk, Oprah's employees sign a lifelong confidentiality agreement, and several attempts by former employees to publish their experiences have been blocked by the courts. So when Oprah enthuses, "I am just thrilled that I

get paid so much every day for just being myself," the remark is disingenuous.[3] Being "herself" requires careful grooming and management, and the rhetoric of authenticity here sidesteps the fact that the persona operates at several removes from whatever the "real" Oprah Winfrey might be up to on any given day.

Besides protecting her persona from being sullied by negative PR, part of Oprah's management of her public self involves mediating between her "superstar" image and her "everywoman" image. Commentators define Oprah's charisma as "the heroism of everyday life" and point to her "accessible style" as the key to her popularity (Illouz 114). An example frequently used to support this opinion is Oprah's highly publicized struggle with her weight. Sharing so much information with her fans about her diet and grueling exercise regimen (Oprah often says she "hates every second" of her workout, an admission that always brings laughter and cheers from her studio audience) certainly underlines her self-discipline and determination. But at the same time, viewers see the extreme effort that goes into looking camera-worthy and feel Oprah's stardom is less mysterious, less removed from their everyday lives, than that of other media celebrities.[4]

Onstage and on television Oprah performs her "everywoman" persona by presenting herself not only as the host of her talk show, but as a member of the various groups being represented: the black middle class, women in general, slighted lovers, abused children. Oprah thus appears to be "always already one of her own guests" (Masciarotte 94). But at the same time, Oprah also manages to align herself with her audience. In a show on proper brassiere fitting, for instance, Oprah reacts with the same laughter and incredulity as the studio audience to the "slimming" tips offered by the lingerie experts ("Oprah's Bra and Swimsuit Intervention"). Kathleen Green calls this tendency to identify with the skepticism of her viewers a "recurring motif" in Oprah's everywoman persona (671). Oprah's periodic switch into southern black vernacular is another manifestation of her ability to become one of the crowd. Of course, Oprah has spoken with her guests before the show, and is thus more familiar with their ideas than are her viewers, so perhaps she may be better described, as Kathleen Dixon terms it, as "first citizen" of her audience (175): a regular member of the group, but also always the designated spokesperson for it. Oprah's ability to shift her position in relationship to her guests and viewing audience maxi-

mizes the public's opportunity to identify with her. Indeed, as one admirer puts it, Oprah is "our mammy, our therapist, our cheerleader, our role model, our moral conscience, and our harshest critic when we need it" (Haag 120).

Oprah's Venue: The Talk Show Genre

Television talk shows have inherited some of their generic and structural characteristics from other, older cultural traditions. Formal debates, panel discussions, courtroom proceedings and public inquiry hearings all use codified procedures for sharing ideas and opinions, including the ideas and opinions of expert guests or witnesses. Talk shows adopt many of the discursive rules of these traditions, like turn-taking, rebuttal, and "taking the floor," but the rules are less rigidly enforced on TV. What makes the talk show look like a more participatory, democratic forum is the central role played by the studio and call-in audience. Historical pastimes that emphasized public discussion include the Italian academy, the French salon, and the English coffeehouse or club, and—going far back— the ancient Greek agora. Prior to TV, the radio call-in show featured (and still features) a public chat centered on an issue of common concern or interest and mediated by a charismatic host. But in many ways, talk shows are a unique product of the TV age, the natural showcase of what the medium of television does best. The first theorist of mass media, Marshall McLuhan, argued that television is the most intimate medium because it demands a high degree of viewer participation. Speech, according to McLuhan, is the most complex form of communication, involving more of our senses than, say, print (78)—and TV speech is the nearest thing to the live version (at least until webcams become ubiquitous). TV is also by nature a close-up medium. Even in scenes of action or violence, viewers tend to focus on the reactions displayed on the actors' faces (319-20), so close-up shots that are used sparingly in movies are standard fare on TV (317). Electronic images almost immediately received by viewers in their own homes bring content "closer," collapsing distance and seeming to establish an intimacy between performer and viewer (Wilson 91). People conversing on television has thus proven to be as popular a format as sitcoms or dramas, and TV talk

show hosts in particular take advantage of the medium to "connect" emotionally with the camera.

The Oprah Winfrey Show stands out amongst its competitors in maximizing the potential of the television format. Over the years Oprah and her producers have developed techniques that tailor the show to the demands of its two largest stakeholders: the advertisers, whose commercials constantly interrupt the program, and the viewers, who for the most part "tune in and out" of the show while performing other tasks (like child care) at home (Dixon 173). Oprah employs a wide variety of programming "genres" to sustain viewer interest, alternating casual onstage conversation with pre-recorded segments of a higher, almost filmic, production quality. Such segments might sketch out the background story of a guest with footage of his/her home and family, show suffering children in a developing nation where a guest volunteers, or re-enact a crime scene being recalled in the "live" discussion. The musical soundtrack and voice-over in these segments are always dramatic and emotive, helping to pull viewers in when they might otherwise remain detached or only marginally interested in the issue being discussed. Before each commercial break, viewers are offered a "pitch" for the episode's next segment: Oprah will turn directly to the camera and say, "Don't go away; you won't believe what's coming next," and a pre-recorded vignette will offer a glimpse of something intriguing like a weeping or horrified guest, or a man in a prisoner's uniform holding his head in shame. Also helping bridge commercial breaks are "commercials" for upcoming episodes of *Oprah.*

Oprah's own hosting style varies throughout the show, too, from reportative or didactic speech to pathetic appeals; from generalized, "words to the wise" delivery to an intimate, whispering exchange with a guest. While no footage is ever repeated, the show is structured recursively and continually returns to the same themes and conclusions. Every statement Oprah makes responds to and recapitulates what a guest has just said, so that each comment relates to the episode's over-arching concern. This ensures that a viewer can turn on the TV at any point in the show and never struggle to pick up the thread. All of this intertextuality and dialogic overlapping has led some scholars to suggest that the talk show is the most postmodern genre on television (Rapping, qtd. in Dixon 173). Mastering the elastic nature of television discourse to this extent has allowed Oprah to

create a product that capitalizes on the balance between entertainment and information, "reality" programming and slick, riveting drama.

Several of Oprah's predecessors in the talk show business helped pave the way for her success with the format. 1960s programming focusing on "women's interests" included Dinah Shore's *Dinah's Place* and Virginia Graham's *Girltalk*; these shows pioneered the "homey, folksy, friendly feel" of Oprah's studio today (Haag 116). News interview shows hosted by Barbara Walters and Connie Chung also fueled audience appetites for TV talk. But it was Phil Donahue who first achieved long-term, sky-high ratings with a talk show centered on female guests and female audiences. The panel of experts, the audience participation, the sensational confessions, the roving cameras, the emotive, human host—Donahue made such elements an integral part of daytime TV. But Oprah really picked up where Donahue left off. Emotions in *Donahue* were merely by-products of the topic under discussion, side effects that undoubtedly served as the basis for viewers' interest but were rarely discussed directly or acknowledged as important in themselves. Oprah dispensed with Donahue's pose of (masculine) rationality amidst the (feminine) hysteria of the guests and his habit of reducing his guests' painful stories to "evidence" of whatever social problem he was trying to present on the show that day (Masciarotte 92). For Donahue's "report" approach she substituted "rapport" (Tannen), so that the focus shifted from *what* the guests were telling to *how* they were telling it and how it made them feel. For Oprah, women's feelings are the whole point.

Discourse in *Oprah*

Some commentators point to the emphasis on feelings in *The Oprah Winfrey Show* as participating in a uniquely female type of discourse. Studies on gender differences in communication note that women tend towards greater self-disclosure than men in their conversations with friends (Haag 117). Sharing life stories and personal information builds intimacy in female relationships, and Oprah's continued self-disclosure makes both guests and viewers feel closer to her. We could take this idea further to argue that Oprah's insistence on "female" norms of communication also explains the show's relative open-endedness and its favoring of process over product—

the discussion itself rather than its conclusions. Oprah herself likes to point out that her empathy with others' emotions stands her apart from other interviewers. Poking fun at her early career efforts to emulate the likes of Barbara Walters, she says "[it] wasn't really effective as a news reporter to be covering a fire and crying because the people lost their house" (she pretends to cry as she says this) (Wellesley Address).

The key word here is "empathetic" rather than the broader "sympathetic," as one might imagine any good interviewer would have to be. While the discussions on *Oprah* may represent "female" ways of interacting, a more accurate description emerges by narrowing the scope beyond the female to the personal—to the reactions of Oprah herself. Oprah's empathetic tears (or her conspiratorial laughter) comprise the key element of the narrative experience that viewers are expecting when they sit down every afternoon to watch her show. When my mother telephones me to say "women are still being killed at the hands of the men they love," I can hear Oprah's voice; I can see the quiver of Oprah's curls as she shakes her head slowly, her eyes brimming with tears for the stricken sister-in-law on her stage. The statement my mother is quoting transcends the banal for her not because of shocking new national statistics, nor even because of the heart-rending testimony of the women onstage, but because of Oprah's own manifest sorrow as she summarizes the show's theme.

By the "narrative experience" of Oprah's viewers, I am referring to a combination of story (entertainment one can sit back and watch) and gesture (questions put to viewers, mainly "what do you make of this?"). Oprah's tears set her apart from other interviewers by choreographing the narrative of her show around her own reactions, so that the climax of the plot occurs whenever Oprah is visibly moved. A glance at any transcript of the show reveals the extent to which Oprah's responses shape, echo and propel the guest's revelations. For example, in the show on wife-murder my mother was referring to, Oprah teases the details from the victim of attempted murder by echoing her comments:

> Winfrey: And I hear—do you have flashbacks about this every day?
> Karen: Oh, definitely.
> Winfrey: Yeah.

> Karen: If my mind sits idle for too long, I'm right back to that night.
> Winfrey: Right back to that night. I know—I've heard—you told the producers that you can tell if it's going to be a good day or bad day when you're brushing your teeth.
> Karen: If I can brush my teeth and not throw up, it is going to be a pretty good day.
> Winfrey: A pretty good day. Yeah. But you had an indication even before your mother told you that the children were gone. You had an indication. Because when he was stabbing you, he said. . .
> Karen: All he would say the whole time is 'You need to be with your children. Your children need you.' And so I know—I couldn't wrap my brain completely around it, but he's stabbing me. He wants me to die and so that must mean my children are dead, too. ("Oprah Goes to Prison" 11)

Each time Oprah repeats one of Karen's phrases, the camera cuts back to her face rather than remaining on Karen's. The back and forth movement ensures that viewers feel the emotional tension increasing as the story gets more gory and Oprah probes deeper, until the point at which Oprah reacts with emotion: falls silent, shakes her head, sighs heavily, tears up, reaches for the guest's hand. Often this reaction will include the audience, as Oprah looks into the crowd or into the camera and acknowledges our emotional response, too, with a tearful nod. Or, at one of these climactic moments, Oprah will break from the story altogether to tell the guest, "we applaud you for being here," and to solicit applause from the audience. This narrative arc occurs many times during the course of a single show, since commercial breaks allow for a redrawing of the initial tableau of dispassionate interviewer and guest ready for confession. Over and over, then, we watch Oprah bear witness to the guest's stories, and her experience of witnessing—rather than the stories themselves—forms the backbone of the show's plot.

If this formula sounds sensationalistic, it is. If the narrative payoff for the viewers lies in Oprah's tears, then *The Oprah Winfrey Show*'s narrative currency is the specific, graphic details of the guest's stories.

When guests use general, clinical terms to describe their pain, Oprah probes for the details beneath, such as Karen vomiting whilst brushing her teeth in the morning. What makes the host's emotion "real" for viewers is its grounding in the visceral details:

> Winfrey: And how did you keep him from slitting your throat?
> Karen: Well, when he came back in and found me on the phone, he left and came back in with a new knife because we had destroyed the one he had initially used. .
> Winfrey: He had destroyed stabbing you, yeah.
> Karen: Yeah. And me trying to get it from him, I knew that it was, you know, totally bent and so it wasn't working properly. And then he came in and started slashing at me again. And I had a big sweatshirt on. And I just grabbed, you know, the collar and I put it in my mouth, so he'd have to, you know, cut through the sweatshirt.
> Winfrey: Cut through the sweatshirt. ("Oprah Goes to Prison" 13)

In Karen's story, the deepest "truth" lies not in overcoming the trauma—in the language of healing, social support, and the empowerment of women—but in the details of the trauma itself. Masciarotte states of Oprah that "though her stated message may advocate cure, her investigative message denies the importance of cure" (97). Rather than being told about collective healing, viewers are being called upon to recognize individual suffering as the crux of the guest's authority and authenticity.

This discursive fascination with pain rather than on its relief is the source of many accusations against *Oprah* (and other talk shows) of trashiness—of selling spectacle and scandal despite all the self-improvement rhetoric. But the show's focus on the gory details doesn't necessarily contradict Oprah's social message. Firstly, the act of publicly admitting the specifics of pain contributes to the guest's relief, insofar as Oprah plays the role of therapist and facilitates a kind of catharsis-through-confession.[5] Secondly, the notion of sharing one's story on *Oprah* often carries the rhetorical intent of overcoming alienation and shame. Indeed, a standard moment in the *Oprah* script has the guests explain why they felt compelled to share their story:

> Winfrey: Why have you chosen to speak publicly?

> Karen: That's a hard question. I never thought that I would. I thought that I would just keep it in, but there are so many people—you just read this more and more, and it's a very lonely feeling. You know? I have a wonderful community. I just love my city, but I'm alone, you know? There's no one that can really say, "I understand. I know what you're going through. And it's going to be OK." And if I could say that to another person that "I understand. I know what you're going through," I actually mean it. You know what I mean? ("Oprah Goes to Prison" 14)

Here, Karen is seeking a cure for her trauma in the possibility of a community of sufferers discovered through her appearance on the show. At the same time, she claims to be telling her story for the relief of others who might be going through something similar, also in isolation.

Even beyond this psychological function, the thirst for disturbing detail on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* comprises a serious inquiry into the moral relations between individuals. Emotions in talk shows are not simply an object of viewer's voyeurism: in a society that lacks a public language of morality, "emotion talk is talk about social relations" (Illouz 118). The seemingly superficial treatment of the guest's problems—the "we're all crying for you" reaction to his/her testimony—is merely a sidebar to the wider, ongoing moral investigation into embattled subjectivity in today's society. "Pain," according to Illouz, "has become a dominant cultural and political category to discuss selfhood and intimate relations" (118). In the talk show's moral architecture, the pain of the guest simultaneously offers proof of the "wrongness" of what he/she has suffered and validates him/her as the authentic subject of his/her own story. This is obvious for a victim like Karen, nearly murdered by her husband, but it is equally true of the pornography addict or compulsive spendthrift who breaks down in tears on Oprah's stage. If he is in pain, he must be worthy of our sympathy; in this formula, right and wrong are decided by the authenticity of emotion.

The recognition that emotions have a moral valence on talk shows helps explain the sense some commentators get that they are "value-laden programmes" operating prescriptively in the service of "advisory regimes" (Wilson 2). The cultural code of individualism, to which Oprah's own rags-to-riches story gives the nod, dictates for the show a master narrative of

self-definition and self-help as the path to happiness. But it is important to note that on *Oprah*, rehearsing the details of the problem—claiming pain as one's own—is more vital to the act of self-definition than overcoming the problem or banishing the pain. Karen's declaration that "I will make it. I will find a new normal," is followed by her admission that she hasn't, in fact, found it yet ("Oprah Goes to Prison" 15). But this lack of therapeutic closure is incidental to the narrative of the show, which has already achieved its rhetorical goal of moral authentication through emotional disclosure.

The Politics of *Oprah*

This is not to say that Oprah doesn't have an agenda beyond having people show their true colors. On the contrary: the formulaic trajectory of the interviews on her show suggests several rhetorical goals. Firstly, the open-ended, recursive structure, in which guests are brought in one by one with increasingly dramatic versions of the same problem, underlines that problem's sensational and seemingly insurmountable nature. Since the presentation of the problem is cumulative and the solutions incidental, varied, and partial, viewers are left with a troubling sense of collective malaise. My worried mother calls to say that wife-killing is on the rise not because she has been confronted with comparative statistics, but because *The Oprah Winfrey Show* presents it as a social crisis without a solution. At the same time that such problems are presented as systemic and omnipresent, however, they are always framed in terms of individuals instead of groups. Oprah tends to solicit from her guests what Dixon calls "testimonials of personal responsibility" (14) rather than comments that frame the issue in terms of social or state conditions. Oprah has said that all the problems in the world stem from lack of self-esteem (Peck 101). This posits an ideological starting-point that undermines the possibility of a collective approach to empowerment. The show thus leaves its viewers with a strong sense that something should be done about the problems plaguing Oprah's guests, but with very little rational direction as to how or where to apply their concern.

The mobilization of social concern without a socio-political framework in which to act brings the question of activism back to Oprah herself. Running parallel to and even eclipsing the show's interview narrative is the

ongoing story of the interviewer herself, Oprah Winfrey, as a force for change.[6] This is most directly the case for the episodes whose themes dovetail with Oprah's social and charity causes, such as the "Oprah's Latest Capture" shows, in which the story centers on someone nabbed through the host's online database of wanted pedophiles.[7] Similarly, the show regularly features stories from Oprah's Angel Network's South African orphanage visits, Hurricane Katrina rebuilding projects in New Orleans, and Use Your Life Awards program.

But even when Oprah doesn't have a direct hand in the action, her role on the show is increasingly eliminating the need for a guest expert to offer an authoritative interpretation of what needs to be done. An interview with a guest who habitually cuts herself saw Oprah first admitting, "I've said before I've had almost every experience. But I do not understand the cutting," but then reestablishing herself as the authority in relation to the guest's childhood experience of molestation, declaring of the link between sexual abuse and negative self-esteem, "I've been trying to say this for years" ("From White House Intern to Crack Addict"). Teaching a leadership course at Northwestern University in Evanston, conducting "Live Your Best Life" speaking tours, anchoring round-the-clock "coverage" of the Hurricane Katrina crisis in Louisiana—all of these recent activities confirm the extent to which Oprah has surpassed the traditionally neutral role of "interviewer" or "host." From its inception the show may have been, on some level, about Oprah herself, but the total eclipse of her role not just by her personality but by her social activism in recent years comprises a narrative that, in its own right, makes for good TV. When Oprah follows through on her planned one-month tenancy in an inner-city housing project in Chicago for a reality series on the housing crisis, the transition from interviewer to protagonist will be indiscernible to her viewers ("Oprah Launches Project").

The question of Oprah's political influence continually haunts this and similar discussions of the star's high-profile social causes. Is her expanding role as political activist altering her message of individualism and self-governance? Commentators agree that her endorsement of Obama represents a turning point in Oprah's approach,[8] but her dealings behind the scenes of American politics are not new. Oprah was present at President Clinton's 1993 signing of the National Child Protection Act, a piece of legis-

lation of which she'd been such a vocal supporter that it was informally known as "the Oprah bill" ("President Clinton Signs"). Indeed, if Clinton was dubbed "The Oprah President" for his "touchy-feely" race-relations initiatives (Dokupil, MacArthur), and campaign analysts refer to the middle-aged, middle-income female constituency as "the Oprah vote," how far a leap might it be to "Oprah for President"? Often asked about running for office, to date she has always demurred, arguing that she can achieve more, spread her message more widely, with her show and website than she could in the formal political arena (King). Judging by the combination of ratings for her show—in 2005, 8.6 million viewers tuned in every day—and what's now commonly known as the "Oprah Effect" on sales of everything and anything she singles out (Walsh), whether an "Oprah's Book Club" title, a product featured on her "Oprah's Favorite Things" segments, or an up-and-coming pop star on "Catch the Buzz," she may be right in opting for omnimedia over public office.

Politicians, though, have not been able to resist cashing in on the Oprah Effect for themselves. While Bill Clinton may have been promoting his biography, since 2000 George W. Bush, Al Gore, and John Kerry have been guests on *Oprah* purely for campaign reasons. As material for her show, Oprah has always disdained politics as a "no-win situation," stating that it does not work for her viewing audience, which prefers issues centered on feelings rather than argument (Baum 214). Oprah's interviews with the candidates thus focused on the men rather than on the issues, and studies have subsequently shown that, sure enough, within the Oprah demographic, regard for each candidate who appeared on the show increased regardless of the viewers' prior political leanings (Baum 217). Speculation runs high whether her first direct foray into candidate endorsement will affect Oprah's public credibility (Venkataraman).

As television's most ubiquitous and influential interviewer, how has Oprah changed our expectations of public "talk?" The seemingly conflicting operations of Oprah as public persona and Oprah as universal sounding-board have produced a media "master narrative" of emotional divulgence, personal pain and self-healing whose reverberations are felt across the spectrum: from reality-TV shows, where competitors confess their darkest secrets to the camera, to "serious" dramatic series like *Six Feet Under*, *The Sopranos, Huff,* and *In Treatment*, where therapy and self-actualization

are central themes. *The Oprah Winfrey Show* offers a masterful example of the rhetorical balance of power through which a "truth" is negotiated collaboratively, in conversation between host and guest—but is also decided upon through the multiple frames of the interviewer's persona and her "messaging" apparatus. This process, in turn, offers insight into the way all "truths" come into being for us as individuals navigating between public and private spheres of mediated subjectivity. In general, the media interview is still a relatively undertheorized genre. The increasing acknowledgement of Oprah Winfrey as an interviewer who has transformed the genre, transcending its boundaries' limits as both an art form and a site for social inquiry, suggests that cultural studies may offer the most fertile ground to develop a critical language for assessing the interview's particular narrative and rhetorical force.

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Notes

[1]These opinions were expressed by friends and colleagues in my personal correspondence with them.

[2]Janice Peck notes that white viewers say that Oprah's race is "not important" to them, while to black viewers it is central (91). See also Dana L. Cloud's commentary on the "rhetoric of tokenism" that surrounds Oprah's biography.

[3]Oprah qualifies this statement by adding, "but it was a lesson long in coming, recognizing that I had the instinct, that inner voice that told me that you need to try to find a way to answer to your own truth" (Wellesley Commencement Address). However, this caveat pertains to living one's "authentic life" rather than trying to please others—the core message of Oprah's self-help discourse. It does not acknowledge that the "self" Oprah gets paid to be is a more consciously performative and more heavily mediated one than most.

[4]Illouz argues that Oprah's public disclosure of her "painful work to fashion her body. . .de-fetishizes what is otherwise the most revered fetish of media culture: the thin and flawless body" (114). I am not sure Oprah's "everyday celebrity" approach helps demystify any Hollywood beauty ideals beyond her own, but it certainly creates an image with which her (largely female) audience can more readily identify.

[5]Illouz refers to talk shows as a "therapeutic genre," because they purport to enact the remedy for the very conflicts they raise. The various scenarios of discussion—confessions, reunions, disputes and confrontations—are intended to bring about a therapeutic change in the participants' relations and states of mind (111-12).

[6]Masciarotte discusses "two overlapping mechanisms" in the show: the talk itself, and "the media operation of representing Oprah Winfrey" (93). I am pressing beyond the story of Oprah's media persona to examine the narrative of her social influence and activism that, in the last half-decade, has taken precedence over, or at least merged with, her celebrity biography.

[7]See, for example, "Oprah's Latest Capture: From Boys' School Director to Most Wanted Pedophile," aired 17 Jan., 2006, and "Oprah's Latest Capture: Hiding in Mexico—Turned In By a Friend," aired 7 March 2006.

[8]See "Can the Oprah Effect Make Obama President?" and Venkataraman for examples.

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