

**Worshipping the Enterprising Self:
The Oprah Empire's Brand of Spiritual Self-Governance**

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ABSTRACT

Worshipping the Enterprising Self:

The Oprah Empire's Brand of Spiritual Self-Governance

Ainsley Jenicek

Oprah Winfrey, currently one of the most popular American cultural and moral leaders, frames her empire of media products with the slogan “Live Your Best Life.” Oprah uses this slogan to urge audience members to govern their choices, thoughts, and feelings in such a way that they might emulate her American Dream-like success. According to Oprah, the first step toward one’s “Best Life” is to work to perfect one’s spirit. The spiritual practices and products she endorses, then, become entry points into the fundamental aspects of the Oprah Empire’s subjective ideal. This thesis examines Oprah’s recent promotion of two explicitly spiritual books: *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne and *A New Earth* by Eckhart Tolle. Specifically, this thesis uses Critical Discourse Analysis to examine five episodes of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* from 2007 and 2008 that focus on one of these two books. Because the intended messages and ideological frameworks embedded in cultural products do not disclose what audiences make of them, the second part of this analysis studies the dominant messages of one online class used to promote *A New Earth* in dialogue with a sampling of related audience discussion posts on Oprah.com. Together, these two sections of analysis reveal how Oprah, as part of the contemporary historic bloc, works to align audience members’ interests with an “enterprising” subjective ideal that benefits neoliberal, postfordist governance.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	The Subjective Ideal and Your Best Life.....1
Chapter 1	The Material Grounds of Oprah’s Discursive Power.....15
	The Rise of Oprah Winfrey: From Token Hire to Queen of Daytime Talk.....15
	Commodity Exchange and its Impact on the Content of Daytime Talk.....21
	Talk Show Host as Television Personality and Commodity.....27
	The Ultimate Example of the American Dream: Oprah Winfrey’s Mythical Biography.....30
	A Fine Line: Between Just Enough and Too Much Difference.....35
	Conclusion.....44
Chapter 2	Charting Out a New (Thought) Direction.....46
	Taking the Spiritual “High Road”: From Trash to Class Post- 1993.....46
	The American Tradition of Spiritual Self-Improvement.....52
	Therapeutic Empowerment on <i>The Oprah Winfrey Show</i>55
	From “Change Your Life Television” to “Live Your Best Life”.....58
	Conclusion.....64
Chapter 3	Oprah’s Secrets to Success: <i>The Secret’s</i> Law of Attraction and <i>A New Earth</i>66
	Oprah’s Recent Spiritual Directions.....66
	Methodological Approach.....68
	Opening Statements and Foregrounding the Subjective Ideal.....70
	Controlling the Discourse: Oprah and her Cast of Characters.....75

	The Enterprising Self and the Maintenance of Dominance.....	80
	The Out-Group: Subjects Failing their Potential.....	92
	Spiritual and Scientific Truth.....	95
	Conclusion.....	98
Chapter Four	Seeking Salvation through Self-Governance.....	99
	Context: <i>A New Earth</i> in the Oprah Empire.....	99
	Methodology.....	101
	The Enterprising Ideal and the Pain-Body in Oprah's Fifth Web Class.....	104
	Discussion Boards: Social Construction of Self in the Image of the Subjective Ideal.....	112
	Defending the Subjective Ideal: Policing the Limits of Discussion.....	117
	Conclusion.....	122
Conclusion	Enterprising Worship.....	124
	Primary Sources.....	128
	Secondary Sources.....	139

Introduction: The Subjective Ideal and Your Best Life

During the summer of 2008, I stumbled upon a commercial for an upcoming episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* that guaranteed to reveal “the secret” to financial abundance, happiness, and whatever the heart desired. The key to receiving these things was to obey the law of attraction—a New Thought¹ idea that what you think about and feel, you will attract into your life. Tempted by these promises, I watched the episode and found myself captivated by this spiritual law’s apparent material and social results. My pleasure, however, was interrupted when Oprah² was positioned as a shining example of “the secret” at work. Her rags to riches biography was used as evidence that in spite of one’s race, gender, weight and inherited socioeconomic position, one could “overcome” these impediments to achieve spiritual, emotional and material success. Oprah was thus employed as a persuasive subjective ideal that, in apparently revealing the secret behind her success, stimulated anxieties in others for not having mastered themselves as she had through spiritual self-management. To control one’s life situation like Oprah, one simply had to learn to use spiritual techniques that help manage one’s mind and soul.

Oprah, however, is not simply an image of success but also an institutionalized celebrity commodity that facilitates the marketing of other commodities through her media empire. Her position as an idealized image must therefore be examined in relation to her economic function and her institutionalized power. Oprah’s media empire has grown out of the longstanding popularity of her eponymous daytime talk show that has,

¹ Because *The Secret* refers to New Thought teachers such as Wallace Wattles and William Walker Atkinson as inspirations for this film and book, and because it resembles New Thought principles initially formed in the nineteenth century, I refer to this as a New Thought book. For instance, the book refers more to what Trysh Travis identifies as New Thought—universalism, idealism, the belief in the power of thought to control material reality—than New Age—“past life regression, shamanism, crystals and so on” (1018, 1039n8).

² I will refer to Oprah Winfrey as simply Oprah throughout this thesis to emphasize that I am discussing the celebrity persona, a figure whose first name suffices to identify her.

in turn, facilitated her personal economic growth, the establishment of her own production studio and the creation of a variety of Oprah Brand media products, including a successful magazine and website. Under the slogan “Live Your Best Life,” Oprah promotes a range of products that instruct her audience members about how to categorize their lives and personhood, evaluate each category for success, improve productivity and performance in each area, and continually monitor themselves to prevent backward slides. In other words, she teaches audience members how to imagine and manage their subjectivities. Moreover, these categorizations and prescriptions are anchored by certain key lessons from Oprah’s well-known life story, such as the importance of accepting personal responsibility for one’s past and present actions and continually searching for ways to improve one’s life. These key lessons create an ethical framework for the good or proper mentality one should take toward one’s life.

Oprah’s celebrity sign and commercial institution are entry points into the study of how our subjectivities, lifestyles, and relationships are being governed at this historical moment. This thesis positions the Oprah Empire as part of the moral leadership that works to coordinate the interests of various groups and “the life of the state as a whole” (Hall “Gramsci’s” 14). Oprah’s media products attempt to persuade audience members to work on themselves in order to better cope, survive and even thrive *within* the changing political economic structure. This thesis therefore positions her as part of the moral leadership in the “bloc of social forces,” the group that not only dominates via coercive force, but also “wins by leadership and authority the active consent of those over whom it rules” (Hall “Gramsci’s” 19). The Oprah Empire helps to win broad consent for the current system, such that the ethical ideal she popularizes may be explored for how it

produces subjects amenable to contemporary governance. Furthermore, an examination of Oprah's media products in particular provides an occasion to study how her intersecting identity traits—her weight, her status as an African American woman born into poverty—are framed so that this ideal subjectivity seems attainable to others in a broad swath of social locations. Although this subjective ideal may appear to be a transcendently ideal human subject, this thesis interrogates how the characteristics it idealizes sustain interlocking forms of dominance under modern governance.

Brand Oprah media products may not appear, on the surface, to be complicit in contemporary governance. However, through this media empire's participation in a larger therapeutic discourse, a discourse that hinges on subjective confessions and regulation of the psyche, it is intimately connected to producing governable subjects. In order to outline the linkages between the therapeutic discourse and contemporary governance, we must first turn to Michel Foucault's notion of governmentality. Foucault writes that Western states began to be governmentalized in the sixteenth century³ when the ultimate end of the state shifted from the sovereign's power to the population's health, wealth, welfare and improvement ("Governmentality" 99, 100). Over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the state began collecting numerical or demographic data about the population, disciplinary institutions were created to manage the population, and new forms of knowledge were created to help the government know the subjects under its governance (99-102). Nikolas Rose states that one of these new bodies of knowledge were the "psy" sciences—including psychology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis and so

³ Foucault argues that questions of government—how, by whom, toward what end—greatly intensified in the sixteenth century when feudalism gave way to expansive territorial and administrative colonial states, and when the Reformation and Counter-Reformation raised questions regarding how people ought to be spiritually ruled on earth in order to achieve salvation ("Governmentality" 87-8).

forth—which made the human psyche and all traces of individuality a domain of sociopolitical rule and normalization (7). He argues that expertise of subjectivity provided by the “psy” sciences is crucial within a liberal democracy because of the limits placed on the state’s coercive interventions into the lives of its subjects (Rose 10).

Through expertise, government “achieves its effects not through the threat of violence or constraint, but by way of the persuasion inherent in its truths, the anxieties stimulated by its norms, and the attraction exercised by the images of life and self it offers to us” (ibid.). Psychotherapeutic expertise consequently helps to align the ambitions of individual citizens with the sociopolitical goals of the state so that individuals willingly self-govern and manage their choices in order to carve out a fulfilling life within these constraints (Rose 10-11).

Oprah’s media products are dominant outlets for popular therapeutic experts to not only define certain norms and ideals, but also to provide practices that audience members can use to shrink the distance between their current condition and these goals. As Rose observes, “Psychotherapeutic language and advice extends beyond the consultation, the interview, the appointment; it has become a part of the staple fare of the mass media of communication, in the magazine advice column and in documentaries and discussions on television” (218). Oprah’s self-improvement focused media products are sites of this psychotherapeutic discursive expansion. These products have drawn on both specific therapeutic languages, including that of the recovery movement and feminist therapy, and more generally on the therapeutic ethos, “a complex set of historical practices directed at ameliorating various forms of human suffering and related societal

problems” (Peck *Age* 19). They are therefore involved in the reproduction of this therapeutic orientation toward the self and the world.

This thesis works to frame the concept of therapeutic self-governance (or self-regulation) within the current dominant economic, political and social logic, what Nancy Fraser refers to as both postfordist (or postindustrial) society and neoliberal globalization (160). Postfordism may be described as a period of shifting economic, political and cultural configurations beginning in 1989 with the fall of Communism (Fraser 165). It is unlike Fordism, which involved mass industrial production, vertically integrated corporations, nationally-bounded social regulation, and disciplinary self-regulation (161-65). Postfordism entails a shift toward the transnationalization of social relations and governmentality, toward the “desocialization,” deregulation and privatization of social services, and toward a return of repressive social control, as seen through the build-up of the prison-industrial complex often subcontracted to for-profit corporations (161-4, 165-6). Fraser appears to implicitly use “globalization” to refer to the transnationalization of political, economic and social life. Fraser also notes that “flexibilization” is a postfordist mode of social organization that gives rise to a particular form of self-constitution or subjectification process, one with “a temporal horizon of ‘no long term’” which creates subjects prepared for frequent changes in employment and geographical locations over their lifetimes (169). It gives rise, in other words, to flexible subjects.

Because Fraser does not define neoliberalism in her paper and instead employs it interchangeably with postfordism, this thesis draws on another scholarly work for a definition of neoliberalism. Janice Peck traces some of the dominant common qualities among new liberalisms which, like postfordism, refer to overarching economic, political

and social ideologies. These common premises include: (1) that big government impedes post-industrial or postfordist economic growth and encourages dependency, such that individual competition must instead be encouraged in all sectors of life, including social services; (2) that rather than have workers with specialized skills, workers should be approached as “human capital” who need to have adequate knowledge and education in order to adapt to shifting, global industry needs; (3) that “special interests” and “interest group politics” must take a backseat to individual responsibilities and obligations toward the larger “community” and majority virtues and values (Peck *Age* 119, 120, 121). These definitions of postfordism and neoliberalism have two clear overlaps, namely the stress on individual competition in social services and the need for “flexible” subjects within the labour force who accommodate changing market needs. Still, they do not overlap entirely based on the definitions outlined above. For that reason, this thesis refers to “neoliberal” and “postfordist” both separately and in conjunction with one another in order to be precise throughout about the phenomena to which it refers.

At this moment of neoliberal, postfordist governance, Nancy Fraser argues that the current form of self-constitution is no longer that of Foucault’s disciplinary self-regulation but of “responsibilized self-regulation” in which each individual is interpellated as an actively responsible agent with full control over his or her life (168, 169). This form of self-regulation grows out of an increasingly dispersed and marketized mode of governmentality in which the nation-state is simply one level of social order and which relies heavily on “marketized ordering mechanisms” (167, 168). Fraser explains, “In the guise of neoliberalism, [postfordist governmentality] vastly expands the scope of economic rationality, introducing competition into social services, transforming clients

into consumers, and subjecting expert professionals to market discipline” (168). As consumers of social services and expertise, individuals are consequently charged with the responsibility of maximizing their quality of life through their choices (ibid).

Fraser’s concept of responsabilized self-regulation best describes the Oprah Empire’s promotion of a can-do and how-to mentality from the mid-1990s to date. Through Oprah’s media products, she commodifies this form of self-regulation in two ways. First, she advertises herself and her guest experts as subjective ideals—exemplary figures who take responsibility for their lives and make good, “conscious” choices. Second, she aids in the commodification of certain products and practices that can ostensibly help audience members emulate these properly responsible, subjective ideals.

Oprah’s self-improvement rhetoric and the self-help products she endorses make therapeutic self-improvement widely accessible. Many of the products she promotes either have hidden costs (they are available to those who already pay for cable or internet services and enable producers to sell audiences to advertisers) or relatively inexpensive (in comparison to one-on-one therapeutic appointments). These accessible how-to products become increasingly important in a context of growing American middle-class poverty, “the poverty endured by middle-class working people as wages have retrenched and costs for healthcare, housing, and education have far outpaced the overall rate of inflation” (McGee 229n106). Oprah’s media empire renders accessible a wide range of “technologies of the self,” techniques and practices that facilitate subjects to individually or socially perform “a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (L.H. Martin et al.

18). Audience members who accept the Oprah Empire's ethical obligation to take charge of their lives may select from among the technologies of the self she promotes in order to fulfill this obligation.

Significantly, the first step toward living one's "Best Life" in Oprah's terms is to develop one's spiritual side, to work on the soul. Oprah has stated that one cannot begin to maximize one's experience of life without developing and evolving the spiritual self ("A New Earth" 1). Since the mid-1990s, Oprah has hosted a range of spiritual "experts" on her show and her interpretations of Book Club selections have frequently meandered into spiritual territory (see Travis 2007). All of these experts provide spiritual technologies of the self that are then framed as either part of Oprah's past successes or technologies she is now incorporating into her self-management. Oprah's role as a bridge between these spiritual texts and her audience positions her discursive power in a distinct way: she exercises a special kind of power, what Foucault terms "pastoral power" (Foucault "Subject"). Although pastoral power grew out of what Foucault identifies as "Christian institutions," by which he likely meant French Catholic institutions, he explains that it has since spread to other areas of the social body and may be recognized by certain characteristics, including its focus on individual salvation and its need for access to individuals' minds and secrets ("Subject" 783). These characteristics may be observed in *The Oprah Winfrey Show's* focus on individual testimonials and confessions as well as other aspects of Oprah's role in the lives of her audience members—subjects that will be expanded upon in the first and second chapters of this thesis. The notion of pastoral power helps to elucidate how Oprah's position as subjective ideal enables her to pastor her audience members and to facilitate spiritualized therapeutic governance.

Aside from these theoretical frameworks, this thesis also situates itself in relation to existing scholarly work on the Oprah Empire's spiritual orientation. Wendy Parkins (2006) examines the transformative and empowering potential of *The Oprah Winfrey Show's* spiritual material in the late 1990s. Parkins argues that Oprah's spiritual self-help may produce affective changes in audience members' daily lives that may lead to a changed understanding of feminine subjectivity and may open up possibilities of transformation (155). Trysh Travis (2007), in her study of New Thought in Oprah's Book Club, also highlights the importance of considering the affective appeal of spirituality in Oprah's products because of how it may influence American audiences' political actions (1020, 1037-38). Other articles more specifically examine the nature of Oprah's spiritual material and messages. Kathryn Lofton (2006) considers whether or not Oprah's promotion of spirituality in her capitalist endeavors may be considered a religion (and concludes without a clear answer to this question). Maria McGrath (2007) presents numerous similarities between Oprah's post-mid-1990s spiritual redirection and the New Age movement of the 1960s. Denise Martin (2007) argues that Oprah's public expression of spirituality is the result of blended spiritual influences of African spirituality, African humanism, eastern spiritual philosophies, and metaphysical influences.

The scholarly work most similar to the questions and aims of this thesis is Janice Peck's recent book *The Age of Oprah: Cultural Icon for the Neoliberal Era* (2008). In this book, Peck presents a detailed historical critique of the therapeutic, New Thought mind cure, and neoliberal elements in Oprah Brand products. In her final chapter, she even examines the same two 2007 episodes on *The Secret* that are examined in the third chapter of this thesis. However, Peck's analysis of these episodes is brief and aims at

illustrating the ideological connections between Oprah's spiritual, pedagogical, and political actions in 2007. Peck's analysis does not consider how Oprah's audience members negotiate and interpret the ideological framework embedded in Oprah's texts. This thesis, then, fills this gap by connecting an examination of the ideological framework privileged in Oprah's recent promotion of explicitly spiritual texts with a reception study used to see how audience members are negotiating, taking up, and playing with the privileged framework.

Oprah's recent promotion of the law of attraction, the main principle in the popular New Thought book, *The Secret*, is evidence of her ongoing commitment to the spiritual—though not “religious”—side of the self. Oprah featured four episodes on *The Secret*, two in 2007 and two others in 2008, bestowing upon it ample promotion time and thoroughly articulating it to her “Live Your Best Life” slogan. Also in 2008, Oprah made the unprecedented move of selecting an overtly spiritual, non-fictional book for her Book Club, *A New Earth* by Eckhart Tolle, which she promoted through one television episode. Between 2007 and 2008, these episodes comprise the only explicitly and unequivocally spiritual episodes of *Oprah*, still one of the top-rated American daytime television shows. In another unprecedented move, Oprah co-hosted ten web classes through her website on *A New Earth* in 2008, one class for each chapter of the book, as a way of both encouraging audience members to engage with the text and to make the text more translatable into everyday life. The online classes are permanently embedded in its own section of Oprah.com under Oprah's Book Club. It features resources for student-audience members to discuss the classes in an online discussion board, to perform spiritual homework, and to gain more inspirational motivation to continue on their path.

In order to appreciate how the Oprah Empire uses the spiritual in its recent construction and commodification of a subjective ideal, I examine its promotion of these spiritual texts and the ideological framework sold through them in these five episodes of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and through one *New Earth* web class. Because the text does not fully control the meanings taken from it, Paul du Gay et al. (1997) recommends examining meaning-making as a process or a “cultural circuit” in which the production end continually tries to exert control over consumers’ interpretations and uses, while consumers continually construct new meanings from these products (85). For this reason, a select number of posts from the online *New Earth* discussion board are examined in dialogue with one web class. These discussion posts provide an opportunity to examine how Tolle’s spiritual technologies of the self are being integrated into audience members’ lives and how self-governance is socially reinforced.

The central organizing question driving this thesis is: *How does Oprah’s recent commodification of explicitly spiritual texts facilitate “responsibilized,” therapeutic self-governance?* This central question produces related sub-questions such as: How is Oprah’s identity mobilized in order to promote self-regulation and what does this reveal about the Oprah Empire’s promoted subjective ideal? What rewards are associated with modeling oneself on the subjective ideal and what spiritual technologies of the self are offered to help one in this pursuit? In what ways do these individual benefits align themselves with the interests of neoliberal, marketized governance? To answer these questions, this thesis is broken into four chapters organized as follows.

The first chapter addresses how Oprah has reached a position of discursive power from which she can facilitate therapeutic governance. It begins by historicizing her career

and the build-up of her media empire in terms of both the social movements that enabled her rise and how she fit into a changing daytime talk show genre. Her television personality is then examined as the “selling point” of her talk show. She is positioned as a celebrity commodity that shares traits with other talk show hosts while also bearing particular meanings derived from both Oprah’s mythical, American Dream-like biography and her position in the “grammar of race” due to her racialized, gendered and weighty embodiment. Oprah’s role as celebrity commodity that signifies a subjective ideal must first be understood before examining how she can be used to promote spiritual and therapeutic technologies of self-regulation.

The second chapter focuses on Oprah’s spiritual turn in the mid-1990s, when her production company redesigned her talk show and began to build up Brand Oprah. This chapter builds on the first by focusing specifically on the spiritual form of therapeutic self-governance promoted through Brand Oprah products. It begins with a brief history of spiritual, namely New Thought, material in Brand Oprah products and how they fit into the market logic of constructing a successful talk show and brand. The chapter then reviews some historical precedents for this spiritual-therapeutic material, like the beginning of the New Thought movement, in order to uncover the affinity between the fundamental tenets of this spiritual framework and capitalist industrial and now postindustrial governance. Oprah’s spiritual self-help is then framed within the broader therapeutic ethos that has entailed the psychologizing of human subjectivity and the way that people language themselves inside and outside of the “psy” sciences. The therapeutic ethos is then examined through Oprah’s talk show as it is used to promote individual-level empowerment, a model of empowerment that has been critiqued by numerous

scholars. Finally, a preliminary examination of Oprah.com's categorization of subjectivity, the spiritual self-regulatory mechanisms she offers and Oprah's ability to wield pastoral power are considered.

The third chapter delves analytically into the five episodes of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* from 2007 and 2008 that focus on *The Secret* and *A New Earth*. These episodes provide specific moments in which the ambient spiritual material in Brand Oprah is made explicit. These five episodes are critically analyzed for how they spiritualize and naturalize the prevailing social order through their construction of the universe, of the subjective ideal and through the recommended spiritual techniques to help excel within the existing order. They are used as entry points into how the subjective ideal, and consequently self-governance toward this end, are being legitimized and promulgated discursively through Oprah's media products.

The fourth and final chapter examines audience responses to and creative interpretations of Oprah's spiritual products through her online discussion board that is linked to her web classes on *A New Earth*. Therapeutic self-governance would not work, of course, without people's consent to self-regulate in order to achieve some ideal self. This chapter thus begins by briefly analyzing one web class in terms of the subjective ideal it presents, how it imagines and languages the self, and the self-regulatory techniques the class promotes for spiritual perfection. A cross-section of online audience discussion threads begun immediately after this web class are then examined for how this ideal self and self-governing techniques are related to audience members' lives. These posts are scrutinized for how the *social* aspect of the discussion board is used toward reinforcing *self-governance* and specific ways of speaking about one's subjectivity.

Methodologically, the first and second chapter rely primarily on literature reviews organized according to political economic questions and attempts to historicize Oprah, her talk show and her brand. The third and fourth chapters employ Critical Discourse Analysis to analyze the selected texts, but the fourth chapter supports this methodology with some concepts from Internet ethnography and reception studies. The methodologies used in these last two chapters are outlined in the chapters themselves before presenting the analysis.

To begin, the following chapter introduces a brief history of Oprah Winfrey's career trajectory as a way to draw out the significance of social movements to her rise and the slight irony in her promotion of a self-governing subjective ideal.

Chapter 1: The Material Grounds of Oprah's Discursive Power

Over the past few decades, Oprah's discursive power and economic value have been carefully built on the twin pillars of audience ratings and advertisers' dollars. At the heart of this commodity exchange is Oprah, the television personality turned media brand, as the primary selling point of her talk show. The construction and sale of her personality have been central to her growing institutional and economic power. At the same time, her ownership of the rights to *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, to its means of production, and other related media products have provided Oprah with staying power; her extensive resources back the power of her voice. In order to appreciate Oprah's contemporary discursive power and her complicity in reproducing therapeutic self-governance, we must first understand how this power is anchored through capital and how Oprah's celebrity television personality has enabled the accumulation of economic capital. This chapter will, therefore, begin with a brief overview of the trajectory of Oprah's career in media, move to a consideration of how she has fit into the broader economic logic of television broadcasting, and finally thoroughly examine the meanings attached to Oprah as a commodified personality. The final part of this chapter entails an engagement with the articulation of Oprah's biography to the "American Dream" and her legibility within the grammar of race.

The Rise of Oprah Winfrey: From Token Hire to Queen of Daytime Talk

Oprah Winfrey's entry into the job market in the 1970s came on the heels of a few American social movements calling for sweeping change. The Civil Rights movement, black power movement, the feminist movement, the anti-Vietnam war movement all called for changes to the status quo and influenced America's political tone (Peck *Age* 14;

Shattuc 35). To keep up appearances of progressiveness and to maintain audiences' attention, the face of broadcasting was forced to change as well. Oprah's first job in television was with WTV-TV, Nashville's CBS affiliate, as *both* their first female *and* black co-anchor (Brands 294, 295). Although Oprah's natural on-air talent was undeniable, her boss later admitted that he in part hired her because he needed a black reporter—a fact that did not bother Oprah as long as she had the job (Brands 295).

Oprah's confidence and ease on-camera attracted an offer from ABC's affiliate in Baltimore, WJZ-TV, to co-anchor the nightly news as they expanded the length of their news program and "diversified" their news team (Brands 295). News reporting was, however, an uneasy fit for Oprah, who had trouble distancing herself emotionally from tragedies (Brands 296). In 1977, one station manager, inspired by the success of the *Phil Donahue Show* with Baltimore audiences, recast Oprah as co-host of local daytime talk show, *People Are Talking* (ibid.). This proved a much better fit. *People Are Talking* shot up Baltimore's ratings, quickly taking the number one seat from *Donahue* (Brands 296).

Oprah was subsequently recruited in 1984 by WLS-TV, an ABC/Walt Disney-owned station in Chicago, to host their struggling *A.M. Chicago* show (Brands 296). Although Oprah was concerned about Chicago's history of racial tension, the WLS-TV station's general manager assured her that she would have a job as long as she did well in the ratings (Brands 296-97). And do well in the ratings she did. Within three months, she surpassed *Donahue* in the Chicago market and, after one year, the show was expanded to a one-hour format and renamed *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (Peck *Age* 15; Manga 29). That same year, 1985, the Academy Awards nominated Oprah for the Best Supporting Actress for her role in Steven Spielberg's adaptation of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Her

celebrity persona was thus inflected, albeit briefly, with a film star quality. More importantly, as a result of this nomination, numerous magazines featured Oprah on their covers and rival talk shows were even forced to discuss her film success (Brands 298). And Oprah strategically used this added publicity to push her daytime talk show forth into national syndication (ibid.).

In order to nationally syndicate *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, Oprah and her agent had to secure a syndicator because the Federal Communication Commission prohibited “major television networks [from] syndicating their own shows to nonaffiliates, on grounds that this would create a conflict of interest” (Brands 299). Before being syndicated, Winfrey’s show was produced by WLS, a station owned by ABC and therefore unable to distribute the show nationally (ibid.). Oprah’s agent chose King World Productions, whose head executives saw great potential in Oprah’s show because of how well African American shows were doing on national television and, therefore, in “white” markets (ibid.). Oprah’s show premiered nationally in September 1986 on 138 stations (a record number), and, within its first three months, it became number one in its time slot in all top-ten television markets in the States (ibid.). A significant contributing factor to *Oprah*’s lead in the ratings was the show’s timeslot. King World Productions sold *Oprah* specifically as the lead-in to evening news programs, thus guaranteeing her show the coveted late-afternoon slot when viewership was larger and of higher income, helping her show both in terms of ratings and advertising sales (Shattuc 60).

As Oprah’s salary and popularity grew, so did her desire to have editorial and financial control over her show. In 1988, with her \$8 million salary and 25% of her show’s gross profit, Oprah was able to take control and ownership of her show from

WLS and opened her own production studio, Harpo Productions (Brands 300; Shattuc 39). She was only the third American woman and the first African American to own her own film and television production studio (ibid.). By the early 1990s, *Oprah's* distributor, King World, was marketing her show to advertisers as the “number one daily program for all women demographics,” the most valuable demographic of the time because research showed that women were still in charge of buying household items and made up the largest numbers of habitual viewers (Shattuc 62). At the same time, Oprah used King World's dependence on her show's success to gain a greater percentage of the distributor's revenues and shares, increasing her personal revenue to \$40 million for the 1988-89 year (Brands 300; Shattuc 39-40).

By 1990, *Oprah's* daytime ratings were higher than some prime time programs and her yearly salary was creeping ever higher (Shattuc 40). Since her national debut in 1986, Oprah won every ratings sweep and her estimated net worth neared the one billion mark (Lofton 602). By 1993, “*Oprah* reached 204 markets (98 percent) and 64 foreign countries,” meaning that her audience numbered between fifteen and twenty million viewers daily (Shattuc 58; Brands 301). *Forbes* named Oprah Winfrey the highest paid entertainer in 1994, beating out Bill Cosby and Steven Spielberg (Illouz 2). Her show was also quickly raking in symbolic capital. She received her first Daytime Emmy Award in 1987, later going on to win thirty more as well as a Lifetime Achievement Award by the age of forty-four (Illouz 2). In 1996, Oprah received broadcasting's highest honour, the George Foster Peabody Individual Achievement Award (Travis 1027). By the early 1990s, *Oprah* had also won four awards from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) (Peck “Talk” 90). *Oprah* was therefore

bestowed with “ethnic” symbolic capital as well as the non-specific symbolic capital of awards like the Emmy’s. Her power was growing and reaching across American constituencies.

From the mid-1990s onward, Oprah expanded her media endeavors. In 1995, Oprah created an interactive website in partnership with AOL. In 1996, Oprah’s Book Club⁴ began and immediately started to generate a list of back-to-back best-selling novels causing Oprah to be credited with the revival of the publishing industry. Oprah opened her Angel Network charity in 1997, which has been used to encourage volunteer work and charitable donations to selected causes (“About Us”). In 1998, Oprah launched her independent website Oprah.com explaining that she wanted to make expert information and resources more available to viewers. And in 2001, Oprah launched her eponymous magazine *O: The Oprah Magazine*, which experienced the most successful launch in the history of the magazine industry (Lofton 603, 605; Peck “Effect” 143; Travis 1028).⁵ During this period, Oprah also signed an agreement with ABC to produce six prime-time, made-for-television movies and became co-founder and co-owner of the Oxygen network, an American television channel aimed at “women’s interests” (Brands 301; Einstein 137). Subsequent to that rapid period of expansion, Oprah has opened two schools in South Africa in January 2007: one a coed school and the other, an all-girls school called the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls, for which she personally interviewed and selected all the students (“Opening Shot”). In January 2008, Oprah

⁴ For an examination of the historical role of book clubs in disciplining, subduing and gentrifying the working class, see Janice Peck, “The Oprah Effect: Texts, Readers, and the Dialectic of Signification” in *The Communication Review* 5 (2002): 143-78.

⁵ In the mid-1990s, critics scrambling to explain Oprah’s cultural authority in relation to the success of her Book Club coined the term “the Oprah Effect,” suggesting Oprah’s almost magical ability to turn floundering cultural industries into gold (Peck “Effect” 144).

announced that she was buying the Discover Health Channel, along with its 70 million subscribers, and rebranding it as OWN: The Oprah Winfrey Network in 2009 (Umstead 6). All of these endeavors have created a synergistic effect, each project helping to secure the success of the others. Each media outlet publicizes her other media outlets as well as what Mara Einstein calls the “brand of Oprah”—a brand that is built on a combination of Oprah’s personal beliefs as well as the people, products and services in which she believes (138). This ever-expanding media conglomerate and brand-related endeavors form a media empire with Oprah, both its owner and central organizing image, as its undeniable supreme authority.

During the period following *The Oprah Winfrey Show*’s national syndication, I argue that Oprah Winfrey entered the contemporary cultural and moral leadership of what Antonio Gramsci calls a “historic bloc,” the group that leads a period of hegemony (Hall “Gramsci’s” 15). The historic bloc is a complex social composition not based on a homogeneous class but on a system of alliances that participates in political struggle extending beyond simple class-based divisions (Hall “Gramsci’s” 16). One does not automatically enter the historic bloc by accumulating financial capital alone. Entry into the historic bloc is marked instead by becoming one of those who is invested in the interests of capital and the existing power structures. This social formation leads rather than dominates, meaning that it works “by the winning of consent, the taking into account of subordinate interests, the attempt to make itself popular” across all social spheres, including moral and intellectual fields (Hall “Gramsci’s” 16, 17). Oprah Winfrey’s place at the helm of this moral leadership is anchored by her immense economic power and her ownership of a media empire that provides the means of her discursive and cultural

production. Oprah need not necessarily continue to produce media products that facilitate the advertising of other products in order to maintain her economic power; but because she continues to do so, the contents of her media products must remain favourable or at least non-threatening to the interests of advertisers and, relatedly, to the interests of large corporations and their stakeholders. In other words, as long as Oprah's talk show, website and magazine rely upon the funding of major corporate advertisements, her products must be amenable to the kind of political and economic structure that privileges corporate dominance. At the same time, Harpo Entertainment Group (or Harpo Productions Inc.) is a corporation itself that sells products, such as *O* magazine, the Oprah Winfrey Network, and most centrally, Oprah's image itself. Although Harpo Entertainment Group, or the Oprah Empire, likely holds a complex and at times contradictory set of interests that are expressed differently according to context, it is still significant that it must remain viable within the marketplace in order to function. This media empire must therefore participate in the maintenance of the system that enables its continued economic growth and cultural influence.

In order to further elucidate how dominant economic interests influence Brand Oprah media products and the kind of moral leadership they popularly wield, the following section explores a brief history of the relationship between financial interests and talk shows, with specific examples from *The Oprah Winfrey Show* woven throughout.

Commodity Exchange and its Impact on the Content of Daytime Talk

To understand the basis of Oprah's discursive, economic and institutional power, the exchange of commodified labour through television broadcasting must first be laid

bare. The commercial broadcast television circuit of exchange may be described briefly as follows. The work of both television producers and talk show hosts is commodified as wage labour, albeit differently organized and made up of different groups of people. Capital then transforms this wage labour into a television show broken up by commercial breaks. The market value of the show and the wages of its producers and host are pegged to the show's ratings—the number of television sets tuned in during the show's timeslot. The higher the ratings, the more television networks can charge advertisers for access to the show's audience, and thus, the higher the surplus value earned by the television show's production company, distributor and television network. Talk shows must therefore make their content both appealing to viewers and conducive to the sale of advertised products.

The market interests of talk shows make a notable imprint on their ideological structure. The talk show programs generate “needs” for various products (therapy, self-help products, films, books) while commercial breaks provided tangible answers to these needs (Shattuc 51). Through daytime talk shows, audience members become expert consumers with identifiable needs and identifiable products or services to fulfill them.

The construction of a marketable demographic has long been important to the existence of television broadcasting because of the precedent set by radio broadcasting. P. David Marshall explains that at the birth of radio broadcasting, program production was funded through the sale of receivers (Marshall 120). The United States market, however, quickly became saturated so “broadcasting became modalized around the selling not of receivers but of audiences—more specifically, the selling of audiences' time to advertisers” (ibid.)—a dynamic, Marshall implies, that persists to this day and has been

inherited by other forms of broadcasting. This idea is drawn from Dallas W. Smythe, the first scholar to theorize that audiences are the mass media's primary commodity (Mosco 148). For Smythe, the audience's labour or service to the advertiser is expressed in "learning to buy goods and to spend their income accordingly," particularly along brand lines (Smythe 39-40). Within this view, media programming is mere enticement to the real purpose of mass media: attracting (potential) customers—a materialist view that dismisses media content and the ideological work conducted through it (Mosco 148). Other scholars have thoroughly criticized Smythe's arguments and offered alternatives to this view of the audience-mass media relationship.⁶ Rather than delve into these debates here, what is most important here is to highlight "analogies between audience activity and the labor process because the latter is a dynamic activity involving complicity and contestation between capital and labor over control of the process and the product" (Mosco 149). Audiences may thus be read as active in the exchange of their attention—though not necessarily constant attention nor an obedient interpretive position—with producers, distributors, advertisers and other holders of capital.

Since the beginning of daytime talk in the 1950s, television producers have been targeting female constituencies who presumably take care of household purchases. During these early decades, producers were still experimenting with different genre traits in search of a popular television product. Some shows emulated women's magazines, others were less gender-specific and mixed news summaries with interviews, weather

⁶ Smythe's arguments have been thoroughly criticized for their evasion of differences between public and private media, North American and European; Smythe's arguments have also been revised to state that *ratings*, not audiences are the actual primary commodity in the media system (Mosco 148; Meehan ctd. in Mosco 150). It has also been argued that research companies *manufacture* identifiable audiences that media channels *sell* to advertisers of relevant products (Ettema & Whitney qtd. in Shattuc 48)—in other words, decipherable audience demographics do not exist prior to being analyzed according to specific criteria, including age, gender, socioeconomic background, and so forth.

reports and more (Shattuc 32). Two of daytime talk's earliest successes came in the 1960s through the female-hosted *Dinah's Place*, which invited viewers into her living room with a kitchenette, and *Girlltalk*, which offered a slightly more gossip-oriented take on the former (Haag 116). Since the 1970s, daytime talk shows have been the most common programming to fill early morning (9:00 a.m. to noon) and fringe times (4:00 to 6:00 p.m.), the latter of which has double the viewership of daytime programming and, hence, twice the advertising revenue potential (Shattuc 59). These daytime slots were and are believed to fit the schedules of mothers and homemakers—the chief consumers of “emotion-filled narratives about socially current domestic issues,” and the main consumers of household goods (Shattuc 78).

Daytime “issue-oriented” talk shows⁷ boomed in the 1980s when they emerged as desirable, low-cost programming for television networks. Over the course of the 1980s, existing networks' audience shares were chipped away by competition from satellite, cable and new television networks (Manga 24; Shattuc 35). Inexpensive programming was therefore crucial to the survival of existing networks. Network affiliates bought daytime talk shows from syndicators for much less than it would have cost to produce the programs themselves (Shattuc 35). Affiliates could, therefore, continue to produce their “flagship” nightly programs and fill their daytime hours (*ibid.*).

In order to attract audiences to their television sets, the content of daytime talk shows has had to evolve with the changing landscape of American social relations.

⁷ Shattuc has termed this late 1970s to the early 1990s generation of daytime talk shows the “issue-oriented” talk show and identifies it by certain key characteristics. These traits include active audience participation, construction for/of a female audience, topics that have social currency but are addressed through an individual experience—or human-interest news (Shattuc 3). They are also “structured around the moral authority and educated knowledge of a host and an expert, who mediate between guests and audience” (*ibid.*).

Oprah's entry into commercial television broadcasting, after all, had to do with television networks working to maintain the appearance of inclusion and progressiveness in their news teams. In a similar fashion, the content of daytime talk shows evolved in response to the social politics of the 1960s through 1980s, which changed both the way that Americans defined themselves and the way they thought of politics. Identity markers like race, gender, generation and political affiliation became so important to television advertisers, producers and networks that Jane Shattuc concludes, "No longer was the audience deemed an undifferentiated mass" (35). Furthermore, the feminist slogan "the personal is political" opened up private life as a new realm of political debate such that personal stories became entry points to socio-psychological issues (Shattuc 2, 35). The daytime talk show genre as a whole consequently transitioned toward a populist image and changed the nature of its guests and host-audience relationships.

By the 1980s, the criteria for inviting guests to speak in daytime talk shows shifted from expertise to experience. In other words, "everyday" Americans willing to publicly confess their problems and receive therapeutic advice from the host and any expert guests became the mainstays of daytime talk shows (Abt and Mustazza 58). Talk shows began to feature traditionally dismissed, "uneducated" voices as the voice of *lived* expertise, though well-educated experts did not disappear from these shows (Shattuc 3, 102).⁸ When *Donahue* and *Oprah* became nationally syndicated, they popularized this

⁸ Because of the greater attention paid to previously marginalized voices both on and off the talk show stage, some have argued that the daytime talk show during this time began to represent a modern public sphere (Tolson 15). Daytime talk shows have been praised for allowing expertise to be challenged with "common sense," for providing a space akin to town hall meetings in which citizens can stand up and speak about issues that affect their lives, and for promoting debate without the need for expertise or "bourgeois education" (Tolson 15; Shattuc 85, 93). Such celebratory takes on daytime talk have been challenged by critiques of daytime talk shows' limitations, such as the fact that most do not actually feature discussions or debates and that access to these shows is limited by socioeconomic factors (Tolson 19; Shattuc 73). Furthermore, daytime talk is constrained by producers' control of the "sides of the debate" and by

new type of guest who was featured because of her willingness to bare her soul and receive therapeutic advice in front of millions (Abt and Mustazza 58). In terms of compensation, these everyday guests were only furnished with the means of coming to the show (travel expenses, lodging, and meals paid) and the attention that came from sharing their stories (Abt and Mustazza 58; Shattuc 70). This change in the nature of guests and their voicing of previously unaddressed social issues made daytime talk seem to be the champion of “‘the people,’ ‘the little guy,’ or ‘underdog’ against the reigning power, whatever it is construed to be” (Shattuc 20). Rather than addressing forms of oppression feeding such inequalities, however, the voices of “everyday Americans” were narrativized as a modern-day version of David-versus-Goliath (ibid.).

Daytime talk show hosts’ relationships with the studio audience also underwent a major change between the 1970s and ‘80s.⁹ Rather than remaining obediently quiet during the show’s taping, studio audiences became part of the daily conversation, invited to offer opinions and questions to the day’s guests (Manga 25).¹⁰ This also changed the role of the host who, by entering the studio audience, sometimes sitting in the audience, and holding a microphone to audience members’ mouths, the host could align themselves

commercial interests’ ongoing use of the show’s commercial breaks. The content of talk shows must remain friendly to “consumer culture and, ideally, connected to the products advertised” (Marshall 121).

⁹ The “populist” image presented through guests was extended to the studio audience as well, but structural limitations constrained who could actually sit in the studio. In contrast to most other talk shows, *Donahue* and *Oprah* have had the ability to be more selective with their studio audience members because of their higher ratings (Shattuc 73). Tickets to most of their shows were distributed a month in advance to those who called or wrote to producers, meaning that these audience members “had to be able to predict his or her life a month ahead; and most important, had to be in a position to take a weekday off from work or home duties. A self-selected middle-class studio audience was the result” (ibid.). Thus, while *anyone* can participate in the studio audience *in principle*, the effect of certain practical and institutional constraints is such that studio audiences tend to be narrow representations of the “general public.”

¹⁰ *Donahue* was the first talk show that encouraged active studio audience participation, though it only stumbled upon this dynamic by chance (Manga 25). The show’s producers allowed the women who made up the studio audience for the talk/variety show being replaced—*The Johnny Gilbert Show*—to stay in *Donahue*’s audience and, during commercial breaks, these women began to suggest questions for Donahue to ask to his guests (ibid.).

with audience members and use their apparent lack of authority to elicit a collective response through subtle, informal cues (Shattuc 96). Hosts could therefore appear more responsive to audience members' concerns. Oprah positioned herself on the audience's side by using these techniques and by doing something that Phil Donahue, her main competitor, was not doing. She divulged her personal struggles, past and present, alongside her ordinary guests thereby enabling the formation of empathetic identification (Brands 297-98).

Talk Show Host as Television Personality and Commodity

The main selling point of any daytime talk show is, inevitably, the host. Famous hosts like Oprah Winfrey are the selling points of their talk shows and thus bear great economic weight (Shattuc 51). These carefully managed public personae perform a similar role to that played by movie stars for Hollywood studios: they represent a monopoly product for television syndicators, just as film stars do for movie studios; they assist in organizing the market; and they help to guarantee profits as well as returns on investments (Shattuc 56; Dyer 11). Once a host gathers a following, she may be considered a presold product, someone who guarantees popularity with certain audience segments and thus reduces the financial risk in programming (Rosenbaum 366).

While daytime talk show hosts may not always begin as well-known personalities, many hosts quickly gain this position of fame through their daily presence in the lives of their viewers. Hosts are the touchstone of the talk show program. They mediate between the studio audience, the home audience, guests and experts (Haarman 32). At-home audience members are drawn into the show through their looking relationship with the host: they look at the host and the host looks back because of their live (or simulated live)

and direct mode of address (Marshall 23, 124). Hosts also provide stability in a televisual world of constantly changing topics. Their voices thread through all episodes as the central moral authority regulating discussion while also representing the educated middle class—the voice of the class norm (Shattuc 7). Hosts are thus the symbolic central organizing principles within the show, making them the stars of their shows.

All television personalities have certain shared qualities. The particularities of television personalities may be best understood in opposition to film stars. The chief differences between these forms of celebrity may be distinguished as follows: (1) the star system involves “the spectacular, the inaccessible, the imaginary” whereas the personality system operates within the accessible realm of daily life; (2) while the star system features the distant and exceptional, the personality system features intimacy, a quality enhanced by home viewing; (3) contact with stars is sporadic and unpredictable whereas contact with personalities is regular and predictable; (4) stars play parts while personalities play themselves; (5) stars play archetypes or idealizations whereas personalities are framed as typical, representative, and are “experienced as *familiar*” (Langer 167, 168). The regular appearances of the television personality cohere into an “authentic” and “genuine” personality that audience members feel entitled to know fully (Langer 169; Marshall 131).

Oprah is one of the most intimately known talk show hosts not only because of her show’s longevity, but also because of the way she has constructed her public persona. For example, Oprah has constructed intimacy with her audience members by allowing them to be on a first-name basis with her, by conveying caring and compassion for others, by frequently looking the camera—and her home audience—in the eye, and by

consistently and freely dispensing informal advice (Shattuc 55; Abt and Mustazza 65). These strategies for constructing intimacy are rather common across talk show hosts. What has set Oprah apart has been her attitude toward her guests and the indulgence of her audience's desire to know her. Oprah has consistently shown her guests a high level of respect and compassion and has refrained from expressing antagonism or anger, unlike some other talk show hosts (Abt and Mustazza 65; Haag 119). Oprah also broke away from "the traditional distanced-adviser role and bec[ame] as much adviser as guest-in-need" (Shattuc 39). Laurie L. Haag notes that, as Oprah grew more popular, she consistently disclosed more and more intimate stories and struggles, such as those about her childhood experiences of sexual abuse and her struggle with weight (117). Haag links this to distinct patterns of gendered friendship-building among women, specifically the important role of self-disclosure—a person's divulgence of personal information that would not otherwise be accessible to another (ibid.). Oprah's audience, therefore, has been invited not to simply know Oprah intimately, but to become her friend.

Oprah's candidness, however, has been suspiciously well-timed. A major confession can translate into increased ratings and publicity. Shattuc observes, "Winfrey's 'spontaneous' confession of cocaine addiction on her show in late January 1995 came just before a sweep period (when the most important ratings are calculated from which advertising charges are set)" (56-7). Oprah also had a "tell-all" interview with *People* magazine in 1994, just after her ratings dropped for the first time (Shattuc 57). Oprah's finely crafted familiarity, then, makes good business sense by attracting a large audience loyal to her "authentic" television personality.

The intimacy and consistency associated with Oprah as a television personality and commodity extend to the Brand Oprah, a brand rooted in “the commoditized version of Winfrey’s personality and worldview” (Travis 1019). Brands may be defined as “commodity products that have been given a name, an identifying icon or logo,” sometimes a tagline, and a story or myth, “to differentiate them from other products in their category” (Einstein 12). For the Oprah brand, the name is Oprah, the icon or logo is both Oprah’s face and her signature, and, since 2001, her tagline has been “Live Your Best Life.”¹¹ Oprah’s biography is the center of her brand for it encapsulates and signifies her passions, beliefs and values—what Mara Einstein argues are the strongest bases for constructing any brand (138). These values and beliefs have not only threaded through the topics presented through Oprah media outlets, but have also been narrated through decades of storytelling about Oprah’s struggles in life.

The Ultimate Example of the American Dream: Oprah Winfrey’s Mythical Biography

One of the chief anchors of the Oprah brand has been the ongoing repetition of her mythical biography. By mythical biography, I am referring to the shorthand version of Oprah’s life growing up and her struggles, such as with her weight, that have been strung together as a series of hurdles she has overcome. Her biography is mythical insofar as it transforms this series of events into a natural way of telling Oprah’s history and infuses her shorthand biography with certain dominant connotations.¹²

¹¹ This tagline will be further examined in the following chapter.

¹² The term “mythical biography” is not intended to suggest that a *real* biography could be told about Oprah Winfrey. Instead it is meant to highlight the active and ongoing construction of a story that bears certain dominant connotations. My use of the term “mythical” draws from Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies* in which he explains that, myth “gives [history] a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact” (143). In the case of Oprah’s mythical biography, the complexities of her personal history are distorted in order to communicate the message that she is a survivor.

Oprah's biography began its transformation into popular mythology once she made a successful debut on American big screens. After being nominated by the Academy Awards for her supporting role in Steven Spielberg's *The Color Purple*, Oprah rose quickly in popularity and the now commonly known details of her life story began to be publicized (Haag 117). In a study of popular magazine articles published on Oprah's life between 1986 and 2001, Eva Illouz (2003) finds that five aspects of her life are recurrently reported: (1) Oprah's childhood was difficult due to poverty, sexual abuse, and her neglectful and dysfunctional family; (2) Oprah rose from this poverty and neglect to international fame through hard work despite her self-doubts; (3) she has struggled with her weight; (4) she has repeatedly engaged in philanthropic endeavors; and (5) her intimate relationships, romantic and otherwise (29).

The central message of Oprah's mythical biography is that, as an underdog, she has overcome many hurdles through hard work and self-reflection. The simple mention of her difficult childhood, which as Illouz observes is repeatedly mentioned, immediately places Oprah in the following narrative structure: a singular person, born into poverty, who "overcame" numerous forms of adversity to become one of the wealthiest and most famous people in America. Because Oprah tends to inflect her life story with New Age and therapeutic meanings, the moral of her biography may be summarized as follows: "if I am self-actualized and work hard, good things will come to me" (Harris and Watson 8). Her success is almost never credited to the organizational group politics that enabled her rise, an omission that both Patricia Hill Collins (2004) and Tarshia Stanley (2007) have both criticized (143; 47). Oprah has also been careful to distance herself from the black power movement by repeatedly publicly stating that she did not take part in black

political struggles during her youth and that she believes differences between people should be deemphasized (Cloud 128). Oprah's story, therefore, tends to entrench the image of a rugged individual who, by her grit and wit, has made it to the top.

By deemphasizing differences, Oprah's mythical biography derives broad class appeal. Laurie L. Haag notes that none of Oprah's competitors have had an equivalent legend built around them, a legend that has worked "to let us feel intimate with her as well as making both her obvious ethnicity and her amazing success acceptable to a largely poor and largely white audience" (118). Oprah's success appeals to "[working]-class and middle-class Americans [who] love a winner because he or she holds out hope for what they can become if they work at it" (Abt and Mustazza 64).

Oprah's mythical biography is often referred to as a modern-day incarnation of the American Dream. The Dream can be traced back to the days of President Lincoln whose moral opposition to slavery went hand in hand with his economic vision "that all Americans should have the opportunity through hard work to build a comfortable middle-class life" (Garfinkle 27-8).¹³ Lincoln believed that, above all other rights, African Americans in particular should have the economic right to own the fruits of their own labour because economic opportunity was of fundamental importance to the individual liberty guaranteed by the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution (Garfinkle 28-9). Oprah's narrative, therefore, is a powerful expression of the Dream precisely because she began life as a poor African American. While the original articulation of the

¹³ Although Lincoln described the qualities of the American Dream, the term itself was not coined or popularized until the early twentieth century historian James Truslow Adams published his bestselling book *The Epic of America* in 1932 (Garfinkle 31). The dream of social mobility, however, precedes Lincoln and may be traced back to Benjamin Franklin's notion of the "self-made man"—implicitly white European—who could break through traditional hierarchies based on the quality of his work (McGee 7, 13). As Micki McGee points out, however, the self-made man's personalization of success (or failure) in achieving social mobility was contingent on the unacknowledged servitude of women and people of colour (ibid.).

Dream did not address the gendered disparities in economic opportunity, Oprah's biography nonetheless signifies that gender oppression may also be overcome in the pursuit of social and economic mobility. She is framed as living evidence that *all* Americans have the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, since racism, sexism and class barriers are either relics of the past or simply not serious hindrances anymore (Cloud 133).¹⁴ Her individual success story can be a powerful tool against criticisms of structural dominance and oppression.

While Oprah's biography certainly symbolizes economic liberty in the land of the free, to frame her success as evidence of the Dream mystifies even Lincoln's original vision. President Lincoln, after all, only envisioned that all Americans should have the liberty to become middle class, or part of the economic majority, not the ability to become one of the rich, capital-controlling elite. Oprah's wealth of success, however, communicates that all Americans, even the poorest ones, do indeed have the opportunity to rise to the highest economic strata. The United States is thus framed as a pure meritocracy, in which "the playing field is level, [and] although everyone may not start with the same income and wealth, everyone has the same chance to reach the top of the income hierarchy because a person's class background does not limit a person's chances of economic success" (Jhally and Lewis 68).¹⁵ Because of Oprah's identification with certain traditionally oppressed groups—African Americans, women, and those of lower

¹⁴ Dana L. Cloud argues that Oprah's popular biography is a tokenist one, defined as "biographical narratives that authorize a person from a marginalized or oppressed group to speak as a culture hero *on the condition* that the person's life story be framed in liberal-capitalist terms" (116). A token must, by Cloud's definition, appear to have "surmounted" the forms of oppression facing their group (122). Cloud goes on to explain that Oprah has been framed as the "classical liberal self," the individual hero who is apparently free of structural barriers to economic liberty, whose narrative biography "reveals more about cultural ideologies than about its purported [object]" (119).

¹⁵ For more on the effect of class background on one's economic opportunity, please refer to Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis, *"Enlightened" Racism: The Cosby Show, Audiences, and the Myth of the American Dream* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992).

socioeconomic class—she stands as evidence that the American Dream is attainable, that indeed *anyone can* financially “make it,” and conversely, those who do not are simply not trying hard enough. Rather than acknowledging that her success is in part due to changing hiring practices because of the Civil Rights movement, the black power movement, and the feminist movement, her success is constructed so that it appears that she has “transcended” her embodied identity and her humble class beginnings to realize her full economic merit. Her story is part of what Sut Jhally and Justin Lewis call the mediated myth that turns “the ‘exceptions’ into the ‘rule’” (68).

The articulation of Oprah’s mythical biography to the American Dream positions her as an all-American subjective ideal that helps in the regulation of other subjectivities. Her story stimulates anxieties in others not by the norm she represents, but the ideal she appears to realize.¹⁶ As the American Dream, the myth of Oprah acts as a conduit for liberal and now neoliberal governance. The American Dream has been translated into common sense mythology that anchors liberal ideology—the privileging of individual freedom and private enterprise above all other considerations (Hoerl 358). Liberalism, through its apparently neutral focus on the individual, perpetuates systems of oppression simply by denying their significance and impact. The rugged, liberal individual who overcomes all barriers through hard work still resonates within neoliberalism, but this individual must negotiate different kinds of barriers under neoliberalism. Such barriers include the increasingly marketized competition between individuals in all sectors of society, including social services, and the increasing need for workers to have adequate knowledge and education to adapt to changing industry needs (Peck *Age* 119, 120, 121).

¹⁶ Oprah’s mythical life story readies her for hero-worship within “the larger story of liberal individualism in capitalist society” (Cloud 125).

Under neoliberalism, individuals are to act as “entrepreneurs of themselves” and to express their citizenship not through reliance on a welfare state, but “through the free exercise of personal choice among a variety of marketed options” (Rose 230). With the evasion of the direct benefit of “special interest politics” on the start of Oprah’s career and her own tendency to emphasize that psychological obstacles over structural ones, the myth of Oprah’s success remains available as a conduit for dominant ideologies that can be legitimized through the values and virtues encapsulated by her story.¹⁷ She represents a properly responsabilized individual who has taken her well-being—material and otherwise—into her own hands through careful decision-making.

Oprah, as a personification of the American Dream, is extremely useful at a time of deregulation and the minimization of state intervention in the lives of American subjects. With the ongoing dismantling of the welfare state and its replacement with a postfordist competition state, social services are increasingly privatized by being shifted either into market solutions or onto the family (read: women) (Fraser 166). Yet properly self-governed, properly responsabilized subjects such as Oprah should be able to manage on their own without depending on the state. Oprah’s embodied identification with women, African Americans and those born into poverty brings these groups into the fold of those who should be able to make it without “special” political treatment.

A Fine Line: Between Just Enough and Too Much Difference

¹⁷ While Oprah Winfrey participates in the construction and commoditization of her biography, she is not and cannot be its sole author because she must speak through the existing ideologies surrounding social mobility, class, race and gender in American society (Cloud 120). How her story is told and how it is used as a shining example to buttress the dominant ideological framework is largely out of her control. As Cloud puts it, “Even when black people produce their own images, as Cosby and Oprah Winfrey do, secondary texts, including the news, star discourse, and biographical profiles work to frame those images and build the personae of black stars in hegemonic ways that escape the stars’ control” (116).

In order to persuade others to emulate her success and to consume Brand Oprah, Oprah's television personality has had to be nonthreatening to the status quo. Her embodiment, one that signals her belonging in marginalized groups within American society, has been both part of her appeal to audiences and something she has had to downplay in order to avoid having audience members turn off their television sets. Because she speaks to a largely female audience of lower to middle socioeconomic backgrounds, the main point of difference between her and her eighty percent white audience is race (Peck *Age* 166).¹⁸ Through interviews with a cross-section of Oprah's audience members in the early 1990s, Janice Peck has found that while white viewers claimed that Oprah's race was unimportant to them, black viewers explained that it was central to her appeal ("Talk" 91). Both Janice Peck and Dana L. Cloud have argued that white audiences' love for and comfort with Oprah enables them to imagine that they are past racism (*Age* 166; 130). Furthermore, in an earlier work, Peck suggests that Oprah's gender functions as a mechanism of racial containment since black women are popularly read by white audiences as less threatening than black men ("Talk" 91). Peck goes on to note that Oprah's feminine talk show style is also conducive to containing the issue of racism because of the gendered expectation that she will address "racism in terms of its emotional, interpersonal dimensions, thereby reducing the potential for political conflict" (*ibid.*).

Oprah must both talk about race because she is racialized and be careful how she talks about it so that she does not alienate her largely white audience. Recently, she misstepped and accused a Paris boutique of keeping her out because of the staff's racial

¹⁸ Although Oprah is no longer either lower or middle class, she has lived through these socioeconomic levels, enabling her to apparently relate to audience members in terms of class.

profiling (Wise 51). Tim Wise writes that “public reaction was swift and furious. Even those who had always liked Oprah were blasting her on chat room boards and talk radio, accusing her of ‘playing the race card’ and alleging victim status, which they insisted she had no right to do” (ibid.). It should perhaps be unsurprising that Oprah tends to contain and simplify these issues on her show, a tendency that has been thoroughly criticized by Janice Peck. Peck has criticized Oprah for her problematization of racism within the constraints of the prevailing Western liberal, therapeutic and religious frameworks that limit understanding of racial politics (“Talk” 90). Peck has also argued that in racially coded episodes on “welfare, poverty, public housing, crime, and affirmative action,” Oprah tends “to feature conservative black and white guest experts who promulgate underclass theory; blame government aid for fostering ‘dependency’; wax on about ‘values,’ the ‘work ethic,’ and ‘personal responsibility’; and prescribe self-help and empowerment as cures for poverty” (*Age* 167). This language absents race and racism, thus upholding certain universal expectations and virtues that in fact benefit white dominance. While these shows may legitimately be critiqued for buttressing neoliberal values and for dismissing the systemic nature of racism and poverty, Oprah’s ongoing discursive power and growing economic strength depend on her conformity. No matter how powerful she becomes, she cannot speak without being policed by audience members, commercial interests and other groups in society.

Oprah tends to tie herself to the African American community in a cultural and historical rather than a political sense (S. Wilson 179). She has repeatedly compared herself to popular African American women writers, such as Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison, and has acted in and produced a number of movies about African American

history (S. Wilson 180). She also regularly uses playful black vernacular¹⁹ on her show, a voice that helps her interpellate her audience into a relation of intimacy and familiarity (Harris and Watson 6). These historical and cultural references, however, are not explicitly connected with ongoing systems of power and oppression. Oprah's public approach to organized politics reveals something about her negotiation of these precarious grounds. As noted earlier, Oprah has distanced herself from the kinds of black politics that have made her success possible through "the efforts of structured protest and the passage of anti-discrimination laws" (Stanley 47). However, she recently endorsed Democratic candidate and now forty-fourth president of the United States, Barack Obama. When he secured the presidency, Oprah carefully celebrated the fact that "hope won" and focused on how far America had come since its slavery days ("Post-Election"). Oppositional politics, then, that radically challenge the system are eschewed—at least publicly—in favour of their later incarnation as intra-system changes that are perhaps more symbolic than anything else. While some viewers may read Oprah's affiliations and discursive maneuvers as evidence of a liberal humanist attitude that emphasizes human equality and similarity, viewers who are already critically aware of ongoing forms of oppression may read a political edge into these references. In any case, these examples demonstrate how Oprah may discuss race and racial advancement but only in a restrained manner.

Some media critics have deemed Oprah's mass appeal as evidence that, like Bill Cosby and Arsenio Hall, she has "transcended race" (Peck "Talk" 91; Peck *Age* 166). This claim, however, is built on the assumption that her popularity exists *in spite of* her

¹⁹ For a detailed consideration of black vernacular, please refer to Dana L. Cloud, "Hegemony or Concordance? The Rhetoric of Tokenism In 'Oprah' Winfrey's Rags-to-Riches Biography," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 13.2 (1996): 130.

racial identity rather *because of it* through talk show commodity diversification. Oprah's racial identity enables her to appear to offer something different from other talk show hosts. Furthermore, the argument that Oprah has transcended race begs questions about how she fits into what Stuart Hall has termed the "grammar of race," the prevailing syntax for popularly representing racialized subjects. Hall uses this term to explain how cinematic representations of racial Others are made to conform to certain base-images or stereotypical representations of their racial groups so that they have "recurring resonance" ("Whites" 21). While certain versions of Black womanhood or other groups' base-images may have faded, "their *traces* are still to be observed, reworked in many of the modern and up-dated images" ("Whites" 22). This grammar, therefore, has a degree of flexibility and may change with time, but it is resistant to complete erasure. To be a consumable celebrity commodity, Oprah's racial difference must therefore be contained and made legible within this persisting grammar.

In his 1973 book on American black film, Donald Bogle identifies five base-images used during the early silent period of motion pictures that have had enduring effects on black representation: the tom, the coon, the tragic mulatto, the mammy and the brutal black buck (4). Bogle describes the mammy as either "big, fat, and cantankerous" and related to the comic coon or of the more recent Aunt Jemima type who are more like faithful and submissive toms, usually religious and "sweet, jolly, and good-tempered—a bit more polite than mammy and certainly never as headstrong" (4, 6, 9). Patricia Hill Collins examines more recent types—what she terms "controlling images" that attempt to entrench the racialized, gendered and classed social order (*Feminist Thought* 72)—created for black women according to the changing political economic needs of American

society. She also begins with (1) the mammy, but one more closely related to Bogle's Aunt Jemima, then describes the (2) Black matriarch (working single mothers or failed mammies whose children fail in school because of their neglect), the (3) welfare mothers (unwed mother, sapping system's resources because not aggressive enough) which transmuted into the welfare queen under Reagan (same qualities, but also highly materialistic and domineering), (4) the Black lady (who has achieved success through hard work but still resembles all previous types in some way), and (5) the jezebel (women with excessive sexual appetites whose deviant sexualities justified their sexual regulation) (*Feminist Thought* 72, 75, 76, 78-9, 80-1, 81).

The "controlling image" most commonly associated with Oprah Winfrey is that of the mammy.²⁰ In a more recent work, Hill Collins argues that Oprah is both a modern-day mammy and a template of middle-class Black womanhood, one that appropriately displays subordination to White and/or male authority and demonstrates aggressive ambition only when working for other's benefit, not her own (*Sexual Politics* 140, 142). Two other scholars, Tarshia Stanley and Dana L. Cloud, agree that Oprah is read as a mammy because of her role as comforter and confidant of her largely white audience, cheerleader in their own self-transformations, her role in giving them "sage advice," and her benevolent work through literacy and big-sister programs (Stanley 45; Cloud 125).

²⁰ Hill Collins acknowledges that the mammy figure has transformed from a faithful, obedient domestic servant who loved the white children she cared for more than her own into a still asexual, surrogate mother who must still be completely committed to her job (*Feminist Thought* 74). This ongoing, self-sacrificing commitment, however, takes place in an economic system that continues to either pay black women less for the same work or make them work twice as hard for the same pay (*ibid.*). The comfort that came from the domestic mammy figure's loyalty to the white family, a loyalty that "symbolizes the dominant group's perception of the ideal Black female relationship to elite White male power," has now shifted into submissive and loyal work within the capitalist system without threatening the exploitative relations that uphold white male economic privilege (*Feminist Thought* 72, 74). The modern-day mammy, in other words, does not question her servitude, at least not publicly.

Oprah's weight has also played a role in her being read as a mammy because the mammy is traditionally "fat": a physical trait that signifies the containment of her sexuality (Cloud 125; Stanley 43). Cloud interprets Oprah's repeated attempts to lower and control her weight as both her rejection of the mammy image and an attempt to conform her body to liberal, entrepreneurial ideology in which the body is a site of expressing mastery and control over the self (Cloud 125). Interestingly, when Oprah has lost weight, it has affected her audience reception and perhaps also her ratings. P. David Marshall notes that some of Oprah's loss of audience in the 1994-95 season may be attributed "to her new, less accessible, less vulnerable, slim image" (147). Oprah actually tried to address her disgruntled audience members, usually women "who disliked her after her weight losses" (Stanley 44). Granted, these reactions may in part come from those audience members who identify with her overweight body and wish to see themselves represented on television; however, because Oprah's fat is racialized, gendered and part of a thoroughly domesticated celebrity sign, it is quite likely that this reaction to her weight loss relates to controlling her image as mammy.

Hill Collins also relates Oprah to "Black lady figure," a figure that draws on other controlling images of black women (*Sexual Politics* 139; *Feminist Thought* 81). Hill Collins states that the Black lady is a *modern mammy* in the sense that she works twice as hard as everyone else (*Feminist Thought* 81). Hill Collins explains that the mammy and the Black lady figures, as the more positive of the controlling images of black womanhood, share a common feature: their "hard-earned, middle-class respectability is grounded in [their] seeming asexuality" (*Feminist Thought* 84). Hill Collins explains that this desexing of more positive controlling images of black womanhood speaks to the

“desired levels of fertility” for black women of different classes (ibid.). In other words, though the mammy and Black lady are more acceptable images of black womanhood, they are still not welcomed to (re)produce black children.

Not all scholars agree that Oprah’s persona is made to conform to this racialized ideological structure. Valerie Palmer-Mehta and Sherryl Wilson argue that Oprah defies—and perhaps transcends—all stereotypes of black womanhood outlined by Hill Collins (Palmer-Mehta 69; S. Wilson 179-80). Because Oprah does not fit any of these stereotypes perfectly, both of these scholars argue that she cannot be reduced to them and, therefore, presents a challenge to existing ways of perceiving black women. Palmer-Mehta carefully examines each of these base-images and argues that Oprah’s identity is too fluid to be contained in the two stereotypes usually related to her, that of the mammy and the Black lady (71-72, 75). Instead, Palmer-Mehta argues that Oprah presents “a new image of black womanhood, and womanhood in general, that serves as a paragon for all women, despite their marked differences” (75). S. Wilson bases her argument that Oprah does not fit the mammy stereotype on the fact that the mammy figure is based on the fulfillment of others while Oprah seeks self-fulfillment (180). She suggests that a more appropriate term for Oprah’s public persona is that of “othermother”: a figure based on black women who cared for parentless black children during enslavement and who have passed down an ethic of care within the African American community (88-9).²¹ In empowering others, the othermother empowers herself (S. Wilson 180). However when a black woman cares for *white people’s children*, the base-image associated with this

²¹ This term is also introduced in Hill Collins’ book *Black Feminist Thought*. Hill Collins explains that othermothers are a part of many African-American communities because of the absence of men and the recognition that bloodmothers cannot necessarily take care of their entire load of domestic labour (*Feminist Thought* 178).

labour necessarily shifts, likely towards that of a mammy. Still, S. Wilson's critique importantly foregrounds the point that base-images may change according to the cultural group consuming the image. African Americans, therefore, may read Oprah as the contemporary othermother rather than mammy figure.

Because the grammar of race is flexible and constantly shifting, it is perhaps more elucidating to consider Oprah as a mix of the foregoing base-images, depending on who is consuming her image and which of her actions are highlighted. Still, I wish to emphasize the controlling image of the mammy in relation to the Oprah Brand because her capitalist endeavors are sold to her audience through an ethic of care and service. As noted earlier, Oprah's television personality has been built around her having compassion for her guests and audience members and Oprah's more recent product developments, often loaded with "uplifting" information, have been framed by a rhetoric of service (Einstein 140). Over the last decade, the Oprah Brand has been unmistakably centered on helping her (largely white) audience uplift their lives, realize their potential, and access information more easily. The banner of service is further fastened to Brand Oprah through her philanthropic endeavors—the Angel Network, her schools in South Africa as well as the other countless causes she champions through her show. Brand Oprah, then, may be seen as not only practicing what it preaches, but as a selfless empire, working for the good of others. This rhetoric of service and care for others may indeed render Oprah's capitalist endeavors more palatable to her audience, for it continues to at least symbolically place her in relations of attending to her white viewers' cares and needs.

Oprah has, however, stretched the box used to contain her. Following Donald Bogle's argument that we must pay attention to what black actors *do* with the stereotypes

they are given (xxii), Oprah's ideological impact must be acknowledged. She has, for instance, produced numerous films that show the history of American racial segregation through the eyes and voices of black characters. As an image of a successful black woman, her continued presence on national and international television challenges the ideological grid that tends to relegate black people to positions of either invisibility and erasure or hypervisibility and deviance. Corinne Squire praises *Oprah* because it "regularly features successful African-American business people, professionals and entertainers, generating a picture of black culture and achievement rare in mainstream media" (359). While she might be contained by stereotypes for popular consumption, Oprah Winfrey has used her position within the historic bloc to shift expectations about black America and to help insert a different vision of it.

Conclusion

The two factors that enable Oprah to act as an important conduit for therapeutic governance are, first, her position in the cultural and moral leadership of the contemporary historic bloc and, second, the effective commodification of her television personality as a contemporary subjective ideal. Without her enormous economic power, control over the means of production of her television show, and ownership of a growing number of media products, Oprah would not have the material grounding for her voice and her message to be so powerful. At the same time, this material build-up has depended upon the careful construction and commodification of her television personality. As a contemporary version of the American Dream, Oprah's racialized, gendered identity coupled with her lower class beginnings function as evidence that she began her rise to economic success from an underdog position. She thus represents the promise that *any*

American can achieve the American Dream if they simply work hard enough on themselves and on their craft. In other words, Oprah represents a highly persuasive subjective ideal that works to convince others to work on themselves to achieve their potential as she has. Her media empire further buttresses her persuasiveness by appearing to work *in the service of* her audience, trying to help them improve their lives and, implicitly, to become like Oprah.

To maintain her share of audiences however, Oprah has had to continually distinguish herself from other talk shows, a feat that became increasingly difficult in the early 1990s with the proliferation of imitation talk shows. The following chapter examines the course Oprah has taken to achieve this product and brand differentiation, one that has proven extremely financially lucrative for her empire.

Chapter 2: Charting Out a New (Thought) Direction

By the early 1990s, Oprah's success caught up with her by having inspired a slew of copycat talk shows. Copycat talk shows tended to "[offer] carnivals of absurdity: encounters between incestuous relations, cheating romantic partners, and criminals with their victims" (Lofton 602). Increased competition for audience shares forced *Oprah* to differentiate itself from this expanding number of talk shows in order to maintain its dominance in American television ratings. To achieve this, Oprah and her producers began to weave in an eclectic brand of spirituality and grand, overarching questions about the purpose of one's life. The individual psychological questions and problems examined in the show up to this point did not disappear, but were reoriented and rearticulated through spiritual-therapeutic language, techniques and truths. In order to understand the significance of Oprah's spiritual turn, this chapter first reviews how spiritualizing the empire made economic sense for the Oprah Brand, especially in relation to changing cultural demands during the shift into a postfordist economy. Thereafter, I turn to the historical precedents of overlapping spiritual and psychological quests for well-being and examine the limitations of the therapeutic worldview as it is used in talk shows. The chapter concludes with an examination of Oprah's spiritual-therapeutic material, as well an inquiry into how Oprah's mythical biography and relationship with her viewers allows her to promote these materials and perform the role of pastor to her audience members.

Taking the Spiritual "High Road": From Trash to Class Post-1993

With increased competition amongst talk shows in the early 1990s, a period sometimes referred to as the "talk show wars," *Oprah* continued to lead the market but her ratings took a hit in the 1993-94 season and continued to slide in 1994-95 (Travis

1025; Abt and Mustazza 65). In response, Oprah began to speak out about distinguishing her show from “trash talk,” the flurry of new talk shows “whose young hosts, sensational topics, and production designs aimed to create maximum conflict and disruption among the guests and the studio audience” (Travis 1025). In 1994, after engaging in a televised discussion with scholar Vicki Abt about the pitfalls of her show’s existing format, Oprah announced that her show would be “more responsible” and she opened her 1995 season by denouncing the “trash” being produced by her competitors (Peck *Age* 127; McGrath 131; Travis 1019; Abt and Mustazza 65). She publicly stated that she did not want to focus on dysfunction anymore because “everyone had some problems” (Adler qtd. in Travis 1026; Adler qtd. in Lofton 603). Instead, Oprah wanted to focus on what people were doing about their problems (*ibid.*).

Oprah simultaneously “began to pursue a new and more affluent audience through nonbroadcast media,” such as her Book Club, which debuted in 1996 (Travis 1019). Consequently, Oprah’s roster of topics and guests shifted. She began to invite more middle-class guests and to feature more “middle-of-the-road” topics, ranging from “the common problem of finding trustworthy and reliable childcare providers to fawning celebrity interviews to large social problems like the effects of violence on the family” (Abt and Mustazza 66). Increasingly, experts and celebrities occupied Oprah’s stage rather than dysfunctional ordinary citizens (Travis 1026; McGrath 131). The new focus of *Oprah* became guests’ hopes and dreams, uplifting examples of success, and personal responsibility balanced with cosmic design (Travis 1026-7; McGrath 127).

The reclassification of *Oprah* also translated into studio audience behavior. No longer was her studio audience as boisterous and uncontrollable (Travis 1026), and Oprah

gradually stopped circulating among her studio audience, soliciting random opinions. She still occasionally allows studio audience participation, but today, she remains firmly planted on stage as the clear orchestrator of her show. Together, the move away from lively audience debates and spontaneous confessions as well as the greater authority bestowed on Oprah and her guests have provided her with “more time to drive home the moral-spiritual lesson of the day” (McGrath 131). *The Oprah Winfrey Show* gradually came to “epitomize the ‘classy’ pole of the genre” and it largely evaded the criticism launched against “trash talk” during the mid-1990s (Peck *Age* 129).

Aside from classifying her show, Oprah also began to spiritualize her therapeutic focus. In a 1993 interview, Oprah stated that after asking God for clarity regarding her talk show, she realized that “[h]er purpose was to promote a spiritual message that would counter negative forces at work in the personal lives of individual viewers as well as in the world at large” (Travis 1026). Although Oprah was raised a Southern Baptist Christian and continues to identify as a Christian, the spiritual inflections she introduced on her show revolved around “spirit,” “karma,” “dreams,” “spiritual evolution” and “the divine within,” which fall more comfortably under the syncretistic openness of “spirituality” than under any organized religion (Lofton 603; Parkins 149; Travis 1026). She has publicly rejected the idea of God as a man with a flowing white beard who provides a list of things you can and cannot do in favour of a syncretistic and open-ended faith (Travis 1018). Oprah’s attitude employs what Leigh Eric Schmidt identifies as the American invention of “spirituality,” a word not commonly used in early Protestantism but which has come to connote “a search for a religious world larger than the British Protestant inheritance” (4, 5). The rise of American religious liberalism or “spirituality”

has opened the way for movements like the New Thought movement and other “nonconformist” religious groups to grow. These nonconformists “charted a path—at least, so they imagined—away from the old ‘religions of authority’ into the new ‘religion of the spirit’” (Schmidt 7). The “religion of the spirit” is an appropriate description of Oprah’s spiritual project in that its spiritual thrusts go hand in hand with an anti-authoritarian individualism, an ideological commitment that encourages followers to be spiritual pioneers.

The appearance of New Thought²² material on *Oprah* occurred gradually, beginning with popular psychologists and motivational speakers and, toward the turn of the century, moving toward experts with clearer, more explicitly spiritual worldviews (McGrath 133). Oprah has drawn heavily on some of New Thought’s main ideas but under the general label of “spirituality,” such as holism, the divine within, personal potential, and the message that what one puts out into the world, one reaps back (McGrath 133; Travis 1026). Notably, *Oprah* began to interview authors who preach the fundamental premise of New Thought: “thought-as-power” or the belief in the power of the mind over material reality (Travis 1018, 1026; Schmidt 161, 163). Oprah has also emphasized that the cosmic meaning of pain and its ability to help one become one’s

²² Although McGrath identifies Oprah’s spiritual material as New Age (126-7), following Trysh Travis, I use New Thought instead for it more closely resembles the spiritual principles found across episodes of *Oprah* (see Travis). Travis explains that Oprah’s spiritual message encompasses specifically New Thought principles including “the invocation of the divine within, the importance on attuning the mind to a divine plan, the INTA belief that those ‘who express fullness shall reap fullness in return’” (1026). INTA refers to the International New Thought Alliance. Travis specifies that Oprah’s message is not New Age because it is distinct from New Age occultism with its beliefs in “past life regression, shamanism, crystals, and so on” (1039n8). Gail Harvey, in contrast, highlights a historical lineage between the two movements, with the diffuse New Age movement that germinated in the 1970s having adopted some features of New Thought. Harvey argues that New Thought “has obliquely projected its cardinal precepts into the mainstream culture to serve as a foundation for the New Age movement” (64). Oprah’s show, therefore, may be understood to have a mix of New Thought and New Age material, with New Age practices complementing her fundamental, New Thought message. For the sake of specificity in identifying the sources of Oprah’s dominant spiritual message, I use New Thought throughout.

authentic self—a state that one must strive toward also using education, “awakening” to our potential, and self-transformation (McGrath 136, 137). These ideas further emphasize the individual capacity to choose to psychologically govern her life.

The Oprah Empire’s focus on spiritual self-help may stem from a conscious or latent attempt to appeal to a certain gender, class and generation of audience members. Although one can only speculate about the reasoning behind using contemporary New Thought experts, it is interesting to note the historical demographic appeal of this movement. In the late nineteenth century, during an epidemic of nervous conditions among middle- and upper-class white American women, many middle-class women turned to the New Thought movement for help (Peck *Age* 29-30). Its appeal was that it grappled with the late-Victorian emotional and cultural tensions these women were experiencing at a time when psychological theory rooted women’s inferiority in their reproductive organs (*ibid.*). The New Thought movement was consequently gendered as a “women’s religion” since many women followers became teachers, healers and authors, and since numerous early leaders aligned themselves with the postbellum woman’s movement, which included suffrage (for white women) and temperance (Peck *Age* 30; Travis 1023, 1024). Some scholars have argued that New Thought was more attuned than traditional religions to the changing developments in American society, as demonstrated by many New Thought writers adopting the increasingly popular psychological language at the beginning of the twentieth century (Peck *Age* 26). The “cardinal precepts” of New Thought then served as the foundation of the New Age movement that surged in the 1970s (Harvey 64). Baby boomers took up eclectic strands of the New Age movement as countercultural spirituality in the therapeutic pursuit of authentic existence (McGrath

127, 128). McGrath argues that the iconoclasm of the 1960s and the persisting idealization of American rugged individuality led many to an increasingly diverse New Age movement (129). Interestingly, New Thought's longstanding gendered and classed appeal as well as its more recent appeal to baby boomers may reveal why it was chosen as the centerpiece of the Oprah Empire's new direction.

Between 1994 and 1998, the Oprah Empire developed "Change Your Life Television" based on spiritual uplift, personal responsibility and empowerment (McGrath 126-7). Producers added two-minute segments to her show for the 1998-99 season called "Remembering Your Spirit," which were intended to encourage viewers to listen to and follow their souls (Parkins 148-9). Oprah's new direction received mixed reviews: many criticized her for proselytizing and Christian groups began to voice increasingly harsh condemnations of the spiritual material Oprah promoted (Parkins 149; Lofton 604). Oprah's attempt to spiritualize and raise the class of her show also did not pay off immediately in terms of her ratings,²³ but Oprah used this time to expand her media empire (Lofton 605), as outlined in the previous chapter.

Trysh Travis argues that foregrounding the spiritual and New Thought principles in her show enabled Oprah to not only enhance her brand, but to also unify her new media extensions (1028). Such unity of message is crucial to the success of a brand, for it helps consumers to make sense of a brand's particular signification. Although Oprah's different endeavors do not uniformly foreground their spiritual aspects, spirituality inflects everything Oprah now does (Einstein 140). Every Oprah product is now woven with spiritual undertones that prompt thinking about one's earthly salvation.

²³ Even though *The Oprah Winfrey Show* did decline in ratings after 1994, it remained number one among talk shows every season and "as of September 2002, consistently drew an average twenty-one million viewers a week" (McGrath 133). It therefore remained the most profitable talk show on television.

The American Tradition of Spiritual Self-Improvement

Oprah's focus on solutions rather than on problems from the mid-1990s onward tapped into America's heightened demand for self-help. This reorientation occurred at a time when sales in the American self-help industry were reaching an all time high. While self-help literature has experienced a period of intense growth in the United States since the mid to late 1970s, between 1991 and 1996 alone, publishers saw a ninety-six percent rise in book sales (McGee 11). The entire self-help industry, which extends beyond books to include audio and video recordings, seminars, and personal coaching, has swelled to a multi-billion dollar *per year* industry (*ibid.*).²⁴

The growing attraction to self-help material was likely a "responsibilized" reaction to broad shifts in the American economic and political structure. Micki McGee argues that it was an expression of American insecurity and anxiety in the face of dismantled social welfare programs, the destabilization of the marriage institution and lifelong jobs (12). Following the women's movements of the 1960s, the dream of becoming a (usually white) "self-made man" was stretched to include middle-class women who wanted not merely an independent income, but self-fulfillment through work as well (McGee 14). Up to that point in history, the pursuit of "self-made" status was gendered insofar as men's selfhood could be more thoroughly focused on the individual self while women's selfhood had long been bound up with the care for others and their development of selfhood (Simonds 5). In the 1970s, not only were more women entering the labour market, but the manufacturing sector, previously a pillar of the American

²⁴ The boundaries of the self-help industry are debatable and, thus, so too are its profits. Must we only include products that identify themselves as self-help products or is self-help a manner of approaching materials, an orientation of audience reception (McGee 193)? This question is beyond the scope of this thesis, but it should be noted that self-improvement suffuses all the Oprah Empire's endeavors.

economy, was being outsourced to other countries while low-paying service sector jobs and “knowledge work” grew in importance (McGee 14). American workers were therefore grappling with the changed social make-up of the workforce with the increasing pressure of a political economic system transitioning into postfordism.

Since these social, political and economic changes began to take place, the privileged subject has had to shift. The contemporary subject has been described as a fluid, protean, multiple, decentered site of ongoing invention and reinvention—a process that self-help literature tends to describe as “discovering or uncovering an authentic, unique, and stable self that might function—even thrive—unaffected by the vagaries of the labor market” (McGee 14, 15). Rather than secure a marriage and a profession, Americans must now ensure that they remain marriageable and employable through life; they must consequently continue to improve on and manage themselves (McGee 12). Micki McGee terms this contemporary subject the “belabored self” and describes its two main traits as follows: first, this subject must continually work on the self in order to remain (re)employable in the face of declining employment opportunities; and second, it is a “cultural preoccupation with the self in terms of labor,” wherein domestic labour conflicts with the imperative that all family members create autonomous selves (16).

Oprah’s inflection of recent self-improvement culture²⁵ with spiritual rhetoric and practices may be understood as a reinterpretation of longstanding beliefs about the role of spiritual life in self-betterment. The American pursuit of self-improvement has long had a spiritual component to it, with late nineteenth-century thinkers arguing that social

²⁵ The focus on self-improvement in American culture can already be detected in de Toqueville’s nineteenth century treatise on American morality in which he wrote of the prevailing belief in limitless improvement and the widespread desire for newness (Simonds 4). This “quest for individualism” and for constant progress has been one of the dominant threads in American culture from its inception and may, according to Wendy Simonds, even be considered a nationalistic pursuit of sorts (5).

mobility and political democracy could only be properly exercised if one developed one's spiritual potential as well (Cawelti 80-1, 84).²⁶ In the same period, "The consolidation of vast wealth in the hands of a few industrialists, and a burgeoning population of new millionaires, required moral justification," so wealth, however acquired, became a sign of virtue and one's alignment with divinity (McGee 34-5). New Thought ideas—like that of the cosmic abundance of opportunity and wealth as well as that of abstract flows of energy in an "amorphous undifferentiated universe"—were used to help justify discrepancies between the wealthy and the poor (McGee 35-6).

In the late nineteenth century and the preceding Fordist economy, it became increasingly important to attract attention to oneself through characteristics like initiative, confidence and "Personal magnetism, a quality which supposedly enabled a man to influence and dominate others" (Cawelti 183). The use of personal magnetism in self-help literature aimed at career success is also linked to the New Thought movement, for it grows out of Emerson's idea that "the truly self-reliant individual could be transformed by uniting himself with powerful universal forces" (Cawelti 97). Much of the work that one needed to do to channel the power of the universe and to control one's life had to do with controlling one's mind—again linking New Thought and the "psy" sciences through their common interest in the mind as the primary site of self-regulation. Both New

²⁶ Nineteenth-century intellectual advocates of the self-made man, including William Ellery Channing and Walt Whitman, argued that political democracy and economic mobility could only be effectively exercised if individuals reached their *spiritual potential* as well (Cawelti 80-1, 84). Ralph Waldo Emerson synthesized many of the ideals of early nineteenth-century self-improvement culture, linking them to transcendentalism and his belief in an Oversoul—a universal spirit that provided energy to any who lay aside what was "foreign and proud" (Cawelti 86). Although Emerson's writings were not widely accessible, his idea of the Oversoul and belief that a truly self-reliant individual could exist permeated the American public imagination and were simplified and reinvented by many in the New Thought movement (Cawelti 97).

Thought and self-improvement held a common, fundamental truth: “the power of mind over matter” (McGee 60).

Therapeutic Empowerment on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*

The focus on the mind in these overlapping popular cultural phenomena are expressions of the broad “therapeutic ethos” that took hold of American society over the course of the late nineteenth century. The word “therapeutic” encompasses the examination, analysis, regulation, and languaging of the psyche (and the body in holistic approaches) introduced by the “psy” sciences (psychology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and psychotherapy) (Rose 7, 217-8). Information about the human psyche can therefore be used to factor human subjectivity into analyses of different areas of society and to enable the “knowledgeable management of the depths of the human soul” (Rose 7). These new ways of thinking about subjectivity have seeped into everyday ways of thinking about our feelings, beliefs, desires, ethics, relationships, and how to manage all of these things (Rose 3, 218). The New Thought and “positive thinking”²⁷ self-improvement movements of the late nineteenth to early twentieth century are examples of this, and they have evolved and branched into parallel movements, such as the recovery movement based on Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) (Peck *Age* 32-33).²⁸

Certain discursive conventions, like the confession, reveal the influence of therapeutic language and practices on daytime talk shows since the late 1970s and early 1980s. Andrew Tolson notes that the kind of public therapy of talk show guests may be framed within Michel Foucault’s concept of “ritual confession,” in which the confessor

²⁷ The title of the “positive thinking” movement is rather self-explanatory, but to be specific, McGee explains that this form of self-help arose early in the twentieth century when entrepreneurial advancement waned in favour of white collar corporate advancement that required conformity rather than initiative (36).

²⁸ Other 12-Step programs for food “addiction” and drug abuse appeared in the 1960s and, in the 1980s, the recovery movement expanded to include emotional “addictions” as well (Peck *Age* 34).

gains absolution of guilt by admitting fault and submitting to the judgment of those listening (21-22). Jane Shattuc, in contrast, argues that the evangelical testimonial is a more accurate description of talk show discussions because as in evangelicalism, “the act of standing up and speaking one’s religious experience is a social obligation—done without regard for personal safety and comfort” (130). Oprah’s use of the testimonial specifically resonates with the historical role of black American churches as a site where African American women’s voices could be heard (Squire 363). Both the notions of confession and testimonial are discussed further in the following two chapters, but what is important to note here is the ongoing confluence between spiritual and therapeutic practices on talk shows generally and in *Oprah* specifically. Some producers may even encourage a guest’s unbridled participation by framing the sharing of their story as a form of public service, of helping others, without necessarily mentioning that the candidness of everyday guests is critical to the production of a compelling show (Shattuc 70).

Oprah’s talk show is an example of what Janice Peck calls the “therapy talk show,” which foregrounds the “psychological worldview.” For *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, this psychological worldview drew on the recovery movement once it blurred with feminism in the 1980s and emotional dysfunction began to be popularly regarded as a disease that manifested itself in compulsive behaviour (Peck *Age* 34).²⁹ The disease model was then extended to relationships and to the same “women’s problems” addressed by the women’s movement of the 1960s, thus locating the problem in women’s psyches instead of society and politics (Peck *Age* 34, 36). The real problem, in other words,

²⁹ Peck argues that the two premises of AA—that one must admit “powerlessness” over one’s addiction and that one must therefore turn one’s life over to a Higher Power—resonated with feminists who had to recognize their individual powerlessness over the “historically produced relations of gender inequality” and, in turning to collective political action, “reclaim their independence and power” (*Age* 33-34).

appeared to be women's ways of thinking, what they accept and internalize rather than broader issues. Using this framework, Oprah has presented abusive relationships between men and women as the result of women's "addiction to pain": their internalization of gendered expectations and their low self-esteem was therefore evidence of mental illness (Peck *Age* 76). The psychological disease model thus diverted critiques from the men in these women's lives and from the broader sociopolitical realities—critiques that might actually threaten the social order (*ibid.*).

The predominance of the psychological framework in *The Oprah Winfrey Show* has attracted scholarly critique of one of the show's goals: empowering audience members. Oprah has publicly stated that she does not want to simply entertain and educate audience members, but to empower them as well (Peck *Age* 36; Shattuc 123). This framework has chiefly been criticized for its easy slide into victim-blaming, a feature at odds with pre-1993 Oprah who sympathized with the crises of the American underclass (McGrath 129-30). Hill Collins criticizes Oprah's longstanding emphasis on "personal responsibility" because it intersects with the removal of welfare programs (*Feminist Thought* 143), and Janice Peck criticizes even feminist therapy techniques used in *Oprah* for continuing to focus on self-esteem when it is impossible to feel better without challenging the system of social relations that produce those negative feelings (*Age* 38). Jane Shattuc takes a more negotiated stance on therapeutic empowerment, for she recognizes both the potential of feminist therapy to help people realize their shared victimization and the value giving voice to traditionally unheard voices (123, 136). On the other hand, Shattuc critiques the psychologization of social problems more generally, as it is expressed through talk shows like *Oprah*, because this framework "[falls] within

the dominant ethos of the American belief in self-determination, individualism, and personal success. They are a mechanism that assures advertisers a “can-buy” audience while reproducing the dominant ideology of a capitalist system” (83). Yet as Wendy Parkins notes, it is nearly impossible to determine from textual analysis alone whether or not the promotion of self-help is empowering since one can read feminist, collective transformational politics into Oprah’s spiritualized self-help (147). Furthermore, Corinne Squire argues that *Oprah*’s recurring focus on psychological truth appears less individual over time and that the show often features super-realist confessions that defy any conventional psychological explanation (364-5). Rather than choose a side of this debate before presenting the findings of my analysis, this productive tensions underpins my analysis of produced and consumed ideological frameworks in the following two chapters.

From “Change Your Life Television” to “Live Your Best Life”

Oprah’s “Change Your Life Television” eventually transformed into the equally prescriptive new motto “Live Your Best Life,” which remains her empire’s slogan to this day. This new directive slogan was introduced in 2001 in order to connect the new *O, The Oprah Magazine* to existing electronic texts accompanied by a series of “personal growth summits” that Oprah hosted around the country (Travis 1028). The full slogan read: “Live Your Best Life: Your mission is true happiness. Your purpose is your destiny” (ibid.). “True happiness” and one’s “purpose” are not framed as givens, but goods that must be sought out through certain actions and practices, such as those presented through Oprah’s media empire. These statements are therefore the first push into a web of technologies of the self—techniques and practices that subjects may use to individually

or socially transform their bodies, souls, thoughts, behaviour, and so forth in order to attain a certain level of perfection (L.H. Martin et al. 18). They trigger the reader or the listener to set in motion a series of reflective questions: “Am I *truly* happy?”; “How can I become *truly* happy?”; “Have I found my purpose in life?”; “Am I living up to that life purpose?”; and so forth. These questions help to shape needs; they are designed to stimulate interest and desire for help in achieving these ends, while the entire website provides links to self-regulatory mechanisms that visitors may employ.

Although questions regarding one’s life purpose may appear contradictory at a time when most have multiple careers over their lifetimes, Micki McGee argues that the idea of life purpose has simply changed to suit the times. McGee traces the idea of life purpose back to the Puritan notion of a “calling” when one’s profession passed from father to son (34). She explains that a secularized, psychologized version of a “calling” was offered women in the 1960s as insurance against the uncertainties of married life while, since the 1990s, it has been offered to everyone as psychological protection from the instability of a changing economy (42). One may find meaning and happiness—earthly forms of salvation—in pursuing a career path for self-discovery and self-realization rather than monetary compensation (McGee 41, 43). The Oprah Empire, in taking up the idea of life purpose and true happiness, then provides practices and techniques that audience members can use to achieve this psychological, earthly salvation.

The inclusion of spirituality in the Oprah Empire has given it another means to participate in the construction and management of audience members’ subjectivities. Since its reorientation in the mid-1990s, this media conglomerate has introduced a whole

set of spiritual linguistic devices, methods of evaluation and surveillance to add to other technologies of the self already in use, such as those designed for weight control. By shifting away from simply empathizing with the pain and complexity of guests' problems and toward the possibility of taking action, Oprah's show began to promote the heightened responsabilization of her audience. It increasingly emphasized the power of choice and the realms in which individuals made choices proliferated. Indeed, it now seems as though every second of life is a choice-making moment. As Kathryn Lofton puts it, when engaging with any of Oprah's array of texts, "it seems imperative to *do something*" (607).

Oprah.com makes the Oprah Empire's construction of subjectivity very clear. All website homepages "issue virtual reminders to viewers of the familiar, displaying recognizable representations of that to which they are already well accustomed, their interests and enthusiasms" (T. Wilson 194). In other words, Oprah.com can be mined for the Oprah Empire's evolving but conventional ways of imagining and dividing up one's subjectivity. It is therefore significant that the website's main categories include: health, relationships, style, food, money, home, and world. Each category teaches visitors to identify and language aspects of the self: one's bodily functioning, interpersonal dynamics, bodily presentation and performance, nourishment of the body, one's economic and domestic life. The final category, world, asks visitors to consider a small array of issues that appear to be slightly removed from their everyday lives, or at least from their psychological and behavioural well-being: the environment; global issues; culture and travel; education; people and politics.³⁰ The website works to bridge this

³⁰ Interestingly, the "world" category's main topics still focus on many American, domestic issues, including an ongoing look at Hurricane Katrina, building community health facilities, how Americans are

apparent gap between the everyday role of the self and “worldly” issues by lacing through questions such as, “What can *I* do about it?” and “How does this impact *me*?” The website’s greater emphasis of everyday, domestic, emotional and interpersonal issues versus worldly ones, however, helps to construct a specifically feminine subject who may chiefly express her agency in intimate, everyday actions, including her care for others.

“Spirit” is currently the first of Oprah.com’s categories for well-being. As Oprah recently stated, she believes that one cannot begin to live one’s best life without first connecting to one’s spirit (“A New Earth” 1). Under the Spirit tab, there are four sub-categories listed in a sidebar—know yourself, inspiration, emotional health, body image—and four “experts” who write on different topics relating to spirit—Marianne Williamson, Elizabeth Lesser, Martha Beck, Jenny McCarthy (*Spirit and Self*). These sub-categories provide visitors with numerous instructive articles about how to discover their authentic self, regulate their emotional health, cure themselves of psychic ills, find inspiration to shift their consciousness, and finally, how to build their body-related self-esteem. While this final sub-category may seem at odds with the others, it reflects the same New Thought idea about the relationship between mind and body as the other sub-categories: the way we think about materiality shapes materiality. Thus body *image* points to the power of one’s perception over one’s actual body.³¹ The Spirit section thus specifically deals with the psychological aspect of the self.

When so much of the information featured under the Spirit tab on the website bleeds into the psychological and emotional realms of subjectivity, what changes when it is labeled “spiritual”? Articulating issues regarding one’s mentality and emotions in

grappling with the recession, the child pornography industry, and more. “World,” therefore, does not imply simply “foreign” issues, but issues that are larger than the individual self (“Explore”).

³¹ Weight loss itself or control of one’s corporeal self is addressed under the “Health” category.

spiritual terms repositions these issues within an ethical framework of higher good, of morality, and thus ennoble them with the possibility of virtue. Feelings and thoughts thus become ethical entities within a spiritual framework of the good and the bad.

Faithful self-regulation becomes righteous. McGee writes that, in the 1960s, it appeared that the psychological had overtaken the role of American religious structures and spiritual values for many, when “[p]sychotherapeutic notions of health and well-being were conflated with spiritual values of saintliness or goodness, while the Protestant religious imperative to pursue a calling was wedded to notions of mental health and psychological well-being” (43). Oprah’s approach to the spiritual may be seen as both the ongoing conflation of these realms and as the revitalization of the spiritual. Spiritual or psychological, however, it is nonetheless another method of aligning the subjective ideal with the prevailing neoliberal values embedded in Oprah’s “Best Life” rhetoric.

Oprah may be perceived as wielding pastoral power in her promotion of “Best Life” products and programming. Pastoral power is an historically Christian form of power relations in which some lay Christians could serve others as pastors because of the caliber of their religious character (Foucault “Subject” 783). Similarly, Oprah may act as a pastor to her audience because she appears to be living her “Best Life.” When Oprah falters, as with her recurring weight gains, she admits her human weakness and explains what she is doing to address this setback. She thereby maintains her position as a trustworthy pastor and as subjective ideal, albeit a very human one. Michel Foucault identifies four unique characteristics of pastoral power: (1) the pastor’s ultimate aim is individual salvation of those being ministered; (2) those who exercise pastoral power must be prepared to sacrifice themselves for the greater good; (3) the individuals being

ministered are cared for over the course of their lives, and separated out from the social in order to do so; and (4) knowledge of people's souls, of their minds and consciences is required before pastoral power may be exerted ("Subject" 783).

To an extent, Oprah expresses these four characteristics in relation to her audience. Firstly, the Oprah Empire's abiding framework is that of individuality and individual, earthly salvation. Oprah tends to examine issues at the individual level and her media products focus on the individual development of one's authentic self. Secondly, Oprah's media products frame her ongoing candidness about her personal struggles as being motivated by the desire to help and to inspire her audience. She therefore appears selflessly vulnerable. Oprah and her media conglomerate are also framed as performing a service to her audience. Even if this service is not imbued with self-sacrifice specifically, it at least connotes benevolence and a lack of selfishness. The third aspect of pastoral power may be observed in Oprah's relationship with audience members and in the construction of her media products. Oprah's audience members tend to be very loyal to her media products (McGrath 129), and Oprah is one of the only television figures that has been around on a daily basis for decades. If audience members wish, they can consume her products and those she recommends over the course of their lifetimes. Finally, the fourth characteristic of pastoral power may be seen across daytime talk shows because of their confession and testimonial-based model of talk. Oprah is able to know her subjects' innermost secrets because they are offered up for discussion and judgment on her talk show, through their letters and emails, and through online discussion boards. Oprah.com provides yet another means of knowing Oprah's subjects, for even if they do not divulge their secrets in detail, the articles and information they

search for on the website may be recorded in order to learn their interests. Using her particular version of pastoral power, Oprah can facilitate the spiritual self-governance.

Not all of Oprah's audience members, however, have embraced the overtly spiritual aspect of Oprah's pastoral relationship with them. Her institutionalization of spiritual technologies of the self has been met with critical resistance from some religious groups and audience members. Unhappy fans created a website in 1998 to air their frustrations with Oprah's presentation of spirituality and devoted their website discussion to picking apart Oprah's spiritual power (Lofton 605). Some born-again Protestants and traditional Catholics have criticized the "Church of O" for seducing viewers into a spiritual vacuum of New Age illusions that focus on miracles, affirmations, healing, meaning, spirit, and soul rather than sin, redemption, sacrifice and, of course, Jesus Christ (Schmidt 285-6). Such criticism of Oprah's spiritual turn, however, may be seen as a continuation of more longstanding criticisms of the American Spiritual Left, including Protestant liberalism and spiritual eclecticism—those who view their faith as a process of questioning and searching, a process that sometimes leads beyond the boundaries of Christianity itself (Schmidt 286). Oprah may therefore be seen as one of many focal points for criticism of ever-shifting boundaries of American spirituality, perhaps explaining some audience members' rejection of her pastoral role in explicitly spiritual matters.

Conclusion

Oprah has maintained her discursive power in part by effectively distinguishing her talk show from the rest of the talk show market. Her mid-1990s shift toward a more prescriptive tone and her integration of explicitly spiritual concerns infused her "therapy

talk show” with characteristics distinct from her competitors. For this new spiritual direction, the Oprah Empire has drawn on New Thought principles and has tapped into the existing overlaps between spiritual and psychological goals. Indeed, the introduction of spiritual material has made psychological well-being a matter of ethical importance. It has also provided another aspect of subjectivity that can be imagined, languaged, examined, judged and corrected through therapeutic self-governance. Oprah.com is one medium through which the Oprah Empire constructs a feminine, self-governing, enterprising subject that conforms to the needs of a neoliberal, postfordist society. There, audience members can find an array of technologies of the self to help them emulate this ideal, or, more accurately, emulate Oprah.

Oprah’s role as both subjective ideal and pastoral figure to her audience members are centrally important in the television episodes examined in the following chapter because they are what enables the sale of *The Secret* and *A New Earth*.

Chapter 3: Oprah's Secrets to Success:

The Secret's Law of Attraction and A New Earth

The spiritual elements of Brand Oprah are not always merely implied or subtly woven through her discourse. At times, Oprah makes explicit commitments to certain spiritual worldviews in order to provide audience members with specific principles, goals, techniques, and means of self-evaluation. In recent years, Oprah has informally and formally endorsed two unambiguously spiritual texts, *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne and *A New Earth* by Eckhart Tolle. These texts have been featured in episodes of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and related "experts" have appeared on Oprah.com and in *O* magazine. Such explicit promotion of these two books' spiritual lessons suggests that they reveal something about the Oprah Empire's spiritual framework. Oprah's promotion of these two texts may therefore be examined for how she is utilizing spiritual material as another means of constructing an ethical framework for the subjective ideal.

This chapter analyzes five episodes of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* aired between 2007 and 2008 that promote *The Secret* and *A New Earth*. Using Critical Discourse Analysis, this chapter scrutinizes these episodes for how they language the subjective ideal, how they outline its possibilities of action, and how they integrate an ethical dimension into emulating this ideal. This analysis also pays close attention to which voices are heard and what other frameworks of "truth" are used to help persuade viewers to integrate *The Secret* and *A New Earth* into their self-governing practices.

Oprah's Recent Spiritual Directions

The Secret and its central principle, the law of attraction, have been featured in four recent episodes of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*: two in 2007 and two more in 2008. In

one of these episodes, Rhonda Byrne claims to have “traced ‘The Secret’ back through history” (“The Secret” 1), and simply packaged it in both book and film-form. Both of these products compile interviews from “experts” in different domains³² who live by the secret and understand it in slightly different ways, depending on their area of expertise. *The Secret’s* key to empowerment is the “law of attraction,” the idea that “like attracts like” because “You contain a magnetic power within you that is more powerful than anything in this world, and this unfathomable magnetic power is emitted through your thoughts” (Byrne 7). This law applies to all realms of life, including money, relationships, health, world, and “you” (Byrne ii). *The Secret* was considered a blockbuster success even before being featured on *Oprah*, and its popularity was credited with the spike in sales of related self-help books that addressed the New Age themes of the power of thoughts and intention (Bond 20).

A New Earth was only featured in one 2008 episode of *Oprah*, but it was also advertised in one 2008 episode on the law of attraction (“The Secret Behind” 16, 23). It was the first explicitly spiritual non-fiction book that Oprah selected for her Book Club. Oprah also made the unprecedented move of creating a *New Earth* online class series, with one class for each chapter, and created a special section under the Book Club tab on her website for pedagogical material relating to the book (“A New Earth: Are You”). Eckhart Tolle wrote *A New Earth* with the intention of it being a device for shifting readers’ consciousness—or “awakening” them—if they let it (Tolle 7). The book

³² The “experts” presented in the book *The Secret* include: Bob Proctor, “philosopher, author, and personal coach”; Dr. Joe Vitale, “metaphysician, marketing specialist, and author”; John Assaraf, “entrepreneur and moneymaking expert”; Dr. John Demartini, “philosopher, chiropractor, healer, and personal transformation specialist”; Dr. Denis Waitley, “psychologist and trainer in the field mind potential”; Michael Bernard Beckwith, “visionary and founder of agape international spiritual center”; and Jack Canfield, “author, teacher, life coach, and motivational speaker” (Byrne 1-3).

addresses how to become fully present, how to release one's negative emotions, and one's inner and outer purpose, including helping to transform humanity into a more peaceful state by first awakening oneself. The book reincarnates the old idea that by transforming oneself, one can transform those with whom one interacts, and eventually, change all of humanity.

The spiritual lessons and practices foregrounded in these *Oprah* episodes help to expose the ideological premises of Oprah Brand's recent spiritual direction.

Methodological Approach

This chapter uses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), a critical methodological framework that seeks to uncover the reproduction of sociopolitical dominance and inequality in talk and text (van Dijk, "Critical Discourse" 352; van Dijk *Power* 85; Bloor and Bloor; Fairclough).³³ This political commitment stems from the recognition that "Texts in their ideational functioning constitute systems of knowledge and belief... and in their interpersonal functioning they constitute social subjects (or in different terminologies, identities, forms of self) and social relations between (categories of) subjects" (Fairclough 6). Texts, then, re-present broader asymmetries of social power and thus enable examination of power asymmetries' constitution and changes over time. CDA takes a critical stance against these power asymmetries in social relations as they are manifested in representations of the world—or ideology—instrumental to the reproduction of dominance (Fairclough 17).³⁴

³³ The main tenets of CDA are: "1 CDA addresses social problems; 2 Power relations are discursive; 3 Discourse constitutes society and culture; 4 Discourse does ideological work; 5 Discourse is historical; 6 The link between text and society is mediated; 7 Discourse analysis is interpretative and explanatory; 8 Discourse is a form of social action" (Fairclough and Wodak ctd. in van Dijk *Power* 86).

³⁴ Norman Fairclough criticizes the abandonment of critical uses of "ideology" as emerging from an aggressive "new right" silencing critics and from post-structuralist and post-modernist theory that neutralized the critical edge ideological critiques (15-17).

This thesis shares CDA's critical goal in its examination of how Oprah's media Empire enables the reproduction of therapeutic governance in a neoliberal, postfordist moment. In order to see *how* this reproduction and resistance occurs, this chapter focuses on certain properties of the text that reveal ideological commitments. Numerous methods of analysis may be encompassed under CDA, the selection and use of which depend on both the goals of the research and the type of data being analyzed (van Dijk *Power* 2). For the goals of this analysis, various dimensions of discourse are analyzed in these five episodes of *Oprah*: "The Secret: February 8, 2007"; "One Week Later: The Huge Reaction to the Secret: February 16, 2007"; "The Secret Behind the Secret: Aired February 6, 2008"; "The Law of Attraction: Real Life Stories: June 27, 2008"; and "A New Earth Phenomenon: An Hour That Can Change Your Life: April 9, 2008." Some of these features include institutional-level questions regarding discursive access, control of context and speech/text, as well as the construction of participants and social roles (Bloor & Bloor; van Dijk "Critical Discourse"). These texts are further analyzed through structures of meaning created through local (sentence) meanings, global discourse meanings (topics), rhetorical devices such as metaphors, and the implicit content expressed through presuppositions (van Dijk *Power* 104-105; Fairclough 6). These analytic techniques are used to detect which ideological framework is being privileged and projected through these five episodes of *Oprah*.

The following analysis, however, is limited to an examination of verbal exchanges because these five episodes of *Oprah* are not accessible in their original audiovisual form. The Oprah Empire only sells transcripts of past episodes, with the exception of special episodes chosen for compilation DVDs ("DVDS"). These transcripts largely

absent the body and other audio-visual dynamics from these five episodes. It is therefore not entirely possible to examine how these speakers' embodied identity traits—race, gender, class, sexuality, and so forth—are framed through camerawork and interwoven with what these speakers are saying. This analysis attempts to draw out the body when it is the focus of dialogue, but this analysis is admittedly limited to analyzing the verbal aspects of dialogue in these episodes.

Opening Statements and Foregrounding the Subjective Ideal

Oprah's opening statements in each episode constitute key moments in these texts for they perform two important functions. First, they connect the important points of *The Secret* and *A New Earth* to Oprah, the show, and audience members' lives. Second, these opening statements frontload the main messages of these spiritual texts that will be privileged throughout the episode. In other words, the opening statements address why viewers should watch the rest of the show and they gesture at the main ideological frameworks employed in these episodes.

The four episodes on *The Secret* and the law of attraction (aired February 8th and 16th, 2007, February 6th and June 27th, 2008) open either with the promise that this spiritual teaching will deliver a desired job and a special love, or with sound-bite testimonials from other audience members. The February 8th, 2007 and February 6th, 2008 episodes open with references to finding a job or love. In the former, Oprah announces that everyone has the power to “start creating the life you want, whether it's getting out of debt, whether it's finding a more fulfilling job, even falling in love” (“The Secret” 1). In the latter, she exclaims, “Get the job, the love, the life you want” (“The Secret Behind” 1). “The Secret” is thus presented as a cure-all for these common

problems. These opening segments are constructed to appeal to those interested in finding meaningful employment or a “calling,” in securing financial stability amidst employment instability, and in finding (heterosexual) love that lasts, a highly gendered quest for a satisfying romantic relationship.

The other two episodes from February 16th, 2007 and June 27th, 2008, open with testimonials about the emotional and psychological benefits of Oprah’s earlier episodes on *The Secret* and the law of attraction. Random audience members testify that these episodes made them feel “connected,” helped them realize that they were “in control,” prompted them to change something in their lives, lifted a weight from their lives, and miraculously made everything “fall into place” (“One Week Later” 1; “The Law” 1). These benefits resonate with common spiritual and therapeutic desires for something greater, but also a desire for greater mastery of one’s life circumstances. These opening testimonials promise that *The Secret* holds the key to obtaining all of one’s desires.

Crucially, these opening statements connect *The Secret* and the law of attraction to Oprah, the subjective ideal. In the first 2007 episode, Oprah confirms that “The Secret” has been one of the principles by which she has lived her life. She states, “I realized I’ve always lived by the secret. I didn’t know it was a secret” (“The Secret” 1). In her opening statements of the February 16th, 2007 and February 6th, 2008 episodes, Oprah makes it clear that *The Secret* and the law of attraction encapsulate the driving message behind her show: personal responsibility for the quality of one’s life (“One Week Later” 1; “The Secret Behind” 1). In one of these opening segments, she even states, “it’s what this show is all about, and has been about for 21 years, taking responsibility for your life, knowing that every choice that you’ve made has led you to where you are right now” (“One Week

Later” 1). *The Secret*’s law of attraction, therefore, captures the longstanding essence of Oprah’s show through its emphasis of the keywords “choice” and “responsibility.” It also implicitly connects to Oprah’s celebrity sign and mythical biography because her show is sold as a conversation with Oprah. The fourth episode, that of June 27th, 2008, is the only one that does not contain such an explicit link between the spiritual principle and Oprah’s show, though the connections become obvious later in the episode. Most of these opening statements, therefore, clearly create a strong association between *The Secret*, the law of attraction, the central message of Oprah’s show, and Oprah herself.

The law of attraction³⁵ provides a supernatural justification for Oprah’s message and translates it into an issue of faith or spiritual acceptance: whether we like it or not, the law of attraction is simply one of the main rules of the universe. Oprah’s mythical biography already functions as a sign for the maxim of personal responsibility; in framing this law as the spiritual expression of personal responsibility, Oprah’s story of overcoming hardship also becomes a sign for this law—a slightly ironic use of her mythical life story considering that it is frequently noted that she suffered from great self-doubt, as noted in the first chapter. Oprah’s mythical biography is an ever-present, implicit tool that confirms the presupposition of the choosing individual’s incredible power to overcome their circumstances. Significantly, through Oprah’s biography and central message, the individual is rendered visible as a choice-maker. Freedom of choice—a guarantee embedded in American law and democracy—is imagined to provide all individuals, irrespective of circumstance, with the absolute freedom to make choices every moment of their lives that lead either to their personal happiness or unhappiness.

³⁵ Because the episodes on *The Secret* focus on the law of attraction, its central principle, for the rest of this text, I will refer primarily to the law of attraction.

This construction of the individual also rests on the presupposition that emphasizing personal agency and one's capacity to make choices *empowers* the individual to carefully and effectively take control of one's life. This model of agency rests, in other words, on a model of individual-level empowerment, as opposed to collective or structural empowerment. Accordingly, these opening statements set individuals up to be charged with the responsibility to work on themselves, and to perfect their choice-making, in order to better navigate the system in which they live. Individual subjects, then, are readied for examination and judgment via their choices.

All four opening segments provide a short summary of this universal principle. These opening segments present the law of attraction as: "the most powerful law in the universe" ("The Secret" 1); that feelings and thoughts are energy, and the energy we give out is what we then attract back to ourselves ("The Secret" 1; "One Week Later" 1; "The Secret Behind" 1); consequently, each of us is literally *creating* our lives and experiences ("One Week Later" 1; "The Secret Behind" 1; "The Law" 1). The notion that one attracts things and events into one's life dovetails with the popular understanding of "karma": the notion that what we put out into the world eventually comes back to us. Significantly, this suggests that everyone is already in complete control of their lives; one simply needs to be made cognizant of it. Once aware of this truth, individuals can use any number of spiritual techniques presented in these shows to develop, evaluate and perfect their control over themselves and their lives.

In her opening statement for the episode on *A New Earth*, Oprah announces that this episode is part of her commitment to helping her audience live their "best lives" by helping audience members "[awaken] to the possibilities of their lives" ("A New Earth

Phenomenon” 1). Oprah also mentions that it is not too late to join the online classes, though they had already started on March 3rd, 2008 (2). As with the episodes on *The Secret* and law of attraction, *A New Earth* is quickly and explicitly linked to the purpose of Oprah’s show: helping audience members live their best lives. The notion of awakening to the possibilities of one’s life overlaps with the central message of the law of attraction episodes for it suggests that individuals must become aware of how much power and potential they have. *A New Earth* simply provides different language and different emphases than the law of attraction episodes, but again rests on the same presupposition of the individual-level model of empowerment.

Not one central message from *A New Earth* is presented in the opening of this episode. Instead, Oprah repeatedly states how excited she is about how many millions of people are “awakening,” notes that it is her most recent Book Club selection, and directs viewers to her website where “Every Monday, people from around the world come together on oprah.com for our live, groundbreaking ‘New Earth’ web classes” (“A New Earth Phenomenon” 1). The most important message of this opening, therefore, is that it has caused Oprah’s excitement because she believes it stimulates readers to find earthly salvation: realizing their possibility and potential. Relatedly, a strong promotional message regarding Brand Oprah products comes through; Oprah wants viewers to consume this book *alongside* her media products, such as her website. Toward the end of her opening statement, Oprah attempts to neutralize any potential criticism of her promotion of this book. She states that the book “is not, let me repeat, not a new religion or a new doctrine. But it really is an invitation for you, the reader, to connect to your authentic self, to begin to connect to your spirit, to your soul, to your inner being, to your

consciousness, whichever word you want to use” (“A New Earth Phenomenon” 1). This semantic move attempts to preemptively quell any resistance to non-religious, spiritual material so that this book may be employed as another conduit for Oprah’s ethical framework of individual potential, earthly salvation and the necessity of (spiritual) work on the self.

Controlling the Discourse: Oprah and her Cast of Characters

As host, Oprah is the point of contact between guests, experts, and both studio and at-home audiences. She, like all talk show hosts, is responsible for representing the audience’s point of view (Marshall 123). At the same time, “[the] host organizes the entire event so that his or her own position is seen as sensible and rational” (Marshall 124). The appearance of sensibility and rationality relies in large part on representing and appealing to the audience’s concerns. Oprah and her producers may in part guarantee this appearance of rationality on an institutional level, through the careful selection and scheduling of daily topics, through the selection of guest experts, and through post-show editing. If Oprah can successfully link new topics to the popular “Best Life” slogan and to her own beliefs and life story, the audience will be more likely to feel catered to and to perceive Oprah’s position as a reasonable one.

To ensure that audiences feel connected to the discussion, Oprah’s voice must be present throughout. Oprah performs multiple roles in these episodes: host, friend, fellow student/peer, interpreter, translator, summarizer, and spiritual ideal. There are several mechanisms at the micro level of each show itself that enable Oprah to control discourse. For instance, Oprah is the one who introduces each episode and provides closing thoughts, thus framing each episode. Between these book-ends, she mediates between

guests, experts and audience while also guiding the discussion with questions and comments. By small omissions or subtle emphases, then, Oprah can influence the way that various social issues are framed. Although she never explicitly disagrees with any of her guest experts in the five episodes examined, she does emphasize points or phrases of which she approves and which she wants to make part of the show's main message. For instance, she repeats concepts or questions she has mentioned in previous episodes, such as the idea that each of us teaches others how to treat us ("The Secret" 19). These intertextual references help to legitimate the spiritual texts under discussion by reproducing Oprah's brand of common sense. Oprah's voice dominates these episodes. Her messages, lessons, and construction of the self are foregrounded throughout.

A common cast of discursive positions aids Oprah in the articulation of these texts to her position as subjective ideal and to her "Best Life" programming. The other voices heard in these episodes may be grouped into one of the following categories: guest experts, those who have been specially invited to the show to clarify the teachings of *The Secret* or *A New Earth*; testifiers, both "ordinary" people and "extraordinary" celebrity audience members who testify to the usefulness of these texts' teachings; the question posers, who are, again, both ordinary people and celebrities with questions regarding how to apply these texts to their representative struggles; the studio audience, who perform the largely silent function of giving the at-home audience a point of identification.

The voices of guest experts on the program are given the most discursive space, after Oprah. These guest experts include: Rhonda Byrne, the creator and producer of the film *The Secret*; best-selling author Jack Canfield; Lisa Nichols who has "made a fortune motivating more than 60,000 teens to make better choices" ("The Secret" 3); Dr. Michael

Beckwith who “leads” thousands of faithful at the Agape Spiritual Center in Los Angeles (“The Secret” 3; “One Week” 1); James Arthur Ray, who “runs a multi-million-dollar corporation dedicated to teaching people how to create wealth in all areas of their lives” (“The Secret” 3) and is the author of *The Science of Success* (“One Week” 1); Louise Hay the “acclaimed,” best-selling author and publisher whom Oprah considers “the expert and mother of the power of positive thinking and the law of attraction” (“The Secret Behind” 1) and “who’s been at the forefront of this idea for 30 years” (“The Law” 1); *O* magazine writer Martha Beck who “really gets the core” of the law of attraction and love (“The Secret Behind” 1); life coach Cheryl Richardson, who has clients across the country (“The Secret Behind” 2; “The Law” 1); and the sole expert on the final episode about *A New Earth*—the book’s author, Eckhart Tolle (“A New Earth Phenomenon” 1). Most of these guests’ expert statuses come from their life experience, and from a shared narrative of “making it” in the marketplace after experiencing incredible lows in their lives. Their biographies tend to conform to the following structure: they had a serious problem, hit rock bottom, then had a spiritual awakening, turned their lives around, and now are being rewarded for their spiritual growth with economic prosperity. Like Oprah, these guest experts have used the lowest moments in their lives as springboards to their current success by drawing important (spiritual) lessons from them. Their claims to legitimacy are thus similar to Oprah’s. Their marketplace success proves their spiritual virtue within a neoliberal capitalist system.

Audience members’ testimonials further confirm the legitimacy and spiritual leadership of these guest experts. These speech acts imitate the discursive structure of media evangelicalism testimonials and the long history of American Christian

fundamentalism or “pietism” from which it draws (Shattuc 130). The testimonial comes from Christian pietism when one stood up before others to tell them “what the experience of God has meant to you, how His grace has touched your life, and maybe the circumstances of your conversion” (Cox *Seduction* 91). The use of testimonials in these five episodes of *Oprah* also performs the function of bearing witness to the spiritual truth in *The Secret* and *A New Earth*. While no social obligation to testify exists, all are rewarded with gratitude and appreciation from Oprah. Most testifiers are “ordinary” people who have used these spiritual teachings to help them in some aspect of their lives. Many of these are reduced to sound-bite endorsements of these products, in the same style as infomercial testimonials. Other testimonials are slightly more drawn out, such as that of celebrity Jim Carrey who recounted how he wrote himself a fake cheque for ten million dollars before his career took off and was paid that exact amount for his first major film (“The Secret Behind” 21). Because testimonials are generally quite short, they are empty of much of the detail and context that would animate viewers’ understandings of how their success came to be. Time also tends to be emptied out of these mini-narratives unless it emphasizes the power of these spiritual teachings, such that testifiers’ wishes and desires seem to happen almost overnight. Testimonials, therefore, function discursively as evidence of these spiritual texts’ magical power.

The questions asked by audience members perform a similar function in buttressing the appearance spiritual truth in these texts. The show’s producers select and edit question segments in such a way that it appears that these texts can answer any question. As with the testimonials, the show provides very little background to the questions being asked beyond briefly describing them as personal struggles. The

shorthand depiction of problems and guest experts' immediate, digestible solutions constructs a self that is essentially quite simple. A few uncomplicated spiritual practices and techniques can apparently be used to manage *any* personal problem. Like testimonials, questions create more signs or more evidence of these texts' infallibility.

Both questions and testimonials enable the flattening of differences between social locations. For example, celebrity Jenny McCarthy is featured in both of the law of attraction episodes in 2008, describing how she used the vision board—one of the recommended spiritual practices that involves plastering pictures of things one wants to attract into one's life on a large piece of paper. McCarthy explains that while writing her most recent book, *Louder Than Words*, she put both Oprah and a miniature cover of her upcoming book on her vision board and Oprah announces that “Just one year later, Jenny's dreams became reality when she made her first visit to the Oprah show and talked about her son's struggle with autism. The book quickly became a New York Times bestseller. Now that's powerful thinking” (“The Secret Behind” 16). Her experience of success is framed as resulting directly from her use of the law of attraction and to stand as yet another example of its power, without any acknowledgment of how her celebrity facilitated her success. With the small amount of discursive space given to testifiers and question posers, it is impossible to appreciate the structural differences between speakers' social locations. Testifiers and question posers, thus, perform a strategic discursive function. The easy transition between ordinary and celebrity speakers results in a populist message: everyone has problems, but these spiritual teachings can work miracles for anyone who learns how to put them to use.

Together, these discursive practices produce strictly formulated local scripts which facilitate the sale of Oprah's maxim about choice and responsibility. These episodes exclude dissenting voices in order to frame these spiritual teachings as unquestionable, mystical truths.

The Enterprising Self and the Maintenance of Dominance

Despite the differences between each of the five episodes and, more broadly, between *The Secret* and *A New Earth*, each shares a common subjective ideal: the enterprising self. They frame the enterprising self as a latent part of each individual, with individuals either "awakening" to their personal power or not. These episodes build intertextually on other *Oprah* episodes, as a ritual confirmation³⁶ of this model of selfhood. Their particular ways of languaging the self and the technologies of self they prescribe bring together a community of experts and audience members to affirm and worship this version of the self.

The enterprising self can only exist within a particular kind of conception of her context. In the episodes on *The Secret's* law of attraction, the individual is located in the cosmic "universe," one that passively acts as a mirror to one's thoughts, feelings, focus and intentions. This is, essentially, a ritual retelling of New Thought's amorphous universe examined in the previous chapter. In these *Oprah* episodes, the universe is still a passive context in which all-powerful individuals construct their discrete lives. The universe may or may not amplify the forms of energy that we emit through our thoughts and feelings, but, ultimately, what we *choose* to think about and feel that actually *creates*

³⁶ Here, I am drawing on James Carey's description of "ritual communication" which "is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs" (18). These episodes of *Oprah* may thus be understood as performing the ritual function of confirming her and her audience's belief in the virtue and admirability of the enterprising, neoliberal self.

our life circumstances. Because these episodes assume that one's unuttered thoughts and emotions have such a potent influence over one's life, the law of attraction constructs subjects who are responsible for mastering their souls and minds. These episodes aim to trigger or reinvigorate viewers' senses of themselves as actively responsible for their lives.

The episodes on *The Secret's* law of attraction promote a number of spiritual-therapeutic technologies of the self to help viewers control their thoughts, feelings and lives. Some of the mental technologies include: increasing self-love by telling oneself "I love you" in the mirror; saying daily affirmations to soothe one's worries and solidify one's sense of self; forgiving oneself and others any past trespasses by simply "letting them go"; and developing gratitude for everything in life, including traumatic experiences for the lessons they have provided. For instance, one audience member is praised for celebrating when her husband was laid off and trusting that it was opening up a better opportunity for him ("The Secret Behind" 18). Material practices are also recommended, including: keeping a gratitude journal; making a vision board of what one wants to "attract" into one's life, a practice akin to making a wish list for Santa Claus or praying for something to arrive in one's life; and writing a "love list," a list of qualities that one seeks to find in a romantic partner.

Underlying all of these mental and material techniques is the principle of focus, for one must train oneself to focus one's mind in certain ways to attain certain desired ends. The law of attraction is rooted in New Thought's foundational teaching—the power of the mind over material reality—and therefore unsurprisingly reproduces many of the same recommended practices as those prescribed in the late nineteenth to early twentieth

century. For instance, meditation or the practice of *focusing one's attention*, was one of the essential late nineteenth-century practices of New Thought as were affirmations or ritualized repetitions of a particular belief (Schmidt 161; Travis 1022). One must train oneself to keep one's eye on the prize and to ignore the conditions or histories structuring one's struggle toward it. For instance, one audience member, who asked about escaping her mounting debt, is advised to *focus* on the words "financial freedom" rather than "debt" and to *forgive* the person who contributed to her debt ("The Secret" 11, 14; "One Week" 16). Her material reality is thus rendered abstract through an existential pedagogy that looks solely at what she can change rather than at what the material realities of her difficult situation. Such teachings and technologies aim to neutralize negative histories and experiences, to reorient the mind toward its desires, and solidify the ontology of the choosing subject.

The law of attraction episodes differ from the episode on *A New Earth* in that the former promote a spiritual "how to" for taking control of the psychological and material parts of one's life while the latter promotes a complete shift in priorities. *A New Earth's* message is far more esoteric, asking that we detach ourselves from our thoughts, worries, pain and egos by staying in the present moment. One celebrity audience member, the daughter of Quincy Jones, testifies that Eckhart Tolle's technologies of the self, including breathing exercises and observing nature, have helped her to stay in the present and shift her thinking away from her goals, her future, her career, finding a partner and having kids ("A New Earth Phenomenon" 12).³⁷ This goal of staying present and detaching oneself from the feelings attached to one's imagined future is completely opposed to the message

³⁷ These breathing and nature exercises resemble meditative exercises, thus revealing an overlap between *A New Earth* and the law of attraction.

of the law of attraction, which encourages followers to focus on what they want to attract into their lives. The bridge between *The Secret* and *A New Earth* is created by Oprah's excitement about each and by her testimonials regarding their spiritual usefulness. Oprah seems to treat these truths as complementary: the law of attraction will help one get what one materially and socially wants; when one needs respite and renewal in order to continue in one's pursuit of these goals, one can practice some of the technologies of self in *A New Earth*.

The *New Earth* episode presents restorative spiritual techniques to help three audience members: one dealing with recent bankruptcy; another who has terminal ovarian cancer; and one American soldier handling the stresses of being stationed in Iraq. All three focus on the moment at hand as a way of detaching themselves from their negative emotions (worry, fear, shame, anger) and testify that this is extremely beneficial to their well-being. Tolle's book reminds them be aware that they can *choose* to stay focused on the present moment in order to more effectively bear their situations and to even find joy in them. Like all psychotherapies, *A New Earth*'s teachings work to "restore to individuals the capacity to function as autonomous beings in the contractual society of the self" (Rose 231). *Oprah*'s audience members can therefore choose to use *A New Earth* to help manage their outlook on their life burdens.

Tolle's book also paradoxically presents techniques to better compete by not competing. Although Tolle preaches non-competition, this episode applies his comments and teachings to everyday life in a system structured by competition. Competition comes up twice in the episode: first in relation to a woman who was struggling to lose weight and, second, by another woman who explaining what she has found helpful in her work

as a Catholic lay minister. The woman who wanted to lose weight explains that Tolle's book helped her realize that her negative body image stemmed from a desire to be better than others by being skinnier than others ("A New Earth Phenomenon" 4). She ends by noting that since she has let go of that desire, she has stopped eating emotionally and she's lost three pant sizes (5). In the second case, the Catholic lay minister explains that she loved Tolle's story about a Zen master who, watching an archery competition, commented that one man's desire to win drained him of his power (7). Oprah echoes her love of this story and rearticulates it: "It's like run your own race. Any energy you give to somebody else's race takes energy away from you" (8). Both of these testimonials encourage shifting one's focus onto oneself and away from others as a means of winning one's competition *against others*. *A New Earth's* focus on detachment, then, becomes associated with Oprah's "Best Life" project in that it can be integrated into improving one's performance in life.

This enterprising definition of selfhood fits the logic of the contemporary moment in which American economic and political structures are shifting. Two crucial factors have changed the nature of the American economy: women's entry into the paid workforce in large numbers; and the intensified competition of an increasingly globalized capitalist economic structure, which has consequently heightened the need for productivity (McGee 30, 40). As a result, companies have employed a series of "flexible accumulation strategies"³⁸ to protect their profit margins, creating an increasingly insecure environment for workers (McGee 30). Over the same period of time,

³⁸ Three such strategies have included "Downsizing (the layoffs of white-collar and managerial workers who had previously been largely insulated from the recessionary contractions of the economy), outsourcing (the use of outside vendors and consultants for work previously handled by corporate employees) and the use of flexible, contingent temporary workers" (McGee 30).

government has also become increasingly globalized through layers of national and international policy and the marketization of social services (Fraser 166). With the dispersal of government power, subjects are increasingly left to fend for themselves. Governments shift responsibility for their subjects' welfare onto their subjects themselves. Consequently, "[the] political subject is now less a social citizen with powers and obligations deriving from membership of a collective body, than an individual whose citizenship is to be manifested through the free exercise of personal choice among a variety of marketed options" (Rose 230).

These new pressures on individual subjects require a new form of self-constitution. Nancy Fraser argues that the postfordist subject "is the actively responsible agent. A subject of (market) choice and a consumer of services, this individual is obligated to enhance her quality of life through her own decisions" (168). Oprah's media products are a means of facilitating this contemporary subjectification process. Her guest experts and the books she recommends are guides to perfecting one's decision-making and life-controlling abilities. Making proper consumer choices thus extends to the consumption of proper ways of thinking and feeling, as sold in *The Secret* and *A New Earth*.

This subjective ideal's complicity in ongoing systems of domination may not be evident when discussed in general, universal terms, but when applied to specific bodies, their embedded relationship to social inequality surfaces. Both guest expert Lisa Nichols' and Oprah Winfrey's separate accounts of their experiences of racism as African American women reveal how this ideal reproduces social dominance. In the first episode on *The Secret*, Nichols explains that she grew up in South Central Los Angeles

surrounded by gangs and poverty (“The Secret” 18). In grade five, she was part of the first group bussed to school in the Valley, a wealthier and whiter area, where she says, “I thought I’d be greeted with, welcome to the Valley, but it wasn’t that way. I was called blackie, nigger. I was told that, God left me in the toaster too long” (ibid.). Nichols links these experiences of racism to plummeting self-esteem, to looking for love through sexual promiscuity, and eventually to becoming obese as a way to prevent sexual invitations that would lead to more emotional pain (ibid.). Nichols’ explains that her salvation came through the combination of a prayer to God, committing her life to “service”—specifically, helping others struggling with problems similar to hers—and learning to love herself (18-9).

Oprah also briefly relates an experience of racism. She reflects on her first job in a “five-and-dime store” in which she was not allowed to touch the cash register or speak to customers (“The Law” 22). Only more recently, when writing about this experience for *O* magazine, does she realize that that treatment was an experience of racism (ibid.). However, Oprah states that “what I realize is I’ve gone through my whole life just trying to do the best I could and not using my race or my gender as an excuse for things that didn’t happen,” and that the difficulty of not being able to speak to customers in fact pushed her to find a job in radio (“The Law” 22, 23).

From their positions as exemplary figures, Nichols’s and Oprah’s speech acts to minimize the apparent effects of systemic racism, poverty and sexism by framing their current financial and emotional success as evidence that these problems can be surmounted with the correct frame of mind. They only vaguely describe their escapes from these contexts of poverty and racism. In Nichols’ case, it seems as though one

conversation with God turned everything around, leading her to a newfound commitment to service and realization about self-love. In Oprah's case, it seems as simple as finding a new (and more prestigious) job in a field that embraced her talents. The vagaries of these two stories help to enhance the apparent effectiveness of the spiritual and ethical teachings being promoted. Their decisions in these difficult times relate to teachings and spiritual-therapeutic techniques promoted elsewhere in these episodes: believing in a higher power (whether it be God or the universe); loving the self; taking responsibility for what does and does not happen in one's life. More importantly, these techniques are framed as truly powerful for they have helped them escape the effects of oppression, as demonstrated by their current fulfilling, well-paying jobs and emotional well-being. Both Nichols and Oprah represent what I term the "productive mentality," for their use of these techniques has helped them to succeed *within* the existing political economic system. It is productive insofar as it is a way of thinking about the self and the world in terms that help to create productive political economic subjects, subjects who are willing to work on themselves in order to conform to the needs of larger structures and the historic bloc. Consenting subjects may adopt this mentality as a tool to help them survive and perhaps even thrive within a structure that seems at times too large to change.

Both of these stories also exemplify the extent to which personal responsibility must stretch. Nichols' story is followed by an exchange between her and Oprah about how we each teach people how to treat us, therefore we need to love ourselves first ("The Secret" 19). Nichols states, "I'm the first example of how the world is supposed to love me. And I have to give them the best example ever... And I, I can't expect people to treat me better than I'm treating myself. It's unrealistic, and it's unfair" (ibid.). Nichols thus

takes responsibility (or *blame*) for the racist treatment she received from wealthy, white students. Oprah confirms this statement and she repeats the idea that we *teach* others how to treat us a number of times. This repetition helps to elide its contradiction with Nichols' earlier story: she lost her self-esteem *because of* the racism she experienced at the white school in the Valley. She even states that she *expected to be welcomed* to the Valley, but was greeted with racist rejections instead. Again, the vague description of Nichols' turning point allows this contradiction to stand and to even be used to legitimize the concluding lesson: we teach others how to treat us.

The vagueness of Oprah's story similarly enables a great emphasis on personal responsibility. Her instructive realization demonstrates that a truly responsible, enterprising individual does not blame one's problems on one's identity traits, but works one's hardest to find better opportunities. The use of the word "blame" rather than "explanation" or another more positive word disparages those who discuss their identity traits as bodily markers that structure their relationships with oppressive power-hierarchies. Similarly, Oprah's choice of the words "my race and gender" rather than "racism" and "sexism" individualizes these as identity traits rather than framing them as systemic means of establishing the social order. These local meanings correspond to the larger schemata of privileging those who have apparently overcome racism, sexism, and poverty, which implicitly relies on the derogation of those who have not. The personalization of responsibility for the effects of larger systems of oppression discursively benefits the existing social order in that it allows those listening to feel innocent, to excuse themselves from complicity in the reproduction of oppression.

In terms of linking the law of attraction to structures of inequality, it is also significant to note how it conceptualizes material gain and poverty. This does not apply to the episode on *A New Earth*, for Tolle does not link one's material gain or loss to one's spiritual and psychological actions.³⁹ The four episodes on *The Secret* and law of attraction, on the other hand, teach that the development of one's spiritual consciousness is rewarded not simply by emotional and psychological well-being, but also by material gain. Popularity in the market place and financial success, then, may be interpreted as evidence of spiritual growth. The most explicit connection of material gain to spiritual development occurs through the Oprah ideal. In the third episode on the law of attraction, Oprah and her three Guest Experts have the following exchange:

OPRAH WINFREY (HOST): What do you mean by raise our level of consciousness for the people who--

CHERYL RICHARDSON (LIFE COACH): Become evolved as spiritual beings. You know, we didn't come here to, like buy SUVs and get nice jeans and we all know that, by the way. I mean, every human being I talk to...

OPRAH WINFREY (HOST): We all do know that...

CHERYL RICHARDSON (LIFE COACH): ...knows that.

OPRAH WINFREY (HOST): ...don't we?

CHERYL RICHARDSON (LIFE COACH): Although, I do have to say your shoes are pretty hot.

³⁹ Because *Oprah* is a talk show that must remain friendly to advertisers, it is not surprising that there would be more episodes on a spiritual text and doctrine conducive to consumer capitalism than episodes on a spiritual doctrine that encourages detachment from material possessions. It is also interesting that the episode on *A New Earth* aired originally on April 9th, 2008, meaning it was sandwiched between the February 6th and June 27th, 2008 episodes on the law of attraction.

OPRAH WINFREY (HOST): I was just going to say... It's nice if you can wear good shoes in the meantime, yeah... But I understand that they, you know, shoes have their place.

CHERYL RICHARDSON (LIFE COACH): Yeah. They have their pla--I mean, we're human beings on Earth having a physical experience so let's just own that as well. But when I talk about raising our level of consciousness I talk about investing in our own personal development, our emotional healing, our physical healing. *You know, raising our level of consciousness so that we're not just consumed by what we get, which is simply a stage in the spiritual journey, by the way.* There's nothing wrong with that. But raising our--*it's a by--*but raising our consciousness beyond that.

OPRAH WINFREY (HOST): It's a what, Martha?

MARTHA BECK (LIFE COACH): *It's a by-product.* You are so at your Core of Peace that when you say, 'I want a bubble blower,' you get one from Tiffany's.

OPRAH WINFREY (HOST): I know.

MARTHA BECK (LIFE COACH): That's a *by-product of being Oprah.*

LOUISE HAY (AUTHOR 'YOU CAN HEAL YOUR LIFE'): But that's your level. *Tiffany is your level.*

OPRAH WINFREY (HOST): Is it?

LOUISE HAY (AUTHOR 'YOU CAN HEAL YOUR LIFE'): Yes.

OPRAH WINFREY (HOST): I know...

LOUISE HAY (AUTHOR 'YOU CAN HEAL YOUR LIFE'): *You're not dime store. Not anymore.*" ("Secret Behind" 9-10, *emphases mine*).

There are two significant lessons in this exchange, besides the reconfirmation that Oprah is the spiritual and subjective ideal: first, if one focuses on raising one's level of spiritual consciousness rather than on material gain, the material gain will naturally follow; and second, the quantity of material gain speaks to one's spiritual level. Material reality thus takes on an immaterial quality, since it seems to magically appear in the lives of those who are spiritually evolved.

The connection between spiritual evolution and material accumulation importantly abstracts flows of material wealth. In this framework, money is the result of the kind of energy and attention one puts out into the universe, making it appear to be the product of the immaterial and, thus, at anyone's disposal. An important question left out of this discussion is whether or not those who are "dime store" for their entire lives are spiritually stunted and whether those who are materially rich are spiritually evolved.⁴⁰ The association between spiritual and material wealth is never weighed against these questions, thus leaving such conclusions open for viewers' personal interpretations. The capitalist economic system appears to be open and ready for all individuals within it, but only insofar as individuals are ready to work on themselves.

One cannot justify one system of oppression, however, without justifying them all. It is impossible to separate capitalism from its role in upholding all other contemporary systems of domination. Mary Louise Fellows and Sherene Razack argue

⁴⁰ According to the book *The Secret*, it appears that these individuals have not mastered The Secret. It states that, "People who have drawn wealth into their lives used The Secret, whether consciously or unconsciously. They think thoughts of abundance and wealth, and they do not allow any contradictory thought to take root in their minds" (Byrne 6). Conversely, those who have not "drawn wealth into their lives" have simply not mastered *The Secret*.

that systems of oppression interlock, meaning that they do not coexist alongside each other, but depend upon one another in complex ways (335). The idealization of Oprah's spiritual level as it is expressed through her economic wealth is a means of celebrating and mystifying the contemporary economic order as well as all forms of oppression that devalue her race, gender, weight, even her original socioeconomic class. More importantly, Oprah powerfully endorses these texts both by crediting her economic prosperity to her spiritual development and by holding up her wealth as evidence that she has "overcome" all forms of discrimination facing her. The use of Oprah's mythical biography simultaneously confirms the truth of the law of attraction and the underlying, one-individual-at-a-time model of empowerment that cannot actually change the structure of domination that causes mass disempowerment.

The Out-Group: Subjects Failing their Potential

Those who are not willing to adopt this personal responsibility model or who pursue incorrect goals in life constitute failing subjects or out-group. Whether implied or not, the out-group or Other must be visible so that the dominant self may constitute itself in opposition (Fellows and Razack 343). The imagined subject that rejects any component of these teachings or refuses to "responsibilize" is everywhere implied in these texts as the resisting viewer who must be convinced and made to obey. The failing subject in the episode on *A New Earth* similarly has the inherent potential to join the in-group, but for some (illegitimate) reason, has decided not to "awaken" and spiritually transform. The out-group in this sense is always a potential member of the in-group because everyone is imagined to have the *potential* to become an enterprising subject.

The same is true of in-group members—each has the *potential* to fall back into the out-group if they stop working on themselves.

Some in the out-group are not intentionally disobedient, but simply lack the understanding and tools necessary to become responsible, choosing subjects. They might be confused, frustrated, wondering whether or not to give up. These people hover on the border between in and out, and to them, these episodes send a message about the importance of timing. In two episodes, guest experts explain that these spiritual lessons may not work until we are ready. In the *New Earth* episode, Oprah states that audience members must be “ready to awaken to the possibilities of their lives” for the book’s teachings to work (“A New Earth Phenomenon” 9).⁴¹ In the law of attraction episode, Cheryl Richardson and Martha Beck explain that sometimes, we need to do some spiritual growing before we are ready to receive the gifts we would like, so we must surrender to the “Divine Timing” that judges our progress (“The Law” 5). In the same episode, Louise Hay states that “when the student is ready the teacher appears” (ibid.). The notion of readiness is a rhetorical maneuver that protects these texts from being criticized as ineffectual. It displaces blame from the text onto the responsabilized individual subject who must then self-analyze and further perfect their use of spiritual techniques in order to ready themselves for the gifts of “awakening” and spiritual evolution. These gifts may never come, but the readiness argument ensures that those who are willing will at least be in the in-group of enterprising subjects.

The failing subject of Oprah’s “Best Life” program more generally may be glimpsed in an exchange between Oprah and guest expert Martha Beck on June 27th,

⁴¹ Tolle states this idea in different terms at the outset of his book: “This book is about you. It’ll change your state of consciousness or it will be meaningless. It can only awaken those who are ready” (7).

2008. On behalf of her at-home audience members, who do not enjoy her privileges, Oprah asks guest experts what they would advise these viewers who are struggling to pay their bills and are, generally, in trouble (“The Law” 5). After a brief response from Hay who emphasizes the value of even “small changes,” Beck replies with an experience she had as a volunteer with “homeless heroin addicts”—an example Oprah clearly finds impressive, for she twice repeats it (6). Their homelessness is significant for, in the context of a show that pegs material gain to spiritual development, it signifies spiritual barrenness. Also, heroin addiction signifies an illness, again being the opposite of the happiness and health associated with spiritual evolution. Beck explains that she thought that “if [the law of attraction] works, it has to work for everyone” and goes on to state that these active (not recovering) heroin addicts completely transformed when discussing how to obtain money to buy heroin (6). Beck concludes that this proves that “what they believe and expect, is what, they get. Even at their level” (ibid.). The fact that the law of attraction appears to work *even at their (lowly) level* means it may be universalized to people at all “levels.” This example makes it seem as though everyone wields incredible power through choice and expectation. It is not known *how* these heroin addicts were obtaining money for their habit, but this vagueness emphasizes the *fact* of their having obtained what they were focused on obtaining. More importantly, these heroin addicts have failed to use their power of focus, choice and expectation toward the idealized ends of “Best Life” programming. Their homelessness and addiction deviate from Oprah’s ideals about finding earthly salvation through meaningful work, health and happiness. This exchange also reveals that owning or renting a home, and thus maintaining a certain level material wealth, is implied in Oprah’s “Best Life” standard. Rejection of these goals

and out of a lifestyle conducive to the current political economic system is, thus, framed in a negative light.

Spiritual and Scientific Truth

In order to further persuade viewers to believe in *The Secret's* and *A New Earth's* spiritual truthfulness, these episodes include strategic uses of other religions and of science. Buddhism and Christianity are used to appeal to viewers who believe in spiritual truths while physics is used to those who trust science. These discursive strategies work to link *The Secret* and *A New Earth* to audience members' existing frameworks of truth.

Although Oprah frames both *The Secret* and *A New Earth* as spiritual rather than religious texts, they are both draw on Buddhism, as a source of exotic wisdom, and are made to contend with Christianity as the religious norm. Buddhism is mentioned briefly in two episodes ("The Secret Behind"; "A New Earth Phenomenon") while Christianity is discussed four of the five episodes ("The Secret"; "One Week"; "The Law"; "A New Earth Phenomenon"). The references to Buddhism are limited: one Zen Buddhist story is summarized in the *New Earth* episode and, in another episode, Buddhism is used to reinforce the idea that we must not "grasp energy" when trying to attract things into our lives ("The Secret Behind" 20).⁴² Despite the brevity of these references, there are many similarities between the teachings of *A New Earth* and some basic tenets of Buddhism. For instance, both encourage detachment from achievements and accomplishments (Cox *Turning* 25, 29).⁴³ *A New Earth's* Buddhist-inspired teachings, therefore, may be seen to

⁴² Zen, I contend, is conflated with Buddhism more generally in these episodes, not necessarily because of the speaker's lack of knowledge or specificity, but because they are so briefly discussed and because no other branch of Buddhism is mentioned.

⁴³ Harvey Cox notes that the Western adoption of Eastern spirituality has been framed in largely psychological language, likely due to the "psy" disciplines looking to invigorate their knowledge production and to the dominance of psychological language in popular culture (*Turning* 74-5). Such an

perform the same role as Buddhism more generally in these episodes. This Eastern spiritual philosophy is instead used as a foreign or “oriental” counterpoint to Western ways of thinking. Harvey Cox, writing in the 1970s, states that “To the Western mind Zen seems to exemplify the mirror opposite of everything Western civilization affirms,” since it discourages attachment to accomplishments and goals (*Turning* 25). Cox hypothesizes that the immense popularity of Zen could be attributed to providing a promise of escape from Western norms “in learning to glimpse an inclusive void or to realize a detached tranquility” (*Turning* 29).⁴⁴ This statement can easily be applied to the promoted use of *A New Earth*. Buddhism is, furthermore, a relatively non-threatening spiritual philosophy because of its association with contemplative, enlightened non-violence. These connotations stand in contrast to Islam, for instance, another foreign spiritual tradition with the opposite connotations of barbaric, hate-filled violence (aimed at the West, specifically). The kind of spiritual difference that Buddhism offers is implicitly in contrast to Islam in the racialized grammar of religion. Buddhism is, therefore, much more likely to be rendered desirable, admirable and safely consumable within the spiritual marketplace.

Christianity, in contrast, is highly present throughout the five episodes. “God,” “Lord,” “Christ” are recurrently used as alternative names for the spiritual presence that encompasses everything as well as in prayers presented by Oprah and in testimonials (“The Secret” 12, 18, 28; “One Week” 24, 26, 27; “A New Earth Phenomenon” 8; “The

observation is suggestive of the spiritual-therapeutic lineage of thought in which Eckhart Tolle and others participate.

⁴⁴ Early on in the movement, New Thought thinkers considered religious differences to be impermanent expressions of the permanent, universal spiritual bedrock, thus establishing a liberal universalizing approach to religion, albeit to varying degrees in different circles (Schmidt 157). Intermingling with other religions, including Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, Bahá’í, Buddhists and more thus expresses this underlying liberal commitment.

Law” 7, 20). Significantly, both the law of attraction and *A New Earth* are linked to Christianity. In the second episode on the law of attraction, Oprah identifies herself as a practicing Christian and her two experts explain that the law of attraction helps to explain part of “how God works” (“One Week Later” 6, 7). One guest expert says, “when you study the prophet, Jesus the Christ, he used the language, he said, Pray, believing that ye have, than ye may receive. That’s *The Secret* in a nutshell,” while the other expert explains that Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is within us and *The Secret* teaches us to focus on the positive so we can make this kingdom grow within us (ibid.). In the episode on *A New Earth*, the lay Catholic minister explains that Tolle’s book helped her understand that Jesus was teaching “Christ-consciousness,” that to be fully human is to be Christ-like (“A New Earth Phenomenon” 8). This is a message that Oprah wholeheartedly endorses. These are just a few of the many times that Christianity is brought up as an important predecessor of *The Secret* and *A New Earth*. For certain viewers, then, these texts may gain their legitimacy and truth-value from their similarities to Christianity.

For those who will not buy a religious framework, all of these episodes link these books to scientific fact. The justification that “this isn’t just belief... it’s science” runs through every episode and is expressed in different ways. In all of episodes on *The Secret*, the law of attraction is claimed as scientific truth because “quantum physics” has shown that everything is energy. If we can control our energy, we can control thus the kinds of energy that we attract. Furthermore, in all five episodes, it is stated that energy cannot be destroyed and only changes form, hence proving that there is no death. These repeated references to science and the physics of energy specifically work to link these

spiritual texts to scientific truths, to the hegemonic discourse of science. In working to depoliticize and buttress these spiritual teachings, the use of science is simultaneously working to depoliticize the subjective ideal and social order embedded in these teachings.

Conclusion

Combined, these episodes' appeals to religion and science, and the careful management of discursive interactions between host, guest experts, testifiers and question posers work to frame *The Secret's* law of attraction and *A New Earth* as spiritual truth. In doing so, they also function to legitimize the dominant ideological framework embedded in these *Oprah* episodes: that of the "responsibilized" enterprising subject who strives to overcome all obstacles through self-governance. Although this subjective ideal and the productive mentality it exhibits are apparently politically neutral, its application to Oprah and another guest expert exposes how this universalized subjective standard in fact justifies ongoing structural inequalities. Through the causal linkage between the material and spiritual mentality as well as the imagination of a mirror-like universe, these episodes and the spiritual texts they promote abstract the material in order to emphasize the all-powerful agency of the individual human being. At a time when citizens are increasingly placed in charge of their own well-being and of continually working on themselves in order to fit into a shifting labour market, this intense focus on the individual agency of worker-citizens facilitates governance.

The question remains as to how audiences respond to and navigate these lessons and ethical obligations. The following chapter examines this in the context of Oprah.com's online discussion board and one of her webinars on *A New Earth*.

Chapter 4: Seeking Salvation Through Self-Governance

Oprah's sale of a particular subjective ideal and related spiritual technologies must be framed in such a way that viewers consent to using it in their own lives. Yet the mere popularity of these shows and texts does not explain the kinds of meanings and uses that audience members are extracting. In order to address this gap between the manufactured meanings embedded in texts and the meanings taken from texts, this chapter examines audience responses through an online discussion board to *A New Earth*. This analysis includes a textual analysis of one web class that immediately precedes the posts culled for analysis in order to add to the ideological commitments found in the television episodes of the previous chapter. These production-side meanings will then be weighed against the consumption-side meanings found on the discussion board. This chapter first provides some context to the *A New Earth* web classes and discussion board and then reviews the methodological approach employed. Following this, I draw out the selected webinar's dominant and significant messages before analyzing a limited number of discussion threads⁴⁵ for audience members' common uses of the discussion board, online social regulation, the construction of self through participation, and interpretations of the subjective ideal.

Context: *A New Earth* in the Oprah Empire

Eckhart Tolle's *A New Earth* has been integrated into the instructive parameters of Oprah's "Best Life" programming. When Tolle's book *A New Earth* (2006) was selected in 2008 for Oprah's Book Club⁴⁶ and, like every other Book Club selection, saw

⁴⁵ A "thread" is made up of an original discussion post and all the replies to this post.

⁴⁶ Oprah's Book Club is explicitly pedagogical in its actions. For instance, the Book Club works in partnership with, "the American Library Association (ALA) to distribute thousands of free Book Club selections donated by each publisher, to school, public, and community college libraries nationwide"

its sales skyrocket.⁴⁷ Unlike other Book Club selections, however, the extent and means of its promotion through the Oprah Empire exceeded its usual methods of featuring the book on a special episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Oprah and Tolle hosted a series of online classes, one for each chapter of the book, and a permanent *New Earth* sub-section of Oprah.com was created, featuring materials related to these classes. This online class was the first of its kind and targeted key markets “in the United States, the United Kingdom, South Africa, Australia, Canada, India, China, New Zealand and Ireland”—mostly English-speaking countries as well as countries with considerable and/or growing economic clout (“Oprah Chooses”).⁴⁸ In the first two weeks of announcing the free interactive webinar, 250,000 people had signed up and after four weeks, over 500,000 people from 125 different countries had registered (“Oprah’s First-Ever...250,000”; “Oprah’s First-Ever...Half a Million”).

These classes are permanently embedded in a sub-section of the website simply titled “A New Earth.” When one clicks on this sub-section, the visitor is greeted with a page welcoming the visitor to “get started” and use a number of links to resources like tips for how to read the book and an article that addresses religion and *A New Earth* (“A New Earth: Get Started”). The other five areas of this sub-section, listed in separate tabs under the overarching orange banner featuring the book’s title, organize the online

(“Oprah Chooses”). Although the structural availability of certain books does not necessarily translate into the dominance of Oprah’s interpretation of these books, her decisions materially impact what is made culturally available in America.

⁴⁷ *A New Earth* has been the ‘all-time fastest selling’ Book Club selection and set a record for the largest number of copies ever shipped out by Penguin Group Publishing over a four-week period (“Oprah’s First-Ever...250,000”; “Oprah’s First-Ever Half a Million”). Prior to Oprah’s endorsement, *A New Earth* had been available for three years and had sold half a million copies; after Oprah’s endorsement, the publisher had to print one million copies a week through March 2008 to meet demand (“Books and Arts” 107).

⁴⁸ A technological constraint accompanied this apparently widespread availability of the webinars. The online classes at first required high-speed internet from its registrants to be streamed, meaning that registrants with dial-up internet could not watch these classes but had to rely on the transcripts provided afterward. Aside from this classed exclusion, transcripts from the show were not provided in languages other than English.

experience as follows: Take the Class; Your Workbook; Talk With Others; Webcast Archive; Awakening Exercises. Each of these tabs encourages a thorough engagement with the book through standard lists of questions one should ask oneself in relation to each chapter, through reading other people's testimonials of how this book worked for them, through the use of spiritual "awakening exercises," and, of course, through discussion with other participants about their journeys through this book.⁴⁹

Methodology

Unlike the episodes of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* examined in the past chapter, these niche online classes have an attached online forum under "Talk With Others" wherein those registered on Oprah.com can discuss the class.⁵⁰ This forum is visibly accessible to anyone who visits the site, but only those who have registered for Oprah.com accounts may write posts.⁵¹ Here, it is possible to observe how discussants are engaging with the online classes and the Oprah Empire's endorsement of this book. This online forum, in other words, provides a limited kind of access to examining the kinds of interpretations, meanings, uses, and critiques audiences are producing around Tolle's book *as it is mediated through* the Oprah Empire.

⁴⁹ As with other Brand Oprah products, these classes and related online resources were framed through a rhetoric of "service." For instance, during one of the 2008 episodes on the law of attraction, Oprah announced that she was offering a chapter by chapter free web class taught by herself and Eckhart Tolle free of charge because "I want you to take the class. Not interested in making money. Interested in you awakening to your life's purpose" ("The Secret Behind" 23). Of course, the financial benefits to the Oprah Empire were elided, including the sale of web class audiences to advertisers such as Nature Made Liquid Softgel Vitamins who Oprah promotes at the outset of the fifth web class ("Oprah.com" 1). By simply promoting other industries' products, the capital gained via these promotions—in eager advertisers, in free products commanded by Oprah's Empire—are camouflaged in the appearance of unsullied, non-capitalist service.

⁵⁰ This discussion forum may be found at: "'A New Earth' by Eckhart Tolle" <<http://www.oprah.com/community/community/obc/anewearth>>.

⁵¹ It should be noted that all threads are subject to regulation by Harpoboard1, Oprah.com Community Moderator, and Harpobear, Oprah.com Community Producer, both of whom can delete posts deemed "inappropriate" as well as posts that violate copyright. These moderators also reply to posts requesting practical information and, occasionally, remind participants that their posts are subject to the discussion board's "House Rules" ("Oprah.com House Rules").

Audience interpretations of these texts offer crucial sites of analysis for the goals of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) because this methodology is concerned with the ideological effects of text and talk (see Fairclough 1995). Audience interpretations grow out of a dialectic between the meanings embedded in the text during the production process *and* the cultural capital and interpretive resources held by audience members at their moment of encountering the text (Fairclough 9; T. Wilson 8). Textual analysis therefore remains critically important, but must be balanced with attention to consumed meanings in order to close the “cultural circuit” (du Gay 1997).

This analysis uses same CDA framework and methods employed in the previous chapter, tempered with methodological tools from Internet reception and ethnographic studies that will be introduced throughout the analysis (T. Wilson et al. 2003; T. Wilson 2004; T. Wilson and Tan 2005; Soukup 2006; Garcia et al. 2009). Within ethnographic studies, the method of collecting data used here is pejoratively called “lurking,” because it involves, “completely unobtrusive observation,” wherein my presence as the researcher is undetectable to those using this online site (Garcia et al. 58).⁵² This method of data collection is used primarily for practical purposes in that I want to examine the discussion boards at the time that the online classes were first being aired in 2008, when they were still brand new, rather than culling a more temporally dispersed sample that would not necessarily reflect the social dynamics of audience interpretation. Members of online communities already tend to be very loosely bound to one another individually (Soukup 324). After reviewing hundreds of discussion threads in this online forum, it seemed most likely to find recurring members and thus a loose community of interpretation if posts

⁵² For background on the debates surrounding the ethics of “lurking” on Internet and “computer-mediated communication,” see Angela Cora Garcia et al., “Ethnographic Approaches to the Internet and Computer-Mediated Communication” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 38.52 (2009): 52-84.

were selected based on a short period of time. New discussion threads continue to appear every day on this discussion board, however they are considerably less frequent than when the classes originally appeared.

To examine the relationship between ideological production and “consumption”—which may also be considered a form of production since it produces meaning⁵³—this chapter examines the fifth web class and sixty discussion threads posted immediately after it originally aired from Chicago, Illinois in the evening of March 31st, 2008. The fifth web class was chosen because it addresses a topic that challenges the dominant individualistic framework examined in the previous chapter: the *collective* pain-body as a living remnant of the racialized domination of Jewish people, Native Americans, and African Americans. I therefore wanted especially to see how discussion board participants dealt with the notions of collective pain and of history’s impact on the present. The sixty discussion threads begun after the web class were chosen based on the time of their appearance rather than subject matter.⁵⁴ Because the topics of discussion threads ranged so widely and some posts did not appear to address a particular webinar, a time-based selection process was used to isolate the sixty most recent threads after the

⁵³ Consumption may be defined as “a productive activity because it leaves neither the person engaged in it, the object(s) involved, nor the sphere of production untouched” (de Certeau ctd. in du Gay 103). Production and consumption, in other words, are “mutually constitutive,” for each bears effects on the other albeit within a structure of unequal power relations (du Gay 103). In Oprah’s promotion of *A New Earth*, this mutual though unequal influence may be observed in the repeated emphasis that *A New Earth* is *not* a religion, but about spirituality—a palliative gesture aimed at criticisms received for the promotion of non-Christian spiritual beliefs. Because these audience members’ voices were counterbalanced by approving ones, ones that wished to consume these Oprah Brand spiritual products, the dissenting voices received only palliation while Tolle’s book continued to be featured prominently on oprah.com

⁵⁴ The participants in these online discussion boards appear not to have any offline contact and can therefore, according to Garcia et al., be studied solely through their “online behavior” (55).

fifth web class.⁵⁵ This cross-section of posts is not intended to be a representative sample of discussion board posts, but a “recognizable” one (Hirsch 222).

Because the web classes and online discussion boards may be considered intertextually connected to the episodes examined in the previous chapter, this analysis of online discussion posts provides insight into how audiences are negotiating Oprah’s spiritual ideology of the self. This analysis begins with an examination of the fifth web class using CDA since some of the posts in my corpus speak directly to it and others may have been inspired by it. Analysis of the fifth web class, coupled with the analysis from the previous chapter, reflect the inscription of ideological limitations on the production side. The subsequent examination of online discussion posts affords a partial view of what meanings audiences are producing through consumption.

The Enterprising Ideal and the Pain-Body in Oprah’s Fifth Web Class

The first four web classes mirror the subject matter of the first four chapters of Tolle’s book. They begin with the purpose of this book as constructing a “new earth” out of an arising “new consciousness,” followed by an examination of the “ego” as something that leads us into illusion and makes us greedy, needy for superiority, and war-like. Following this, the web classes review the many faces of the ego through the idea that one plays many false “roles” in one’s life. All of these web classes are peppered with stories and questions from celebrity and ordinary audience members. And while Tolle’s

⁵⁵ Two infrastructural limitations imposed on this search are worth noting. First, there is no search option on the discussion boards rendering it impossible to find all posts related to the material presented in the fifth web class. Considering that, as of July 1st, 2009, the discussion boards have 1,083 pages with fifteen threads per page, this is a considerable constraint on defining one’s corpus. Second, every time someone responds to a thread, it is moved forward on the discussion board. This means that if two threads were started at the same time and one received a response one minute later and the other received a response one day later, the thread with the more recent response would be moved forward on the discussion board pages and it would be separated from the other thread. This means that it is nearly impossible to find the exact order in which threads were started.

book and teachings are the focus of these web classes, Oprah's voice dominates as in her television episodes, with her often prompting and directing Tolle's speech.

In the fifth chapter web class on *A New Earth*, Oprah and Tolle are both positioned as spiritual, subjective ideals through the way that they relate their stories to *New Earth* teachings. Tolle confirms his position as spiritual, subjective ideal by virtue of his having written this book, while Oprah must work harder to position herself as highly spiritually developed within Tolle's framework. One way that Oprah accomplishes this is by telling a story about childhood beatings and linking it to Tolle's idea of the "pain-body"—the energy fields carried by most humans that are made up of remnants of unexpressed *negative* emotions ("Oprah.com" 5-6). She explains that her grandmother did not allow her to express the pain of being whipped, forcing Oprah to instead put a smile on her face (6). Oprah concludes that this experience resulted in her having a huge pain-body as a child, developing the "disease to please" and over-eating (6-7). The use of past tense in this story, including in relation to trying to please others and over-eating, implies that Oprah has healed herself of this aspect of her pain-body and may thus be considered highly spiritually and emotionally evolved. Oprah continues to act, however, as a bridge between the beginner and the ideal. She is living proof that with work, viewers, too, can achieve this level of spiritual evolution.

From this position of survivor-expert, Oprah further notes that while she "ate her feelings," others may be more outwardly angry and negative than she was ("Oprah.com" 8). This provides viewers with a means of judging not only themselves, but others around them who may be perceived as over-eating, angry or negative. These behaviours are rendered legible as evidence of their unresolved pain-bodies and thus their lack of

spiritual evolution. Oprah's observation, thus, gives viewers a method to evaluate their own and others' spiritual and psychological progress.

One of the first topics broached in this web class is the relationship of past to present. Here, the main local semantic move is that of denial. Oprah and Tolle repeatedly confirm that the past holds no power over the present. For instance, Oprah states, "it's *really just the story* that you've told yourself about yourself" ("Oprah.com" 4, *emphasis mine*). Tolle translates this into spiritual terms. He states that because the past cannot prevent a person from being fully present now, it has little power since, drawing back to his opening statements, the present moment is the essence of life (2, 5). Their denials about the formative influence of personal history on one's present are apparently motivated by the goal of empowering viewers to take every new day, every new moment as an opportunity to change negative and undesirable behaviours. The past is pit against the present as two distinct portions of linear time, with the present privileged over the past in terms of power and importance. It is almost as though one's personal history must not disturb one's present ability to make individual choices. These denials of the past's significance again emphasize the responsabilized agency of the ideal neoliberal subject who is consequently made accountable for each passing "present moment."

The relationship of past to present is a fundamental topic for this chapter on the pain-body because the pain-body is an accumulation of negative feelings and thoughts that were not dealt with in those past "present moments." Using the lexicon of "pain-body" rather than "memory" or "trauma" is significant because it verbally distances this accumulated past pain from one's *true* self. Tolle explains that the pain-body is an energy form that, "can be considered almost an entity in its own right that lives in you," that

feeds on negativity and does not want happiness for that would spell its end (“Oprah.com” 7, 9). The pain-body is often dormant, but is occasionally triggered, especially in family and other intimate relationships (ibid.). Tolle explains that this “alien force inside of us” is “very cunning, very clever” and will try to force others to react negatively in order to feed themselves (11). The pain-body may be understood as a contemporary incarnation of the old idea of personal “demons.” Its contemporary languaging simply facilitates the commodification of a new text and provides an opportunity to examine an old concept with new eyes, in a new historical moment. In Tolle’s version of personal demons, the pain-body is part of the “egoic mind” that drains one’s power and “[is] like a little parasite. Egoic thought patterns are almost like a parasitic entity that lives in you, and it sucks up all your conscious attention” (“Oprah.com” 42). Tolle is trying to encourage readers and viewers to rid themselves of their egos altogether, so framing different aspects of the ego as foreign to and malicious toward one’s true self functions as a semantic strategy that encourages the use of certain techniques of the self—like deep breathing, awareness of the body, staying still—to help detach this alien substance.

In similar fashion to the five *Oprah* episodes examined in the previous chapter, this webinar positions individual agency as more powerful than social dynamics. For instance, Tolle states, “it just takes one person to be present and one person not to participate” in the old, negative family dynamics (“Oprah.com” 15). Tolle leaves vague the positive outcomes of refusing to be drawn into the drama; in contrast, his instructions (stay in the present moment, avoid being triggered by the pain-body) and the consequences of not following them (the usual, negative reactions and so forth) are

clearly outlined. The awakened individual subject, then, should be able to transcend group drama and perhaps even shift the overall dynamic.

The individual must awaken through the dialectical process of awakening in order to expel the pain-body and expelling the pain-body in order to awaken. It is frequently unclear if the state follows from the action or the action follows from the state. What is clear, however, is that it is possible to shed the pain-body. Late in the webinar, Tolle recounts how he was suicidal between the ages of nine and ten and, just before the closing remarks, he tells Oprah that after “years of dreadful suffering” he eventually lost both his ego and his pain-body (“Oprah.com” 49). This exchange further confirms Tolle’s position as the spiritual ideal while also acting as a spiritual bridge, someone who, like Oprah, has suffered immensely, but with enough introspection, came through it stronger and without those alien hindrances inside of him.

Many of the spiritual practices that Tolle prescribes resemble those publicized in the four episodes on *The Secret*’s law of attraction. For instance, forgiveness, compassion for the self and others, letting go of the past, and gratitude even for suffering all overlap with technologies of the self from *The Secret* and law of attraction. Although the practices may be slightly different—Tolle does not tend to prescribe many material practices—they strive toward similar ends: highlighting the micro-level choices that we make on a daily basis and encouraging more spiritually (and mentally) healthy choices.

Another overlap between this web class and the five episodes examined in the last chapter are the connections drawn between Tolle’s teachings and Christianity and science. For instance, Tolle explains that when Jesus on the cross instructed his followers to forgive his persecutors for “they know not what they do,” he was advocating

forgiveness of those acting “unconsciously,” who have not yet awakened (“Oprah.com” 22). As in the five episodes examined in the last chapter, Christian language seeps into this web class, saturating it with the Christian norm. The web class also uses similar scientific language regarding the physics of energy in order to link Tolle’s teachings to scientific fact.

The testimonials and confessions of selected audience members tend to focus on the interpersonal level: dealing with an estranged, drama-loving sister; honouring the memory of a father without adding to pain-body; letting go of being taunted for one’s weight; worrying that one will be alone forever when not in a relationship. Besides these problems, others raised by Tolle and Oprah include artists’ expression of pain-bodies in their art, pain-bodies loving violent movies, and so forth. Because the pain-body in each of these cases is individual, they are given prescriptions that also remain on this level. Tolle and Oprah do not challenge those who define “fat” (read: uncontrolled) women’s bodies as ugly; rather, the individual woman is instructed to let go of the past and realize that she is playing an old, negative tape on a loop and that this tape is “not her reality” (“Oprah.com” 33). Oprah and Tolle frame her as the main person responsible for her present misery and lack of self-esteem. This approach to this woman’s problem resonates with the “culture of recovery” in which “victimization exists but only in the past, where it cannot be remedied. The sources of one’s problems, in this milieu, occurred only in childhood; thus no political action in the present is possible” (McGee 182). One must instead govern one’s recollection of this past problem.

One problem, however, diverges from this pattern and the dominant, individual-level framework. Lana, a screenwriter and producer brought in via Skype, expresses

concern that her pain-body as an African American is what is stimulating her interest in making a documentary about the “second generation kids” in Denmark (read: children of immigrants) who recently rioted and burned cars (“Oprah.com” 28). She observes that the common comment that some “don’t understand how people can burn their own neighborhoods,” can be likened to what was said about the riots after Martin Luther King was assassinated (ibid.). Her question opens up the discussion to the notion of “collective pain-bodies,” which Tolle addresses in this chapter of his book. Oprah reads the related passage about the collective pain-bodies that have arisen out of the historical persecution of Jewish people, of Native Americans “whose numbers were decimated, whose culture all but destroyed by the European settlers” and black Americans whose “ancestors [were] violently uprooted, beaten into submission, and sold into slavery. The foundation of American economic prosperity rested on the labor of four to five million black slaves” (“Oprah.com” 29). The passage concludes by stating that these racialized pain-bodies have become generalized as a collective American pain-body since “both victim and perpetrator suffer the consequences of any acts of violence, oppression, or brutality. For what you do to others, you do to yourself” (ibid.). Oprah goes on to hypothesize that many Americans both are not aware of this collective pain-body’s existence and want to deny its existence in order to absolve themselves of responsibility for it (“Oprah.com” 29-30).

Although Oprah and Tolle keep these historical details brief and mask their connections to present-day structural realities with the metaphor of the collective pain-body, this exchange performs two disruptive functions: first, it crucially calls attention to the ongoing effects of these histories; and second, it expresses that systems of oppression

hurt everyone they touch, even the privileged. Oprah and Tolle, then, are interjecting an idea of historical and social responsibility that is not highlighted in any of the episodes examined in the previous chapter.

Tolle goes on to explain that Obama's highly criticized pastor, who he does not mention by name but undoubtedly refers to Reverend Wright, is sometimes taken over by this collective pain-body ("Oprah.com" 30). Both Oprah and Tolle observe that Obama appears to understand this collective pain-body and Tolle states that once one realizes that this pastor is expressing collective pain, one may understand these statements in a broader context and need not personalize them (ibid.). Oprah connects this to women as well, and reading from Tolle's book, raises the idea that the "suppression of the feminine principle" enabled the ego to take over during the past two thousand years and, only recently, have enough women begun to awaken in order to bring about change ("Oprah.com" 30-31). The verb tenses in this discussion are instructive, for Oprah concludes, "reading this as a female living in the world today, able to make choices, and be my own person, and express myself, I had forgotten about the years and years of torture and suppression and, you know, killing of women were the most natural things" (31). The violent aspects of gender oppression are located in the past while the collective pain-body of African Americans is acknowledged to be lingering on. Oprah's strangely myopic statement, in fact, alters the message of this chapter.⁵⁶ This, however, goes unchallenged by Tolle and the conversation moves on to congratulate women for bringing about a broad shift in consciousness.⁵⁷ Here, it seems as though Oprah's

⁵⁶ For more on the feminine collective pain-body, see Eckhart Tolle, *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose* (New York: Plume, Penguin Group, 2006): 154-57.

⁵⁷ Later in the class, Tolle states that all individual pain-bodies are expressions of the 'universal pain-body,' a concept that encourages an interconnected caring about others ("Oprah.com" 46).

political choices, namely her endorsement of Barack Obama over Hillary Clinton, are seeping into how this spiritual text is framed. Significantly, though both racialized and gendered collective pain-bodies are acknowledged, Hillary Clinton is not referred to in relation to the gendered one. Oprah's selective silence, while it might be unintended, is instructive and ends up reinforcing the need to fight racialized oppression over gender oppression.

Discussion Boards: Social Construction of Self in the Image of the Subjective Ideal

The first sixty threads started after the fifth web class was streamed online ranged broadly in topic and were not limited to the fifth web class alone. The original posts in these threads coalesce into a number of different categories: (1) confession of a personal problem and request for advice from others; (2) testimonial regarding how *A New Earth* or these web classes have helped; (3) clarification questions; (4) practical, how-to-find-X questions; (5) worship or defense of Oprah and/or Tolle; (6) policing the nature of the posts; (7) critical or doubtful statements and questions; (8) farewells. There are a few posts that do not fit into one of these categories, but these eight types of posts account for the majority in my corpus.

The first six categories of posts, which also comprise the majority of posts in my corpus, express a desire to better understand and better practice these teachings, often in relation to a specific personal problem or dilemma. Many explain at length the kinds of problems they are experiencing, from a husband with wandering eyes, to having a suicidal daughter, to having trouble letting go of the ego, to being at a loss for words in everyday conversation. Others address the usefulness of Tolle's teachings for their Christian practice, both creating meaningful junctions between the different spiritual

doctrines and challenging other discussants who argue that Tolle's work should be ignored in favour of the Bible. These frequent attempts to make Tolle's teachings apply directly to the details of their lives are essentially processes of personal meaning-making. These participants are creatively constructing meaning in Tolle's teachings in relation to their lived experiences and existing framework of understanding. Tony Wilson characterizes this meaning-making process as a "seriously play-full" process similar to the kind of goal-oriented pleasure gained from game playing (Wilson 233; T. Wilson and Tan 397). T. Wilson explains that audiences' are ludic in their interpretations of online texts, that they actively construct sense and coherence when prompted by textual cues (233-4). The interpretation of Tolle's teachings *in relation to* one's personal problems constitutes "serious play" in that it demonstrates a meaning-making process aimed at extrinsic, instrumental ends of resolving personal, everyday problems. Participants actively appropriate Tolle's spiritual therapeutic tools in order to better cope with their psychological and spiritual stresses and help other discussants cope with theirs. This does not cancel out the intrinsic pleasures and goals of participating in these discussion boards, but simply points out the dominant use of the online discussion for offline problems.

The presentation of personal problems typically takes the form of either a confession or a testimonial. Confessions enable the "finer and more intimate regions of personal and interpersonal life [to] come under surveillance and are opened for expert judgment, and normative evaluation, for classification and correction" (Rose 244). Testimonials also expose participants to surveillance, but because their stories are about how Tolle's spiritual technologies of the self have *already helped* them, they are less vulnerable to judgment, evaluation and correction than those who confess. Testimonials

represent discussants as having properly taken responsibility for their lives by using Tolle's teachings to solve their individualized problems; confessions, on the other hand, represent the willingness to responsibly improve oneself, but without having yet done so. Both of these types of divulgements open participants to a largely anonymous form of social evaluation, judgment, and prescription from other participants. These participants, in other words, become subject to the gaze of other participants, a gaze that socially enforces self-regulation using Tolle's spiritual techniques. These participants appear to be seriously playing with a responsible, self-improving subject position in the image of Oprah's individualistic pursuit of one's "Best Life." Tolle's tools simply provide a new spiritual self-help kit to be used in working toward self-perfection.

Responses to these original posts tend to either be advice-focused or empathy-focused. The responses that provide advice tend to repeat almost precisely what Oprah and Tolle have said. For instance, many responses advise the original post to "be present" and cultivate their "awareness," which are two of Tolle's core messages. These ritual repetitions reinforce a particular worldview and set of values embedded in Oprah's mediation of Tolle's text. The empathy-focused responses tend to be expressed through validations, well wishes and words of appreciation. Most responses express well wishes to others and it is quite common for respondents to thank the writer of the original post for sharing. Both of these discursive conventions enable participants to at least temporarily inhabit particular discursive positions. Giving advice enables one to confirm one's cultural capital in relation to this spiritual work. It enables the writer to position him or herself as spiritually knowledgeable and as helping others, in like manner to Oprah and Tolle. In writing empathetically and appreciatively to others, on the other

hand, participants also position themselves as spiritually advanced. Like Oprah and Tolle, these respondents are increasing the amount of positive energy in the world.

Rather than claim that the testifier, the question-poser, the advisor, and the position of empathetic appreciation are the only discursive positions available in this local instance of discourse, this inquiry aims to understand the construction of relational subject positions within this online community. These participants are actively establishing a warm, open, and supportive online community by facilitating and encouraging each other's use of the spiritual techniques presented in Tolle's book and in the webinars. One of the most apparent intrinsic benefits to participating in this online discussion board is the construction of an idyllic community of people striving toward the subjective ideal outlined earlier. Websites generally are virtual places wherein subjects may align themselves with others and converge around shared beliefs (T. Wilson 193, 195). In an online community of fans whose members come and go, participants' identification tends to be less with one another and more with what Charles Soukup calls "the 'sacred object' or the highly specialized topics and practices that interest the community's members" (324). Participants in the *New Earth* discussion board can observe and appraise their personal alignment with the shared belief in the "sacred object" of Tolle's teachings through their posts to the board. It is a site where participants may collectively express their reverence for and devotion to a shared object. Together, these participants are creating an online *site of worship*, wherein they may temporarily experience themselves as manifesting the peaceful, compassionate, pain-body-less subjective ideal. Participants may come to know themselves as part of the in-group striving to become Tolle and Oprah's virtuous ideal.

The majority of the posts either implicitly or explicitly draw on the enterprising subjective ideal examined in the previous chapter and earlier in this chapter. Despite the different accents placed on Tolle's message, the dominant framework of the choosing individual who is entirely responsible for his or her life via his or her mentality remains a prominent motif throughout the majority of the posts. Participants express their common belief that a peaceful life is the result of individual choices in three ways: first, through repeated injunctions to stay present, to accept and provide space for pain-bodies, to let go of negative emotions; second, through their recurring testimonials about how Tolle's teachings have worked; and third, through the language they use to regulate each other's posts build. In advising others on how to practice Tolle's teachings and in sharing how this teachings have worked, participants worship this subjective ideal. The repeated invocation of the enterprising ideal functions as ritual confirmation that people's ethical frameworks should remain focused on what individuals can do irrespective of the contexts in which they are situated.

Some voices, albeit a minority, wholly reject Tolle's teachings and appear to be participating in the discussion boards in order to convince others to read the Christian Bible. These posts do not necessarily reject Oprah's broader construction of this subjective ideal, but they instead reject this expression of it. One such participant, "lkgmkg" or LeeAnn, actually bids farewell to the discussion board in three different posts in my corpus (lkgmkg et al. "OPRAH EXPOSED"; lkgmkg "Love"; lkgmkg et al. "More"). In these farewells, LeeAnn states one final time that Tolle's teachings contradict the Bible and expresses hope that others will read the Bible and come to (the Christian) God. These posts receive only three responses, two of which express hope that

the discussion boards have in turn taught her something. These responses expose the ongoing struggle over a spiritual terrain between dominant or mainstream religion and Tolle's more marginal, though mainstreamed through the Oprah Empire, form of syncretic spirituality.

At the same time, those who express the desire to understand, apply and "seriously play" with Tolle's teachings expressed in the majority of these discussion threads do not accept the promoted messages uncritically. For instance, in response to a mother asking how to "lighten" her daughter's pain-body, one participant responds that, "It can obscure things if you say you want to lighten her painbody, as this is language that no one really understands" (kygirl2008 et al. "Question"). This participant goes on to advise this mother to simply love and be present for her daughter (ibid.), thus echoing Tolle despite the critique of his language. It seems that this participant's main concern is giving helpful advice to the original post rather than reinforcing Tolle's teachings. Tolle's teachings are only used insofar as they align with this participant's practical purpose. Criticisms of Tolle's work in this sense are uncommon in my corpus, but all participants demonstrate high levels of selectivity in negotiating his text and the web class. They are "crafting meaning" (T. Wilson 6, 7, 231) by creatively and critically consuming the content presented in Oprah's webinars and in Tolle's book.

Defending the Subjective Ideal: Policing the Limits of Discussion

The active construction of this online community faithful to Oprah and Tolle's subjective ideal necessarily involves the maintenance of its boundaries. Its boundaries are continually challenged by participants who are either critical of Tolle and Oprah's work or who refuse to conform to the discursive conventions examined in the previous section.

Within my corpus, the majority works to convince this critical minority of their flaws in logic or affective orientation when this minority questions the framework of the enterprising subjective ideal or express any form of “negativity.” These discursive actions are regulatory attempts to police the boundaries of what may or may not be said. Such social regulation is, of course, not limited to these threads—it is a dominant feature of the discussion boards. These posts are unique, however, in their attempt to maintain boundaries of discourse that are yoked to the board’s intended function: a space of ritual confirmation and well-meaning support.

The few participants who dare to shift the discussion onto larger contextual structures are criticized and silenced by other participants. For instance, one participant divulges that s/he was fired from their informational technology job when it was relocated to Bangalore, India and is suffering from a series of health problems but can only find temporary work without benefits (mikki65 et al.). The person complains that “I live in a country where I cannot see a doctor” and criticizes others for telling him or her to “not worry” (ibid.). This person finishes with the following critical statement, “Tolle explained when [health] was brought up about releasing worry and only speaking to your doctor about your pain. Hmm. I can’t see a doctor” (ibid.). This original post receives two responses, the first of which speaks in the same practical tone of voice as Oprah and acknowledges that, yes, life is difficult right now, but the “real question is how to cope effectively with what is” (ibid.). They go on to advise this person to “lovingly surrender” to their circumstances, to change their attitude, and then go to work finding practical solutions to one’s problems, such as locating a free medical centre (ibid.). The second respondent then agrees with the first and advises the person who wrote the initial post to

listen to the first respondent's advice. These respondents, then, presume that the original participant's problems lie primarily or most significantly in his or her mind. It is apparently outside the framework of the respondents that one's attitude toward Tolle's teachings may stem from the physical and material pressure exerted by the structural limitations. This mind-over-matter type of attitude is the first and most crucial building block in the enterprising individual ideal because it casts attitudes and feelings as choices rather than the outcome of material deficits, structural limitations, and other inequalities. Any attempt to shift the critical focus onto larger issues becomes legible as not taking adequate responsibility for one's actions within those constraints. As such, even when the first respondent addresses practical, physical concerns in the second part of his or her message, they are addressed to the individual, for the individual. Those who put forward institutional critiques are shown that they must articulate their thoughts and feelings differently or they will either continue to push up against these kinds of attitudinal policing or be pressured to exit from this discursive space. The prevailing individual-level model of empowerment is socially reinforced through this kind of social regulation. Importantly, while most participants try to silence critical resistance to the therapeutic self-governance on these discussion boards, critical voices are never pushed out entirely, for new critiques of these teachings continue to appear over time.

The dominance of this enterprising individual framework likely explains why zero posts in my corpus of sixty threads address the collective pain-body and only two refer to Oprah and Tolle's statements about Obama and Reverend Wright. These issues are not what most participants—at least in my corpus—wish to grapple with on this discussion board. Instead, personal problems and individual applications of Tolle's teachings

dominate, reflecting at least a local acceptance and use of the framework privileged across Oprah Brand products.⁵⁸ Of the two posts that refer to politics, one defends Oprah's use of Obama as an example in the fifth web class and the other criticizes Oprah for not mentioning Hillary Clinton. The first participant argues that Oprah and Tolle used the Obama example not to influence people politically but to help explain concepts (moonct2007 et al. "BE POSITIVE"). This participant then shifts the emphasis onto the idea that Oprah is under no obligation to share Tolle's teachings with others and that she is the only wealthy person "giving us the answers" (ibid.).⁵⁹ Oprah's service to her audience in laying bare the secrets to her success is used to defuse and depoliticize any criticisms that may be launched at her use of Obama's name, but the reference to politics and, more importantly, the collective pain-body from the web class are absent.

The second post about Hillary Clinton again does not address the collective pain-body, but implicitly critiques her privileging of racial over gendered oppression (dianabl et al.). Responses to this second post likely reveal why politics and collective pain are unpopular topics on this discussion board. Of the two responses received, the first expresses a wish that "we could keep politics off this message board!" and the second dismisses the original critique by noting how much Oprah has done "for women" and finishes by stating, "your thoughts are your thoughts as are Eckhart and Oprah's" (dianabl et al.). The first response relies on the separation of the personal from the

⁵⁸ In his study of Oprah's talk show audience, Tony Wilson finds that "Reading the show in their very different ways, viewers in our research appear nevertheless to agree in finding unproblematic its implicit ideology that fulfillment is the exclusive responsibility of the individual, to be energetically attained (for instance) by a five-point campaign of personal change" (16).

⁵⁹ Interestingly, some of this worship is expressed through a request for products. One post requests for Tolle to have a regular show on Oprah's new television network, another asks for an anthology of the best discussion board posts, a third post requests translations of the web class transcripts, and a fourth requests a scientific experiment of the brain waves of those listening to the webcast and those not (nancee ; mcsabau; allareone1 et al. "I think"). These product requests are a fitting form of worship and approval within the capitalist system.

political while the second disregards the imbalance of attention as Oprah's human error and further confronts the original participant with a statement akin to saying "keep your thoughts to yourself." The silence around the first post's mention of Obama and the silencing responses presented to the second post both function to exclude these topics from the message board. They furthermore demonstrate the limits of Oprah and Tolle's discursive power. While Oprah and Tolle may attempt to raise rarely discussed topics to temporarily shift the discussion toward collective issues, the dominant framework of the powerful, lone individual in a malleable universe established through the rest of Oprah Brand products remains. Deviance from the dominant focus on individual action and responsibility may stimulate regulatory actions—like complaints and criticisms—from audience members.

Any perceived "negativity" on this discussion board is also subject to policing. These regulatory acts appear to be motivated at least in part by Tolle's message about the pain-body feeding off of negative energy. Any participant's critical engagement with or doubts regarding Tolle's teachings tend to be interpreted as expressions of the individual's negativity rather than valid points of discussion. Within my corpus, three threads are devoted to the topic of silencing the "anger" and "hate" on these boards, though the topic appears in other threads as well (kygirl2008 et al. "Positive"; sonyaigray et al.; moonct2007 "Turning"). In these posts, participants discuss how they are eliminating negativity from their lives and even judge those who are expressing negativity on the discussion boards to be showing their pain-bodies. Interestingly, a few participants within these discussions in turn correct this first group of participants. One participant warns others not to fall into the mindset of waiting for others to awaken

before awakening oneself while another participant states that s/he approaches the anger as a “gift” (sonyaigray et al.). These regulatory comments reveal that everyone’s remarks, whether or not they are in line with the dominant ideological framework, are subject to the regulatory gaze of other discussion board participants. All are subject to judgment, evaluation, and correction and, thus, are taught to continually self-evaluate and monitor their thoughts and statements. The regulatory comments of other regulatory comments may enable these participants to experience a sense of superior knowing within the online discussion board for they are refusing to confront negativity with criticisms--another form of negativity. Through regulation of others, participants can construct themselves as part of the knowing in-group reaching for the subjective ideal.

Conclusion

In actively constructing and policing the boundaries of this online in-group, many audience members using the *New Earth* discussion board find support in their pursuit of emulating the subjective ideal. The majority of those who employ this discussion board do so in a manner that fits with its intended purpose: to help Tolle and Oprah’s “students” perfect their comprehension and application of these spiritual beliefs. In doing so, these participants are creating an online site of worship, a place where they may collectively idolize and express reverence for Tolle’s teachings and Oprah’s enterprising subjective ideal. Through use of these online boards, audience members can practice the scrutiny, judgment, evaluation, and correction of themselves and of others according to the enterprising subjective ideal. They may, in other words, socially reinforce self-governance. The motivation behind this worshipful participation appears to be that Tolle’s teachings and Oprah’s model of the enterprising self appeal to these participants’

needs and interests. Tolle and Oprah's overlapping frameworks and practices provide hope for emotional and physical survival. The languaging of agency as choice provides these participants with a tangible way of experiencing their personal power and of conceptualizing possible avenues of improving their life situations. Tolle and Oprah may therefore be seen as effectively performing the role of moral leadership in persuading these subjects to focus on changing themselves in order to change the social, psychological, and material dynamics of their situations.

The widespread acceptance of the responsabilized, *choosing* subject privileged not only in the fifth web class, but across Brand Oprah media products, does not mean that Oprah's power to influence her audience is absolute. The persisting minority of critical voices reveals that not all who consume these media products accept the ideological framework or political consequences of these teachings. Further, both Oprah's disclaimers about *A New Earth* not being a religion and the discussion board silence around the idea of collective pain-bodies indicate that the dominant ideological framework at play in Oprah's media products is arrived at through a negotiation between the production and consumption side forces, albeit one that is structured by uneven power relations. Oprah's pastoral influence over her audience members reaches only so far, though perhaps with more consistent shifts from individual to social issues, these issues may garner more attention from her audience members. These limits to Oprah's power point to the fact that therapeutic self-governance is a cultural phenomenon larger than Oprah's media institutions while being powerfully reinforced through the ideological framework embedded in her products.

Conclusion: Enterprising Worship

The Oprah Empire's commodification of *The Secret* and *A New Earth* encourages faithful self-governance in the image of the enterprising ideal. The spiritual aspect of this framework is crucial, for it establishes that the productive, self-governing mentality exhibited by Oprah, her guest experts, and audience testimonials is not merely a functional philosophy that helps one in the socioeconomic order, but something that is spiritually in tune with the universe. It therefore entrenches this ideological framework as transcendental truth by placing it outside the hands of human creation and into the realm of an eternal, higher power. These episodes and online classes reference both spiritual and secular higher powers in order to persuade different constituencies: this greater power is portrayed as God or a malleable, magical and abundant universe for those who believe in the mystical spiritual realm; for agnostics and atheists, the higher power of 'science' is used as a tool to convince. These higher powers help to attach *The Secret's* law of attraction and *A New Earth* to the existing frameworks of truth by which audience members faithfully live.

These episodes and online class reproduce the prevailing individual-level model of empowerment and the imperative of individual responsibility in spiritual, even moral language. Acceptance of this framework thus becomes an ethical obligation and refusal of this framework becomes ethically irresponsible. Oprah's mythical biography is critically important in the marketing of this framework. Her story signifies the great power of individual agency in the face of structural dominance, since the social movements that enabled her entry into the broadcasting business are sufficiently pushed into the background. Oprah therefore embodies the ideal subject: the enterprising self.

Ongoing use of Oprah's mythical biography to repackage the American Dream and to sell the enterprising self functions to belittle the effects of structural privilege and oppression in order to magnify individual responsibility (and culpability) for the state of one's life.

Oprah's endorsements of *The Secret* and *A New Earth* further "responsibilize" subjects by reinforcing the New Thought belief that the power of the mind is greater than the power of material and social reality. One's reality becomes a matter of thought and perception. Because thoughts and feelings are types of action within this spiritual framework, and individuals are expected to have full control over any action they take, the deepest crevices of the human psyche and spirit are imagined to be governable dominions. It is as though the great American frontier has been turned inward and subjects are given the duty to drive back this psychological and spiritual frontier, taming everything in their path.

Ideal subjects must empower themselves by accepting this task and working to master every undomesticated area of their minds and souls. Everyone *has the potential* to become this ideal subject by continually striving for self-perfection. It is a kind of ideal that is never fully achieved, but is always in the making. The need for self-governance, consequently, never disappears. Aside from choosing whether or not to emulate this ideal and pursue their "Best Lives," audience members can express their agency in choosing which technologies of the self and moral codes to employ. The promised reward for conquering oneself is achievement of one's material, affective and social goals as forms of earthly salvation.

This “productive mentality” greatly benefits postfordist, neoliberal governance in numerous ways for it helps to produce subjects who are quicker to blame themselves and each other than the system in which they live. The Oprah Empire helps to create self-sufficient political subjects at a time when “Welfare and social security no longer seem vital elements of political stability and social efficiency, necessary both to ensure a healthy and motivated population and to bind individuals into the social body” (Rose 230). These political subjects must instead experience and demonstrate their citizenship through their exercise of “free” choice in the marketplace and through their consumption of services (Rose 230; Fraser 168).

For the economic system, the Oprah Empire helps to produce workers who continually work to self-improve, to make themselves re-employable, in order to accommodate the demands of an insecure, flexible economy with increasing numbers of “temporary positions, downsizing, and non-elective self-employment” (McGee 41). A subject’s re-employability is not only manifested in skills, but in her adoption of a productive mentality. For instance, an ideal subject must learn to read the increasing job precariousness as a source of opportunity. She must also learn to evaluate jobs not for their financial compensation, but for the fulfillment and identity they produce. This ideal subject must therefore work on herself in order to find and fulfill her life purpose. Work on the self “is offered as an antidote to the anxiety-provoking uncertainties of a new economic and social order” (McGee 43).

Oprah’s use of New Thought to promote this productive mentality further helps to mystify how material and economic inequalities are currently organized. Just as New Thought ideas were useful at the turn of the twentieth century when the entrepreneurial

upper class was solidifying and the possibility of entering that class was slimming, these ideas reincarnated in Oprah's spiritual material currently help to spiritually explain and legitimize the growing gap between the American wealthy and the poor. Economic gain becomes a matter of proper spiritual practice and self-perfection and therefore appears accessible to any subject who is willing and able to work hard for it.

Oprah's promotion of this mentality, however, does not mean that her audience members unquestioningly accept this framework or that it wipes out audience members' other ways of thinking about themselves and their lives. As Stuart Hall points out, while dominant culture does not affect dominated classes as if they were blank slates, its definitions of the self and different groups "do occupy and rework the interior contradictions of feeling and perception in the dominated classes, they do find or clear a space of recognition in those who respond to them" ("Deconstructing the 'Popular'" 233). Oprah's media products, as part of dominant culture, present a way of languaging the self that audience members at least have to contend with, even if they ultimately decide to reject it.

Not all of the audience members participating in her online *New Earth* discussion boards accept the enterprising subjective ideal presented in the connected webinars. Within the corpus of discussion posts analyzed, one refuses Oprah and Tolle's messages on the basis of religious belief while another criticizes Tolle's de-contextualization of the subject and emphasis on mental power over physical reality. These challenges to the dominant framework demonstrate that even if the discussion board is primarily a site for worshipping Tolle's teachings and perfecting one's practice of his spiritual techniques, a small number of participants still struggle against this dominant current. This discussion

forum, housed on Oprah.com, is unlikely to be the chosen site of resistance for many audience members who instead of debating the text with others, choose not to engage in this discussion. Resistance to Oprah's spiritualized promotion of the productive mentality may take many forms outside of the Oprah.com discussion boards: choosing not to watch; criticizing Oprah's endorsements and messages in everyday conversation; even creating a dissenting website. Further research is required to examine all the ways in which audience members are oppositionally reading Oprah's spiritual messages and what this means for their interpretation of her subjective ideal.

Importantly, those who do accept this framework and who police any critical resistance expressed on the discussion boards are not being duped into adopting a mentality that benefits governance alone. Instead, their interests have been successfully aligned with those addressed in Oprah's endorsements of these texts. For instance, middle-class, white audience members may indeed have sufficient amounts of material comfort to believe that their material circumstances are less important than their mental and spiritual actions. These audience members may also enjoy enough structural privilege to experience their personal choices as powerful actions in various areas of life. Audience members from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may feel that their interests align with this framework at the point of Oprah's mythical biography, for she signifies the ongoing if narrowing possibility of social mobility. While there are numerous, potentially contradictory points of alignment between audience members' interests and Oprah's messages, it suffices to highlight that the audience members who choose to creatively integrate these teachings and tools into their lives do so because they speak to their interests. In obediently and faithfully governing themselves, subjects may in fact be

rewarded by the socioeconomic system in which they live. They may also enjoy the affective and social benefits of conforming to certain norms, such as enjoying in-group status in the Oprah.com discussion board and experiencing oneself as among the righteous. *It is therefore in their personal interest to self-govern.* Therapeutic self-governance in and of itself is unlikely to shift the structures of dominance that lead to widespread economic insecurity, class reproduction, continued gendered, racialized and other forms of oppression; still it at least temporarily provides a framework for understanding what types of action are possible and potentially effective within the current system.

Oprah's television personality and mythical biography are important tools in persuading audiences that the most effective kind of empowerment occurs through work on the self. Both her identity as a racialized, gendered, "overweight" person born into the lower socioeconomic class and her approachable, intimate television persona enable her to seem like everywoman—a relatable figure who could easily exchange places with any one of us. The exceptional level of her economic success is not denied, but is framed as entirely earned and therefore possible for others who work equally hard and find their callings. She signifies the ideal enterprising subject because she appears to continually work to self-perfect and has lived up to her economic potential. This wealth is her reward for ethically accepting responsibility for her life and for faithfully developing a productive mentality. Furthermore, Oprah's repeated intimate confessions of personal struggles with weight, her romantic life, drugs, feelings of self-worth and experiences of racism function to highlight just how much she has worked through. She stands as a symbol of the potential inside each of us to achieve our "best lives."

From this elevated yet very human position, Oprah wields pastoral power. She provides long-term care for her audience members' individual salvation, she "sacrifices" herself for their greater good through vulnerable confessions, and she comes to intimately know her audience members through their letters, emails, and uses of Oprah.com. Her discursive power, therefore, is not simply that of any other celebrity, but of a quasi-spiritual leader.

The racial difference that Oprah represents to her largely white audience must be contained in order to effectively sell her biography and her persona. The Other must be domesticated and rendered safe for consumption. It is therefore likely that many audience members read her through a contemporary version of the mammy figure even if she stretches the boundaries of how a mammy has previously been viewed. Oprah's ongoing presence and dominance within this mediated still presents a rupture to racial norms of whose voices should be heard and should count. She still presents a vision of black womanhood so rarely seen through the mass media. Even if her image is contained, she prevents the ongoing invisibility of this group.

In rare instances, Oprah also appears to tentatively challenge structural oppression even if she more often supports it through the enterprising framework. Her exchange with Tolle regarding the racialized collective pain-body enabled her to introduce the idea of social responsibility for the historical legacy of oppression and persecution. Discussion board participants' silence on these topics, however, expose the limits to Oprah's influence over her followers. Though her empire is a powerful conduit for therapeutic governance, the dominance of the enterprising framework does not begin or end there.

The question remains as to where this research will go from here. Regardless of the limits of its influence, the Oprah Empire remains an important site of intervention, of challenging the individualistic model embedded in the enterprising ideal. Certainly research and academic examinations are a necessary part of challenging structures of dominance; however, I believe that research must be actively spread beyond the bounds of papers and publications to try to influence the phenomena researched. For this reason, I plan to condense some of the findings of this thesis and to write a letter to Harpo Productions, Inc. In it, I plan to propose a short list of ways to contextualize individual agency within broader structures and to perhaps introduce the need for organized social movements. Small shifts to Oprah's dominant ideological framework and to the voices heard on her show may be the first step toward challenging contemporary forms of governance and domination.

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