A Dialectic With the Everyday: Communication and Cultural Politics on Oprah Winfrey’s Book Club

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This essay explores the cultural politics of television talk-show host Oprah Winfrey’s Book Club. Because women constitute both the primary Oprah television audience and the largest United States book buying public, it focuses specifically on women’s involvement in the club and their modes of engagement with its selections. The Book Club’s astonishing success was attributable in part to the carefully considered communication strategies through which participants, Winfrey, and Oprah producers collectively articulated the value of books and reading specifically for women. Their de-emphasizing of purely literary considerations, I contend, enabled women to strategize how to use Book Club selections simultaneously to distance themselves from and to engage more intensively with the demands of living in a patriarchal and otherwise socioeconomically stratified society – a relationship I call a “dialectic with the everyday.” This essay thus traces the communicative processes/practices through which those involved in Oprah’s Book Club articulated a highly sophisticated economy of cultural value around books and reading and the implications of that economy to a possible feminist cultural politics.

The Oprah Book Club did something extraordinary. I don’t think there’s been anything ever like it. When a beloved television personality persuades, convinces, cajoles, hundreds of thousands of people to read books, it’s not just a revolution, it’s an upheaval.

– Toni Morrison, Nobel Prize winning author, also selected for Oprah’s Book Club (Oprah’s book club anniversary party, 1997, p. 17)

Come on, people; Oprah isn’t a literary critic, or a family therapist, or a priest. She’s a talk-show host. Some perspective here, please.

– Abby Fowler (2001, p. 21), letter to the editor, Newsweek

When Oprah Winfrey announced on the September 17, 1996 installment of The Oprah Winfrey Show that she wanted “to get the whole country reading again” (Oprah’s book club anniversary party, 1997, p. 1), few would have predicted the daytime television talk-show
personality's extraordinary influence on bibliographic taste and patterns of book buying in the United States. Yet her first selection for the newly-formed Oprah's Book Club, Jacquelyn Mitchard's (1996) hitherto modestly successful novel *The Deep End of the Ocean*, proceeded to sell more than 700,000 copies and shot to number one on the *New York Times* bestseller list. The sudden, intense interest in the book, and by extension the Book Club, prompted the *Washington Post* less than two weeks later to profile the Club in a cover story (Streitfeld, 1996). The significance of the *Post*’s coverage was not lost on Winfrey, who noted that the Book Club enjoyed "an even bigger start than Watergate" in its pages (Newborn quintuplets, 1996, p. 15).

Over the next six years, all 48 of Oprah's Book Club selections followed a similar pattern of success. Each typically sold a further half a million to one million copies or more after being chosen by Winfrey (Gray, 1996; Ticker, 2000; Touched by an Oprah, 1999). She even was awarded a gold medal at the 1999 National Book Awards, the Oscars of the book industry, in recognition of the Book Club's ability to stimulate interest in and demand for books and reading. Despite Winfrey's decision in May 2002 to discontinue Oprah's Book Club as a mainstay of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, her selections continue to figure prominently in most retail bookstores and non-book outlets (such as supermarkets, department stores, pharmacies, and so on).  

Oprah's Book Club was and continues to be a complexly mediated cultural phenomenon, combining printed books, television programs, letters, emails, and face-to-face conversations, among other media and forms of communication. At the heart of this study, then, lies a concern for the specific communicative processes through which books are produced, distributed, exchanged, and consumed (Darnton, 1995). It both insists on and explores the role of communication with respect to the apparent success and popular appeal of Oprah's Book Club in the late 1990s and early 21st century. More specifically, it considers how communication about the selections for Oprah's Book Club affected how individuals and groups engaged with the texts by asking: How have those who orchestrated and participated in Oprah's Book Club together negotiated the purpose and value of books and reading?

The success and popularity of Oprah's Book Club did not, of course, insulate it from controversy; in fact, the club's extremely high profile probably attracted and intensified it. During its six year tenure Oprah's Book Club elicited an array of responses from authors, readers, publishers, professional and lay literary critics, booksellers, and others. As the quotations above attest, critical appraisal ran the gamut from outright exuberance to unmitigated contempt. Opponents of the Book Club were at a particular loss to explain how a stark, ambiguous German novel like Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader* (1997) could sit side-by-side in the Oprah's Book Club catalog with Breena Clarke's *River, Cross My Heart* (1999), which one journalist dismissed as "a poorly written, sentimental novel from a diversity bureaucrat at Time, Inc." (McNett, 1999, para. 5), let alone four selections by Nobel Prize winning author Toni Morrison — *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Paradise* (1997), *The Bluest Eye* (1970), and *Sula* (1973).

Feelings of contempt for the club came to a head in September 2001
when author Jonathan Franzen publicly divulged his misgivings about Winfrey’s selecting his highly acclaimed novel, *The Corrections* (2001), for the Book Club. Winfrey has “picked some good books,” Franzen remarked upon hearing the news, “but she’s picked enough schmaltzy, one-dimensional ones that I cringe myself, even if I think she’s really smart and she’s really fighting the good fight” (quoted in Kirkpatrick, 2001, p. C4). Franzen worried, in other words, that so-called serious readers might cease taking his book, well, seriously, given its association with a host of books of putatively lesser caliber. His public comments earned him the dubious distinction of being the only author ever to have an invitation to *The Oprah Winfrey Show* rescinded. Despite — or perhaps because of — the controversy, his novel went on to win the coveted National Book Award in December 2001.

These and other critics have repeatedly thrown their hands in the air trying to explain how high art so easily could commingle with mass culture, let alone how millions of *Oprah* viewer/readers were unfazed by this seeming contradiction. Thus, not only is it worth considering how specific communication practices relate to the Book Club’s popularity, but also how members of the Book Club challenged normative economies of cultural value through their participation in it. This struggle becomes all the more salient when one considers that women between the ages of 18 and 54 make up both the primary audience for *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and the largest aggregate book reading public in the United States (Dortch, 1998; Gabriel, 1997; Kinsella, 1997; Radway, 1984). Reproachful responses to Oprah’s Book Club, in other words, provide a kind of cover under which are smuggled demeaning attitudes towards women and the cultural forms they tend to engage.

Thus, this essay critically reads women’s conversations about and modes of engaging with the selections for Oprah’s Book Club, bearing in mind these negative appraisals and the ways in which patriarchal assumptions inflect them. Both the success of and controversies surrounding the Book Club, I maintain, flowed in part from the ways in which Winfrey, *Oprah Winfrey Show* producers, and participants in the club together articulated the value of books and book reading specifically for women. The first part of this essay, therefore, both reflects on and situates Oprah’s Book Club within the context of feminist responses to mass culture. Here, I argue that the club offered a set of symbolic and material resources with which feminist cultural producers might begin piecing together a feminist aesthetics. In addition to teasing out the logic by which selections were made for the Book Club, in the next section I show how women’s patterns of engaging with Oprah books as material artifacts paralleled the ways in which groups of women have been shown to employ specific categories of popular literature (such as romance novels) to escape temporarily from conservative gender role expectations. In the third section, I reverse course to consider how conversations about the narrative content of Oprah books prompted women to move closer to and interrogate the determinate conditions of their everyday lives and experiences. As such, I argue, Oprah’s Book Club advanced a particular protocol for engaging with popular literature, a dialectic with the everyday, whereby women were encouraged to use books and book reading as vehicles both to step outside of and to interro-
gate critically values and routines. Finally, this essay concludes by assessing the club’s actual and potential relationship to a feminist cultural politics, recognizing how, as a club, it may have opened possibilities for dialogue and collective political action.

**Feminist Responses to Mass Culture: A Critical Framework**

Condemnations of Oprah’s Book Club follow a long line of condescending responses to media genres and mass cultural forms targeted toward and consumed primarily by women. At least since Tania Modleski’s (1982) path-breaking book *Loving With a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women*, feminist scholars have challenged both popular and scholarly accounts that at best are dismissive of, and at worst openly hostile to, women and their relationships to mass culture. This line of research thus has focused on a host of media genres, including romance and gothic novels (Light, 1999; Modleski, 1982; Radway, 1984, 1999b), young women and girls’ magazines (McRobbie, 1991), popular music and dance (McRobbie, 1994), soap operas (Modleski 1982, 1998), prime time television sitcoms featuring women (Dow, 1996), and literature, television programming, and films geared toward women of color (Bobo, 1995; Bobo & Seiter, 1997). Without diminishing the significant differences across these studies, they (and this essay) share at least two attributes in common: first, a recognition that demeaning attitudes toward these mass cultural forms and women’s engagements with them reflect larger patriarchal assumptions about the value of women in society, and second, an abiding commitment to taking seriously these and other mass cultural forms, with the intention of assessing their effects and political possibilities.

Modleski (1982, 1998) recognizes that the narratives and fantasy structures of romance novels, gothics, and daytime soap operas produced in the 1970s and early 1980s surely reinforced highly circumscribed understandings of women’s place in society. Despite their conservatizing impulses, however, she maintains that feminist scholars should resist flatly condemning them. “It is useless to deplore [mass cultural] texts for their omissions, distortions, and conservative affirmations,” she argues. “It is crucial to understand them: to let their omissions and distortions speak, informing us of the contradictions they are meant to conceal and, equally importantly, of the fears that lie behind them” (1982, p. 113). Thus Modleski, Janice A. Radway (1984), and numerous feminist scholars who have followed them have enjoined researchers to engage the thorny question of why women are drawn to such texts, the nature of the pleasures they derive from them, and the relationship of these texts to women’s everyday lives.

Together, Modleski (1982, 1998) and Radway (1984) maintain that the pleasure and popularity of romance novels, gothics, daytime soap operas, and other texts derive at least partly from the ways in which they achieve both a symbolic and practical fit with the everyday lives and experiences of women living in patriarchal societies. As Modleski (1982, p. 14) puts it, the “enormous and continuing popularity” of these types of texts “suggests that they speak to the very real problems and tensions in women’s lives.” Similarly, Radway (1984, p. 43) asserts,
"the meaning of the romance-reading experience may be closely tied to the way the act of reading fits within the middle-class mother's day and the way the story itself addresses anxieties, fears, and psychological needs resulting from her social and familial position." While both Modleski and Radway are cautious not to overestimate the progressive political possibilities that may follow from women's engagements with mass culture, both underscore how "contemporary mass-produced narratives for women contain elements of protest and resistance underneath highly orthodox plots" (Modleski, 1982, p. 25; see also Radway, 1984, pp. 17, 220). In other words, mass entertainment and feminist politics are not, perforce, antithetical.

The challenge facing feminist scholars of mass culture, then, is what to do with these pleasures, these small kernels of protest which, at some level, may challenge patriarchal values, assumptions, and power structures, albeit within the constraints of capitalist production? Modleski (1982, p. 25) observes that, in most circumstances, these challenges are neither obviously nor explicitly feminist. Yet she also maintains that they can provide the rudiments of a more sustained and broad-ranging critique of patriarchy. "Clearly," she states, "women find soap operas eminently entertaining, and an analysis of the pleasure that soaps afford can provide clues not only about how feminists can challenge this pleasure, but also how they can incorporate it" (1979/1997, p. 43). She goes on to propose the project of recovering a "feminist aesthetics" from the specific media genres and mass cultural forms targeted to women. This feminist aesthetics would "rechannel and make explicit the criticisms of masculine power and masculine pleasure implied in the narratives of soap operas" and other mass cultural forms involving a predominantly female audience (Modleski, 1979/1997, p. 46), with the larger goal of amplifying these criticisms and articulating them back into the sphere of cultural production.

Critical responses to daytime television talk shows further confirm the rule that mass cultural texts intended for and consumed primarily by women tend to attract condemnation. Popular, scholarly, and lay critics alike routinely impugn these shows for spectacularizing the profane and/or for offering a surfeit of popular psychological quick-fixes to recalcitrant social problems. Among scholarly critics, Janice Peck (1994) and Dana L. Cloud (1996) have argued respectively that talk on The Oprah Winfrey Show and popular biographies about Winfrey both turn on and reinforce a classically liberal notion of the autonomous individual subject. By advancing an ethic of individual responsibility and personal psychological healing, they maintain, the Oprah Winfrey text denies the necessity of contesting structural forms of oppression through collective political action.

On a more optimistic note, Peck (1994, p. 115) concedes that The Oprah Winfrey Show is "haunted by traces of social egalitarian values, democratic strivings, and desires" to transform "social worlds." Some feminist scholars have engaged various Oprah Winfrey texts hoping to recover these traces and let them speak, thereby cobbled together a feminist aesthetics from the raw materials of mass culture. Corinne Squire (1997), for example, argues that although the show's persistent focus on women's victimization may prove disarming for some viewers, it still manages to weave to-
gether a complex, shifting narrative of women’s experiences of gender, race, and class. As such, the show consistently illuminates “the contradictions that traverse our [women’s] subjectivities” (p. 109). Against those who would claim that Oprah merely reduces structural social inequities to personal psychological problems, moreover, sustained viewing of the show suggests a recurrence of specific psychological motifs. As more and more Oprah guests attest to their reality, Squire claims, they aggregate or “begin to shed [their] individual psychological character and start to look like … social, political, or religious fact[s]” (p. 110). She concludes, therefore, that The Oprah Winfrey Show possesses “some modest feminist value” owing to its narrative structure (p. 109; see also Masciarotte, 1991; Shattuc, 1999).

This essay continues the project of recovering a feminist aesthetics vis-à-vis Oprah Winfrey’s Book Club, by investigating why women were drawn en masse to a specific category of popular literature. Methodologically, it consists of a close reading of transcripts of all 45 episodes of The Oprah Winfrey Show featuring Oprah’s Book Club. These materials, at minimum, provide a reasonably accurate and accessible public record of how Winfrey, Oprah Winfrey Show producers, authors, and viewers invited to join them on the air conceived of and regularly talked about the value of specific books and books in general, in addition to particular norms and protocols for engaging with them. Indeed, the transcripts provide some evidence of how approximately 200 club members publicly discussed the selections in relationship to their daily lives—with the important caveat that these conversations were strategically planned, organized, edited, and arranged, given the conventions of commercial television and the producers’ understandings of what might appeal to The Oprah Winfrey Show’s television audience.

All viewers invited to discuss Book Club selections on the air distinguished themselves by taking the time to write in to The Oprah Winfrey Show. In other words, they demonstrated a level of interest and practical involvement setting them apart from the majority of readers who presumably decided not to write in. Thus, their comments are not necessarily typical of the club as a whole. These voices are significant, nevertheless, because those invited to participate on air were considered by the show’s producers to be ideal readers whose relationships to the book(s) under discussion, they hoped, would resonate with the broadest possible audience.

The question, which is best left open for the time being, is whether the responses of these ideal readers reflect a reasonably diverse cross-section or an essentializing amalgam of women’s experiences engaging with Book Club selections. Indeed, as Charlotte Brunsdon (1999, p. 361, emphasis in original) notes, “the personae and positions” offered by mass cultural texts, and which often serve as the taken-for-granted analytical categories for feminist critics (such as “the ‘female spectator,’ ‘reading as a woman,’ ‘women of color,’ ‘we,’ ‘the ordinary woman’”), are “historical identities, the contradictory sites and traces of political arguments and exclusions.” The mode of address of The Oprah Winfrey Show and the Book Club selections is thus worth scrutinizing, insofar as it may reflect normative assumptions about, and perhaps challenges to, proper female subjectivity.
“No Dictionary Required”

According to some critics, Oprah Winfrey’s emergence as a key arbiter of cultural value and authority bordered on absurdity. The Wall Street Journal, for instance, claimed (through a thinly disguised veil of indignation) that “no dictionary is required for most” of Oprah’s Book Club selections, “nor is an appreciation for ambiguity or abstract ideas. The biggest literary challenge of some Oprah books is their length” (Crossen, 2001, p. W15). As the primary spokesperson for the club, the Journal took Winfrey to task for failing to challenge readers with the apparent literariness of Book Club selections, or, alternatively, for failing to challenge readers with titles that were sufficiently literary at all. The Journal, however, made no effort to understand the Book Club’s decision-making on its own terms.

The televised Book Club discussions admittedly tended to shy away from even the most basic vocabulary employed in literary criticism (tone, imagery, metaphor, symbolism, allusion, and so on). Thus, the Journal was right to point out that length was a more important criterion for selecting titles for the club than were traditional literary considerations. Almost every on-air announcement of new Oprah’s Book Club selections, in fact, included at least some mention of each book’s total number of pages. Why then did page length play such a crucial role in the selection process?

The selection of Barbara Kingsolver’s (1998) The Poisonwood Bible is telling. When Winfrey announced the book in June 2000, just prior to The Oprah Winfrey Show’s summer recess, she described it as “a walapalooza of a book … . It’s 500 and some pages … . [A]ctually, it’s – yeah, 546, 546, which is wonderful for the summer, because I didn’t want you to, like, just breeze through it and then have to complain to me because you didn’t have enough to read.” Winfrey then went on to admonish her audience to “take your time with it. Read one of the … chapters, come back, let that settle in with yourself, come back and read another chapter” (Oprah’s book club, 2000, June 23, p. 17). She concluded the broadcast by reiterating that it was a “great, great, great book for the summer, 546 pages” (p. 18).

Winfrey framed other selections almost identically. At the beginning of a June 1997 broadcast, Winfrey stated: “Today we’re announcing a big – I mean B-I-G book” (Book club finale, 1997, p. 1). Later, when she revealed the selection, she explained (p. 17):

I knew back last year when we first started this Book Club that this was the book that you should be reading for the summer, because it is 740 pages long. Now for a lot of you, that’s – that’ll be your first time with a book that big – a big accomplishment, OK? So our big book for the summer is Songs in Ordinary Time by Mary McGarry Morris.

Winfrey used virtually the same language to frame the June 1998 selection, Wally Lamb’s (1998) I Know This Much Is True – “a great, big book for the summer,” she called it, at 897 pages (Oprah’s book club, 1998, June 18, p. 17). Jane Hamilton’s (1988) The Book of Ruth, in contrast, appears to have been selected in December 1996 in part because of its brevity. “You have two months to finish … and it’s not even a whole lot of pages … . [I]t’s only 328 pages in paperback,” Winfrey explained. She then commented on the possible significance of the book’s length: “The next Book Club
airs Wednesday, January 22nd of next year, 1997. We gave you extra time over the holidays so you don’t have to read at the Christmas table, OK?” (Behind the scenes, 1996, pp. 20–21).

The language Winfrey used to frame every one of these books suggests that her selections for the club were not made on the basis of her tastes alone. That she repeatedly referred to specific selections as summer books, holiday books, and so forth indicates that both time and page length were carefully considered criteria by which specific books were selected. Longer books often were timed to coincide with the summer months, when Oprah viewers presumably had more time to spend reading. Shorter books, on the other hand, often coincided with months when women were assumed to have more responsibilities and thus less time to read (such as around the winter holidays). Oprah’s Book Club producers were sensitive, in other words, to how books and reading could be made to fit into the routines of women’s lives, rather than placing the burden on women to adjust their schedules to accommodate books and reading.

In one respect, then, women’s patterns of engaging with the selections for Oprah’s Book Club can be said to mirror those of women who consume other categories of popular literature. Among the women whom Radway (1984, p. 213) interviewed, for example, reading romance novels functioned in part as “a ‘declaration of independence’ and a way to say to others, ‘This is my time, my space. Now leave me alone.’” Romance novel reading, in other words, allowed these readers to construct imagined—albeit effective—spatial and temporal barriers with which to modulate their heterosexual partnerships, the needs of their children and, more broadly, the everyday demands they faced as women living in a patriarchal society. Similarly, women used Oprah’s Book Club selections to create spaces and thus remove themselves both symbolically and practically from their domestic, female role-assigned duties.

Indeed, women featured on Oprah’s Book Club highlighted how these kinds of responsibilities posed formidable challenges to their finding personal time. The August 2000 Book Club program, for example, included an audio excerpt of a letter explaining how one woman was moved by The Poisonwood Bible (Kingsolver, 1998), a novel chronicling a pious American family’s mission in the Belgian Congo and the Congolese struggle for independence. “As a stay-at-home mom, I often feel caught up in the world of children, conversations with children, conversations about children. I loved this book. It brought me out of the world I live in” (Oprah’s book club, 2000, August 23, p. 23). Karen, another Book Club participant, likewise explained: “My children now are trained that when they see Mom with a book, they just don’t bother me … . And on Saturday and Sunday mornings, my husband knows I’m going to get up early at five to read, fall back to sleep, and wake up again and read some more … . I get up about 1:00 in the afternoon to start my day, because I love to just lay there and read” (Letters to Oprah’s book club, 2001, para. 271). Like Radway’s (1984) romance novel readers, these women affirmed how the reading of popular literature could help them both to justify and to enact a desire to step outside and away from the sometimes tedious and unfulfilling role expectations placed upon them as women, if only temporarily.

Although women may have turned
to Oprah’s Book Club for this reason, its extraordinary success cannot be reduced to that alone. Many women featured on Oprah’s Book Club attributed their inability to read books to their responsibilities at home, yet equally as many women indicated never having developed an interest in books or book reading at all prior to their involvement with the club.

For example, the September 1997 Oprah’s Book Club program featured an interview with Candy Siebert, who had written in to *Oprah* explaining her newfound interest in the Book Club:

Winfrey: Candy Siebert wrote us to say … she’s never read a book in her entire life. Not one?
Siebert: Not one. […]
Winfrey: Until?
Siebert: Until – I kept watching the Book Club … . And finally I bought my first book, and I bought it so I would have to read it. And I did it. I – [Wally Lamb’s 1992] *She’s Come Undone* – and I – I cried at the end and it was because I finished it and it was a great book.
Winfrey: It was the first book you read at 40 years old?
Siebert: Yes.
Winfrey: I could weep for you.
(*Oprah’s book club anniversary party, 1997, p. 4*)

The same program also featured videotaped excerpts from previous episodes of *Oprah*, in which one unidentified woman testified to not having read a novel in two decades; another shared that she had not read any books at all in about a dozen years. Similarly, the October 1996 Book Club discussion included an audio excerpt of a letter from an unidentified woman who stated: “I am 46 years old. And until this past year, I have not read more than five books” (*Newborn quintuplets, 1996, p. 15*).

Candy Siebert’s provocative statement that something about Oprah’s Book Club compelled her to take up books and book reading raises an important question: What about the club moved women to engage with and read books for the first time in many years, perhaps even for the first time in their lives?

Some critics have expressed dismay over the range of titles chosen for Oprah’s Book Club. “Taken individually,” the *Wall Street Journal* reported, “Oprah’s books run the gamut from absorbing to vacuous” (*Crossen, 2001, p. W15*). The *Journal* was troubled, in other words, by the seemingly inconsistent demands Oprah’s Book Club placed on participants in terms of the degree of difficulty of club selections, which fluctuated between arguably straightforward books like A. Manette Ansay’s (1994) *Vinegar Hill* and Alice Hoffman’s (1997) *Here on Earth*, to more intricate, lyrical titles such as those of Toni Morrison and Bernhard Schlink. Perhaps those who had not read books in many years were drawn to Oprah’s Book Club precisely because of this apparent inconsistency.

Indeed, *Oprah Winfrey Show* producers demonstrated remarkable sensitivity to the range of reading abilities of both actual and potential club members, and this sensitivity was reflected in the timing and relative degree of difficulty of titles chosen for the Book Club. Anticipating that readers might encounter difficulty with *Paradise* (*Morrison, 1997*), club members were granted seven, rather than the customary four weeks between the announcement of the book and its discussion (*Book club: Toni Morrison, 1998*). Beyond merely acknowledging and making allowances for the fact
that certain titles might prove more challenging for readers than others, the choice of books often was influenced directly by the relative difficulty of the preceding one. The Reader (Schlink, 1997) was followed by Anita Shreve's (1998) The Pilot's Wife, which Winfrey described repeatedly as a "quick read" in contrast to the previous selection (Oprah's book club, 1999, March 31, p. 21). The Poisonwood Bible (Kingsolver, 1998) similarly was followed by Elizabeth Berg's Open House (2000). "[A]s I've been saying," Winfrey revealed, Open House "is really going to be a breeze. I thought after reading over 500 pages, we needed something lighter" (Oprah's book club, 2000, August 23, p. 20).

The intense frustration many members of Oprah's Book Club felt towards the September 1999 selection, Melinda Haynes' (1999) Mother of Pearl, provides by far the richest example illustrating how the relative difficulty of club selections affected the choice of subsequent books. When announcing Mother of Pearl in June 1999, Winfrey anticipated some of the difficulties readers might encounter with the book but encouraged them to persevere. Mother of Pearl "is layered," she observed, "which means that in the beginning you're thinking, 'Where is this going?'" (Oprah's book club: White Oleander, 1999, pp. 14–15). At the conclusion of the program she re-emphasized: "It's not a fast read, again. The first few chapters may challenge you, so stay with it until the flood. Hang in there until the flood, OK? You've got all summer to read it" (p. 17). When the Book Club reconvened in September, Winfrey reiterated her caveats. "I warned you-all," she stated, "it wasn't an easy book, but my feeling was that you have the whole summer. There are no deadlines. You can take your time" (Oprah's book club, 1999, September 9, p. 8).

Still, Winfrey's warnings did not manage to defuse readers' strong reactions to the book. Rather than trying to conceal the fact that many club members disliked Mother of Pearl, producers of The Oprah Winfrey Show opted instead to air readers' frustrations in an audio montage:

Winfrey: Some people didn't make it beyond the first word before getting frustrated.

Unidentified woman #1: Why is Even's name Even? I am so confused.

Winfrey: Others got stuck a little later in the book. […]

Unidentified woman #7: Half the time I'm not sure what the characters are talking about. Will it get better or should I just wait for the next book? […]

Winfrey: One reader even used it as a sleep aid.

Unidentified woman #12: It was a great book to read before going to bed because I always fell asleep quickly.

(Oprah's book club, 1999, September 9, p. 9)

Airing readers' negative reactions was an extremely clever strategy by which to reframe the confusion and frustration many women felt toward Mother of Pearl from a personal failure to an error on the part of the Book Club. What this incident reveals is that on Oprah's Book Club reading did not connote the act of humbling oneself before the genius of an intractable book, as it may in a more traditional economy of literary instruction. Rather, it connoted, on the one hand, doing one's best to engage with challenging books, and on the other, recognizing that one's dissatisfaction with specific selections stemmed not from a personal intellectual defect but rather from Winfrey and her producers' failure to choose a book that met
the needs, tastes, and desires of the club.

Like other longer and more complex books, *Mother of Pearl* was followed by what Winfrey characterized as a far easier and quicker selection. “Now if *Mother of Pearl* was too challenging for you,” she stated, “I’ve got the ideal one to bring you back, really” (Oprah’s book club, 1999, September 9, p. 6). Her remark acknowledged that *Mother of Pearl* alienated many members of the Book Club, and that the subsequent selection was chosen precisely to help them to re-engage. When Winfrey finally revealed the selection at the end of the program, Maeve Binchy’s (1998) *Tara Road*, she reiterated: “OK. Now some of you might have felt a little challenged with our summer book but I’ve got a new book to bring you back. It is a fast read – far, far away from the Deep South” (the setting of *Mother of Pearl*). She continued: “It’s a thick book. It’s a thick book but a really fast read. I promise you” (p. 19).

This is not to suggest, however, that members of the Book Club were unanimously turned off by *Mother of Pearl* and that faster reads like *Tara Road* were the only fare that appealed to them. Indeed, several women expressed how much they enjoyed *Pearl* during the September 1999 Book Club broadcast. “A friend asked me if I was leaving this planet, what three books would I take with me,” one woman shared. “My second choice was *Mother of Pearl*” (Oprah’s book club, 1999, September 9, p. 9). Similarly, a second woman revealed: “*Mother of Pearl* is the only book that when I finished reading it, I immediately began rereading it because I was captivated” (p. 20). At the end of the broadcast, Winfrey asked a guest in the studio audience who belonged to a women’s book club to share some of the group’s favorite selections. “Truthfully,” she said, “*Mother of Pearl*, we all agreed was … four-star. We loved it. We would read passages just to anyone walking by that’s how much we loved it” (p. 20).

There was no single level, then, at which members of Oprah’s Book Club read, and indeed their range of reading interests and abilities was reflected in the seemingly inconsistent profile of the titles chosen for the club. Winfrey and her producers, deliberately made and timed selections to appeal strategically to a broad range of women/readers and to welcome newcomers to the club, some of whom may have felt intimidated by books and book reading.

**“It’s More About Life”**

In the previous section, I explored how women involved in Oprah’s Book Club used specific selections to create spatio-temporal barriers, which allowed them to regulate the incursions of children and heterosexual partners. This pattern of use is consistent with the findings presented in Radway’s (1984) study of romance novel readers. Yet the foregoing analysis explored only how the very fact of the Oprah books as material artifacts occasioned the construction of these barriers. How, then, did Oprah’s Book Club articulate the content of specific selections? It is worth pointing out that Radway’s romance readers employed both the actual, physical books and the narrative content to distance themselves and/or to escape from the everyday/patriarchal demands they faced as women. The narratives of “failed” romances, in fact, “tread[ed] too close to the terrible real in ordi-
nary existence” (Radway, 1984, p. 72). In contrast, women routinely turned to the narrative content of the selections for Oprah’s Book Club to reflect on the conditions of their lives and experience – to engage more intensively with and to interrogate everyday life.

The March 2001 Book Club discussion included an intriguing message from Winfrey directed to those who had and had not read that month’s selection, Joyce Carol Oates’s (1997) *We Were the Mulvaneys.* “Don’t worry if you haven’t read … *We Were the Mulvaneys,*” she stated, “because as with all our Book Club shows, it’s more about life than about a novel” (Oprah’s book club: *We Were the Mulvaneys*, 2001, p. 1). What this statement suggests, and what emerged time and again on episodes of Oprah’s Book Club, is that the content of specific books was perceived to be valuable by Winfrey and viewer/readers to the extent that it shared a clear connection with life, or that it resonated with their everyday interests, personal experiences, and concerns.

One way in which the Book Club both established and maintained this connection to life was through its constant emphasis on the actuality – not merely the realism – of the settings, events, and people featured in each book. Nearly every episode of Oprah’s Book Club thus included interviews in which the author related her or his creative process, which almost always highlighted how she or he drew significant inspiration from existing people and places. This pattern began at least as far back as the beginning of the club’s second season, when the Book Club featured Morris’s (1996) *Songs in Ordinary Time.* “Even though the people were made up, some of the places in Atkinson, Vermont [the setting of *Songs*] are not far from Mary’s hometown” of Rutland, Vermont, Winfrey explained. The program then cut to a videotaped segment of Morris touring Rutland:

> There is so much of Atkinson, Vermont in Rutland, Vermont …. On the corner is the funeral home I imagined when I was writing the funeral of Sonny Stoner’s wife, Carol. And I naturally thought of this little restaurant when I was writing the book. This is the Rutland Restaurant. It’s been here since 1917 …. The character of Sam is very much like my father. He – he was a very intelligent man, an educated man, who was cursed with the disease of alcoholism …. I’ve created my own Rutland, I guess. (Oprah’s book club anniversary party, 1997, p. 17)

Similarly, the January 2001 Book Club episode focused on the inspiration behind Andre Dubus III’s (1999) *House of Sand and Fog.* The author shared how he drew the book’s premise from an article he had read in the *Boston Globe,* in which a young woman, like the lead character Kathy Nicolo, was wrongly evicted from her house for failing to pay an erroneous tax bill (Oprah’s book club, 2001, January 24). Dubus also disclosed that the other main character, Massoud Amir Behrani, was based on the life of a friend’s father who had been a colonel in the Iranian Air Force before the Shah was deposed and who, like Behrani, lost nearly everything upon emigrating to the United States. Dubus went on to note that the man who had purchased the house in the *Globe* article was of Middle Eastern descent, prompting him to wonder, “What if my colonel bought this house?” – a question that summarizes the book’s basic storyline (Oprah’s book club, 2001, January 24, p. 13).

Because the characters, settings, and so forth to which specific Oprah books refer sometimes no longer were there,
however, producers of The Oprah Winfrey Show turned to authors, invited guests, and particular textual elements to bear witness to their actuality. For example, the November 1999 program on Clarke's (1999) River, Cross My Heart dwelled extensively on the actuality of the novel's setting and main character. The story takes place in 1920s Georgetown, DC, when the neighborhood consisted largely of working class African Americans (in contrast to its far whiter, petite-bourgeois population of today). In order to demonstrate the actuality of "black Georgetown," the episode included a videotaped interview with 100 year-old Eva Calloway, whom Winfrey described as "one of the last living witnesses" of the old community (Anne Murray, 1999, p. 11). Calloway's witnessing was clearly meant to actualize a Georgetown that once existed. The episode also featured an on-camera interview with Edna Clarke, the author's mother, whom Winfrey described as "was the inspiration behind 12 year-old Johnnie Mae," the novel's main character (Anne Murray, 1999, p. 10).

The videotaped interview with Lalita Tademy, author of the September 2001 Book Club selection Cane River (2001), likewise bore witness to the disappearance of people and places while underscoring their actuality. Spanning the years 1834–1936, Cane River chronicles the lives of four generations of Louisiana Creole slave women, all of whom were Tademy's ancestors whom she came to know after conducting exhaustive genealogical research (Oprah's book club: Cane River, 2001, p. 3). Tademy's videotaped tour of Cane River thus provided evidence of the absence of the places featured in Cane River. Near the end of the Book Club discussion, Winfrey also noted the photographs included in the book. "[T]hat's one of the fascinating things, didn't you all think, about the book?" she asked the studio audience. "When you turn the page, there are the pictures of the people you've been reading about" (p. 15). Winfrey drew attention specifically to the indexicality of these photographs: they could not have been produced without the women and places of Cane River actually having been present. Together, the videotaped author tour and the photographs invited participants in the Book Club to think about the characters and setting of Cane River as actual, despite their novelization.

Like the videotaped interview with Morris, the Tademy interview included a segment in which she toured locations that had inspired scenes in the book. "Cane River is a real place," Tademy began. But in contrast to the Morris interview, very few of the places Tademy described in the book still existed. "I began to go and visit Cane River, and I would just walk along unmarked sites just trying to get the feel of the place. [...] A lot of the areas that were plantations that I talk about in the book no longer exist. For one thing, so much of it was burned during the Civil War" (Oprah's book club: Cane River, 2001, p. 3). Tademy's videotaped tour of Cane River thus provided evidence of the absence of the places featured in Cane River. Near the end of the Book Club discussion, Winfrey also noted the photographs included in the book. "[T]hat's one of the fascinating things, didn't you all think, about the book?" she asked the studio audience. "When you turn the page, there are the pictures of the people you've been reading about" (p. 15). Winfrey drew attention specifically to the indexicality of these photographs: they could not have been produced without the women and places of Cane River actually having been present. Together, the videotaped author tour and the photographs invited participants in the Book Club to think about the characters and setting of Cane River as actual, despite their novelization.

The Oprah’s Book Club catalog consists almost entirely of novels, save for two works of nonfiction and three short children's books. Bracketing the children’s books, the preceding discussion suggests that the reified classificatory scheme of fiction versus nonfiction does not adequately account for the logic underlying the se-
lections for Oprah's Book Club; it relies on a predetermined literary distinction that may have been inappropriate from the standpoint of the club, even if those closely associated with it occasionally employed that distinction themselves (Salute to mothers, 1997). Put another way, the two nonfiction books selected for Oprah's Book Club, Maya Angelou's (1981) *The Heart of a Woman* and Malika Oufkir's (2001) *Stolen Lives*, may seem anomalous alongside the 40-plus novels chosen for the Book Club. Yet, the repeated stress producers of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* placed on the actuality of the novels suggests a rupturing of the distinction between fiction and nonfiction on Oprah's Book Club. *Heart of a Woman* and *Stolen Lives* indeed made perfect sense alongside the novels chosen for the club; virtually all of them were portrayed as stories that actually happened, even if book publishers, booksellers, and critics persisted in classifying, marketing, and talking about these selections simply as works of fiction or nonfiction.

Thus Oprah's Book Club producers and participants were further able to connect books with life by troubling this most basic bibliographic distinction. Collectively, they articulated Book Club selections—novels especially—from the realm of the imagined to the actual, or perhaps it would be more accurate now to say from the fantastic to the everyday. For the everyday, as Michèle Mattelart (1997, p. 25) observes, "represent[s] a specific idea of time within which [both] women's social and economic role is carried out" and "the fundamental discrimination of sex roles is expressed." Similarly, Henri Lefebvre (2002, p. 11) notes that women tend to bear a disproportionate burden of "the weight of everyday life" owing to the ways in which patriarchy and capitalism inflect one another, yet he adds that this very burden opens possibilities for the "active critique" (p. 223) and transformation of these structures given the gendered contradictions, inconsistencies, and double standards they inevitably produce.

Indeed, the televised Oprah's Book Club broadcasts regularly went beyond framing the selections as stories that actually happened, by highlighting how the characters, events, and themes corresponded with and provoked women to question their everyday lives. During the first anniversary episode of the Book Club, Winfrey remarked: "I love books because you read about somebody else's life but it makes you think about your own" (Oprah's book club anniversary party, 1997, p. 2). She reaffirmed this point 18 months later: "We love books because they make you question yourself" (Oprah's book club, 1999, March 31, p. 13). Reading books was valued on Oprah's Book Club, then, because it provoked critical introspection or, more strongly, provided women with symbolic and practical resources with which to challenge reified conceptions of their subjectivities.

Herein lies the Book Club's dialectic with the everyday. Following Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), dialectic denotes any two opposing yet dynamically interdependent elements whose tense relationship can provoke change. On Oprah's Book Club, the very fact of the books themselves provided at least some women with time and space away from their daily obligations as partners, mothers, and professionals, while the content of the books encouraged just the opposite. In other words, club members valued the reading of Book Club selections not only because it helped them to create distance from
their everyday responsibilities and routines as women. On the contrary, it also enabled them to move closer to and interrogate their everyday lives as women via the characters and events in the books.

The way in which the December 1999 selection, Ansay's (1994) *Vinegar Hill*, was discussed and framed on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* is illustrative of this dialectic with the everyday. The novel turns on the tensions between a married couple and their in-laws, and more specifically on the main character Ellen Grier's struggle to assert herself after she, her husband James, and their two young children are forced to move in with James's overbearing parents. *Vinegar Hill*, Ansay explained, was born of actual events; she and her parents moved in with her paternal grandparents briefly when she was five, and she drew some of the scenes in the book directly from that experience (Oprah's book club, 1999, December 3). Although Ansay claimed that Ellen was not her mother per se, she did reveal that her “mother's own story inspired Ellen's transformation” (p. 15). The program thus stressed how *Vinegar Hill* was grounded in the events and experiences of a woman who had overcome unreasonable expectations resulting from her heterosexual partnership.

For the remainder of the broadcast, *Oprah* producers broke with the tradition of inviting four or five guests to discuss the book over dinner with Winfrey and the author, opting instead to invite married women and their mothers-in-law to the studio to share how their relationships with one another and their families had been affected by living together. One guest, Valerie, explained that she was “amazed at how similar Ellen’s experience was to something that happened to [her] 18 years ago,” when she was forced to move in with her mother-in-law while her husband completed a degree (Oprah's book club, 1999, December 3, p. 14). Another guest, Cherie Burton, also identified with Ellen Grier. “I wouldn’t say it feels like a prison here,” she stated, describing the experience of living with her in-laws for the past eight months, “but there are some moments where I do feel trapped” (p. 6).

Indeed, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* routinely featured letters and stories from women who connected the narratives/characters of specific Book Club selections directly to their own everyday lives. One viewer/reader named Connie, for instance, wrote in to the show after reading Morris’ (1996) *Songs in Ordinary Time* to express how she felt while reading the book:

Winfrey: Now, didn’t you write me that you thought at one point reading it that Mary [McGarry Morris] had changed the names of the characters to protect your privacy?

Connie: Yes. Yes. Exactly. I— I—that was my first impression. Marie was 35. I was 34 when my experience happened. My children were the exact same age as Alice, Norm, and Benjy. And as I read, I just thought, “This is my story.” … I should be writing this book.

(Oprah's book club anniversary party, 1997, p. 16)

*She’s Come Undone* (Lamb, 1992) generated a similar response from C. C., who was invited to join the videotaped conversation about the book. “[T]his was my life,” she stated. “My father—after my mother died, even though I lived in the same house with him, he was never there . . . . [H]e would be gone for days at a time to his girlfriend’s house, he would be away on business or whatever, and he loved me with food the same way Dolores’ [the
main character] father did” (Third Rock From the Sun, 1997, p. 12). Likewise, Here on Earth (Hoffman, 1997) resonated strongly with Cynthia, a participant in the April 1998 Book Club discussion. Cynthia was drawn to March Murray, the main character, who early on in the book struggles over whether to leave her husband Richard, whom she considers to be a bland but otherwise agreeable partner. Richard “reminded me of my … ex-husband, just a really great guy,” Cynthia observed. “He met my checklist: good looking, athletic, good family, smart, educated, and all of that. But he was the wrong good guy. And, as a woman, I grew up thinking that the only way you would leave a man or should leave a man is if he beats you or if he’s abusive or if he’s an alcoholic … But how do you leave a good man?” (Oprah’s book club, 1998, April 9, p. 17). Identifying with characters and events in specific Oprah’s Book Club selections thus allowed these participants to interrogate some of their everyday assumptions and routines.

The March 2001 program on We Were the Mulvaneys (Oates, 1997) provided some of the most moving examples of this process of identification and self-reflection. Winfrey indicated that numerous readers had written in to the show explaining how they had seen themselves and their families in the book. “[W]hat’s so exciting about We Were the Mulvaneys,” Winfrey observed, was that “we’ve gotten so many letters from … people who were members of families who say, ‘We were the Grants,’ or ‘We were the Pullmans.’ ‘We were’ – a lot of people started their letters that way” (Oprah’s book club: We Were the Mulvaneys, 2001, p. 6). The broadcast also included a poignant videotaped inter-

view with the Hanson family who, like the Mulvaneyes, were ostracized from their community after they filed suit against a young man who had raped their daughter Susan. As Jayne Hanson, Susan’s mother explained, “[I]t dawned on me reading this book, we have all been – we’ve all been raped” (p. 7).

Collectively, all of these women recognized themselves and their everyday lives in the characters and situations presented in specific Book Club selections. Their engagements with the books, therefore, facilitated not only their breaking temporarily from their everyday lives or the normative expectations placed on them as women living in a patriarchal society, but also their interrogating and perhaps even challenging the social pressures implicated in, for example, heterosexual partnerships, families, intimacy, beauty, body image, and gendered violence.

Interestingly, the one novel in which Winfrey promised “a total escape from your own life – escape, escape, escape” (Oprah’s book club, 2000, November 16, p. 21), House of Sand and Fog (Dubus, 1999), met with significant resistance on the part of readers invited to participate in the videotaped discussion. All but one of the guests was particularly disgusted by the character Kathy Nicolo, whose lying, promiscuity, theft, substance abuse, racism, and inattention to her daily responsibilities disturbed them deeply. While the exact source of their distress remains unclear, it may have been at least partly a function of the book’s escapist tenor. Its deeply tragic conclusion – the five principal characters wind up either dead or imprisoned – may have further reinforced this sense of disconnect. House of Sand and Fog may have upset these readers precisely because it
failed to tell a story that resonated sufficiently with their own daily lives.

**Conclusion: Toward a Feminist Aesthetics**

The success of Oprah’s Book Club may help to temper the often-repeated charges about declining interest in books and book reading, which typically authorize critics to make heady claims about the dumbing down of United States culture in an era supposedly dominated by electronic media (Gitlin, 1997; Postman, 1986). The sudden, intense interest in the Book Club and its communicative efforts to bring in non-readers at all levels suggests that an extensive yet largely untapped book reading public existed in the United States prior to the club’s formation, particularly among women; indeed, many more of these nascent publics may exist today. Thus, critics who attribute an apparent disinterest in books and book reading to an intellectual downturn in United States culture or to the putatively deleterious effects of electronic media may overlook a far more mundane explanation for these phenomena. The communicative strategies employed on Oprah’s Book Club throw into relief the global book publishing industry’s general ineffectiveness at communicating the relevance of books and book reading to specific social groups using anything other than the most traditional of aesthetic/literary labels.

But make no mistake: Winfrey, her producers, and the members of Oprah’s Book Club were engaged in the work of distinction. Within the context of The Oprah Winfrey Show, Winfrey, her producers, and the members of the Book Club together rearticulated received categories into a highly sophisticated – and markedly different – economy of cultural value in which proximity and pertinence to women’s everyday lives superceded what Pierre Bourdieu (1984, p. 34) calls the “icy solemnity” of decrepit aesthetic labels. The work of the Book Club consisted not just of finding good books, in other words, but more importantly books that fit – an intractable alchemy that has vexed the book industry for a century.

This understanding may help to contextualize condescending responses to Oprah’s Book Club. They belong, as Radway (1999a) observes, to a long line of phobic reactions to specific reading practices, mass cultural forms, and regimes of cultural value that challenge their hegemonic counterparts. “Reading induces phobic responses,” she argues, “precisely because it contains such rich potential for social disorder and disarray” (p. 24). Indeed, the vociferous public outcry generated by Oprah’s Book Club was and remains symptomatic of the club’s challenge to a regime of cultural value that has consistently excluded, or at the very least marginalized, hundreds of thousands and perhaps millions of women/readers. Future research would do well to assess the extent to which communication on Oprah’s Book Club has helped to construct a broader, creative, and politically progressive set of codes, vocabularies, and practices for these and other women and, if so, to chart their circulation in and beyond the Oprah Winfrey Show. The growth of and access to such symbolic and material resources, as Celeste Condit (1989) reminds us, is a necessary condition for textually-related strategies to take on a larger political significance.

For now, I merely want to ask if the economy of cultural value articulated...
on Oprah’s Book Club, its dialectic with the everyday, indeed contributes to Modleski’s (1979/1997) project of developing a feminist aesthetics. Doubtless, The Oprah Winfrey Show tended to imagine and address the women who watched and participated in the Book Club using very traditional categories: as wives, mothers, victims of gendered violence, and so forth. While it may be too strong to call this mode of address essentializing, given the ways in which race, class, and other factors routinely complicate these subject positions on the show (Squire, 1997), it would be fair to characterize it as normative and quite circumscribed with respect to gender.

That said, it is important not to underestimate the feminist possibilities of the Book Club. While The Oprah Winfrey Show may have performatively reiterated key subjectivities through which patriarchal oppression is enacted at the level of the everyday, the selections for the Book Club and women’s conversations about them nevertheless were powerful vehicles for helping them to step outside of those positions, to deny and disrupt, however briefly and temporarily, everyday life’s profound gravitational pull. In addition, the ways in which narrative content was discussed on the show encouraged women/readers to engage more intensively with these normative subjectivities—not simply to reinforce them, but also to scrutinize them, to interrogate them, to complicate and challenge their apparent self-evidence. Oprah’s Book Club thus helped women to transform the everyday from a locus of banal patriarchal routine to one rife with antagonism and creativity, a project consistent with a progressive feminist politics.

Of course, all that says next to nothing about the effectiveness of these challenges. Can individual acts of book reading and television viewing really short-circuit patriarchy and other forms of oppression? They certainly cannot. Imagining that patriarchy can be overcome in this way merely reaffirms a therapeutic model of politics (Cloud, 1996, 1998), in which individual acts of oppression are abstracted from their enabling conditions and individual psychological healing is posited erroneously as the only viable locus of change. Then again, it is crucial not to lose sight of the fact that Oprah’s Book Club was what it was—a club, which, by definition, implies some level of sociality or, more optimistically, a willingness on the part of viewer/readers to engage the social problems addressed in the selections, discussed on The Oprah Winfrey Show, and manifested in readers’ everyday lives collectively. These inequities, injustices, and brutalities, however, remain stubbornly and undeniably part of women’s everyday lives. The larger political challenge, then, may be to find ways both to broaden and to intensify these kinds of collective relations and engaged conversations—to refuse to close the book, as it were, on Oprah’s Book Club.

Notes

1 Winfrey announced in February 2003 that she will be restarting the Book Club. Rather than focusing monthly on contemporary literature by living authors, however, the new Oprah’s Book Club will feature only literary classics, presumably by dead authors, three to five times per year.
In two instances Winfrey chose more than one book for the monthly Book Club selection, hence the disparity between the number of Book Club programs and the total number of Book Club selections.

The word “public” is absolutely crucial here. One potential limitation of the research for this essay is that it relies only on public transcripts, while on the whole bracketing the hidden transcripts which, for various reasons, typically are excluded from the public record. Further research would do well to take up these hidden transcripts and revisit/rework my hypotheses about Oprah’s Book Club in light of them.

I would caution the reader to differentiate between four forms of belonging to the club. Some members simply might have read each month’s selection; others might have read and tuned into the televised discussions on The Oprah Winfrey Show; others might not have read the books at all but watched the Book Club programs anyway; and still others may have read the selections in conjunction with their local book clubs, with or without having watched Oprah.

Interestingly, the timing of Morrison’s Paradise coincided with the infamous lawsuit brought against Winfrey by a group of Texas cattle producers, in response to an April 1996 episode of The Oprah Winfrey Show about beef and the dangers of mad cow disease. For weeks Winfrey was away in Amarillo, Texas observing and participating in the trial, and The Oprah Winfrey Show was moved there temporarily. One has to wonder to what extent, if any, these events influenced the selection of a challenging book like Morrison’s Paradise and the conferral of extra time for readers to grapple with it. I wonder, moreover, what members of the Texas beef industry would think if they realized that they not only lost their suit against Winfrey but also indirectly may have encouraged more people to read Toni Morrison.

In contrast to the character Marianne Mulvaney, the Hanson’s daughter Susan tragically committed suicide.

Interestingly, during the program in which The Poisonwood Bible was discussed, Winfrey and several women reported feeling transported to Congo while reading. I would argue, however, that the book overall tended not to be considered an escape by the women featured on the show, since many observed how, upon reading the book, they became increasingly aware of and thankful for their domestic accoutrements, such as dishwashers, soap, and so on (Oprah’s book club, 2000, August 23).

References


Ticker (2000, April). *Brill’s Content*, p. 84.


**Oprah’s Book Club Selections**


