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“Hello America, I’m Gay!” – Oprah, Coming Out, and Rural Gay Men

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“Hello America, I’m Gay!” – Oprah, Coming Out, and Rural Gay Men

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Dedication

Crystals of frost sparkled off flowers placed on my brother's grave shortly after he died, upon which one day waited a butterfly. He became a symbol of hope and a symbol of peace for my family, illustrating how death is not an end but yet another of life's journeys. In the year I have taken to write this, I stumbled through a particularly difficult and frankly awful period of time. On the darkest of those days, I opened the door of my apartment in the evening to a cloud of monarchs, and I was once again reminded of everything I strive for in my life's journey. I give this work for brother as he lives on in the wings of the butterfly.

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I am inspired by and grateful to the men who shared with me many hours of their personal lives to make this project possible. Your stories are inspirational, your hearts are kind, and I thank you for allowing me the opportunity to experience both. I express my sincerest gratitude to my parents for all they have done to see me succeed. My journey toward a bright future is paved with your blessings. I send all my love to my sisters, nephews, and niece. My dearest thanks to my best friend and confidant Mary. Your laughter, your smile, and even your spastic puppy bring happiness and light into my life.

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Any good piece of scholarship begins and ends in the presence of our cats – those feline familiars who keep us company through our struggles and give us plenty of excuses for breaks. I am grateful for my kitty Pitters, even though she showed her protest with more veterinary appointments in four short thesis-writing months than the rest of her eleven-year life combined, and a snuggle for my sweet Janie who always pops up just when I need it, and who I am sure will be more than happy to see me sleep again. Yes, you both get soft food tonight.

Finally, thank you to Oprah Winfrey for twenty-five seasons of sweet inspiration.

Abstract

“Hello America, I’m Gay!” – Oprah, Coming Out, and Rural Gay Men

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Recent queer scholarship challenges the academy’s longstanding urban and adult oriented trajectory, pointing to the way such studies ignore rural and heartland regions of the country as well as the experiences of youth. In this thesis, I craft a limited ethnographic methodological approach together with a textual analysis of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* to deliver portraits of gay men living in various rural or heartland areas who use their television sets to encounter and identify with LGBTQ people across the nation. The overarching aim of this project is to explore the ways in which religion, rurality, and *Oprah* coalesce in the process of identity creation to form rural gay men’s conceptual selves and how they are then informed by that identity formation. I will focus my textual analyses through the frames of six of Oprah Winfrey’s “ultimate viewers” to elucidate how they receive and interact with her star text, how they use television sets in the public rooms of their homes to create boundary public spheres, and how they are impacted by the show’s various uses of the coming out paradigm. In so doing, this thesis seeks to contribute to the scholarship of rural queer studies, television studies, and Oprah studies.

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Introduction

“I would have to say, I believe that no matter what, no matter what difficulty, no matter what dark hour befalls me ... there’s a rainbow in the cloud.” -- Oprah Winfrey¹

In the first-ever hour of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (*Oprah*), the eponymous host introduces what she says is her intention in creating the series: “This show always allows people, hopefully, to understand the power they have to change their own lives. If there’s one thread running through each show we do, it is the message that you – you – are not alone” (1986). As Oprah says these words, she points into the camera and into her viewers’ eyes to help them believe that, through the beautiful new world of *Oprah*, they now belong to a community. This thesis is a project to study a neighborhood in that community populated by rural gay men, of which I am a part, whose disenfranchisement with our cultural and geographical surroundings was healed at least in part by our spectatorship of the show and our welcome citizenship in that community.

Before I delve into a textual analysis of both *Oprah* and the voices of the men I have included in this project, I believe it is important to inaugurate this thesis with an autoethnography, which, as Matt Hills writes, is useful in illuminating “the tastes, values, attachments, and investments” of a community I believe my own voice can help illuminate (72). Extending Hills’ work, Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson argue that the autoethnography is “an awareness of our subject positions that creates a stronger, not a weaker, affect” of critical analysis (24). In this introduction, I interrogate continued

¹ (“You Become What You Believe” 12 Oct. 2011).

scholarly criticisms of *Oprah* that argue its use of personal anecdotes and self-help themes largely ignore social injustices and equate failure with personal inadequacy. However, such scholarship fails to investigate how actual audiences receive *Oprah* and the objective good those audiences believe the show and its host have accomplished in changing their lives. It is the absence of reception study that I find most problematic especially given that the audience is always already an integral component of *Oprah*. It is not necessarily my intention to come across as wholly celebratory of the show. I am often critical of it, particularly with regard to the coming out imperative it demands of its viewers. But by crafting a limited reception study foregrounding my subjectivity in my work and my own fandom of the show, I reveal the stakes of this project for myself and my interest in reconceptualizing how scholars understand the reception of *Oprah* through the lens of some of the people who have watched it – and who have lived it – for most or all of their lives.

MY EXPERIENCE – “I FEEL THE LOVE”

My mother cannot fall asleep without the company of television. Every night as she crawls into bed, she takes a moment of silence before her hands find the remote control. She waits as the electricity surges through its wires and the set hums to life. Bright lights on the screen pierce the darkness of the bedroom, momentarily blinding her as she squints, struggling to see what is there. The flickering images and hushed mumbles of the low volume distract her from her pain – a silent torture of memories she suffers every night as she closes her eyes and imagines her four children falling into sleep, one of whom will never awake. He was the brother I would never know, the son stolen from my parents’ embrace in a farming accident just shy of eight years old. The once romantic notion of a life in the countryside had become, for her, harsh and isolated. And to this

day, in the middle of the night, as she moves from bed to couch to kitchen to chair finding the television in every room, I suppose what my mother is truly afraid of is her dreams – afraid to relive the tragedy of her first born's death. In this living nightmare, I imagine she is haunted by that moment when she hears the screams of desperation on the family's two-way radio as my father finds his son's body. And that moment when she arrives on the scene, seeing my brother for the first yet final time, realizing she will have to say goodbye. I can never know, nor can I ever understand, the anguish of losing a child, but the only dream I can conceive of that could pain her more than this is the one in which he is still alive, because when she opens her eyes in the morning, she loses him again. And so in the darkness as her hands find the remote control and the television lights dance off the walls as substitutes for the images of her dreams, she drifts into another night filled with a series of light sleeps.

Unraveling the source of my mother's grief has illuminated in me a new kind of reflexivity – how I have used television to cope with the harsh realities of my own life and how so very much of my identity is wrapped up in my brother's death. I have always felt a debt of gratitude mixed with a deep sense of guilt to him because I learned very young that had he not died, I would never have been born. Though my head knows that my life is not intended to replace his own and that he was not taken so that I could live, in my journey, I walk with a sense of duty to at least in some way honor him however possible. I have struggled to do everything in my power to make my parents proud to call me their son, and so my childhood feelings of shame ran even deeper as I grew up dealing with my homosexuality and the disgrace I feared it would bring to my family, for no feat of academic achievement nor prayers to God were alleviating the burden of the feelings I had.

Growing up in the kind of insular rurality that I did, I had little time to learn the gender role I was supposed to play, and it became apparent very quickly that, in that role, I was poorly cast. A boy must never say “cute” or “silly.” He should never cross his legs knee over knee, nor should he show an affinity for dolls, girls’ toys, or any pink thing. Arts and crafts are to be frowned upon. And sports and farm equipment, above all, should be the foundation upon which to build a future. The guidebook is endless. While I stumbled through the finely choreographed dance of masculinity, my gender inversion contributed to the minoritizing model of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls an “epistemology of the closet” in her book of the same name (1990). That is, my often effeminate voice and mannerisms had betrayed my sexuality to the other students, and my gender deviance or poorly performed masculinity signaled to them that I was probably gay, which my peers, like myself, had been taught to fear. As a young child growing up in the height of the AIDS crisis, fear of the disease and of those who carried it, homosexuals, was bred into me through rhetoric we were pounded with during school. Back then AIDS was still widely regarded as a death sentence originally intended to wipe out homosexuals. Urban legends often told of gay on the attack by spreading the disease to innocent children through needles and syringes – particularly in ball pits like at McDonald’s. We were taught to hate gay men because they were not only contagious, but also vindictive and evil.

All of this of course led to my schoolyard bullying, and the days I spent dodging the hateful things my classmates would say or the stones and snowballs they threw at me every afternoon as I walked to my car. Although I was meant to be in the safe haven of my school, punishment from my peers was rarely limited to hallways and parking lots. Often the vitriol I experienced was on welcome display in the presence of my teachers, few of whom involved themselves in stopping the bullying. Never once did I address my

social life with my parents. Instead I distracted them with sparkling grade reports and an unending list of extracurricular activities. Night after night I came home and closed myself away in the quiet seclusion of the basement. I would find the remote control with my hands and drown my thoughts in a world where everyone was in love with Lucy, Xena was professing her affection for her female sidekick, and Oprah Winfrey was saying to the world – was saying to me – “it’s OK to be gay.”

One such moment came in an episode of *Oprah* that featured Dolly Parton, whose well-worn cassette tape played “Jolene” and “Coat of Many Colors” only half as often as I sang them and whose low-cut tangerine-colored dress and tall blonde hair appealed to me in a way that probably should have concerned my parents. Shania Twain was also on Oprah’s couch that day along with another woman whom I did not know at the time named Melissa Etheridge. When the show came back from a commercial break, Oprah spoke candidly to Etheridge about her marriage to Tammy Lynn Michaels, a woman. Photos were shown. Laughter was had. Kind words were exchanged. And everybody was still breathing.

It was really me who was still breathing, perhaps for the first time. Into Oprah’s world, I could dissolve myself and enter a place of acceptance. I could escape the physical, emotional, and mental limitations of my corporeal body and join part of a river of souls who were all yearning to connect. In that transcendence I owned myself – I was becoming/stealing/borrowing/realizing/actualizing an identity that was, finally, totally vicarious in nature. But it was mine, and although it was ephemeral and fleeting at best, for forty-two minutes every day after school, I felt that I was worthy because I was born. *Oprah* episodes such as Etheridge’s created an imagined space of queer acceptance, and I often experienced them in the presence of my mother. In so doing, I was able to imagine that queer space as reality by sharing the experience with her. In other words, through

Oprah, I could safely perform my queer identity work in my mother's presence. Being in rural northwestern Kansas, thousands of miles from where I imagined gay culture to be, tuning in to *Oprah* gave me the opportunity to find faces of gay men and women from whom I felt so physically distanced. Rhetoric on both sides of the issue had painted gayness as either a disease or a luxury of the metropolis, but as a young boy in a flyover state, while I had never experienced its comfort, I was all too aware of its side effects.

For most of my rural life, I stayed in the comfortable corner of my closet, not only sheltering my sexuality from the world but from myself. I was not exposed to gay culture, I did not wave a rainbow flag, and I would have thought Manolo Blahniks were cookies. At the time, I only knew of one other gay man at my high school. He was several years older than me, a flamboyant and openly gay transfer student who dropped out after a week and killed himself shortly thereafter. I saw what it was like for him, and it was not a life I wanted for myself. I made the "choice" to be heterosexual. I even dated a beautiful woman for nearly two years, earnestly trying to force myself straight – to force myself out of the "phase." In the past, I have referred to this era of my life as the "homofibic years," a play on my own self-homophobia and the "fibbing" I was doing about my sexuality, both to myself and to others. Admittedly, such a phrase is problematic because it works on the binaries of gender and sexuality without leaving room for fluidity. It also relies on the notion that sexualities are in some way determined or that sexual orientation can be identified by the time we hit puberty. But sexuality was still confusing for me at this time in my life largely because of the religious "hush hush" imposed on such subjects in school environments outside of teaching the fear of AIDS. And so my identity work leaned upon what I gleaned from the broadcast media I consumed everyday after school, particularly *Oprah* as a pedagogical tool.

Coming out stories are often represented in the narratives of gay men and women on *Oprah* as revolutionary moments of identity change – a real life makeover. Once we have disclosed our homosexuality publicly, finally we will be everything we are meant to be. Through its constant use of the coming out paradigm, as I call it, and the celebration that was shown to follow coming out stories, *Oprah* often instilled in me feelings of shame for what I perceived as my secrecy and unwillingness to articulate my homosexuality. My split with my girlfriend at seventeen ended the “homofibic” years, and, shortly after I graduated, I came out.

However, I hesitate to call mine a coming-out story. More accurately, I was answering my father’s hammering knock on the closet door. It was early evening, and I was in a rush to get ready to head to the theater to see the then-new movie *Mean Girls* with my friend CJ and her girlfriend. CJ was unapologetically lesbian, so to speak, and her shaggy mohawk coupled beautifully with her girlfriend’s greenish hair. As an “open homosexual,” disgusted grimaces and nasty gossip clung to CJ throughout our small town like that *Peanuts* character’s ever-present cloud of dust. CJ was just home to visit her family on a break from college, but for our hometown, she was a ghost from the past whose presence forced people to confront their own conceptions of homosexuality. In an area of the country known for its racial homogeneity, there were perhaps more African American families in our small town than liberal ones who openly accepted gayness. Lucky for CJ, she belonged to one of the few. As I raced up the stairs to wash the hair product off my hands in the bathroom sink, I looked up as my father appeared in the mirror over my shoulder, “Can we talk?”

At that time in my life my relationship with my father was tense and confused. We rarely talked, and on occasions that we did, it was over the television’s thundering volume. My father pulled me into the dining room and sat me down at the table. My

mother was in the kitchen, which shared the space, washing a plate with a dishrag. “Am I in trouble?” I asked, glancing at the clock – 6:40, the movie started at 7. “No, no, it’s nothing like that,” he said. “I want to ask you about Matt, you know, the man you will be living with next year at college.” I tilted my head a little to the side and nodded, trying to shake into place where he was headed. “Well,” he paused, searching for the phrasing, “The rumor is that ... that he is *openly gay*.” These last two words were voiceless – whispered yet somehow stifflingly loud. My head stopped nodding; I knew where he was headed.

My bouncing legs stood still, and I swallowed down a gulp as I mouthed, “Yes, I think – that sounds right.” Though the expression was commonplace, until that point in my life I had never seen someone’s jaw literally drop open, and my father looked down as his breathing slowed. He was edging toward comatose when I glanced back over at the clock – 6:45, and mom was still washing the same plate. When the air seemed to refill his lungs, he looked up at me and asked, “Well, I don’t have anything to worry about with you, do I?” The water in the kitchen sink quieted, as I knew my mother stopped washing the dish, still in midair, to listen to my response. Here goes: “Well, you don’t have anything to worry about, but, yes ... I’m gay, too.” My mother dropped the dish loudly into the sink, forfeiting her ruse as she took a spot at the table, tears falling quietly from her eyes.

Several moments of confusion and silence hushed the table, and my eyes kept darting at the clock as both my parents shook their heads, wondering what they had done for me to turn out this way. “Do you want me to take it back?” I offered. “Well, you can’t do that now, can you?” he lamented. Still eager to get to *Mean Girls* and not really comprehending the situation, I hurried through my mother’s tortured hug. “Taylor, I’m going to heaven, and I want you to come, too.” To me the moment was numb; it was

surreal. When would I experience that revolutionary release I saw so often on *Oprah*? Where was my standing ovation? I did not realize it at the time, but to my parents it was just as shocking that I was willing to be open with them, as that I was gay. The practice of homosexuality might have been fine had it stayed locked up with all the other skeletons in the closet, after all I was no different at 6:47 than I had been at 6:45. However, through my lack of disclosure and keeping my homosexuality “internal,” I exerted a power that Michel Foucault calls “sovereign subjectivity” – I was not *gay* to them until the “denotative moment” in which I had spoken the words (Foucault 2002, 137). But I did not so much make a proclamation of homosexuality as I just confirmed their suspicions. What, then, had colored those suspicions – what made them believe I might be gay, and why did they feel responsible? Confusingly, if homosexuality is posed discursively as a choice, why then is our society, as represented by talk shows like *Oprah*, so driven to force people out of what, by that logic, should be only a theoretical closet? If people can choose to be gay or not, would their lack of “outness” imply heterosexuality? In other words, is the “choice” of being gay simply in the saying of it?

At this point in my story, most of my friends stop me, giving me telling smiles and saying, “You were headed to *Mean Girls*, and they had to *ask* if you were gay?” But if my media choices (or aforementioned gender inversion) characterized me as a homosexual, why did I need to come out with words? Almost every coming-out story I heard in my childhood included a chapter of religious damnation because we are “choosing” to live in sin. My “damnation” came at the tail-end of my first year of college when I revealed my “gaydom” to my conservative, born-again sisters a year after I told my parents and close friends. My failure to come out to my sisters drove a stake into our relationship at the time because they had heard through the grapevine that I was gay (and disclosing!). Still, even though it was allegedly my “choice,” they believed they were

owed some sort of coming-out proclamation, one I was determined never to give. And when finally I did, they assured me they loved me no matter what but quickly set up the boundary cones. They warned against exposing their children to my flamboyance and my “partner, boyfriend, significant other, or whatever [I] *choose* to call him.” In contrast to my parents, it was the lack of disclosure for them that created their distress, and by coming out to them as they expected me to do, I was unburdening them from that distress only to take it upon myself.

I think all along my mother knew “something was up” with me and that whatever was causing me grief was, at least in part, alleviated by the company of television. She had certainly used it in this way herself. After I came out, my parents and sisters themselves relied upon the media products like *Oprah* to inform their own understanding of homosexuality and to process and reconcile their own new identities as parents and siblings of a gay son and brother.

Even though *Oprah* often shamed me for not being honest with my family, I ultimately felt that the identity the show helped me to develop and the opportunities it afforded me to encounter homosexuality in rural America, made me enormously grateful. So several years later when producers invited me, I finally took my seat in the studio audience of one of Oprah’s final shows, and she walked out onto the set, I was content to say grace to myself for her and her crew for everything I believed they had given me. But when she called me into a hug on stage in front of the audience, all I could whisper into her ear was, “You changed my life. Thank you.” To which she responded in her Oprah-way, “I feel the love!” And then she tried, unsuccessfully, to let go.

This is but one story – my story. And in the spirit of Oprah’s show and the tradition of feminist and queer scholarship, this personal moment is meant to represent the political implications of something much bigger – the potential cultural impact of

television on rural gay men framed through the text of *Oprah*. My thesis is grounded in a textual analyses of the show and its host, and features the voices of people like me who have been influenced by *Oprah* in navigating the struggles of their sexuality and their regionality. Although the voices included in “*Hello America, I’m Gay!*” are all adults, I attempt to, as with my own ethnography, understand the way their sexuality developed and functioned in their youth in order to move away from scholarship on queerness that treats sexuality as belonging to adulthood. As Mary L. Gray writes in *Stories from the Lives of Queer Youth*, queer study often distances itself from youth-centric analysis because of “a fearful adult queer community [building] distance between itself and youth, particularly those questioning their sexuality; add this to our society’s ever-present attitude that the experiences of youth are less than real” (xiii). This is especially true of closeted rural youth who, as an invisible community, are by definition impossible to research. I bring these two perspectives together, rural queerness and queer youth through the common lens of *Oprah* which mass-mediated discourses have suggested contributed to the mainstreaming of homosexuality in rural, heartland, and Midwestern parts of the country to which her show was largely targeted. What about *Oprah* and Oprah Winfrey makes these discourses prevalent? How have *Oprah* and Oprah Winfrey been received by rural gay men, and what reading strategies and spectatorship practices did they perform while watching the show?

As Kathryn Lofton writes, “ethnographic pursuit of Oprah’s viewers would demonstrate the wide variety of experiences gleaned from her prescriptive hegemony” (15). By choosing to focus that work closely on rural gay voices, I am able to study how her rural gay audience consumes her show and how such viewers use the media to navigate their own sexual identities. Methodologically, this thesis imbricates my own textual analyses of *Oprah*, an interrogation of Oprah Winfrey as a potential diva

figure, and a limited ethnography² since these analyses exist alongside and are informed by each other. This is a mixed methods approach I call “memory mining” which is outlined in greater detail below. First, to locate the popularity of *Oprah* and Oprah Winfrey within a study of her audience, it is important for me to position the show and its genre within a historical context to consider its intentions and explore the existing body of work that seeks to analyze the impact of the show.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In their anthology, *Stories of Oprah: The Oprahfication of American Culture* (2009), Trystan T. Cotten and Kimberly Springer note that scholarship on Oprah and her cultural productions is remarkably sparse considering the magnitude and influence of the various texts created within the “Oprahsphere,” including, but not limited to *Oprah, O, The Oprah Magazine*, The Oprah Winfrey Network (OWN), Oprah’s Book Club, Harpo Productions, her film studio, and the star herself (xii). As such, Cotten and Springer invoke the work of Marxist scholars Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer to coin the term “The Oprah Culture Industries” to illuminate the far-reaching, culturally engrained invisibility of her media empire they argue is so immense that creating the field of Oprah Studies could easily be justified.

This association between Oprah Winfrey and the culture industries rightly suggests that Oprah’s cultural products, particularly her eponymous television show, help(ed) shape and determine certain aspects of American hegemony and ideology, a notion this thesis depends upon when critiquing the discourse of *Oprah* mainstreaming homosexuality. But to understand any serious critical analysis of the reception of her industry and its impact on hegemonic institutions and viewers, it is important first to look

² My analysis of claimant’s responses is itself a kind of textual analysis as my own voice controls and investigates the stories contained herein.

at the building blocks upon which Oprah built her empire, what led to its unparalleled popularity, and how she has become a powerful and influential icon in shaping the culture. In what follows, I review literature relevant to my specific object of study, including a textual and historical analysis of *Oprah*, the contested ideology of the Oprahsphere, and methodological approaches that inform my own framework for this reception study.

THE TELEEVOLUTION OF TABLOID TALK

In her first eight seasons on the air, in what some have called her “sleaze” years (1986-1994), Oprah Winfrey was labeled the “Queen of Trash” for popularizing the confessional genre of what is now called the tabloid talk show, sometimes also referred to as “Trash TV.” But tabloid talk has its roots all the way back to 1967 when *The Phil Donahue Show* (*Donahue*) reportedly gave birth to the genre after the eponymous host left the desk from the “*Tonight Show*-style” position on stage and took the microphone out into the audience. He discovered that the questions he found there were, as he often said, much better than his own. Jeanne Heaton and Nona Wilson write that tabloid talk as we now know it was born during a commercial break on one episode of *Donahue* when a woman in the studio audience struck up a conversation with guest and Noxzema model, Gunilla Knutsson, and by the time the show returned from break, the audience member was on stage braiding her hair. “The response was electric. [From] that moment on, the audience was an integral part of the show’s format” (Heaton and Wilson 18). Through this intimate interaction between a “public” celebrity guest and a “private” citizen audience member, *Donahue* also founded what Joshua Gamson argues is one of the major contributions of tabloid talk shows, sometimes called “Trash TV,” which is the blending and blurring of binaries, particularly the public and private spheres. In so doing, *Donahue*

tended to queer sexed programming strategies by mixing together elements of historically men's and historically women's programming traditions.

Many early broadcast programming strategies for local talk shows had been firmly based on sexed assumptions about listening and viewing preferences. However, these trends were inverted in the 1960s from the "civility-oriented, service-talk" of women's programming like *The Home Show* and *Dr. Joyce Brothers* to the "working class conventions of tabloid, high emotion, and immediacy" of men's programming which "exploited news-generated controversies built on contemporary problems about which people were emotionally charged" (Gamson 43). Programming traditions from this epoch depended on the illustration of women as tame and civil (personal/private sphere) while men were emotional (political/public sphere) and loud. After this inversion in broadcasting trends (and perhaps because of it) we now often associate civility with public culture, which tends to be masculine, and emotionality with the private sphere of domestic femininity. The talk show's innovation on this sexed binary was to stitch together these two traditions and conceive in early television talk the "rational, deliberate, often formalized exchange of ideas" built upon personal experiences (33).

Women's culture in early ladies' magazines first adopted the blending of public and private spheres for use in media was by constructing a "strategic intimacy" built through two types of participatory strategies: solicitation of readers' letters and "enlightened self-improvement ... replacing everyday wisdom with the advice of experts, a strategy also picked up by television talk" (Gamson 33). Broadcasters took note of the success of participatory media in women's cultures and adapted it for the airwaves via radio broadcast in the 1930s and '40s when shows such as *Ted Mack's Original Amateur Hour* featured talent from the audience's real-life listeners, *Truth or Consequences* submitted mailed-in questions for its listeners to answer on air (and often to their own

humiliation), and *Vox Pop* featured “person-on-the-street interviews” (Gamson 42). Alongside these other participatory programs, local talk shows emerged and gained so much popularity throughout the 1950s that producers began to craft new, nationally-broadcast talk show series thrust into the spotlight because of their celebrity hosts.³

Cultural scholar and frequent talk-show guest Vicki Abt along with colleague Leonard Mustazza, however, argue that the current talk show format is not directly descended from nationally-broadcast talk shows of the 1950s as is sometimes suggested of Jack Paar’s *Tonight Show*. Rather, they argue, talk shows are more accurately born of yesteryear’s game shows, such as the radio-cum-television big-prize giveaway show, *Queen for a Day*, which debuted on the radio in 1945 and was re-created as a television series in 1956 (Abt and Mustazza 57). *Queen for a Day* contestants were women who had to compete for audience applause by publicly confessing a recent financial or emotional hardship that caused them distress. She with the saddest tale was then rewarded through consumer citizenship, winning a prize which was often a domestic appliance such as a refrigerator or a washing machine.⁴ By locating tabloid talk in early confessional game shows, Abt and Mustazza reveal a textuality about its history that reveal a long-standing programming strategy associating confession and tragedy with entertainment, which Illouz Vouz extends to *Oprah* in her aptly-named book, *Oprah Winfrey and The Glamour*

³ These include programs featuring David Susskind writers Fannie Hurst and Ben Hecht, New Jersey’s governor Robert Meyner, even entertainer/former stripper/Gypsy-inspirer Gypsy Rose Lee” hosted shows as well as some more politically-oriented talk shows such as news-pioneer Edward R. Murrow’s Sunday morning series (Gamson 43).

⁴ *Oprah* reproduced *Queen for a Day* in Feb. 2003 in a segment called “Princess for a Day.” In the episode, an African-American woman, Fannie (the Nanny) Eugene, is given “gifts that helped ease her burden” including a mini-van and maid services to clean her house every week for a year, which Oprah said “every woman needs.” The show reports she was nominated by the (white) woman for whom she worked as a “housekeeper and nanny,” and the house cleaning services gave her more time to spend with her family after spending the day cleaning someone else’s home. I should also note that in the episode the “queen” herself carries a diamond scepter and wears a crown that’s vastly bigger than the one given to Fannie.

of Misery. Abt and Mustazza also suggests *The Dating Game* (1965), *The Newlywed Game* (1966), and *The Gong Show* (1976) are contributors to less respectable and carnivalesque “toxic” talk shows of the 1980s that relied on freaks in the studio, upon which I expand more below.

Situating contemporary talk shows within the history of game shows fails to account for local talk’s intertwined history with controversial topics upon which the success of tabloid talk is built, especially, as I argue, homosexuality. Indeed, homosexuality was first addressed on television in local talk show programs, chiefly as a problem that needed a solution. In his book, *Prime Time Closet: A History of Gays and Lesbians on TV* (2002), Stephen Tropiano references just such an episode in 1954 from a local Los Angeles program, *Confidential File*, in which producers assembled a panel of “experts” on the subject of homosexuality (who were not, themselves, gay) to discuss “Homosexuals and the Problems They Present” (269). The following year, that same series ran another episode called, “Homosexuals Who Stalk and Molest Our Children” (3). In New York, the ironically-named public affairs show, *The Open Mind*, aired “Introduction to the Problem of Homosexuality,” “Homosexuality: A Psychological Approach,” and “Male and Female in American Society,” all of which dealt with the “problem” of homosexuality (4).

As cheap as they were to produce and controversial as they had become, talk shows became even more popular in 1970 when the FCC passed the Financial Interest and Syndication (fin-syn) Rules under which “networks were prohibited from producing and airing shows during some hours of their affiliates” (Abt and Mustazza 8). The rules were set up to discourage NBC, CBS, and ABC (the only three networks at the time), from monopolizing the broadcasting landscape by preventing them from owning all of the programming they aired on their affiliate stations as well as only airing syndicated

programming in which they were financially invested. Desperate to fill newly vacant slots with affordable programming, affiliates turned to independent television production companies like MTM Enterprises and Tandem Productions for their primetime programming, in addition to picking up cheaply produced daytime syndicated programs in the form of talk shows (Lotz 85-86).

Pioneering the formula for this new onslaught of syndicated programming in the first year of his nationally syndicated broadcast was Phil Donahue. In his early years, Donahue depended on controversial issues-oriented episodes in order to compete with what he described as a daytime schedule filled with “soaps and game shows and Monty Hall giving away \$5,000 to a woman dressed like a chicken-salad sandwich” (“Talk Show Hosts” 10 Nov. 2010). Because of Stonewall and the emergence of homosexuality in the media in the late ‘60s, gay guests themselves were controversial enough to boost the low-budget program’s ratings. However, the more episodes about homosexuality *Donahue* produced, the less confrontational it eventually became; tolerance, as the old adage goes, is the offspring of boredom. So, as with other cheaply-produced syndicated talk shows that followed, *Donahue* began featuring even more “subversive” guests in the form of bisexuals and transgendered people. As Gamson’s book, *Freaks Talk Back* carefully illustrates, episodes on bisexuality and gender deviance were so successful in bringing ratings attention to *Donahue* (his most successful episode being one in which he dons a dress, pun intended), that they helped foster mainstream acceptance of gays, presenting the relative “normalcy” of homosexuality in harsh relief to the “freaks” the show began to depend upon. This may have been due to, as Sedgwick writes, the new psychiatry of gay acceptance in the ‘70s that came with the “renaturalization and enforcement of gender assignment” making gender inversion and promiscuity the things that were subversive and not homosexuality unto itself (1998; 236).

After *Donahue*'s initial success, *Oprah* changed the formula by privileging guest anecdotes and their experiential knowledge over *Donahue*'s tendency to use the "expert" guest who was more than likely a white heterosexual male. This new trend helped to dislodge the notion of a single, natural order to things and the legitimacy of so-called authority figures in general. By privileging personal stories, series like *Oprah* "[cut] away any confidence in universal truth" and the legitimacy of "experts" who became "as eligible as anybody else, if not more so, to be 'schooled' by guests and audience members, who know 'real life'" (Gamson 99). By inserting these everyday voices into the conversation, for the first time on television, talk shows provided LGBTQ (especially LG) guests the chance to speak for themselves in a way that only "experts" had been allowed before. Finally, talk shows became a "cultural arena where homosexuals could get beyond polemics and simply justify their love" (16).

Donahue is credited for mining a new demographic in daytime housebound women by providing "useful information and dialogue that had been largely unavailable" to an audience eager "finally [to have] a place in the conversation [and] determined to be heard" (18). The tradition of the blurred public and private spheres confronted by the carnivalesque scourge of lower-class "freaks" created what cultural critics came to call trash TV. *Donahue*, however, called it "democracy" and said that, if he did his job right, "the next big talk show host [would] be a black woman" (31). Indeed it was – enter Oprah Winfrey.

Writing about the early "sleaze" years of the show (1986-1994), Abt and Mustazza bemoan what they see as *Oprah*'s creation and perpetuation of a confessionalist culture that breathed life into more vulgar talk shows themselves spawning reality programming that is "recklessly toxic to our attitudes and culture" (17). As illustration, they title the opening chapter of their book, "Contaminating Culture" and compare

tabloid talk shows with computer viruses that infect the software of the “cultural” computer. They also refer to talk show producers as “the new pornographers” because they “[make] a public exhibition of private phenomena” and create material designed to shock, despite being “devoid of authentic emotional contexts” (20). This harsh analysis of television talk seems like an extension of Newton Minow’s 1961 “vast wasteland” speech in which he condemned contemporary television for delivering low-culture, entertainment-oriented programming that was not using the airwaves to serve the best interest of the public.

Abt and Mustazza are smart to point out the real-world implications talk shows have on the viewing public, but their critique is reductive, as was Minow’s, in that it disallows a celebration of trash TV’s social contributions. They argue from a pessimistic perspective that “television undermines social controls on deviancy” (8) when that very subversive work is precisely why such shows (even the most “grotesque”) are discursively linked to the mainstreaming of homosexuality. While Abt and Mustazza lament the mess of TV talk in general and the toxic, confessionalist culture the genre has created, other scholars point their fingers more furiously in Oprah’s direction for the mainstream popularization and perpetuation of our self-helping, bootstrapping culture and the neoliberalist politics on which it depends.

FROM PO’ COLORED GIRL TO POWERFUL, WEALTHY WOMAN

In the fall of 1986, affiliates across the nation looking to fill slots in their late daytime/early fringe programming schedules⁵ agreed to pick up the newly repackaged, newly syndicated local talk show *AM Chicago*, which was renamed to feature its

⁵ In broadcast programming, day-parting is the division of the day into several time parts based on consumer trends and spectatorship practices (e.g., prime time, daytime). “Early fringe” refers to the hours after school in the mid-afternoon between 3:30 and 7 p.m.

promising new host Oprah Winfrey. If Donahue's innovation had been to create the roving microphone, inviting the audience to participate as guests in the show, Oprah's innovation was to become a perennial guest herself. Gloria-Jean Masciarotte explains, Oprah "was always already one of her own guests. [She] routinely talks about her life as abuse victim, substance abuser, black person, single working woman, and girlfriend of Stedman" (Masciarotte 94). As an example, like Oprah often says of her childhood, "I wasn't even poor. I was po'" (Winfrey 2011b).

Sometimes touted the "Empress of Empathy," Oprah's twist on the talk show genre in the 1980s was to develop a friendly rapport with her guests by divulging personal details of her own life to elicit their stories through conversation (Masciarotte 94). She often sat on stage with her guests, touching them, or embracing them, and appealing to the camera with her own emotion, while on other talk shows, hosts maintained a comfortable distance from and stoicism with their "troubled" visitors. "Oprah Winfrey's use of emotionalism move[d] Donahue's original practice of making issues of the day everyday issues to its furthest extent by making issues of the everyday" (Masciarotte 96).

Although the format of Oprah's show, featuring the stories of everyday guests, was not itself unique (*The Sally Jessy Raphael Show* had already done this and had been on a St. Louis station for three seasons), Abt and Mustazza credit *Oprah* for ushering in the popularity of trash television as *Donahue*'s only true competition because for the first time guests "got on because they were willing to reveal private matters or ease their troubled souls and possibly get 'therapy' on television, in front of millions" (Abt and Mustazza 58). As I discussed above, the everyday confessional already found its place on television via the '50s game show, *Queen for a Day*. But the goal on *Oprah* was not to win a major appliance or the promise of money (though that may have changed with the

show's overhaul in the mid-'90s⁶), instead, as Abt and Mustazza argue, "confession and dubious attention became their own rewards" (58).

Playing with terms like "positive" and "negative" in reference to how a text influences culture can be fruitless and reductive because there are no objective metrics for measuring such concepts. However it is because both terms are used often in reference to *Oprah* that it becomes difficult to find other, less fraught ways of discussing the text. Oprah Winfrey herself often splits the show into two texts: the sleazy early years and the spiritual later years. However, throughout both texts *Oprah's* treatment of politics tends to be the slipperiest site of ambivalence for scholars and cultural critics. For instance, on the "negative" end of the spectrum, Abt and Mustazza suggest that *Oprah* and its offspring represent a clear threat to American culture. For them, the conservatism of the Reagan era in which *Oprah* was created by and large represented a backlash to the failed social reforms of the sixties, and *Oprah* advanced a neoliberal discourse that created a turn toward the self and a greedier more self-serving public (58-59).

On the "positive" or perhaps more optimistic end of the spectrum, Jennifer L. Rexroat suggests that throughout her history, Oprah has been resolutely activist even if her cultural products do not use a language of activism. Drawing on Patricia Misciagno's work in *Rethinking Feminist Identification* (1997), Rexroat argues that de facto feminists fall into the "paradox of feminism," that being: "women who agree with (and in many cases, actively support) the goals of modern feminism [but] refuse to identify themselves as feminists" (21). Rexroat labels Oprah and most of her audience demographic as de facto feminists and, as evidence, she points to Oprah's numerous public statements and show topics relevant to a myriad of women's issues, including everything from violence

⁶ See Chapter 3.

against women and sexual abuse, to lesbianism, women in the work force, and women's independence from men (22-23).

Additionally, Oprah constantly invokes the success of her life as an unmarried, childless, working woman who is in a long-term relationship with her live-in boyfriend Stedman Graham and who has continually refused all manner of domesticity and containment. She unapologetically declares that had she and "Steady Steady" married as planned, their relationship would have failed because "what frustrates me the most is [women] who still live their lives for men. I just want to shake them sometimes!" (quoted in Rexroat 23). Here, in place of staking a feminist flag into heated political issues, Oprah activates her feminism through autobiography to endorse individual empowerment, which, as Howard illustrates, often uses neoliberalist bootstrapping rhetoric to explain how she has overcome, not only financially but personally as well.

Scholars like Gamson and Masciarotte argue that *Oprah's* most successful innovation on the talk show format was its use of emotionalism and Oprah's own tragic biography to appeal to both its guests and audiences in the same way that *Donahue* had relied upon politics. *Oprah's* former executive producer, Debra DiMaio, once joked, "Oprah has had such an incredible life that no matter what topic we do, it's usually something that happened to her in some way or another" (Kelley 211).

In Oprah's early life, as John Howard writes, she endured poverty, rape and molestation, and an early teenage pregnancy that resulted in the death of her infant son. By invoking this "dark period" in her early life, Oprah re-imagines the myth of the American dream and bootstrapping rhetoric so common in Western culture (9). Historians such as Richard Weiss suggest that the idea that "every American child receives, as part of his birthright, the freedom to mold his life [regardless of] the limitations that circumstances impose" originated as a decidedly sexed ideology of *male* autonomy (3).

But through her constant bootstrapping narrative, as Howard argues, Oprah seems to extend the American dream to women and people of color as well. Weiss and Howard argue that advancing this narrative can be dangerous because the myth formula links “virtue with success and sin with failure ... and by equating failure with sin and personal inadequacy, self help popularizers [obscure] the objective causes of social injustice” (7).

Similar to the methodology deployed in this thesis, Howard mines Oprah’s biography to understand her ideology and to situate her story within its context. He demonstrates through her biography how Oprah advances a post-racial and neoliberal, personal-responsibility mentality. As an example, Howard points to the talk show queen’s recent visit to her rural Mississippi hometown of Kosciusko, where she declared, “There ain’t nothing there but corn” (7). Imbued in this comment is Oprah’s ideology of upward mobility – moving up in life by moving away.

Statements like these also lend themselves well to the popular notion that Oprah has become so successful, she has somehow managed to transcend race or to become a “comforting, nonthreatening bridge between black and white cultures [...] sometimes embracing, sometimes minimizing her blackness” but altogether depoliticizing it and breaking down yet another binary (Peck 90-91). Others argue that *Oprah* projects such a strong sense of both race and sex that “black feminism seems, as much as woman-centered feminism, to define the show” (Squire 104-6). For these academics, Oprah’s tide of influence carries with it a kind of implied political activism – the thing that *is* but never calls itself so as Rexroat argues.

For instance, Masciarotte argues that *Oprah* adopts the soundtrack of sixties reform and seventies feminist activism because on the show “there is no area of politics that is not personal, and no space where the personal is exempt from politics” (Masciarotte 96). By illuminating big picture issues from the small frame focus

of her guests' stories and by eliciting "common sense and everyday experience as a mark of truth" (Shattuc 169), Oprah activates the central tenet of feminist culture – that the personal *is* political. Co-opting the term "Oprahfication" from *The Wall Street Journal*, Jane Shattuc goes a step further by illuminating how *Oprah* strengthens the bridge tabloid talk created between public and private spheres by deciphering complex political issues for its viewers. *Oprah* connects the public and private spheres through the voices of everyday people in a public debate elsewhere controlled by "degree-flashing experts" (read: straight white men), translating politics "into the everyday experience of the political" (Shattuc 177). This is a credit to enabling a demographic of voices, mostly women's, in a conversation on politics from which they had been previously excluded, resulting in a more open and diverse debate (Kooijman 132). Bringing public debate into the historically private sphere of daytime television and the home, then, can perhaps be understood as a pedagogical tool to teach members of her largely female mass audience about political issues that affect them, if only through the eyes of Oprah's ideology (133).

As illustration, Jaap Kooijman discusses *Oprah*'s treatment of the war in Iraq and polemical new foreign policy as a result of the attacks of 9/11. While conventionally mostly male "experts" controlled such hefty political debates on TV, topics such as "When Will You Fly Again?" "What Does High Alert Mean?" and "Islam 101" tended to bridge the gap between the historically masculine public sphere and the historically feminine private sphere. The sexed implications of changing the political into a "personal experience of the political" is illustrated by the episode "Is War the Only Answer?" The male expert guests suggest that (impending) war is a necessary evil in order to disarm Saddam Hussein to ensure national security while a female pre-taped interview makes sentimental appeals to mothers about their sons and daughters serving in the war and living in a period of political unrest (140-141).

As Cotten and Springer argue in the introduction to their edited anthology, Oprah's appearance of being apolitical is what makes her political influence even more powerful as when she backed Senator Barack Obama in the 2008 presidential election, not for his views on foreign policy or domestic security but because he, much like her sequined Uggs and cashmere sweaters, was among her list of "favorite things" (Cotten and Springer ix). This "favorite things" endorsement is said to have delivered more than a million votes for Obama and was essential to his campaign win (Garthwaite 1).

Oprah's critics claim that this sort of apolitical neoliberalist rhetoric works within a framework of "individual makeover" thereby ignoring "collective struggle" (Howard 12). Others, like Lynn Spigel, argue that *Oprah* depoliticizes and dramatizes serious events, such as the terrorist attacks on 9/11, by focusing, for instance, on the quick-fix therapy of a pregnant widow rather than exploring the historical causes and tragic circumstances surrounding her situation. Spigel takes issue with the show's focus on the widow's personal experience because it reduces her to a victim of chance, creating the impression that her torment is but a twist of fate while ignoring the complex system of political tensions involved (247). In his review of her article, however, Kooijman is quick to throw Spigel's argument into neutral claiming that while *Oprah* does indeed depoliticize such issues and largely ignores the sociopolitical contexts, viewers come away feeling more personally agential and less helpless to circumstance by focusing on such personal perspectives (133). In other words, Kooijman argues that, yes, *Oprah* oversimplifies, trivializes, sensationalizes, and reduces serious issues into matters of personal scandal (133); however, he claims that *Oprah* creates a more diverse debate, inviting disenfranchised communities into the conversation, such as women, ethnic minorities, and gays and lesbians who feel empowered through their viewership. So while opponents of the program might call her employment of melodrama and emotionalism a

bastardization of serious issues, defenders argue that shows like *Oprah* engage a politics of other means, pointing to “feminist-inspired reworking of what counts as legitimate public discussion,” which is at least in part credited with allowing homosexuals to talk back (Gamson 16).

TO THE PEWS: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE AND METHODS OF STUDY

This project relies upon a theoretical framework informed largely by feminist and queer theory as well as cultural geography. The overarching theoretical perspective that this study asserts is in the feminist tradition of understanding the personal as political but also, as I add, educational. The words and voices of the men included in “*Hello America, I’m Gay!*” are not meant to speak for the whole of the rural gay community but rather to draw lines between individual interpretations and to study the connections viewers highlight as important that might otherwise be lost by studying an imagined viewer. These responses are then mapped back onto the text itself to analyze the hows and whys of rural gay viewer reception.

First, through queer theory I am able to analyze the homonormative notion of gayness as presented in a certain kind of way in tabloid talk and as especially endorsed by Oprah Winfrey. The work of Richard Dyer and Brett Farmer also allow me to expand upon my theorization that these viewers’ devotion to Oprah Winfrey is in a tradition of what has been called gay diva worship. This is done through a discussion of the postmodern, post-structural tendencies of the diva, who fashions gaps in between essentialist dichotomies. Among the binaries the diva seeks to break down are sex (male/female) and their corresponding public/private associations especially defined in our childhoods, upon which Chapter 2 relies. I put scholars such as Sedgwick in conversation with Jürgen Habermas, Spigel, and Gray for a discussion of the bridgework television

does in connecting these binaries, creating what Gray calls a “boundary public” within sexed and gendered spaces in the home in which to do queer identity work through their parasocial interaction – their “friendship” – with Oprah Winfrey.

Perhaps because “*Hello America, I’m Gay!*” is so concerned with understanding the identity work rural queer men do in constructing their “truths,” Chapter 3 is built upon the foundational work of Michel Foucault and his exploration of the church-inspired, therapeutic tradition of the confessional which becomes inextricably linked with sex, deviant sexuality, and daytime television in modern popular American culture. And because *Oprah* is so often thought of as targeted toward rural, Midwestern, and heartland communities, I am also concerned in interrogating how members of those audiences are studied. To do so, I engage Judith Halberstam’s critique of the urban-oriented perspective of the academy and queer culture (2005) as also endorsed by Victoria E. Johnson (2008), Gray (2009). She calls this theoretical notion “metronormativity” and challenges the near-exclusive urban focus of queer scholars who perpetuate what Johnson calls the “myth of the heartland” as a place of rustic social conventions and conservative Christian values. In my analysis of rural gay fandom of *Oprah*, I challenge these scholars using responses from my own participants who did not feel as though the “myth of the heartland” was all that mythical. In so doing, I also contribute to *Oprah* reception scholarship which has been scarce.

According to Cotten and Springer, to date, there are only two anthologies on *Oprah/Oprah* and only half a dozen books of critical analyses by other authors, which are largely concerned with Oprah’s Book Club, leaving her other media texts to be interrogated mostly in book chapters and journal articles (xiii). Much of this shorter work comprises compelling but ambivalent portraits of Oprah’s influence on the nature of spirituality, feminism, and politics, as explored above but is still remarkably sparse given

the “Oprah Industry’s” radius of influence. Rarer are explicit discussions of that influence on the mainstreaming of homosexuality, to which the program is discursively linked. And truly missing are engagements with reception or fan studies even with Winfrey’s unprecedentedly large daytime and worldwide audience and her insistence on their continued presence in the studio.

Oprah was overhauled in the mid-‘90s in response to the new wave of talk shows catered toward a younger audience such as *Ricki Lake* and *The Jerry Springer Show*. In so doing, Oprah positioned her show as “respectable” and “quality,”⁷ moving away from featuring freaks in the studio and envisioning new programming filled with self-help and change-your-life themes. “Originally our goal was to uplift, enlighten, encourage, and entertain through the medium of television,” Oprah explained. “Now our mission ... is to use television to transform people’s lives, to make viewers see themselves differently, and to bring happiness and a sense of fulfillment into every home” (quoted in Lofton 4). With that format transition, Oprah moved out of the crowd and onto the stage, but her audience (in the pews, so to speak) was every bit as important. As Kathryn Lofton explains:

Because her viewers are so integral to her every ritual and gift, the celebrants of her empire cannot be excised from interpretive scrutiny. Precisely because Oprah Winfrey discursively posits and ritually incorporates carefully selected candidates from her viewing audience, the student and scholar of Oprah Winfrey’s manifold productions will never be able to deny their diversity, adamancy, or critical participation (17).

Yet, most Oprah scholarship does just that: It avoids audience analysis of the show in favor of making theoretical claims of its cultural impact on reception. As I write above, Lofton’s work does invite future scholars to do ethnographic research to explore the ways in which *Oprah* is negotiated and decoded by her audience which, as Lofton

⁷ I discuss how I operationalize both the politics of both quality and respectability in greater detail in Chapter 3.

admits, she avoids doing. This invitation in part inspired my decision to focus on this text in *"Hello America, I'm Gay!"*. However, because the show seems often geared toward the imagined and monolithic audience of rural or Midwestern folk, I also wanted to conduct fieldwork which could potentially challenge these theoretical claims and judgments made about rural audiences. To substantiate my findings, it is important for me first to locate my research within a brief overview of related studies in the field of media reception scholarship.

Ethnographic research on media reception informed by cultural studies uses a qualitative method that often, though not always, aims to situate subjects' spectatorship and meaning-making practices within their cultural, historical, and political contexts. Data collection for ethnography more often than not involves the researcher's participation in or observation of the cultural contexts in order to describe the nature and customs of those being studied (who may or may not be aware of ambient influences). By inhabiting the same space as their subjects, ethnographers are said to capture "social meanings and ordinary activities [in] naturally occurring settings" (Brewer 10). However, this is a problematic assertion because by virtue of the researcher's presence, those studied are technically no longer situated in "naturally occurring settings." Because of this, making so-called objective arguments or claims about a group of people based on this data collection method is difficult given their awareness of being studied. This is underscored throughout John Tulloch's and Henry Jenkins' book, *Science Fiction Audiences: Watching Dr. Who and Star Trek* (1995), as a power differential between researchers and their subjects as well as the potential of leading interviewees toward desired results. However, individualistic responses can reveal different reading strategies viewers employ and can avoid overarching assumptions by scholars based upon their own theories of how an audience receives or decodes a text. Ethnographic findings also

snowball into potential future research questions to open up new conversations in the field and serve as building blocks for bridges over gaps in reception analysis.

In one of the first major studies of interpretative communities, Janice Radway (1984) uses an ethnographical approach to interrogate the hows and whys of women's engagement with romance novels by studying a group of women in Smithton (a pseudonym). She uses reader-response theory to break down the ways the novels are received, negotiated, and re-imagined by the subjects who use the practice of reading to suit a variety of different needs in their lives. In doing this work, Radway expands the field by moving beyond reception studies into the realm of audience studies, which is concerned with investigating real people as opposed to "ideal" or theorized audiences. Radway's work is also influential because it situates her own perspective amongst her subjects in a way that chips away at scholarship that claims to present some sort of authoritative truth or universal notion in its findings. Radway's influence on *"Hello America, I'm Gay!"* comes from using her respondents' answers to draw connections that she can then study through textual analyses. In this way, she works toward circumventing the critique of ethnographers who lead their subjects to desired answers, by letting her subjects generate the wealth of material she analyzes in the texts. She also pairs the readers' responses with her own textual readings of the material, a technique I find most helpful in understanding the connections I have drawn from my own participants.

Jenkins' own ethnographic work in media studies coincides with Radway's in the way that it argues for the existence of active, not passive audience members, who negotiate their own meanings of texts. Inspired by Michel de Certeau, Jenkins also introduced the notion of bricolage or poaching, into media studies (1992). These terms elucidate how mainstream products are redefined or a reread in order to serve the needs of disenfranchised audiences. In poaching, the consumer becomes a producer, which

again helps to account for the cultural work of marginalized or subjugated communities who seek to find themselves in popular media. As Jenkins writes, poaching and fan activities are “an impertinent raid on the literary preserve that takes away only those things that seem useful or pleasurable to the reader” (86). Meanwhile Constance Penley expands upon this notion to explain how such audiences pull from existing cultural products in a kind of “hit-and-run” process, such as women who “manipulate the products of mass-produced culture” (137-39).

Queer scholars have extended these theories to investigate the way in which queer audiences navigate and make meaning from media texts. For example, José Muñoz writes on the notion of disidentification in which he argues that queer subjects (specifically those of multiple minoritarian subjects) seek representations of their many identities in order to do queer identity work, and when they cannot find appropriate representation, they instead engage in a strategy of “resistance or survival” by disidentifying with characters and situations not meant for them (5). Another queer poaching technique is read in the “gay sensibility” of the Camp aesthetic. In Michael Bronski’s book, *Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility* (1984), he argues that while Camp is undefinable, it often challenges heterosexual norms and normalized gender roles while allowing for “gay men to re-imagine the world around them ... by exaggerating, stylizing and remarking what is usually thought to be average or normal” (42). Expanding on Jack Babuscio’s notion that Camp “[pokes] fun at the whole cosmology of restrictive sex roles and sexual identifications which our society uses to oppress its men and repress its men” (46), Andy Medhurst recounts his young fandom of the 1960s TV series *Batman* in an autoethnography on *Batman*, deviance, and Camp. Medhurst offers what he calls a “gay reading” of the text by positioning camp as a way of allowing for supposedly straight characters to serve as gay role models and imagine a much more stylized and exaggerated

queer space (149-153). Campy actors or characters celebrated by gay audiences are looking to break down gender performance are appealing because they connote “acting itself – artifice, impersonation, and exaggeration” (White 477).

In this thesis, I engage with these queer strategies and autoethnography which, like Medhurst’s writing, is used by scholars or students who wish to consider their own cultural experiences as evidence – or the Aca-Fan, as Jenkins might call them. The very introduction of “*Hello America, I’m Gay!*” is my brief autoethnography, which I include to give the reader a sense of my own perspective on rural fandom of *Oprah*. So as not to imply a general way of considering the data presented of my respondents, in feminist tradition, I intentionally insert the “I” back into my work. In doing so, I seek to eliminate a definitive reading of the cultural histories and narratives of my respondents and to open up new doors for future research on marginalized or subaltern audiences. Likewise, as Lofton writes of her overuse of Oprah quotations, I include in story form as much as my participants personal backgrounds “as the page will tolerate precisely so that viewers and scholars may not only come to know what I think I have seen but also can come to decide, too, what they might see” in their narratives (15).

To study one such kind of marginalized queer audience, Gray conducted an ethnography (2009) of rural queer youth living in Kentucky who were negotiating and laying claim to their mediated queer identities. Her work inserts young rural voices into queer and media scholarship largely dominated by adult- and urban-oriented scholars, challenging theoretical claims about rural or heartland parts of the country as rustic and governed by old-timey morals and values.

The urban-oriented scholarship of queer studies particularly, and its use of the rural to color the notion of “America’s closet,” has been called into question by scholars like Gray and Halberstam who use the term “metronormativity” to discuss this tendency

(Gray 10; Halberstam 36-37) . Alongside Gray's work, in my determination to insert rural voices into conversations about queerness and televisual reception, I am interested in investigating and challenging the cultural geography myth of the heartland as a place of rustic, religious, and conservative morals and values. In relief against Gray's ethnography, I do not rely on out rural youth who are able to be accessed; on the contrary, each story investigates the closets of my rural viewers. In my research, I found that making claims about rurality and rural queerness based upon the experiences of rural out youth, or youth who have determined their sexuality, is both groundbreaking and problematic. While such work *is* investigating a different kind of audience, it fails to account for the relationship between the audience and media texts used by rural youth who are not out or who are not sexually identified throughout their rural lives, many of whom, like myself, depended on their televisions in a distinct way.

My contribution to the field of ethnographic TV research is in drawing lines between the oral autoethnographies of my research participants and my own textual analyses of the elements of Oprah/*Oprah* to which they most respond in a methodological approach I call "memory mining." This technique allows me to study a group of men and their cultural and geographical experiences in youth when they were not and could not have been accessible for research. By using the memory mining approach, which Oprah models through her constant invocation of her autobiography, I access a library of information about identity formation, the cultural contexts, and viewing practices everyday people consider important in their spectatorship of television. Scholars who rely on memory to study identity argue that people act on memories to produce their present beliefs and norms (Knapp 123). Barry Schwartz claims, "To remember is to place a part of the past in the service of conceptions and needs of the present" (374). Conversely, memories can be problematic for "objective" study because of the way in which the

present influences the representation of the past, or, as David Lowenthal argues, “Instead of remembering exactly what was, we make the past intelligible in the light of present circumstances” (31). Still, memories are important tools in studying how we believe we construct our identities in the present day, and as such, are appropriate for research (Jenkins and Spigel 117-119). Memory mining is especially suitable for a study on *Oprah* because as a talk show, it relies heavily on memories, often invoking memories and experiences in childhood that contribute to our present identities, including Oprah’s, and because quite simply, viewers’ interactions with the show are locked away in their memories because old episodes are not available to the public.

My research methodology was qualitative in nature and comprised six in-depth phone interviews with gay men followed by a discursive analysis of the research subjects’ responses and anecdotal histories. The participants (often referred to as viewers) for this study either resided or were raised in rural areas (not necessarily the Midwest) of the United States and considered themselves either fans or frequent viewers of *Oprah/Oprah*. These interviews were semi-ethnographic in nature in that they were aimed at studying the cultural contexts which informed the viewers’ spectatorship of the show; however, I depended solely on viewers’ memories to paint that cultural context and color data that would otherwise be filled by my personal observation in a strict ethnography. This “memory mining” technique is a useful tool in that it illuminates the contexts the viewers’ themselves considered important in shaping their identities and their spectatorship of *Oprah*, regardless of historical accuracy. It is important to note here, as scholars such as Jonathan Gray (2003) and Janet Staiger (2005) do, that any analysis of the viewers’ responses is, itself, a kind of textual analysis. This important caveat opens the possibility of various interpretations of subjects’ responses which, as I write above, is why I so prominently reinsert the “I” back into my research so as not to claim my

analyses of their responses as authoritative. Furthermore, I decided to memory mine in order to step around existing rural queer research that relies solely upon out youth, youth whose guardians consent to research, or youth already confident of their sexual orientation, which, as I discussed above, can be problematic when making assertions about rural queerness.

To recruit subjects, I networked with dozens of *Oprah*'s "ultimate viewers" by attending the 2011 "O You! Oprah Conference" held in Atlanta. I was also given brief access to the social media sites of *The Advocate* magazine. And I contacted out-gay guests of *Oprah* who appeared in episodes from the show's twenty-fifth season, and its behind-the-scenes sister series which aired on OWN. Sally Lou Loveland, the show's audience producer, also agreed to participate and communicate her personal experiences with *Oprah*'s "ultimate viewers" to understand what she called the psychology of fans dedicated enough to make a pilgrimage to the studio.

To engage critically and situate viewers' reception practices, I also perform textual analyses of common discourses and rhetoric produced by *Oprah* and its "live your best life" motto. Although I interrogate specific episodes mentioned by the viewers, much of their understanding of *Oprah* relies upon the affect of the canon and not individual episodes. Outside of a twentieth-anniversary DVD pack of *Oprah* clips, Oprah has allowed no access to her vault of 4,561 hours and no full-length episodes of the series are available for purchase. The episodes are thus locked into memories by viewers that are not re-negotiated by multiple viewings after episodes are taped-over or deleted. This underscores the importance of a memory-mining approach as viewers mostly watched the show live or very soon after original broadcast. As such, particular episodes that may stand out to viewers are always already connected to the cultural contexts in which they first (and perhaps only) watched them. Ien Ang discusses something similar in *Living*

Room Wars (1996): “watching television can begin to be understood as a complex cultural practice full of dialogical negotiations and contestations rather than as a singular occurrence whose meaning can be determined once and for all in the abstract” (Ang 39). In other words, it is not necessarily specific episodes of *Oprah* that viewers continually renegotiate but the affect of the text itself as it progresses through the years, which makes reception analysis of specific episodes tricky.

My textual analyses of *Oprah* as informed by Gamson and Tropiano seek to investigate the rhetoric of normalcy and gayness as disseminated by the show and its host, largely through three generic paradigms: “gay man versus X” episodes (e.g., versus conservatives, Christians, parents, etc.), coming-out episodes (e.g., celebrity outings), and episodes that paint a darker picture of homosexuality, such as those featuring guests on the “down-low” or guests who have been involved in “deceitful” or phony relationships.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

Each of the three substantive chapters of *“Hello America, I’m Gay!”* explores the way in which rural gay super fans received and negotiated Oprah’s various cultural presences throughout their fandom of Oprah/*Oprah*. In Chapter 1, “Oprah’s Reconceptualization of the Diva,” I locate Oprah Winfrey within a lineage of female performers idolized by gay men in a practice that has come to be called diva worship. Historical and discursive analyses of the star text of Oprah’s life add texture to the fan responses and practices she has inspired upon two of these most devoted viewers. This chapter will also seek to interrogate the way in which Oprah’s divadom and continued use of religious rhetoric have taken these fans on a kind of spiritual pilgrimage which has put them in direct contact with Oprah Winfrey herself.

In Chapter 2, “Watching Oprah in a Boundary Public Sphere” I expand upon work which analyzes the placement of the television in the home and its relationship to gendered spaces, especially with regard to public and private spheres. This chapter then looks at the viewing practices of two rural gay youth who used the televisions in their family and living rooms to create a “boundary public” in the absence of their families to become a space to develop and understand their queer (or gay) identities through episodes of *Oprah*. These boundary public spaces become a site of sanctuary for young rural gay men searching for solace from the physical or emotional danger posed by their families and communities and friendship in the ideal maternity of their “queen” of daytime.

In Chapter 3, “Oprah and How The Truth Will Set You Free ... or Aflame,” I explore how *Oprah*’s well-worn use of the “coming out” paradigm is rooted in religious, confessional traditions, placing an emphasis on openness as the only way to one’s “true self.” I analyze the way in which rural viewers where outness can pose a physical danger received this doctrine and how her changing use of the paradigm from the “sleaze” years of the first eight seasons to the later “spiritual” seasons shifted, for better or for worse, the way those signals were received. Through queer theorists’ work on closets and the way in which those closets are rendered on television, I also explore how *Oprah*’s use of the coming out paradigm supported an imperative for homosexuals to disclose their sexuality in order to correctly perform their gayness in the heterosexual eyes of those around them.

Finally, in the Conclusion, I review the effectiveness of the memory mining methodological approach I performed and explain how it was both problematic and useful in exploring the unique spectatorship practices and reading strategies of these rural gay men. I also outline my contributions to the fields of Rural Queer Studies, TV Studies,

and Oprah Studies through this methodological approach and the avenues it opens for future research.

Chapter One: From Dorothy to Glinda – Oprah’s Reconceptualization of the Diva

*“Our magic ruby slippers are right here inside ourselves;
it’s right in your own heart.” - Oprah Winfrey⁸*

In October 2011, I attended the annual *O, The Oprah Magazine* conference to recruit sources for this project. Part of the conference’s plug was that Oprah Winfrey herself would be delivering the closing speech and taking questions from the audience – five thousand of her most devoted followers. In the moments before she entered the stage, I took my seat next to Charlie, an African-American man somewhere in his thirties, with new silver hairs winding through his long dark braids. His tie dunked into his sweater-vest with labored breaths, and he tried to steady his camera lens as his hands trembled, shaking with anticipation. While we sat awaiting her arrival, I asked him if he was a big fan. He laughed and told me he had been watching Oprah since her daytime talk show first aired nationally in 1986. He explained how watching (and living) her show in his childhood, in his adolescence, and in his young adulthood gave him a feeling of belonging and comfort as he struggled to cope with his homosexuality and his race in rural Mississippi. Throughout our conversation, Charlie talked to me but left his eyes transfixed on the stage, waiting almost nervously for “Her” arrival. I sensed that he was almost fearful. What if she decided not to show? What if she was unlike everything he had always hoped? He had suffered through a long tumultuous journey to be where he was. He had been waiting all his life. When the moment arrived, Oprah walked out onto the stage to the audience’s roar with her arms stretched out as if in anticipation of an

⁸ (“You’ve Always Had the Power” 11 Nov. 2011). 39

embrace, and she screamed, “There you are!” When I looked over at Charlie, I saw silent tears streaming down his face as he captured his first photo, and I knew his life had been forever changed. “Here I am.”

This moment represented more than just Charlie’s adoration of Oprah the person. It became a fixed moment in his life where, for one hour, by breathing the same air as Oprah Winfrey, he could escape the simple mundanities of his regular life and fall into her colorful world he had been orbiting for most of his young existence. The “heavenly body” of Oprah’s world had become for him an imagined space where he could transcend the limits of his life to be connected to hundreds of other disenfranchised souls in the strong bonds of welcome, community, and acceptance he first found through her show. Something otherworldly about Oprah’s presence was transportive for Charlie and to which he had become addicted. I can only compare his obsessive fandom for the queen of daytime to the diva worshipping practices of gay men for other single-named female celebrities like Cher, Madonna, Aretha, or Beyonce. It is not necessarily my intention in this chapter to proclaim Oprah is a diva, a term that like gay icon, is always already fraught and debatable. What I am interested in doing, however, is exploring how and why her fans, in this chapter Ray and Marques, often use more “traditional” pop star diva figures (Janet Jackson and Madonna respectively) to illuminate their own feelings about Oprah and the change she and her show represented in their lives. I start with this chapter to follow my own fandom linearly because of the ways in which this kind of diva worshipping seems to happen in childhood before one sexually identifies, in what scholars sometimes call the protoqueer or protogay phase of life.

Call them divas, call them gay icons, or call them idols, the subjects of these fervent gay subcultures according to Daniel Harris, have historically been flamboyant female performers to whom gay men could turn to find solace from the “almost universal

experience of ostracism and insecurity” (Harris 10). Judy Garland, once thought to reign supreme as diva or gay icon, became emblematic of homosexuality because of her parallel relationship to suffering as theorized by Richard Dyer in 1986. After her death, which is discursively linked to the riots at Stonewall, gay fandom of Judy became tied up with the closeted generation of homosexuals of the 1940s, ‘50s, and ‘60s with whom newly-open gay men wanted to dissociate. “Before Stonewall,” Harris argues, “homosexuals exploited [such] figures as a therapeutic corrective [...] to counteract their own sense of powerlessness as a vilified minority” and triumph “over the daily indignities of being gay” (n.p.) By the 1980s, after a decade of fighting for equal rights, some scholars argue the nature of diva worship began to change as the diva generally “had come to be perceived as the emotional crutch of the pathetic old queen,” a “symbolic icon of an oppressed early stage in gay culture in which homosexuals sat glued to their television sets” (Harris n.p.). *New York Times* writer, Robert Leleux, came to a similar observation after a preview performance of *End of the Rainbow*, Peter Quilter’s play about the final days of Judy. He theorizes that “because of the holocaust that was the AIDS epidemic and its annihilation of the previous generation of gay men, the faith of our fathers risks extinction. Today, Judyism, like Yiddish, is little more than a vague cultural memory” (n.p.).

Sociologist Brett Farmer agrees that movements toward gay liberation have had a radical impact on queer identities and culture, perhaps even changing the nature of diva worship. But he argues consigning it “to the historical dustbin of pre-Stonewall obsolescence,” as Harris does, is reductive and unhelpful, as popular female figures continue to permeate gay culture today (Farmer 172). Farmer argues that Harris perpetuates a “homogenizing division of queer history into mutually exclusive, self-contained categories of pre- and post-Stonewall, in which the former is freighted with all

the negative signs of queer experience – oppression, marginalization, shame [while] the latter emerges as its sunny, rainbow flag-waving antithesis” (173). Such a dichotomy disallows diva worship because it is a practice of the oppressed which cannot exist in the post-homophobic landscape Harris posits.

In the service of continuing this debate, I extend Farmer’s challenge of Harris to ask: Can we understand such claims about the end of diva worship as relying on urban-oriented perspectives of gay culture? And what about Oprah might make her fans compare her to diva figures in the halls of such *music* stars as Madonna and Janet Jackson as well as other more religious icons? My original goal in researching this thesis was to find out if my use of Oprah/*Oprah* was unique or if other isolated and disenfranchised gay men used her and her show in the way that I did, as a mechanism to reconcile my sexuality with the oppressive homophobia in which I lived – similar to closeted homosexuals’ use of Judy in the 1950s and ‘60s. In what follows, I use the diva theory work of Farmer and Dyer as a theoretical lens through which to argue that the days of the diva are not dead, but newly-minted generations of gay men have chosen instead to adopt different kinds of divas: not those bound to notions of suffering and tragedy as with Judy, but those who subscribe to a more spiritual and self-empowered ideology, as with the Oprah quotation that opens this chapter.

“JUST FOLLOW THE YELLOW BRICK ROAD”

Dyer notes that in 1950 when MGM finally fired Judy after years of emotional abuse and manipulation of her career, she tried to commit suicide. The event “made possible a reading of [Judy] as having a special relationship to suffering, ordinariness, [and] normality” (Dyer 138) tacked upon her association with heavy camp and poorly performed gender. In response, an oppressed gay male subculture adopted her as an

emblematic mascot, actively supporting her 1950s and '60s vehicle films including *A Star is Born* (1954) and *I Could Go On Singing* (1962) as well as her successful television career with two specials, *The Ford Star Jubilee* (1955) and *The Judy Garland Show* (1963), which was later developed into a series on CBS. Dyer argues that “The post-1950 reading was also a reading of her career before 1950, reading back into the earlier films, recordings and biography in the light of later years” (139). These back-readings of her biography were buttressed when Judy increasingly began to speak about her life before 1950, illuminating some of the suffering and abuse she had endured in her professional career.

Janet Stagier traces this gay fandom back even further beginning with her most iconic role as Dorothy Gale in MGM’s 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz* (1992, 165). The musical fantasy film reads as a beautiful and compelling allegory of the oppressed and invisible lives many gay men were leading. *The Wizard of Oz* deploys the theme of “home” in powerful ways. Like Dorothy, gay men often suffered in the harsh and colorless world of a kind of “Kansas,” enduring any number of physical and mental hardships, not least of which was an environment posed to destroy their lives at any moment. They also *longed* for home in the way Dorothy did – a place where they were finally loved, accepted, and embraced even if not by their immediate families as Dorothy lived with her Aunt Emily and Uncle Henry.

For the most part, her family ignored Dorothy, a whimsical soul addressed only when she was causing trouble. After Dorothy is transported over the rainbow, she enters a prismatic other world filled with a variety of characters embraced for their diversity – each a unique and celebrated color of the rainbow as opposed to the muted tones of gray and brown the uniform mixture of America’s “melting pot” represented. Among the celebrated cast of misfits was a “sissy character” in the Cowardly Lion with whom many

gay men identified because of the ridicule he faced for his failed masculinity. Dorothy stood up for him – she convinced him of his worth – she loved him for who he was. And she was his friend.

As author and journalist Michael Gross writes, “friend of Dorothy” served gay men as a euphemism for discussing sexual orientation, but disclosed fandom of Judy or articles using her name became themselves “vehicle[s] for the aggressive derision of gay men” (64). In a memoir by Mel Tormé about working on *The Judy Garland Show*, he observed that “it was a rule, not an exception, that the fans in the studio audience were ‘heavily populated’ with ‘odd fellows’” also remarking that some called Judy the “Queen of the Fags!” (quoted in M. Gross 64). In his description of the audience of Judy’s 1967 Palace season for *Esquire*, William Goldman wrote an account of a conversation between two heterosexual men in which one says, “Tonight, no one goes to the [men’s] room” (quoted in Dyer 140; and M. Gross 64).

“[Judy] embodied many of the paradoxical emotional states that gay men commonly experience while coming out: vulnerability and strength, sincerity and duplicity, self-consciousness and abandon, adolescence and maturity” like many gay divas of her time including Marilyn Monroe and Joan Crawford (Gross 66). In representing each side to these binaries, the diva also ruptures them, just as Judy’s androgyny with the gender binary could be read as both male and female as well as both and neither. As Susan J. Leonardi and Rebecca A. Pope note in *The Diva’s Mouth: Body, Voice, and Prima Donna Politics*, the diva “makes visible the seams and fissures of a culture’s gender and sexual ideology” (21). For them, the diva has the power to challenge traditional sex and gender categories and oppositions. She subverts hegemony’s notion of what it means to be male and female, masculine and feminine. If, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick asserts (1990), one of the strategies for identifying homosexuality is through

gender deviance, those who poorly perform the gendering of the sex into which they were born might identify with the diva's gender subversion or, to invoke Judith Butler, "gender trouble" (xxvii).

As Dyer notes of Judy's stage career and Pope, Leonardi, and Wayne Koestenbaum write of opera divas, this form of gay fandom in many ways relied on access to such voices, and so this particular form of the gay subculture, which defined itself *as* gay male culture, was owned and paced by urban, white gay men. Rural access to diva worship, then, relied upon urban culture and depended almost entirely on the media to encounter diva virtuosity, through phonographs and vinyl records, broadcast radio. Because rural gay men could not easily access newly-forming urban gay communities, early rural gay diva worship depended upon these private forms of media to consume public figures, a tradition that continues.

Judy's death in 1969 breathed life into what is understood as the modern gay-rights movement. Hours after her funeral, the Stonewall riots broke out in Manhattan's West Village (64). As gay men became more and more visible in the media, existing rhetoric which continued to tie them to Judy Garland, derisively or not, became tenuous within the community as that association made them feel anchored to the oppressed generation that had come before them. Even gay-cult film director John Waters, whose films are often associated with the "low cultural" Camp aesthetic, has spoken of Judy with embarrassment. "A gay man loving Judy could almost be like a black person watching a minstrel show," he joked. "I mean, I do love her, but if a reporter were coming to my home, I wouldn't have Judy Garland playing. They'd think maybe upstairs I had a room devoted to her" (quoted in M. Gross 66).

According to Farmer, Harris argues that diva worship has "declined in contemporary gay culture to the point of virtual obsolescence" (Farmer 172). Farmer

challenges what he sees as Harris painting a portrait of a post-homophobic landscape, positing that post-Stonewall, many of the oppressive social and political ideologies have “ceded to a new liberal era of acceptance and assimilation” (Farmer 172). As Harris himself describes:

Before the gay sensibility developed, homosexuals constituted an alienated diaspora of scattered individuals who lived a splintered existence in localized pockets where they strove to efface every identifying mark that might compromise them in the eyes of outsiders ... (n.p.)

For Harris, in this transition to liberty, the ritual of practicing diva worship to escape the realities of life is no longer relevant, for the notion of divadom has become for the new, young homosexual a “symbolic icon of an oppressed early stage in gay culture” (Harris 22). Gross contends that as a result of the media’s speedy incorporation of gay culture from the seventies on (especially in the 1990s), gay men today are “mostly indifferent to the faux tragedy and flamboyant exoticism of Camp, and to old-time gay icons like Judy Garland” (M. Gross 64). He argues that contemporary gay culture has fetishized the “flamboyant normalcy” of the cisgendered, masculine gay man and the practice of worshipping gay icons or divas has become just another of the antiquated, queeny, and masochistic stereotypes with which the “respectable community” works hard to dissociate.

While I think that the first part of this statement is true – that there is an added emphasis on normalcy – all the people I interviewed for this project identified Oprah Winfrey as a sort of diva/idol/icon/goddess figure in one way or another. This leads me to position her relationship with rural gay men as an evolved breed of Judy-worship (or as Leleux writes, invoking religion, Judyism). These would-be “friends of Dorothy” shifted their attention instead to Dorothy’s larger-than-life, superhuman self-help guide toward personal fulfillment, who literally showed her the way back home: Glinda, the Good

Witch of the North. Oprah is Glinda. Indeed, gay viewers are encouraged to have this reading of Oprah Winfrey throughout the history of her talk show as she often endorses Glinda's words as her favorite life lesson, "You've always had the power." Like Judy, Oprah does have a strong tie to rural America, suffering, and heartache, but instead of being constantly defeated by her pain, as Judy was understood to be, she claims she has used it to triumph, or as she often says, "Success is the best revenge." In so doing, she became the beautiful, powerful being gay men looked toward for healing and guidance.

Much like Dorothy would consider Glinda her guide or teacher, Oprah constantly activates autobiographical details about her life in order to "teach" her followers which is a kind of diva work Lauren Berlant calls "Diva Citizenship." Diva Citizenship is when a woman from a "stigmatized population" uses her imperiled history as a teaching tool for a "hostile public" because of her belief in their "capacity to learn and to change" (Berlant 222-3). For Berlant, this act of "heroic pedagogy" happens when she "challenges her audience to identify with the enormity of the suffering she has narrated" (223). In that narration, the diva's voice endures and is strengthened against the white heteronormative environment that seeks to silence it. "The diva's mouth is laboring. It delivers. It poses a threat to the gendered order. Not pretty, but sublime," Deborah Paredez writes (3). Diva worship, like the worship of any deity, has a learning objective. Through the diva text of Oprah disenfranchised souls are repaired and connected in a kind of community.

Furthermore, *Oprah* often invites its viewers to assume Oprah's perspective and to model their lives on the lessons she teaches them, in what Lofton called in an interview the "unending rehearsal of her" (n.p.). In so doing, Oprah even teaches her audience how to "worship" her through her own diva fandom practices: On February 10, 1997, eleven years into *Oprah*, the producers of the show surprised Oprah Winfrey on the air when they invited Mary Tyler Moore to the stage during a taping sending Oprah Winfrey into a

bout of emotional hysterics she endearingly calls the “ugly cry.” Composing herself and taking both of Mary’s hands in her own, she says as tears stream down her face, “You have no idea what you’ve meant to me ... I just want to say that, you know, there are many times in our lives when there are those of us who, we only had the television for inspiration, and you were one of those women who was a light” (“Favorite Celebrity Women” 10 Feb. 1997). For Oprah, Mary Tyler Moore the actor and Mary Richards, the character she played on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (hereafter *MTM*), represented a paradigm shift, new ways of thinking that opened up doors of possibility for Oprah as a successful, unwed woman in the male-dominated world of journalism as well as the culture of the television industry. Both Marys represented disruptions of once-embraced roles relegated to women as belonging to both domesticity and the wills of their husbands, which Oprah was being criticized for continuing to break. And both Marys, in Oprah’s eyes, were able to overcome these epochs of sexism and patriarchal condescension to become models of defiant womanhood.

In her emotionally-charged praise of the Marys, Oprah opens up a space to imagine a relationship with the television and the communal fandom of a text as a site to do identity work. In a sense, she makes it *okay* to be “emotionally hysterical” about a television character or actor, and thus allows her own fan base to be recognized in alignment with her fandom of the Marys. On the episode in which Oprah is surprised, she opens Mary’s segment by saying she *never* missed *MTM*, and when *Oprah* became successful, she fulfilled a fantasy by reenacting *MTM*’s opening credits. By doing this “fan work” Oprah magnificently taps into audience sentiment, as she so often and skillfully does, and harmonizes her own fandom with those of her fans filling the studio (and by extension those at home). When Mary walks out onto the stage to music from *MTM*, Oprah jumps to her feet, grabs her head, and screams. In a room filled with fans

(who the camera shows are celebratory of her emotional reaction), Oprah becomes the fan herself and their sense of connection to her is made even more intimate. “What happens [in that moment] is the flood of everything she means to me. Everything,” Oprah later explains. “I’m thinking of all of that and what she has meant to me. And there she is. And now I’ve got to be able to express that; and does she *know*?” (quoted in Winfrey 2006 n.p.). After Mary leaves the stage, and Oprah talks candidly to the audience, she cleverly aligns her fandom with those of the people filling her studio, again validating their love of Oprah by aligning her stardom with Mary’s:

Oh, oh, oh. That was good, that was good. May I have a Kleenex, please? I don’t think I used deodorant this morning. Sweat is running from my armpits. Mary! I always think you know, people write me letters, I go, “Who would I think that about?” Mary. Like people send me my ... send me stuff and they ask me to pay their bills; who would I have asked? Mary. [she laughs and shrugs her shoulders] Mary! I need to calm down. Can I get a Kleenex to get the river that’s running under my armpits? I need two, just stick ‘em in there. Oh boy! (“Favorite Celebrity Women” 10 Feb. 1997).

And perhaps most tellingly illustrative of the transportive abilities of the diva, Oprah said in a later interview about the experience, “It was one of the most happiest and delirious out-of-body moments I’ve ever had” (“Mary Tyler Moore” 2006).

Several scholars call this notion of transcendence “sublimity,” pointing to the word’s religious roots specifically to describe it as spiritual. Scientifically, subliming is the volatilization of a thing from a solid to a gas without passing through a liquid state, which works as a metaphor for the feeling of displacement that occurs in the sublimation of the soul from the body in such an experience. Historically, sublimity connoted a religious transcendence, “an apprehension of the divine through an encounter with that which exceeds the limits of everyday experience and cognition” (Farmer 170). Farmer, Harris, and Koestenbaum, along with a sea of other queer scholars, understand that what

is happening particularly in the lives of gay men who become fans of such diva performers as Oprah is precisely this kind of transportive sublimity. Farmer extends the notion of sublimity in gay culture, calling the reparative aspects of gay diva worship *queer sublimity* that is, “the transcendence of a limiting heteronormative materiality and the sublime reconstruction, at least in fantasy, of a more capacious, kinder, queerer world” (170).

Before Stonewall and the modern gay rights liberation movement, many scholars argue that closeted or repressed gay men turned to Campy or larger-than-life female performers like Judy Garland, Joan Crawford, and Marilyn Monroe in order to reconcile their deviant sexuality with the regime of oppression under which they lived and to build a community through the diva’s network of fans. Divas or gay icons like Judy Garland were thought to be especially resonant with gay communities because of their association with poorly performed gender as well as tragedy and suffering with which gay men had come to identify. After Stonewall and throughout the seventies and early eighties, many gay men began to dissociate with such figures as icons of the repressed generation before them which led scholars like Harris to argue that the diva died with disco. Because diva figures continue to permeate contemporary gay culture, however, I argue the practice of diva worship is not a lost art, rather, the kinds of divas worshipped have become instead those whose relationship to tragedy and suffering were the foundations upon which they built their success. The fascination with Judy led to a repressed generation of gay men who called themselves “friends of Dorothy,” but new generations looking for more agential and powerful figures might be more aptly named “friends of Glinda” because they seek emotional and spiritual guidance to help them find their own power in their homophobic worlds. Oprah continuously invites her disenfranchised viewers like Ray and Marques to think of her in this role as her own success has predicated on Glinda’s

self-motivating mantra, “you’ve always had the power.” Indeed, the way she displays her own fandom of female performers like Mary Tyler Moore, Tina Turner, or Diana Ross, allows her audience to see that they, like she, can step into the ruby slippers of success by modeling themselves on powerful women, or as she once famously said, “I still have my feet on the ground, I just wear better shoes” (quoted in “Oprah’s Success” n.p.).

RAY’S EXPERIENCE – “WHEN I THINK OF HER, I JUST THINK OF GOODNESS”

Just west of Yellowstone in rural Eastern Idaho along the foot of the Teton Mountain Range lies the windy little city of Rexburg, endearingly (or derisively) called by some, the “reddest,” most conservative place in America (Grieve n.p.). A Mormon pioneer founded Rexburg in the hills in the late nineteenth century, growing slowly around the Mormon faith in the last hundred years. On a visit to Rexburg, it becomes clear that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) owns this town. It owns the small college, which has grown enough in the last twenty years to become a part of Brigham Young University (BYU) system. It owns the massive white temple which towers above the city so high the steeple seems to pierce the sky. It is even said that the church owns the liquor licenses because certain citywide prohibitions restrict the sale of alcohol, pushing several of Rexburg’s chain restaurants outside of town limits. As Tim Grieve writes, “Billboards outside the apartment buildings advertise, ‘Approved housing for young ladies.’” And the local cinema plays only “family-friendly fare” (Grieve n.p.).

Many of the people here claim to have embraced a Mormon code of honor, the same code strictly enforced by the university: they do not drink alcohol, tea, or coffee. They do not do drugs. They obey and enforce strict gender-specific behaviors and grooming standards: women’s skirts must reach to the knee, shirts are not to be sleeveless, and formfitting, strapless, or revealing clothing is not permitted. Men are

restricted from having facial hair, and permission is granted only when skin conditions are present. Outside of marriage, people live a chaste and “virtuous” life, free of sexual impropriety and illicit activities. Homosexuality, above all, is strictly prohibited. Violations of these rules, as reported by fellow students, frequently result in warnings and suspensions. But unlike faith systems in other Christian institutions, all sins are not equal at BYU, as some violations yield expulsions.

It was into this tiny town – into a strict Mormon household – that Ray was born in the early 1980s. Because of its rurality, Ray’s school was thinly populated. Walking the hallways, he was the target of bullies who called him “Gay Ray” or “fag” and teased him not only for his supposed differences in gender performance but also because of his book smarts and brown skin. He describes himself as “technically Chicano” explaining how his mother is of Mexican heritage and his father is white and how his brown skin exposed his racial identity in the sea of white faces that make up the more than ninety-five percent Caucasian population of Rexburg – making it also one of the whitest places in the nation.

I introduced myself to Ray during the Oprah conference. He was by himself, one of many singular men who attended the mostly female event, and he was waiting quietly in line for an event to start when our eyes met. After a brief introduction, he told me he was in Atlanta alone because none of his friends in his new home of Boston shared his sentiments for the Queen of Daytime and her eponymous show. “They said I’m crazy for coming here,” he joked. But Ray said he decided to go to the conference because he truly believed in what he understood as the spirit and the mission of the show as well as its host and that Oprah Winfrey had been a part of his life for almost as long as he could remember. “She’s just so personable. She truly just listens,” he says. “I don’t see a lot of judgement coming from her.”

As I would learn in our conversations, like with most of the people I interviewed for this project, even though Ray eventually made a flight to the city in his adulthood, he has continued to carry what he considers his rurality with him on his person and in his psyche – forever a small-town boy living in the big city. This notion of rural identity complicates the study of rurality: What does it mean to be a rural gay man, when does rurality end, and what about rurality makes its conflation with sexuality part of the identity process? Is it also true of urban queerness?

Much of Ray's identity seems to have been forged in his childhood. As a young, rural gay Chicano,⁹ Ray was navigating through a storm of multiple minoritarian identities that, as he explains, *Oprah* helped facilitate. Larry Icard (1986) argues that for the queer of color, identity work can become problematic because it can issue false imperatives on one identity over another (83-85). For example, coming out is seen as placing emphasis on one's sexuality over one's race, which I discuss in greater detail in Chapter 3. As an often queered, overweight black woman, herself from a rural upbringing, Oprah Winfrey presented on the television set an ideal "template" of another individual navigating multiple minoritarian identities upon which Ray could model himself, and so in that regard, Oprah as a diva presence meant Oprah was a teacher.

In our conversations, Ray took me back to his youth, illuminating how Oprah and her show became an inspiring part of his childhood. As a young boy, Ray would sit in the living room of his home with his mother as the two watched television together after school. Occasionally, he says, they would watch *Oprah* because even while it tackled

⁹ Arranging one's "identity adjectives" problematically creates a hierarchy to their sense of self, so Ray's identity could be written one of several ways. When discussing different aspects of his identity, he re-arranges his identity adjectives so there is no preferred arrangement or, rather, the preferred arrangement depends upon the context.

I discuss more about *Oprah*'s transition to "quality," and how I operationalize the term, in Chapter 3.

topics that oppose Mormon traditions, the show often avoided the on-screen antics of the newer breed of talk shows aimed at younger audiences, which was especially true by the mid-90s, when Oprah revamped the show's format to become a "higher-quality" educational forum.¹⁰ At this moment in time, daytime television was overrun with tacky carnivalesque talk shows as soap operas began to be canceled.¹¹ So *Oprah* became the program of choice in houses determined to tune to networks with more respectable programming, like Ray's.

Ray says what brought him to *Oprah* was the intrigue of the depiction of gay men and women on the show, something he claims he had never before seen, at least, as he jokes, in "non-compromising situations." He remembers being drawn to episodes with sexuality front and center, and he feared that his mother would, but hoped desperately that she would not, turn to a different channel at the mention of such topics. He explains his feelings watching early episodes:

Oh my God, there's a real life gay man on the TV screen, and, like ... there's someone else besides me, I was so drawn to. So that's what a gay person looks like. I was so hungry and desperate to identify with someone. I honestly don't remember the messages of those early shows, I just remember feeling elated, that there was someone else to identify with.

For Ray, the television set brought with it scenes from the outside; it brought him the imagination of a world brimming with colorful people, foreign thoughts, and a variety of cultural lifestyles unwelcome in the stringent "Mormanity" of his hometown. Into his living room, the stranger of television was invited, piercing, to some degree, the bare white fabric of his religion's culture and loosening the ropes that tied him to his one

¹⁰ See Chapter 3.

¹¹ In 1985 there were 4 hours of talk shows and 14 hours of soap operas. By 1995, talk shows gobbled up 20 hours of programming space while soap operas only took up 10 (Abt 8-9).

understanding of good citizenship. Although Ray's exposure to homosexuality had for years been relegated to a red checkmark on an honor code, with new images of gay men entering his home in the comfortable presence of his mother, through *Oprah*, that check slowly began to curve into a question mark.

When Ray started pulling away from the systems of beliefs instilled in him through his religion, he began a search for truth and enlightenment he was not finding at the base of the cross. Early in his life, Ray had what he called an out-of-body experience when, while riding on a motorbike, he was hit by a car. He credits the moment for giving him the sense that there is more to the world than what we can see, and there is a higher power, even if we cannot know its form.

It was in slow motion, as often depicted in movies. I remember floating up and looking back and seeing my body. And I remember going ... up there ... into the clouds, but I couldn't get through them. And I tried, and I couldn't get through them. I remember that feeling of looking down and being separated from my body, and not wanting to come back down to earth.

Ray's out-of-body experience underscored the pain and sense of misery he tied to the war of his eleven-year-old, otherly-raced body. He realized the limitation of the kind of life he knew that body would have growing up in an environment that was actively hostile to his ethnicity and the sexual feelings he was beginning to experience. He explained that when he was growing up in Rexburg, conformity was paramount, and being different or unique was demoralizing. "I started noticing how I was different. Where I grew up, there was a stigma around the 'Mexican migrant worker' the stereotype of that – though that was not my family," he said. "It was lonely; it killed my desire. I didn't have self confidence; I didn't want to be different. I didn't have any courage." Ray constantly re-negotiated his identity and used the media and his viewership of *Oprah* to find other individuals with whom to connect and find validation. Eventually, as I expand upon in Chapter 3, Ray was

forced out of the closet and excommunicated from his church for being gay. Ultimately, he contracted HIV. He went through a period in life in which he became embittered by the faith that had turned its back on him. He wanted nothing to do with religion or God, “even a little religious terminology would make me cringe; [excommunication] was a very bad experience for me.” Through his failure to perform heterosexuality, his body had once again failed him and limited his capacity to achieve good citizenship and thus true Christianity. In his “civil war,” Ray seemed defeated early, painted in the image of a young boy trying desperately to force himself through the clouds so he could escape the limits of his life and the confines of his difference.

For Ray, Oprah was a similar multiple minoritarian identity whom he could use as an “indirect mentor” – a teacher – to help him learn how not to feel “wounded.” He identified with her because she was different in ways he was different, and he could relate to the way her body was raced and othered in her audience of white faces. Through the “diva citizenship” paradigm, she taught him to learn and change. That he had the power. Moving away from the faith-based, institutional system in which he was raised, Ray began modeling his spiritual self in part based on what he was gleaning from the show. Through her and the content of her shows Ray says he tries to “remember the messages and the extrapolations that she pulls out. I don’t have a keychain that says, ‘What Would Oprah Do?’” he jokes. “But she definitely influences how I think about things. And I try to emulate her empathy and her messages about living with an open heart.” A similar identificatory phenomenon of gay, white urban men was noted of Judy Garland in the 1950s by a psychiatrist in *Time*: “Judy was beaten up by life, embattled and ultimately had to become more masculine. She has the power that homosexuals would like to have, and they attempt to attain it by idolizing her” (quoted in M. Gross 64).

To encourage that strength, Oprah constantly invokes her faith in God as the genesis of her successful career. But it is not the same God of Noah or Moses or even the Baptist church where she grew up. Oprah's first sense of religious defiance happened, reportedly, when she heard the minister describe him as a "jealous God." As Karlyn Crowley writes, "Somehow the idea of a 'jealous God' just 'didn't feel right' to Oprah, and she began on a journey to take 'God out of a box'" (34). This defiant model of spirituality and religion was not lost on her fans, many of whom were actively neglected or belittled by the patriarchal religions into which they were born. Ray, for instance, believes that backing white patriarchal "old world" religions is not a priority for Oprah. "She talks more about being spiritual and defining God how YOU define it. She doesn't like to say that 'this is the way.' I don't ever remember her cheerleading a religious institution."

At the end of the O You! Oprah Conference, Ray managed to work his way to the front of the auditorium and find a seat just three chairs away from the stage for Oprah's speech – centered directly in front of "Her." A few times, he says, he was so close, they made eye contact. "I felt that same exhilaration ... her speaking to us was just under an hour, and it was a lot of powerful messages that resonate with one's soul. I got teary-eyed myself." He struggled to articulate exactly what sort of sensations he was feeling in the moments he believed they shared, but instead of articulating it through Oprah, he instead compared her presence to the way he loses himself in Janet Jackson's music.

Today I was running and listening to my music and a Janet song came on, and I just kind of got like the chills go through my body and I actually asked myself, you know, what is that? What is it about her – why do I have that connection? When I first started listening to Janet – how her lyrics made me feel and it was kind of empowering. Back then I didn't have any courage, and I was still young. She genuinely tries to empower people ... and tap into the power that they have already. When I think of her I just think of liberation. When I was young and struggling I would hear her music, and I just felt kind of like an escape. In my

imagination, I could escape ... Oprah is that kind of inspiration; when I think of her, I just think of goodness ...

Scholars like Farmer argue that gay diva worship is transporative and allows disenfranchised gay communities the chance to be carried out of the limits of their bodily worlds into a kinder, more caring, and spiritual world through what he calls sublimity. Ray was raised in one of the most stringent Mormon communities in the world and from an early age learned to cope with the homophobic attitudes bred into his people by watching television, where he first saw homosexuality presented, and listening to music, which allowed him to feel transported – to be pulled finally through the clouds even if only ephemerally. Oprah taught Ray to value himself when he was made to feel small and to search for his own power to overcome – she was his mentor, she was his guide. He told me he is not easily star struck, but even if he were, he said his experience with Oprah was not about “seeing stars.” Rather, what he felt was movement – through her presence, as with the television so many years before, he was seeing colors. “Just the message – the power of the message – knowing where she’s come from. I have this saying in my head, ‘What comes from the heart goes to the heart.’ I felt that. And I was moved. ... She is an inspiration, a kind of gentle preacher.”

“TOTO, I HAVE A FEELING WE’RE NOT IN KANSAS ANYMORE”

Harold Camping, a California-based pastor and the owner of a Christian broadcasting network called Family Radio, predicted the rapture for May 21, 2011, an event to mark the return of Jesus Christ to reclaim the souls of his most devout followers, leaving behind the heathens and heretics who had failed to repent their sins, particularly gay people. According to Christians who believe in the event, along with the rapture comes the end of the world. Unfortunately, as several comedians were quick to point out,

Camping failed to take into mathematical account the finale of *Oprah*, a twenty-five year cultural icon set to end four days later. As Joan Rivers quipped on Twitter, “Oprah Winfrey is so powerful that she had the rapture postponed until after her show airs” (Rivers 24 May 2011) while David Letterman joked on his late-night talk show, “Honest to God, every day I get out of bed and think: ‘What can I do to suck up to Oprah?’” (Letterman 18 May 2011). And in response to the shroud of mystery around what was to become the final show, Paula Poundstone tweeted, “Jesus will probably be the surprise guest. She got him started” (Poundstone 25 May 2011).

Two days after the airing of the finale, the popular gay social media site, DList, sent out a mass email to its subscribers titled, “You survived the rapture AND the end of *Oprah*. Now what?” (DList, “You...” email dated 27 May 2011). The subject line is not directly related to any of the newsletter’s contents, but in eleven words DList illuminates two phenomena that popular discourses suggest have become central to disenfranchised gay culture within the last twenty-five years: religious persecution and exclusion as well as *Oprah* fandom. Discourses tying Oprah to religion are not surprising given her show’s spiritual revamp in the mid-‘90s,¹² but even more than just religion, in such discourses she often assumes a demigod-like status that jibes well with how certain diva theorists position the diva’s ability to give her fans out-of-body(esque) experiences.

Building on Dyer’s work on Judy Garland, Farmer argues that gay men engage with diva figures as a means of community and of escapism but also to transcend the limits of their heteronormative reality to escape through sublime reconstruction into a world of total tolerance (170). In this utopia of acceptance, which for the viewers I interviewed became the realm and space provided by *Oprah*,¹³ the “quotidian

¹² See Chapter 3.

¹³ See Chapter 2.

mundanities” of life are ruptured, and the imagined spirit is transported if only momentarily to this other existence. Gay men engage in diva worship to strive obsessively to encounter the unencounterable in the figure of a living, breathing human. This need to approach can be funneled either through the desire to interact physically with the diva, or in the rehearsal of her as with the devout and their deity.

In his watershed auto-ethnographical book, Koestenbaum claims “gay culture has perfected the art of mimicking a diva – of pretending, inside, to *be* divine – to help the stigmatized self imagine it is received, believed, and adored” (133). This notion of the reparative faculties of diva worship for disenfranchised gay men is articulated beautifully by Koestenbaum in his adoration of the opera diva Maria Callas: “Every body is a civil war,” he writes. “Callas sang the war” (146). Many diva theorists also position diva worship as a kind of salve; it is a palliative that ameliorates struggle – it is healing. “While loathe to generalize its heterogeneous functions and values,” Farmer writes, “I submit that much of the enduring vitality of diva worship in gay male cultures resides in the commodious scope it affords for reparative cultural labor,” (169) and Harris writes, it is the “desire to elevate [one]self above [one’s] surroundings” (10).

The sense of the diva as a tool for reparation is also found in the psychoanalytical work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1997), whom Farmer builds upon to suggest that these “survivalist dynamics” of queer culture seek to reassemble the broken queer self into “something like a whole” with which one can identify and find “nourishment and comfort in turn” (quoted in Farmer 167). In a similar way that scholars like Henry Jenkins (1988) argue that disenfranchised communities engage in “poaching” to find themselves in media texts, and José Muñoz argues that queer communities “disidentify” with characters not intended for them, Farmer applies Sedgwick to claim that by engaging in diva worship, queer subjects extract sustenance from a culture that on the whole does not

support them (Sedgwick 35) and are healed by it. To understand these scholars' notion of the diva as reparative through the Glinda lens, I argue that the figure of Oprah offers her viewers a kind of healing that they can achieve only through their hard work. Although Glinda provided the shoes, only Dorothy's journey in them, and the click of her heels can truly *heal* her to quiet her inner struggles. The new understanding of the diva, as conceived by Oprah, is she who not only teaches people how to be but also how to heal.

Into the diva, the soul can dissolve itself in the service of its repair, and along the mend, she makes room: "Listening to Callas, I acquire spaciousness," Koestenbaum writes. Diva worship enlarges one's sense of self, and thus the diva's relationship to space changes her fans' relationship to space. In the diva, many can be contained in one, and her diva worshippers can contain multitudes – can be more empathetic and be both more of themselves and more of other people. Through diva worship, they can expand themselves to include horizons beyond what they think they could be or accept they could be or believe they could be. As Oprah frequently says, "God can dream a bigger dream for you than you can dream for yourself." So, too, can the diva.

Harris writes that the diva herself is not necessarily the agent of devotion so much as a "bellwether," a "cause," or a "messiah" whose body served as a magnet to unify her followers, a presence to overcome their fragmentation and become a kind of community through her. I found this phenomenon in the words of *Oprah's* audience producer Sally Lou Loveland. Loveland explained that the term "ultimate viewer" entered the *Oprah* lexicon in the show's final season, a word the production staff used in part because of Oprah's distaste of the word "fan." For Loveland, "fan" is not a strong enough word to describe viewers' engagement and places the emphasis of viewers' spectatorship on adoration of Oprah Winfrey herself when perhaps the more accurate description of Oprah fandom is the adoration of *Oprah* and the connection it provided its viewers throughout

the years. “It wasn’t like, ‘Oooh, ultimate fans of Oprah, I love Oprah the most!’ It was, ‘Here is what I did with my life because of the show I saw.’” Harris discusses how the priority of audience over artist was especially characteristic of Judy’s gay fans, who used her concerts as a means of connecting to one another (n.p.). Although Judy’s fans connected physically in the theaters and concert venues where she performed, *Oprah*’s rural gay fans not able to connect in person in their youth instead used her show to be transported to a kind of imagined community,¹⁴ where, like Oprah said in the premiere episode, they were “not alone.”

The Oprah diva that gay fans worship, then, is not necessarily just limited to Oprah Winfrey herself, but to everything her body represents, the entire canon of *Oprah* and all the feelings and emotions Oprah and her show ever made them feel. This is why my use of Oprah and *Oprah* is occasionally and intentionally confusing. Where does the show end and the star begin and vice versa? Many scholars argue that a central tenet of diva worship has been in how it can heal or repair subjects’ world into something like a “whole” by allowing them to escape their contexts – the harsh landscape of “Kansas” – and be carried away into a colorful new world. Loveland accurately claims that there is something to Oprah/*Oprah* fandom that is *more than* just adoration of Oprah Winfrey the woman. I argue that, like with Judy before her, Oprah carries on her person in tangible form everything and everyone her show represents, making her larger than life and superhuman thus allowing her to transport her fans. “People come to the show – and it’s not just that they’re coming to a TV show,” Loveland explained to me. “They’re coming to a way of life, and what that show [and Oprah] provided all of us, connection.”

¹⁴ To steal a phrase from Benedict Anderson’s book of the same name, *Imagined Communities* (1983).

MARQUES' EXPERIENCE – “SHE EMBODIES GRACE”

Plugging into that connection at the national debut of *Oprah* was nine-year-old Marques, a young African American struggling to understand his homosexuality in what he called “very rural” New Jersey, just down the road from the local dairy farm. Marques’ small hometown was isolated from the city and during his childhood had less than 4,000 residents. When he was in second grade, his mother’s health began to fail and she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS) which was causing several mobility problems for her including constantly falling around the house. Marques said he did not understand what was happening to his mother or even if she would live an experience he recalls as being very traumatic. In response, he turned to food to distract him from the pain and confusion he experienced because of his mother’s ailing health, and as a child of the eighties the booming fast food industry and proliferation of the microwave oven meant fattening food was always readily available. “I turned to food for comfort. Back then, I turned to it for understanding and healing. It was the one thing that temporarily masked the pain and confusion about my mother’s health.” Marques’ own health would come to be an issue as well when a year later his pediatrician diagnosed him as obese. “Painful words to tell a nine year old,” Marques explained. “He suggested I join Weight Watchers, a plan that was virtually unthinkable for a child back then.”

As an only child, Marques already felt a sense of isolation in the woods of his rural family home. So when he was five his grandparents bought him a small television set for his room, and he used it to fill the voids in his day he believed other children shared with their siblings. Marques said television became especially important after his mother was diagnosed with MS because he began to pull inward and to become introspective which worked to alienate him even more from the other people at school from whom he already felt “different.” Because of his weight, his race, and his growing

confusion about his sexual attractions, he was struggling to navigate multiple minoritarian identities that Oprah/*Oprah* uniquely helped inform when it debuted in 1986, and all he wanted to do was to learn.

Marques believes he saw a commercial for the debut of the show on his television and decided to watch it after school. Because his parents worked, normally he would watch the show at the babysitter's house or at his grandparents' house but when his mother started spending more time at home because of her illness, he was able to watch with her. He remembers hearing about *Oprah* before it aired and how people were calling it "different" and "unusual," which intrigued him. After he saw the September 1986 premiere, he was captivated. "To see a black woman who was overweight, and she [had] a very large personality on TV, was totally mind blowing. She was just so different," he explained. Berlant describes the shock value of the diva of color "flashing up and startling the public [she] puts the dominant story into suspended animation ... calling on people to change the institutional practices of citizenship to which they currently consent" (Berlant 223). Berlant refers to these moments as "dramatic coup" when minority figures, especially divas, are able to captivate the attention of the public sphere in which she has no privilege. "You feel a connection to her – an instant connection ... you feel this sense of joy."

Identifying with her as an overweight black woman in a sea of white faces on TV, young Marques grew attached to Oprah and used what he saw through the show to inform his "different" life, even before he knew the words to describe himself as homosexual. Sedgwick offers a similar representation of protogay children who become absorbed in interpreting a cultural text or object before they have resolved their own queerness: "Such [children are] reading for important news about [themselves], without knowing what form that news will take; with only the patchiest familiarity with its codes;

without, even, more than hungrily hypothesizing to what questions this news may proffer an answer” (“Paranoid Reading” 2-3).

As Marques grew up and began to understand his sexual orientation more concretely, he, like many rural audiences, used the television to inform his understanding of morals and values and feared what he believed would be a homophobic community. He cited the televisual landscape and the lack of gay visibility at the time as indicative of the feelings of the culture: “There weren’t these people on television as if, today you can turn on the TV at any point and there’s a gay character. This is pre-*Ellen* coming out – so, totally different world.” He knew to suppress his homosexuality and tried to become popular among his classmates.

I was first introduced to Marques, who is now 34, through his appearance on OWN’s series, *Season 25: Oprah Behind the Scenes (BTS)*, which followed Oprah Winfrey and her team of producers throughout the taping of *Oprah*’s final season. To combat the fledgling network’s failing ratings, Oprah Winfrey and her producers engaged with her ten million Twitter followers, “tweeting” with the viewers about the episodes live on Sunday nights, answering their questions and responding to their suggestions. Realizing the content her “tweeps” were generating, *BTS* filmed a few episodes in which Oprah Winfrey and her producers sit in a circle discussing the dynamics of the show (both *Oprah* as well as *BTS*) while video chatting with a select few of Oprah’s fans, one of whom was Marques (“The Finale: Special Edition” 14 Aug. 2011).

As part of his participation in the show, Marques was selected to ask a question on the air specifically to Oprah about the finale episode. When the day came for filming, Marques was launched through Skype into Oprah’s world, a virtual presence on a television screen in Harpo studios that Oprah was directly addressing. She started by introducing Marques and then spoke directly to him. In the short clip, before asking his

question, Marques prefaced his remarks by admitting his absolute fandom of Oprah Winfrey, *Oprah*, and *BTS*, saying he skips social engagements specifically to watch the show live. Reminiscent of Oprah's encounter with Mary, Marques struggled to find the words to articulate adequately what she has meant to him, but he realized his time with her was both brief and had a specific motivation, so he moved quickly to his question.

He asked, "Oprah, you say you never sweat anything,¹⁵ so I was wondering [...] did you sweat anything by the end of the season?" The shot cuts from Marques' dining room back to Harpo Studios where Oprah Winfrey looked away from the screen leisurely stirring a drink. After joking with Marques that, even when she is working out, it takes her forever to break a sweat, "No, really it's a metabolism thing, if I sweated sooner, I would be thinner, I'm sure," she answered:

The truth is, no, I can't say that I did. Just before I walked out my heart started to pound just a little bit, and I got a little, you know, dry mouth, and I went, "Whoa, what is that?" I wasn't feeling it emotionally, but because everybody had been telling me what a [big] moment this was, I started to think, "Well, I guess this *is* big." [F]rom my point of view it felt flat because, I've been speaking since I was three years old, and usually audiences give you some kind of feedback. There's like an "uh huh" or they're nodding, you can tell that they're engaged. Everybody was like this [she sits perfectly still and stoic] like almost not breathing ("The Finale: Special Edition 14 Aug. 2011).

This motionless stoicism of Oprah's fans is explained in one line by Koestenbaum about watching the diva perform in which he writes, "I don't want to be aware of my body during the opera. I don't want to divide my attention" (36). Several of the *Oprah* producers respond that the audience was quiet because they were absorbing every moment and every word, "It was a sacred moment that was an hour. It was the end," one producer offers. Lightening the comment, again Oprah Winfrey joked in a silly voice, "I

¹⁵ Except, perhaps, a chance encounter with Mary Tyler Moore!

wish somebody'd said, 'You know what, the reason why we're not doing anything is 'cause this is just so sacred!'" This producer's comment reflects many of her fans' feelings about her and the show as somehow transcendental in their lives and out of their bodies, often locating their reactions in a place of spirituality, rhetoric, which as I mentioned earlier, is commonly tied to Oprah Winfrey and her new conception of the diva.

Today, along with the secularization of U.S. culture, contemporary discussions of sublimity have moved away from an overtly religious significance, extending the sublime to include not only natural, but also "artistic, architectural, [...] technological, electrical, and consumerist phenomena" (Farmer 170). I agree insofar as I would locate media (and television specifically) within these new discussions, but, at least in the case of *Oprah*, I would not necessarily divorce sublimity from any kind of religious or spiritual significance. Television as technology can become the church that houses the altar of Oprah and encountering her every day in the comfort of the living room can become an answered prayer for her viewers, particularly for those who are excluded from or persecuted by popular patriarchal religions.

Loveland explained to me that what most people do not realize about fans who come to sit in the audience of *Oprah* is that often, just by walking in through the doors of the studio the same way Oprah Winfrey has done for 25 years, they are moved to tears. "You see what it means to them, just to be in this space, [like with] any space that has created amazing things for people – it could be a church, it could be a temple ... it took their breath away." According to Loveland that transcendental feeling is not limited to appearing in the audience; it is, as she elaborates:

connection to each other, connection to people we would never know had we not watched the show. [P]eople are looking to make their lives better, and they're dedicated to that. So whether it becomes that you're going to lose a hundred

pounds, or that you're going to hear something that makes you more in tune with the environment around you or something greater than you, call that spirit, call it God, call it what you want, it's opening up your heart, your world. Some people might call that spiritualism.

Several of her devoted followers, among whom are Ray and Marques, used her and her show to serve in this spiritual capacity, echoing Oprah's sentiments for the Marys. What is compelling about Marques' experience is how he describes the sensation of speaking directly to Oprah Winfrey, if even through video chat, using that same word Oprah Winfrey uses for the Marys – light:

I can tell you that something did change in that moment for me ... there was a shift – it's almost like getting clarity in your life. All of the issues you have, all the problems, it all goes away and everything is super clear – and that's how I feel when I chatted with her and that's how I feel at times in church. I feel a real sense of clarity and a sense of “anything is possible.” When she's present ... all that she represents just becomes clear. I feel like she is very truly who she is – she truly is who she is and you can feel it – it almost is like a light.

With these words, Marques again reiterates the notion of Oprah Winfrey's presence as sublimely spiritual, authentic, and somehow course-altering, but that experience was nothing like what was about to happen. After Marques' *BTS* appearance, he won tickets to the taping of another OWN production starring Oprah Winfrey, *Oprah's Lifeclass*, and for the first time in his life he was able to be literally in the same space as her and in the room with her fans, reproducing Judy's live productions that brought together an ephemeral “gay community.” When she walked out on stage, Marques remembers being taken by her instantly: “She was like Wonder Woman. She was just larger than life. She has this presence ... It's like a dream come true,” Marques struggled to try to describe the experience but said that words were failing him.

I need to go to a Madonna reference to explain it. At her last concert, there's a moment when she is inhuman, which made me say “Wow!” I was in awe. And

that's exactly what I felt when I saw Oprah in action. ... If I were to meet her, that would be an out-of-body experience, I really only feel that way about Madonna.

Marques reiterates what Loveland had referenced about the community of fandom, saying that he sensed he was among his people: "It felt like I had gone to church; in this space, you felt the sense of true community." When I asked him to close his eyes and reflect on the moment, he again continued to struggle to find the right wording: "It was a spiritual moment ... it touched me in a very deep spiritual place. A pilgrimage – that's what it felt like. I felt like I was on a pilgrimage with a community of fans." As I argue above, because Oprah carries with her the tangible presence of her show, traveling to her, wherever she is, can become likened to the pilgrimage many of her fans traveled en route to Harpo Studios in Chicago. Loveland described people as dropping everything they were doing when they received the call they had been selected or had won tickets to an *Oprah* taping. Marques thought of his arrival in the audience as the culmination of a spiritual journey, "She embodies grace. Through her, I have a sense of peace."

Marques says that because he longed for the sense of spiritual transcendence and enlightenment he found in the show, he returned to the church and his spiritual journey after it ended in 2011. For the past five years, Marques said he has been on a spiritual exploration, having recently endured what he called a very dark and tough time in his life. Then, in September 2010, with just one final season to go, Marques realized that a year from that point, *Oprah* would no longer be on the air, and the messages he was gleaning from the show, those about living his best life and surviving his toughest hours, would be missing. "I thought that I would need something to substitute that hunger and desire that I was getting from [*Oprah*]," he said. "There is a God – you can pray – there are no perfect people ... I never had had [spiritual belongingness] before *Oprah*. But what I learned is, 'You've always had the power.'"

“MY UNCONQUERABLE SOUL”

While upward mobility for gays post-Stonewall may have grown with visibility in cities famous for their “gayborhoods,” (Dupont Circle in D.C., CJ in New York, West Hollywood in Los Angeles, and Boystown in Chicago), Stonewall also broke open the conversation of gayness in rural parts of the country like Ray’s and Marques’. The television brought new kinds of stories into living rooms and homes where the topic of homosexuality had never been broached, filled with uninvited images of flamboyant gay men and drag queens. The sudden visibility and backlash to queerness in these rural areas exacerbated the need for secrecy, creating the now hegemonic rural/urban binary of the acceptance of queerness, something that scholars such as Judith Halberstam and Mary Gray have called metronormativity (Halberstam 36-37, Gray 10).

The concept of metronormativity is defined as the tendency of queer culture or queer scholars to create an ethos that is anti-rural, conceiving of the country life as one that is rustic, sad, and lonely where gays may be thought of as “stuck in a place that they would leave if they only could,” which Halberstam contests (36). This notion depends on the credence that rural queer individuals are routinely demoralized and discriminated against while urban queer individuals have entered a land of generous acceptance and welcoming not available to their rural counterparts.

Halberstam challenges the myth of the rural/urban binary in her work by demonstrating several instances in which this tragic portrait of rural gay life is not necessarily true as rural gays actively lay claim to their identities and become essential contributors to their communities. The work of Mary L. Gray also complicates metronormativity in her compelling book on activist queer youth in rural Kentucky. *Out in the Country* elucidates how, through television and the internet, rural queers are accessing gay culture contrary to these popular opinions and continuing to develop and

shape their identities based on these social victories. But, as with Farmer's rebuttal of Harris, I come up short of Halberstam's and Gray's optimism because (even as recently as the last ten years) coming from small-town rural America and hearing stories like Ray's or Caleb's and Michael's in Chapter 2, I see this kind of adversity continue to grow, veiled under the guise of gay visibility. Like with Suzanna Danuta Walters' essential argument in her book, *All the Rage: The Story of Gay Visibility in America*, just because we as homosexuals are better *seen* does not necessarily mean we are better *known*. I extend Walters' argument to scholarship – inquiries into rural queerness depend upon access to LGBTQ people who are out of the closet, who have identified their sexual orientation, and who will consent to research, all aspects which can skew any coherent claim one could make about rurality and homosexuality.

I struggle with this concept because I realize that metronormative discourses and perpetuations of the heartland myth suggest rural areas to be unwelcoming to gay men and women are also dangerous because they support a kind of rhetoric that homophobic people in these parts of the country use as ammo in targeting gays who choose to live there, "Move to the city, where you belong!" In facing these challenges, as I found, many of these disenfranchised rural gay men continue to turn to diva figures, just as men turned to Judy years before them. Oprah for them became a new kind of diva figure celebrating them and their diversity and cheerleading them toward a life of success and happiness – leading the way back home. She was the first person to be their friend, the first person to tell them their lives were not lost, and the first person to make them believe they were loved and appreciated. Through the diva body of Oprah Winfrey, these "friends of Glinda" were able to escape their world of gray – to escape Kansas – and become part of a new collective of Totos, those who, to beat the analogy to death, stayed behind to avoid

Miss Gulch forever. After all, Dorothy went back to Kansas, but Glinda lives on as the ultimate deity of Oz.

In a rare late night appearance, Oprah Winfrey was the featured guest on *Jimmy Kimmel Live* in its broadcast immediately following the 2012 Academy Awards. “I met Oprah yesterday ... I had never met her before,” Kimmel says in a teaser for the episode. “We spent the whole day together, and I’m almost embarrassed to admit that about twenty minutes in, I decided I would give my life for Oprah ... She’s like a magic person, she really is!” (“After the Academy Awards” 26 Feb. 2012). Kimmel’s exhilaration is illustrated in another line from Koestenbaum: “Her presence showers me with the intimations of the unknown and the unknowable” (24-5).

Moments before she came out on the stage, Kimmel’s introduction compared her even more explicitly to religion: “What can be said about our guest tonight that hasn’t been said in all the holy books of all the religions in all the world? ... And I know what you’re wondering, ‘If Oprah is here tonight, who is answering our prayers?’ ... Please welcome, the great and powerful Oprah Winfrey.”

This sense of the coming deity was familiar from the Oprah conference, as I watched the room explode with screams and applause the moment she appeared on stage. In her speech, she scanned the sea of faces filling the conference arena and told us she hoped we would leave the event thinking about how we could honor our purpose, how we could identify our fears, and how we could find the courage to move forward and make the world a better place. As illustration, she told us how she has known her purpose since she was a little girl, when she was asked to speak for an event at her church. “Just some rendition of a reading,” she said, underscoring that the church made no specific request. Her family decided to teach her “Invictus” by William Ernest Henley, an anthem for her life to come: “Out of the night that covers me, black as a pit from pole to pole, I thank

whatever gods they be for my unconquerable soul” (“What Oprah Knows for Sure” 15 Oct. 2011).

After she left the stage, and Charlie again took his seat, I asked him how he felt. At first he could only breathe out the words “My god.” After he stalled a few moments to catch his breath, he explained to me how Oprah had become his teacher who taught him to heal his troubled soul. Through her he learned “I was worthy because I was born,” and added that, from his own unconquerable soul, “if the only prayer I ever say is thank you, that will be enough.”

Chapter Two: Refashioning the Family Room – Watching Oprah in a Boundary Public Sphere

You never know who is watching, and what state of mind you are in, and how you just happen to turn on the TV in any given moment, and you hear exactly what you need.

-- Oprah Winfrey¹⁶

On January 25, 2011, nearing the end of its final season, *Oprah* aired an episode called “25 Years of Coming Out on the *Oprah* Show” that discursively identifies *Oprah* and Harpo Studios as a safe space for homosexuality. The opening of the episode began with a standup narration by Oprah Winfrey, gazing deep into the camera. She said that the intention of the show has always been to “help people see things differently by giving a voice to those who might otherwise not be heard. And in doing so, we have helped ignite a national debate” (“25 Years” 25 Jan. 2011). The episode featured clips throughout *Oprah*’s history that positioned the show as a heavy-lifter in the modern gay rights movement and a major contributor in the spread of gay acceptance. “It was 1986. We had just been on the air a couple a months when we first started talking about *gay* issues,” Oprah explained. “That was just the beginning of a highly charged conversation that has continued all these years.”

Clips from what are considered the show’s “groundbreaking” moments continued to play while a voiceover by Oprah revealed that more than 120 episodes of *Oprah* have been dedicated specifically to the theme of “being gay” while hundreds more discussed gay issues. Among those prominently featured was an episode from 1988 in which a

¹⁶ (“The Greatest Lessons” 13 May 2011).

studio audience filled with gay people come out of the closet to the world, which became an annual event for the show. “My name is Michael Caplan. Hello America, I’m gay!” Additionally, a full screen image of the logo for the Gay Lesbian Alliance against Defamation (GLAAD) was shown while the show proudly boast it has won seven GLAAD awards for its respectable treatment of gay issues, the first of which *Oprah* won after Ellen DeGeneres came out on the show in 1997. “A lot of viewers were angry, but many were inspired.”

The episode also positioned Oprah as herself sympathetic and supportive of gay rights issues, as archival footage from a 1996 episode shows her standing up for her gay guests against homophobic audience members. “You know what we’re gonna have next?” an incensed woman in the audience asked, pointing her finger toward gay men on the stage. “We are gonna have a man who has a perversion, an abomination, to have sex with a child. Wait, just a minute, because I’ve listened to enough crap and enough hypocrisy that I have had it up to here.” Without a beat, Oprah responded, “Well, you know what I’ve had it up to here with? I’ve had it up with heterosexual men raping and sodomizing little girls.”

“For all of these years, after *all* of these shows, viewers from every walk of life told us again and again that our candid conversations had an impact,” Oprah said, followed by a clip of a mother who demonstrates how the show itself becomes a school for parents of gay children learning how to understand their children’s sexuality. “When my 21-year-old daughter came out and told me that she was gay, I was completely in shock,” she said. “Turn *Oprah* on and there’s Chely Wright, telling her story about coming out [in 2010]. It was the turning point for me in being able to accept my daughter for who she is.” Without *Oprah*, this mother-daughter relationship would have been in peril, but when a celebrity whom the mother knew and loved came out on the show,

homosexuality became a more legitimate truth that she could then understand, thus healing their troubled relationship. She literally had one of Oprah's signature "aha!" moments in which she realized, "I never thought of it that way before," which Oprah frequently says is the intention of the show.

It is in this vein that most of the gay men I interviewed, especially Ray and Marques, claim to have watched the show "publicly," that is, in the presence of their mothers. Oprah became a model of ideal maternity and godliness for these young gay viewers – she was their guide. They watched the show with their biological mothers to access a feeling of sublimity and transcendence by inviting or imagining their mothers in *Oprah's* world of gay acceptance. In other words, they believed their maternal figures in *Oprah's* world would be accepting of homosexuality, and, if they were not at first, Oprah would eventually guide them toward the true and civilized path – toward loving embrace.

After the clips finished rolling and Oprah took her seat on stage, Michael, the first guest featured in the episode started his story by telling Oprah he remembers rushing home every day after school to finish his chores in time to watch the show. He said he was especially affected by an episode that aired when he was twelve years old featuring Greg Louganis ("Greg Louganis" 27 Feb. 1995). In her visceral and confused reaction, Oprah Winfrey astutely asked the overarching question this chapter seeks to address, "What's a twelve-year-old boy [doing] watching the *Oprah* show?!" Michael explained that his parents forbid him from watching *Oprah* (as he later told me, he was forbidden from watching *any* talk show), and he secretly watched the show after school on the family's only television set while they were still at work. Half of Oprah's original question can be answered looking again toward Ray's use of the show, or the aforementioned mother's use of the show as a classroom to teach parents tolerance for homosexuality. But what about those gay men like Michael expressly forbidden to watch

Oprah – how do they use the show (or television in general) to do identity work, and in what situation or space? How do they use Oprah Winfrey as a tool of identification and what kind of relationship void does she fill in their lives?

In the service of interrogating these questions, I first explore cultural notions of the public and private spheres as television in the home pertains to and blurs them. This conversation will facilitate a discussion of semipublic televisual spectatorships informed largely by the work of Mary L. Gray and Lynn Spigel. Through this discussion, I elucidate through textual analysis how Harpo constructs itself as a counter-public, and I use ethnographic data to illuminate how young, rural gay men use that counter-public of *Oprah's* world as a “space” in which to do queer identity work. I also explore the way “space” is augmented through unique parasocial relationships my viewers developed with their “Queen” of Daytime.

BREAKING DOWN THE PUBLIC/PRIVATE SPHERE

Contemporary cultural studies scholarship on the notions of the public and private spheres is grounded in the work of Jürgen Habermas. Habermas proposed a historical model based on classical civilizations that suggests a basic distinction between what is considered public and what is considered private. He suggests that the public sphere as we generally understand it comprises those “events and occasions [that are public] when they are open to all – in contrast to closed or exclusive affairs” (Habermas 1). But the public sphere is not necessarily an accessible space for all because, by extension, government or state-owned buildings that are not open to the general public can still be considered within the realm of the public sphere (2). “Public” connotes an element of sharedness and access by a variety of citizens, but that public sphere depends upon a peoples’ governance of their private lives. The private sphere is defined as that which is

not public and is generally thought of as the place in which the citizens themselves have “private autonomy as masters of households on which their participation in public life depended” (3). In this sense, because women and children are not masters of the households, they are usually relegated to the private sphere as governed by the familial patriarch and thus have limited access to any kind of public in Habermas’ argument.

Perhaps in part because Habermas’ work carries the subtitle, “An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society,” cultural scholarship has been invested in complicating the notions of public and private beyond the bourgeois sphere which privileges a particular class of citizenship. Borrowing a term from Marxist theorist, Antonio Gramsci, feminist scholar Nancy Fraser argues that the development of the public sphere depends upon what she calls “subaltern counterpublics,” which she argues are “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser 527). In Fraser’s estimation, identifying the public sphere as a single, monolithic courtyard that advantages dominant groups means that “members of subordinated groups [the subaltern] would have no arenas for deliberation among themselves about their needs, objectives, and strategies” (527). Fraser lists journals, bookstores, publishing companies, film and video distribution networks, lecture series, research centers, academic programs, conferences, conventions, festivals and local meeting places as sites of subaltern counterpublics (527).

As is suggested in Habermas’ use of the state-owned building, notions of the public are often extended into the political arena, describing the politics of a people, for instance as an “outraged public.” Michael Warner’s work is influential in this regard because he suggests that even while “publics” are always plural(ist), a particular *type* of people populates the counterpublic, and that type can be defined by its “tension with the

larger public” – often, a political tension (56). These political counterpublics can then create an “odd social imaginary” understood as an “ethic of estrangement” (118, 113). The counterpublic, as Samuel Chambers notes, is aware of its subordination and that the discourses it produces “will be rejected or denigrated by the dominant public” (Chambers 131). Because of this subordinated and rejected status, counterpublics often imagine themselves in confrontation with the dominant public.

Some of this work has been extended to interrogate the solidarity created by Latino immigrants and illegal aliens who create what Kevin Bruyneel calls a “third space of sovereignty” (217). The “third space” is what counterpublics inhabit by rejecting “imperial binaries” like “assimilation or secession, inside or outside, modern or traditional” (Ibid.). Instead, they are enacting a third, gray area space, a “common world” inhabited by multiple understandings of membership. In it, subjects reconceptualize and enact a space of “sovereignty and/or citizenship that is inassimilable to the modern liberal democratic settler-state and nation” (Ibid.). William Flores, for instance, argues that protesting illegal immigrants by “acting upon and changing power relationships [the counterpublics are] not only demanding existing rights, but [creating] new ones” (273). Flores also argues that the third space can create a homogenizing effect. Members of these counterpublics can be homogeneously tagged by the dominant class through their otherness. As an example, because the immigrant counterpublic has become *so* visible, *all* Latinos, citizens or not, are thus rendered as “foreign” (273-277).

Gay rights advocates are another example of subaltern counterpublics who, according to Lauren Berlant and Warner, use the public space of the “street” as a “political base from which to pressure politicians with a gay voting bloc” (Berlant 204). Yet, Gray challenges public/private theories by these scholars by suggesting their definitions of what counts as legitimate publicness is urban oriented or depends upon

access to urban culture. “Fraser and Warner both imagine urban spaces as the ideal environment for the visibility, and invisibility, necessary to the nurturing of alternative subaltern counterpublics,” she writes. “However, rural queer young people’s authorized access to public space is fragile. ... There is no economic base to spawn a strong bourgeois public or from which alternative bookstores can be built” (94-95). Gray rightly argues that the public sphere of Habermas, Fraser, and Warner is complicated and challenged by rural queer youth who use public spaces ephemerally or temporarily in order to do gender identity work. Such spaces are what Gray calls “boundary publics” borrowed from the concept of “boundary objects” by Susan Leigh Star.

Star’s boundary objects are objects that different communities use and define in distinct ways based upon their needs. They are “both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites” (Star & Griesemer 393). Gray expands upon this work in a “spatial-temporal dimension” to understand how spaces themselves can be used in different ways by different communities, even while holding onto a particularly loose universal definition. Specifically, Gray demonstrates how Wal-Mart in rural towns can become a kind of public square different groups, in her case rural queer youth, can mentally transform to suit their needs temporarily even while the bricks and mortar of the building maintain a relatively fluid identity. “There is a permeable and malleable consistency to boundary publics that makes them simultaneously recognizable and elusive to onlookers and constituents, a quality of foggy familiarity tinged with ambiguity that proves critical to queer-identity work in rural communities” (Gray 2009, 95).

Scores of media scholars have theorized the way in which the media’s “invasion” in the home complicate the public and private. Lynn Spigel skillfully argues that the problem with all these delineations of “publicness” and “privateness” relies upon the

notion that people actually understand their houses as retreats and “their domestic lives and social lives to be clear cut and distinct entities” (6). Spigel historically interrogates how postwar suburban life through mass-produced suburbs challenged what it meant to be “private”:

Rapid growth of family based community organizations like the PTA suggest that these neo-suburbanites did not barricade their doors, nor did they simply “drop out.” Instead, they secured a position of meaning in the *public* sphere through their new found social identities as *private* landowners. In paradoxical terms, then, privacy was something which could be enjoyed only in the company of others. (6)

Landowning suburbanites in this era began feeling a sense of isolation in their new homes that the television was helping to alleviate. If the invention of television has the ability to “bring ‘another world’ into the home” and is a “form of ‘going places’ without even the expenditure of movement” as broadcasting critic Charles Siepmann once suggested (340), then the TV set as a private appliance is a tool that pierces the veil dividing public and private. Spigel argues that in the 1950s, suburban home design merged and/or blurred the indoor and the outdoor spaces as a response to the cooped-up Victorian cult of domesticity. In this understanding, the television did the work of “eradicating distances” and thus made closer the separation between this historically public (male) and historically female (private) domains (6-7).

Since its inception, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has understood and defined the airwaves through which televisual and radio broadcasts are transmitted as “public” and therefore in some sense must serve the public and be contained within its rubric of “decency” because it is, in a sense, invading the home. The Fairness Doctrine, which was a policy the FCC introduced in 1949, is a sparkling example of this credence for it ruled that broadcast licenses require their holders to air issues and stories relevant to the public and to do so in a manner that, by presenting

multiple sides, was honest, equitable, and balanced. Similarly, the decency clause ruling of the court case *FCC v. Pacifica* upheld the standard of decency the FCC expected in which a suit against George Carlin's radio routine, "Filthy Words," was censured for broadcasting indecent (and potentially obscene) material. The FCC's interest in policing the airwaves, according to the case, was to shield children from offensive material and ensure inappropriate speech (and by extension, imagery) does not enter the home. Thus, the patriarch's governance over the private sphere in a Habermasian model is complicated because the television's invasion means he can no longer be "master" over all matters in his home.

Spigel also writes that the television set in the home expanded the basic wallless suburban architecture popular in the 1950s, which emphasized open rooms, open spaces, large picture windows, and large landscape paintings in order to make the home feel more connected to the outside world. Television was the window to that world, and manufacturers "placed their sets against scenic backgrounds suggestive of the far-off spaces which television promised to make domestic ... Television would provide for its audiences a view of outside spaces" (9). But this transportive technology depended greatly on *what* was being broadcast and to *whom*.

Television has long had the unique ability to invade the once-thought private space of the home bringing with it images and representations never before appearing in homes in the countryside. For some young gay men, *Oprah* ushered in an era of shared television watching where they could watch the show in the presence of their mothers while simultaneously encountering images of homosexuality. But for others, the hopeful invasion of television was dampened by the close surveillance practices of their parents or guardians looking to shield their families from its contamination, and talk shows were seen as especially pernicious in their pursuit to corrupt family values.

MICHAEL’S EXPERIENCE – “FROM A PLACE SO SECLUDED”

Michael bounced anxiously in the car on the way to the Apollo Plaza, a shopping center near his home in rural New York. He grew up in the southern portion of Upstate New York in a small town carved into the Catskill Mountains with just over 6,500 people. His anxiety rose as they neared the Plaza, a cold panic edging toward tears that he would not have enough money to pay for the book he spent months hoping to buy. After they parked, Michael rushed into the Mostly Books store where he could not even reach the counter while his mother visited the adjacent dollar store for some groceries. He asked the clerk if they had Greg Louganis’ book, and when the clerk said they did, he poured out all of his pennies, nickels, dimes, and quarters onto the floor and began counting. His parents did not believe in an allowance; they never gave him money, and so he knew that if he was even a dollar short, his mother would not cover him. What little he collected and counted on the floor in the bookstore that day were the vestiges of what he found scouring the couches in the house, the floorboards of the car, and old birthday cards he received from relatives. When his counting had come to an end, and he realized he had just enough, he felt a wave of exhilaration unlike anything he had experienced.

Michael’s family was “very Catholic”; his parents were both Sunday school teachers while he and his brother served as altar boys in the church. Along with their religiosity, they were also strictly Republican, conservative oriented, and had little tolerance for homosexuality. In one of his earliest memories Michael remembers his family watching news on television about the “Gay Games,” the world’s largest sporting and cultural event for LGBT athletes. He said he will never forget his grandfather making the comment that LGBT people should be quarantined on an island where they could die off – and his father agreed. Although Michael was quite young and still did not understand totally what sexuality was or more specifically homosexuality, he said the

memory he carried of the event had a devastating impact on him and cemented the lock on his closet door once he began to understand that he himself was gay. Michael already had a tenuous relationship with his father which at times, he said, became physically abusive, built upon an environment where he understood homosexuality as a deadly sin, and HIV as God's way of eradicating gay people.

When he was young, Michael was forbidden from watching certain kinds of programming including but not limited to *The Simpsons* and *Married with Children* because their messages were not congruent with the church which had played such a central role in their life. He was also exclusively prohibited from watching any form of talk show which invariably included *Oprah*. However, both of his parents worked regular hours, his older brother played sports, and his younger brother was at daycare, so everyday after school from 3 to 5 in the afternoon, Michael was home alone. He always had a long list of chores, but when he discovered his new fandom in *Oprah*, he began finishing his chores before 4, when the show came on so he could watch it in peace. Every afternoon found Michael on his elbows in front of the lone family television set "exposed to the world from being from a place so secluded" as he said and darting to the window every so often to make sure his parents were not coming home early.

Because his parents had such limits on the kind of programming they allowed their children to watch, the only television set in Michael's household was set up in the "public" space of the family room. Here, I extend Spigel's argument that the placement of the television set indicates a space's access to the outside world to content also that those spaces are sometimes marked more "public" than others, especially for those rooms dedicated to familial gatherings, such as Michael's family room. These notions of delineated spaces are fairly recent developments in domestic architecture, and thus it is a fallacy to compare the private homes of Habermas' classical civilizations with those of

today's. Rooms with access to the "public sphere" through the portal of television and the invading public airwaves are then themselves publicized. Michael's parents believed that the television set had the potential to bring the outside world into the home, and so to limit his access to the public sphere, they censored his TV choices and limited the home to only one set that could be surveilled easily.

Gray's aforementioned work on the "boundary public" suggests that rural queer youth who have no access to specifically designated public queer spaces can alter the spaces of boundary objects to suit their purposes. These boundary publics, of which Wal-Mart is her example, are public or semipublic spaces that have well-understood identities but that can serve as temporary elusive public spaces for subaltern counterpublics. She also gives the example of local churches that allow youth groups and punk bands to use their facilities even though they are not a part of the church's loosely-defined identity and may indeed be contrary to that identity. Framed through the lens of Michael's and later Caleb's stories, I extend the notion of the boundary public to the abstract public sphere created by the illuminated television set in the family space of their homes. These family spaces serve public functions even if they can also be considered "private." Michael's use of the television set to watch programming that subverted what his parents had deemed acceptable family fare is his rural creation of a boundary public because he used the space of the television and the family room to do queer identity work in much the same way rural queer youth in Gray's study used drag shows at their local Wal-Mart. I extend Fraser's list of counterpublics in locales like coffee houses and bookstores to suggest talk shows and daytime television, especially *Oprah*, as other examples of subaltern counterpublics where voices from disenfranchised communities can come together to create their own counter discourses. Through its constant rhetoric of self-empowerment,

Harpo Studios itself, where *Oprah* was filmed, fostered an actual geographical space imagined to embrace and empathize with such marginalized souls.

Those belonging to this imagined subaltern counterpublic were similarly disenfranchised fans of Oprah whom I wrote about in more detail in Chapter 1. Proof of this defined counterpublic is in its homogenization by the dominant culture or discourses that suggest that *Oprah* is a space for white, middle-class housewives and femmy gay men, which explains the stigma surrounding heterosexual male fans of a show dedicated to “private” sphere, low cultural, melodramatic feminine programming.

Noted in my introduction, talk shows and *Oprah* in particular complicate notions of public and private even further by creating genre-less content that does not fit within historically defined programming strategies. Content aimed at attracting those in the public sphere (read: men) was mixed with emotional, melodramatic programming thought of as belonging to the private sphere (read: women) reminiscent of soaps. As Wayne Munson writes, “the talk show conflates the sensational, the advisory, and the political in a promiscuous hall of mirrors” (5).

As illustration, according to scholars Kathleen Dixon and Kacie Jossart, from the beginning, *Oprah* had just as many viewers as primetime newscasts, and seventeen times more viewers than CNN (115). This statistic comes from a study that questions what it means that so many Americans now turn to “soft news” outlets, like *Oprah*, and what that has done to change how we view the world. Matthew A. Baum suggests that because “soft news” outlets repackage major headlines with entertainment foci, they “create a dynamic that increases public awareness of ‘political issues’” (91). *Oprah* is particularly effective in presenting a multitude of issues because, as the owner of her own studio and as the host of her own show, Oprah can “morph” into any role to fit the needs of whatever it is she wants to discuss, thereby eliminating any semblance of a static “genre” or

program format common on other programs. While competing daytime fare, like *The View*, *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, and *Judge Judy*, follow a fairly predictable formula for each episode, Oprah might discuss the devastation of Hurricane Katrina one day, go on a camping trip with her best friend Gayle another day, and return to the studio for an in depth conversation with child molesters on the third. “Winfrey’s show is in some sense less a genre than a slice of life for her home audience,” Dixon and Jossart argue. “It moves from type to type and topic to topic as the need arises. This juggling act is what ‘women’s work’ has consisted of for millennia, one reason of many that [Oprah’s] audience ‘relates’ to both her and the show” (16).

I would add here that the mise-en-scène of *Oprah* episodes since its overhaul in the mid-‘90s, or “those chairs” as Oprah calls them, is itself indicative of the kind of private-public mixture on which *Oprah* has built its reputation. The stage itself mimics a sort of mirrored familial space, as chairs are arranged conversationally in front of the “public,” pointed toward the audience as the furniture of an actual family room points toward the television. Gone is the desk or the table found in earlier iterations of TV talk, and unlike Phil Donahue, after the overhaul, Oprah Winfrey herself moved onto the stage of her own “family room” to have intimate conversations with her guests without hand-held microphones. From my experience attending a 2011 taping, I was struck by how Oprah’s interviews occur on a part of the stage that extends out into the audience, which is built circularly around the stage. In so doing, *Oprah* cameras are able to capture angles of the host and her guests with and without the audience in the background based upon the needs of the producers to show audience reaction. The studio audience members are important because they verify and convey the authenticity and emotionality felt in person in a way that increases the reality of one’s imagined presence in the studio. For episodes without an audience, they arguably do *more work in absentia* by marking such episodes

as so especially emotional or relevant that even an audience would seem inappropriate. Again, the program can achieve this flexibility because, unlike network-produced series, Oprah Winfrey owns her own studio and the rights to production which gives her a greater dexterity to produce a myriad of episodes and episode formats. Episodes on LGBTQ issues or other controversial subjects, then, do not necessarily degrade the integrity of the show in the minds of their viewers, however, because of the assumption the content will revert back to “normal” on the following day. The expectation that *Oprah* will eventually return to hegemonic heteronormativity is explained by Lynne Joyrich. “Epistemology of the Console.” Joyrich argues that although “the homosexualization of television is here” in recent primetime programming homosexuality is both “envisioned and erased” (440) when patriarchy is restored the following week. On the contrary, what viewers fail to realize is that, at least on *Oprah*, “gay” is the “normal.”

In a recent content analysis of the twenty-fifth season, Stephen Winzenburg revealed that outside of episodes about television shows (of which there were twenty-one), LGBT themed episodes were covered more than any other topic, including movies. And when one considers that sixteen of the twenty-one television show topics were, in essence, advertisements for new programs on OWN, LGBT-themed episodes played a central role in the show’s final season. According to Winzenburg, “Oprah used her show to promote a pro-gay rights platform, and she admits that this is the topic that she gets the most negative response of any that she does. That’s because she discusses LGBT issues without giving opposing viewpoints a voice on her program” (11). This season alone, according to Winzenburg, *Oprah* broadcast episodes featuring the actors who portray the gay parents in *Modern Family*, a lesbian couple with children, a mother who “fathered” her own child using sperm she froze when she was still a man, husbands living on the down-low, Ellen DeGeneres’ wife, Portia de Rossi, the coming-out of Latin superstar

Ricky Martin, transgender advocate Chaz Bono, newly-out actor Meredith Baxter, Fran Drescher and her gay ex-husband, author Terry McMillan with her gay ex-husband, and a transgendered male fashion model living as a woman. Additionally, Carson Kressley made a couple appearances, one of which was to meet his heartthrob. Jokes about Oprah and Gayle's lesbian camping trip, an appearance by Suze Orman, the openly gay prince of India, Greg Louganis, a transgendered little girl, and several other episodes while not dedicated exclusively to the theme of homosexuality give voice and screen-time to LGBTQ guests.

As a teenager, Michael found this wealth of queer *Oprah* material not only entertaining, but also intellectually stimulating. He was able to grasp foreign concepts presented in the easy-to-understand language by the experiential "experts" and translated when needed by Oprah Winfrey herself. For him, *Oprah* became an "escape" from the stringent household routine that had become his life and widened his limited exposure to the public sphere. "*Oprah* brought issues that I found were very interesting, and some of which were gay issues that my parents and family weren't talking about." During a commercial break one afternoon, Michael saw a tease for an upcoming episode that would forever change his life, an episode of *Oprah* in which Louganis, the American Olympic diver, was announcing to the world that he was gay and had HIV. This is a powerful memory for Michael and is the first time he remembers actually seeing a gay man up close. He said the day the episode came on, he made sure all of his chores were done ahead of time so that he could watch the show completely uninhibited and unrestricted.

Through the invasion of television into the public spaces of their homes, rural gay youth like Michael were able to create a boundary public sphere in which they could access representations of LGBTQ folk and start the process of their own queer identity

work. Michael's parents had prohibited him from watching television, but in their absence he hijacked the space to serve his needs in order to build identificatory "friendly" relationships with the people he saw on the screen, particularly Louganis. In his spectatorship of *Oprah*, Michael developed bonds with both its host and her guests.

PARASOCIAL INTERACTIONS AND OPRAH WINFREY – "TOUCHING THE TELEVISION SCREEN"

In 1956 Donald Horton and Richard Wohl introduced the term "parasocial interaction" (PSI) to describe the phenomenon of one-side interpersonal relationships the viewing public was observed to have with characters/actors/celebrities in the media, especially on television. In PSI, a close bond of intimacy develops between the viewers and their subjects, which can be said to feel as close as real-life familial relationships or personal friendships (Horton & Wohl). Horton and Wohl's project was expanded by Denis McQuail, Jay Blumler, and Joseph Brown in the 1970s beginning with a study of British television audiences' PSI with soap opera characters in 1972. After a car crash in an episode of one such program, a viewer in the study commented, "You feel as if they had been in a real road accident, and you'd like to do something for them" (157). In his 1979 study of older adults and their PSI with local television news personalities, Mark Levy found that viewers compared their "own ideas with those of newscasters" and "when the newscasters joke around with each other, it makes the program easier to watch" (69-80).

The results of many of these studies demonstrate that the paramount function PSIs serve is to provide alternative companionships necessary to overcome one's "deficiencies" in social life. Newscasters, talk show hosts, or other figures who address the camera directly are said to be especially suited to the development of the PSI.

Additionally, several of these research participants were also looking for media figures with whom to personally identify, which is also discussed in qualitative research by spectator theorists as simply, “identification.” In her work on feminine fascinations, Jackie Stacey interrogates the relationship formed between stars and spectators and the way in which cinematic modes of address influence their feminine identities. Stacey foregrounds the notion of “identification” as being fraught because her respondents have used it so variably. As such, where words fail her subjects, they represent their connection to Hollywood starlets as “semi-magical” in a similar kind of identification I describe happening between gay men and diva figures in Chapter 1 (Stacey 126-129). Several critical media reception studies scholars have also studied the way in which queer audiences relate to such figures and characters, on which actors and activists often depend. José Esteban Muñoz, for instance, argues that MTV *Real World* persona Pedro Zamora used his appearance on the show as a way of creating a gay counterpublic for the show’s viewers. “What started out as tokenized representation became something larger, more spacious – a mirror that served as a prop for subjects to imagine and rehearse identity. This, in part, enables the production of counterpublics.” Pedro’s was a “new formation, a being for others” (“Pedro Zamora” 332, 336).

Children also use television as a mode of identification. Cecilia V. Feilitzen and Olga Linné noted that “children whose relations to parents and playmates are less harmonious tend to seek models in the world of the mass media” and that an individual “consciously or unconsciously recognizes him/herself in, or wishes to be, another individual so that he/she becomes involved in that individual and vicariously participates in his/her activities, feelings and thoughts” (Feilitzen and Linné 51-52). Dafna Lemish argues that television in this role becomes important in our lives at a very young age. Children as young as ten months old can already have a fascination with television

characters and programs and as early as sixteen months can learn how to control the set on their own (“Viewers in Diapers” 33-57). Lemish also suggests that children’s viewership of television shows can influence their understanding of sexuality: “preadolescents ... reported frequent encounters with sexual material in the media, valued the information received from [them], and used [them] as a learning resource ... and evaluated such content through what they perceived to be sexual morality” (*Children and Television* 116).

Television is especially suited to fostering a “real-life” or “live” atmosphere and sensibility that contributes to such PSIs by heightening the authenticity of that interaction. In her work on the “ideology of liveness” Lynn Spigel notes that “TV’s illusion of presence is rendered through the real-life appearance of the electronic image and the eternal ‘flow’ of the television text (its sense of an ever-present simultaneous world).” Realizing its appeal, broadcasters incorporated “liveness” strategies into their programming to duplicate the sensation of live, in-person performances for viewers at home which included laugh tracks and live studio audiences. These “theatrical modes of representation,” as Spigel argues, “produced the simulation of live theater ... illusion so compelling that it would be identical to a live performance” (16) and thus give the listener or a viewer an even greater sense of presence in the space of the program.

Oprah is particularly well-tailored for the incubation of PSI because of its emphasis on reality, its use of an empathetic and likable host who often addresses the camera and speaks about her own life, and its unassuming, family-room-style set design and furniture that heightens its sense of intimacy, especially after its overhaul to become a “higher quality” program.¹⁷ Into this mold was cast Oprah’s one-on-one conversation

¹⁷ In Chapter 3, I discuss in greater detail *Oprah*’s overhaul, and also how I operationalize my use of the word “quality” to discuss the transition of her program format.

with Louganis about being homosexual and HIV positive in 1995, to which Michael felt he had an especially strong attachment both with Oprah and Louganis. In the episode, Oprah and Louganis embrace as he is introduced to a standing ovation. Immediately after their bodies separate, Oprah steps off the stage and into the audience where she remains for much of the episode and thus Louganis is projected in a more isolated and vulnerable position, which Michael certainly related to his own reality.

It was the very first gay [story] that I had ever seen, and I was just glued to the television. When I first saw him, I was like - I am going to have to marry this man because he is the only other gay man in the world. I really thought he was the only other one besides me. I really felt like it was an anomaly. I developed this huge crush – I felt like it was even exacerbated because I felt like he was really the only other one besides me. It was really exhilarating, and I was really nervous because I was afraid my parents were going to come home early, and I wasn't going to be able to watch the end of it.

Michael's insistent belief that he was the only other living breathing homosexual exponentially heightened his PSI, which came with a sense of both excitement and agony about the possibility and utter impossibility of his future life with Louganis, or by extension, with any other gay man. Michael's excitement awakened in him new feelings and frustrations and worries that he had never before experienced, and he clung to every word. Among the most influential moments he still remembers from the show is a segment with a clip in which an audience member says something "demeaning" to Louganis during the commercial break. When the event is referenced, Michael remembers Oprah addressing the audience member and saying, "This is why we are doing this show, because of people like you." This interaction impacted Michael not only because he believed it demonstrated her great integrity and the spirit of the show as one of dignity (indeed, that she was an ally), but also he realized that this person's hateful comments represented the consensus reaction he would endure should he ever come out.

In this moment, Michael also assumed an identification with Oprah because she, like Michael, had to answer for homosexuality to those around her, and from her spot in the audience (and from presumed heterosexuality), she, like Michael, viewed Louganis from a distance. Additionally, in positioning himself in Oprah's shoes, as the show often invites viewers to do, he could imagine speaking himself directly to Louganis. "I felt like I wasn't alone," Michael told me, "and I knew that the first thing I had to do was to buy his book."

After he and his mother returned from the Plaza, Michael devoured Louganis' book. He said that, luckily, his parents had no idea who Louganis was or the controversy surrounding his appearance on the show. "All they knew was that he was an athlete, and my father probably thought, 'Oh, he's getting into sports. This is good.'"

Michael's use of the family room as a boundary public was also facilitated by his selecting Louganis as a "boundary object" because he could identify with a homosexual whose loose association with the general public was not his identity as a homosexual, at least not until his *Oprah* appearance but, rather, his performance as an Olympic athlete.

In school, Michael was bullied relentlessly. Inside his locker he kept a running tally of the number of times "fag" or "faggot" was shouted at him. A good day might find only one or two while a bad day would carry as many as twenty. He was afraid if his parents found out about his bullying, they would make him answer for his peers' accusations so he made sure they were not present for any kind of school outing or field trip. He spent his time paralyzed by fear until he could handle it no more. His freshman year of high school, he came out to his peers. Many of Michael's friends were supportive of him and, at the end of the year, wrote notes of congratulations in his year book for coming out and being who he "really was." Then, one evening, for probably the first time in his life, Michael's parents came home early, entered the cold and seldom-used living

room, and found his yearbook lying carelessly on the couch. Michael crept down the stairs and found his mother going page by page through his book and reading every comment. He called a friend, panicked about what to do, and while he was on the phone, his parents called him down to the living room.

He took a seat on the piano bench while his mother looked at him with a serious face and asked him what the comments meant. After a moment of hesitation, he said, “I don’t know.” After several moments of uncomfortable silence and persistent questioning, Michael’s mother asked him more directly, “Michael, do you think you might be gay?” In that moment, Michael says thoughts sped through his brain as he carefully considered his options and reflected back to Louganis’ episode, remembering how revealing his truth was difficult but ultimately celebrated in the space of the show. “I don’t think I’m gay; I know I’m gay.” He says their reaction created a tension in the air he could have cut with a knife, and after a long pause, his father looked at him and said defeatedly, “Well, it was nice knowing you.” Michael asked his father what he meant, and his father replied, “Everybody knows that fags get AIDS and die.” Michael’s coming-out, unlike Louganis’, was not welcomed with neither a loving embrace or a standing ovation but with disgust and disappointment. The truth Oprah was championing of Louganis, though it seemed impossible for Michael at the time, ended up having devastating consequences when he told his parents. They ultimately divorced and his father kicked him out of the house when he was sixteen.¹⁸

In the meantime, Michael felt an intense connection to Louganis, a sense of missing a part of himself from which he felt disengaged. He longed to connect, to thank Louganis for helping to hold him safe in what had become a such difficult journey. But

¹⁸ In Chapter 3, I explore in greater detail the talk show’s call to confession and the impact such disclosures can have on their rural audiences.

more than anything, Michael was terrified of Louganis's mortality because of his HIV, particularly because Michael's understanding of HIV's devastating consequences was informed by his father's diagnosis of it as a death sentence. He believed Louganis would die of his disease before he ever had the opportunity to demonstrate his life-altering influence. "I felt that ... that the closest I would ever be to Greg Louganis was touching the television screen."

This act of reaching out and touching the screen is what scholars who study PSI call a "behavioral manifestation" in which a person tries earnestly or not to engage with the subjects on the screen, a common example of which are viewers who talk back to their sets. Most of the studies suggest that behavioral manifestations are quite common among viewers of television, but none of the cases in any of the studies I read were nearly as touching or heartbreaking as Michael's. Consumed with his fear that Louganis would die before he understood how he had changed Michael's life, every year Michael wrote to the producers of *Oprah* hoping no more than that they would pass on his messages before it was too late. After several years of trying, and after several attempts at writing both the show and the athlete, Michael wrote one final letter:

Dear Oprah: I have written to you several times and I know you are a very busy person, but I thought maybe this e-mail would be different. You see, back in 1995, you had a guest on your show, Greg Louganis. I was twelve years old when the show was on and to this day I can't stop thinking about it. As a twelve-year-old boy trying to come to terms with why he was different, your show was just the thing I needed. It showed me that there were other people out there who had the same feelings as myself. ... The reason I am writing is to not only let you know how your show changed me but to ask you if you ever stay in contact with Mr. Louganis and could let him know that he is still very much in my thoughts and prayers. More than anything I would love to thank him personally, but I know he is a very busy person and so if you could pass it on so that at least he knows I would be most grateful. I also want to let you know that show you had back in 1995 changed my life forever in that it made me start to realize that it was OK that I was gay and had these feelings. Coming from a very conservative

republican household one knew not to utter a word about such things as my "disgusting lifestyle" or how I felt. Thank you for that show because I'm sure I wasn't the only other twelve year old that your show really helped. I thank you very much for your time and pray this letter somehow finds you. Once again thank you Ms. Winfrey. – Michael, 11.05.2002

Eight years later, a producer from *Oprah* unexpectedly called his home and said that they had found his letters to Louganis and were interested in interviewing him about how the show had changed his life. Producer after producer kept calling; then they asked for pictures from his childhood, and then they asked to fly out to his new adult home in Hawai'i to film his everyday life. The day following the film shoot, the producers flew Michael to Chicago to film an episode about the impact of the show, but he was assured Louganis would be unable to attend. As a flight attendant with United (the airline that sponsors *Oprah*), he pulled some strings to have the passenger lists checked for any possibility of Greg Louganis flying to Chicago. Anticipating this, the *Oprah* staff flew Greg on American Airlines to throw him off the track. Sitting on stage across from Oprah and telling her and the world his incredible story, Michael was just exhilarated to know that somewhere in the world, Louganis would finally know the imprint he left on Michael's life. However, standing just backstage, ready to sign Michael's well-worn book, Louganis was about to learn just how important he had been firsthand and transform Michael's once-PSI into a genuine mutual friendship.

An important final note about the nature of the PSI relationship with gay men: An old industry standard for children's programming holds that female children will relate with either male or female characters, but male children will relate only with male characters. Qualitatively, this statistic is problematic because it assumes an equality of representation between male and female figures. That is to say, it may not be that female children intrinsically more readily identify with male characters than male children do

with female characters, but rather, that the kinds of roles afforded male characters on television represent a more attractive model for both female and male children than the current brand of female roles currently available in the media. On the contrary, all the men I interviewed for *“Hello America, I’m Gay!”* identified with Oprah Winfrey both in their youth and adulthood beyond their levels of identifications with other male characters or celebrities. Oprah Winfrey’s multi-minoritarian identities allowed Ray and Marques several avenues of identification they could not find in standard scripted characters. For Michael and Caleb (below), *Oprah* created a “boundary public” space populated with a variety of “characters” with whom to do queer identity work in their youth, while allowing them to continue to connect most intimately with Oprah beyond peripheral male personas. Alexander Doty hypothesizes that at the center of this identificatory pattern are:

gay men who identify with some conception of ‘the feminine’ through processes that could stem from conscious personal choice, or from internalizing long-standing straight imperatives that encourage gay men to think of themselves as ‘not men’ (and therefore, by implication or by direct attribution, as being like ‘women’) or from some degree of negotiation between these two processes ... (6)

This information thus encourages future scholarship from both an academic and an activist perspective to interrogate the nature of queer identificatory models and spectatorship patterns. It is important to understand what models young people use and why they use them in order to make programming that better serves our youth which has been the cornerstone of Lemish’s research. Scholars like Lemish suggest that children use broadcast media as a learning tool and a behavioral model. “Social cognitive theory maintains that individuals learn about the world by observing others,” write Sarah F. Rosaen and Jayson L. Dibble. “Moreover, children learn that patterns exist in human communication that resemble scripted behavior where people react in similar ways to

certain scenarios.” In this way, shows such as *Oprah* serve a pedagogical function that young people use to inform their identities and to predict how others will react to them once they decide to come out. Scholars like Lemish argue that young television viewers bring generic “scripts” from the television world into their understanding of how the real world responds to various social interactions. Young children are likely to believe that characters portrayed on television are likely to be reproduced by the people around them. In other words, rural viewers watching television shows that characterized the heartland as rugged, backwoods, or close-minded, were likely to believe they were living in such an uncivilized society.

Nauman Naqvi writes that from a historical perspective, the key characteristics of the civilized are that they are “urban and urbane; secular and spiritual; law-abiding and nonviolent” while conversely the uncivilized are especially “rural, or worse, savage; idolatrous, fanatical, literalist, and theocratic, unlawful and violent” (Naqvi 557). As an extension of this concept, Victoria E. Johnson writes about the “myth of the heartland” of rural America as a place, “condemned for its perceived naiveté and lack of mobility as a site of hopelessly rooted, outdated American past life and values, entrenched political and social conservatism,” as well as a potentially dangerous space for the “other,” especially those of deviant sexualities or subversive genders (5). Applying this definition, the rural can be imagined as the site where violence against homosexuals may be seen as acceptable as they are to be condemned in the name of a god who will quickly gobble them up and swallow them down for their sins. In such a characterization, the heartland communities fail to perform true civility because of their misguided (and sometimes savage) religious beliefs, and need to be set on the righteous path of the truly civilized and tolerant. Those who participate in and support such civilizing missions do so in the belief that they are uplifting their subjects “to a higher state of humanity and of

subjection to the law” (557). However, historically speaking, the process of civilizing a savage people involves insertion not only into their public lives but how they conduct themselves privately, as well.

Through the invasion of television in Oprah’s wake, rural peoples are exposed to her concept of civilized, more appropriate forms of spirituality. Hers is a civilizing religious mission that teaches people tolerance – to embrace homosexuality and denounce homophobia. “Many people aren’t that familiar with spiritual growth. They might need some help at first with the languaging of new consciousness and things like that,” Oprah said when discussing her convergent online-televised classes on spirituality with German philosopher Eckhart Toile (quoted in Minzesheimer n.p.). “So I thought, ‘Wouldn’t it be great to have classes to help people through the process?’ ... I speak a lot to my audience, even more after the show than during it, and I know a lot of people are seeking spiritual enlightenment and encouragement” (Ibid. n.p.).

On one side of the coin, *Oprah*’s theology teaches its viewers the importance of self-responsibility, extending its often-used makeover paradigm to encourage a makeover of one’s own understanding of religion and good spirituality. “Gospel is a word that means the ‘good news,’” Kathryn Lofton said. “Oprah says the good news is you!” (quoted in Blaustein n.p.) In other words, through its new-age value system, *Oprah* can teach its viewers a more “civilized” and tolerant form of spirituality that relies on self-responsibility and independent thinking which exists in relief against the conservative, old-world churches in which many of her viewers were raised.

On the other side of the coin, Oprah Winfrey serves as a model of defiant citizenship for those excluded or condemned by popular patriarchal religions. The boundary public spaces they create for the show in their living rooms allow them to find a kind of metaphorical sanctuary – guarded in their homophobic cultures by the tolerance

the show and its host often preach. Through its teachings, *Oprah* re-conceptualizes the “scripted behavior” gay viewers believe those around them will adopt. In other words, when they see gay men and women like Louganis and Ellen coming out to a standing ovation, they recognize the more urban, “civilized” environment of Chicago to be a place that embraces homosexuality, thus affirming their belief in the heartland myth – where they can never wholly be accepted.

It is in the throes of this mission to civilize her audience that Oprah inspired and empowered one of her young viewers, Caleb, who was struggling with his own savage and religious environment. In response to the barrage of gay teen suicides finding their way more and more into the news media in the last three years. Several of the people I interviewed for this project listed such examples of episodes (as numerous when they were young as they are today), as their own generation’s version of the now-famous “It Gets Better” videos. For them, these types of programs gave them the neoliberal faith that, through their own hard work, the road to the end of their suffering would be much safer to travel and therefore made the journey easier for them. However, the “It Gets Better” videos are highly criticized¹⁹ in the same way *Oprah* has been for ignoring the complex systems of oppression that prevent nonwhite or non-middle class or sometimes even non-urban youth from actually *getting* to the *better*. Yet, for some of these viewers, watching *Oprah* episodes featuring people undergoing the hardest days of their life gave them the motivation to survive and endure not through the mantra, “It Gets Better,” but rather, “It Could Be Worse.”

¹⁹ For more, read: Majkowski, Tina. “The ‘It Gets Better Campaign’: An Unfortunate Use of Queer Futurity.” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*. 21.1 (2011): 163-5.

also: Puar, Jasbir. “In the Wake of ‘It Gets Better’: The campaign prompted by recent gay youth suicides promotes a narrow version of gay identity that risks further marginali[z]ation.” *theguardian*.

CALEB’S EXPERIENCE – “THE DEVIL ENTERED YOUR HOME THROUGH THE TELEVISION”

Caleb lived below his family in isolation, seeking sanctuary in a space in the basement that shared a wall only with the family garage, which he was forbidden from entering. A simple padlock hanging on the door that opened to Caleb’s room fortified its security, layered upon a deadbolt that guaranteed no way of sneaking in. Neither his father nor his stepmother opened the garage from the outside to pull in their vehicles; instead they left their newly-purchased pickup trucks baking in the heat of the rural Missouri summer sun. The padlock on the door concealed his parents’ secret from Caleb’s curiosity, but it failed to protect him from the odors and fumes seeping their way into his room every night from the residue of the meth lab on the other side of the wall. He was thirteen at the time.

At that moment in his life, Caleb had already discovered and embraced his *Oprah* fandom, rarely missing an episode everyday after school. Both his father and stepmother worked regular hours, and so *Oprah* filled the void in between school and their arrival, another tool he could use to disengage with a family and house full of children with whom he would never fully belong. Because it was the early 2000s, Oprah had already revamped her syndicated talk show to follow a “politics of respectability,” and the self-help/self-improvement messages of her show, especially those that guests like Iyanla Vanzant and Dr. Phil McGraw had come to popularize, left her daytime viewers feeling a constant sense of responsibility for their own lives.²⁰ “It doesn’t matter what your mama did; it doesn’t matter what your daddy didn’t do. You are responsible for your life,” Oprah concluded in the 2011 series finale. “You are responsible for the energy that you

²⁰ I adapt Higginbotham’s concept of a “politics of respectability” to discuss the spiritual and political implications of *Oprah*’s overhaul more in Chapter 3.

create for yourself, and you're responsible for the energy that you bring to others. ... Please take responsibility for the energy you bring into this space" ("Finale" 25 May 2011).

Caleb's regular spectatorship, he remembers, began when he was ten as a new fourth grader fascinated by the show's nonfictional themes, translating the complicated news headlines into a language he could decipher as a child. As an extension of the public/private blurring, content featured on *Oprah* itself bridged the gap between historically public sphere political debates with the private sphere of domesticity traditionally associated with women. In so doing, *Oprah* opened a space on television for "ordinary" people to enter into the conversation which on other news media outlets had been controlled mostly by white male "experts" (such as the clergymen, lawyers, and scientists used in early talk shows). While Spigel is critical of *Oprah* for making the show about personal issues and not complex political ones (Spigel 247), Gamson and Shattuc recognize that this departure from the "hard news" genre not only invited easy-to-understand voices into the conversation that appealed to her largely female audience (Gamson 16), but also translated "politics into the everyday experience of the political" (Shattuc 177).

Caleb remembers his young television viewership practices, limited at the time only to network programming, as oriented *only* toward nonfictional programming, but among those topics inaccessible to him at the time in other news media outlets was the subject of sexuality – learning about and understanding how his own homosexuality would soon shape his life. Caleb is unable to list any specific guests from early issues-oriented *Oprah* episodes, instead remembering only big picture themes presented by the show. Although Michael readily identifies *Oprah*'s Greg Louganis episode, he too, as with Ray and Marques champions the affect of the show, how it made them feel in

general, instead of any of its individual players or episodes. Even at ten years old, Caleb was able to pick up on many of the neoliberal themes running through episodes in this era that encouraged, nay, dared viewers who were unhappy in their current situations to take action to improve themselves and their contexts. It was in this spirit of self-improvement and self-responsibility, overcoming one's own uncivilized environment, that one day early in the fall Caleb picked up the phone and called the police on his parents.

Everyday Caleb had become more and more uncomfortable in his environment. He disliked his step-siblings and his stepmother's frenetic mannerisms and paranoia, together with the strange shipment of supplies to the basement made him suspicious of the activities taking place in the garage. With help from an internet search engine, he learned about and deduced that his house was home to a meth lab and his parents were using it to get high – selling meth to those he presumed to be his father's coworkers. Taking control of his life, Caleb hoped that if he were to report his stepmother to the police, to have her removed from the picture, things would be better for him. After his report, weeks went by when nothing seemed to happen, and then on a trip to the grocery store, Caleb noticed some men sitting in an unmarked police car who watched his parents; he realized his family was being surveilled. On Halloween night, approximately one *month* after Caleb reported his family to the police, his father was arrested in what the police called a “Trick-or-Treat Roundup” – a drug bust that jailed several other users and sellers in the area in addition to his parents. But for thirty days, a thirteen-year-old Caleb waited anxiously in fear and panic, knowing his family was being watched, all the while smelling the odors of what he believed to be methamphetamine on the other side of his bedroom wall. By thirteen, Caleb had already bounced from parent to grandparent to parent, along the way passing through twenty-one different school districts before the seventh grade. By attempting to take responsibility of his life, as proclaimed in the “Word

of Oprah,” he was launched on a path that, despite what he understood through the show as his “taking charge” moment, he ultimately could not and would not be able to control it.

Around the same time, Caleb’s biological mother married his stepfather, a union to which a son was born. In the time he lived with her, Caleb’s mother had, in his words, a “mental breakdown,” before she herself was arrested for meth use and losing custody for being an “unfit parent.” After his father was arrested, but avoided jail on a plea bargain, custody of all of Caleb’s siblings, including his twin sister, was restored from his grandparents to his stepmother, but he refused to move back. Eventually, his grandparents decided they could not or would not assume custody, so at fourteen, he was sent to live with a second cousin in the small town of Knob Noster, populated by no more than 2,500 people. Knob Noster is in West Central Missouri between the Osage and Missouri Rivers and is known as home to Whiteman Air Force base, creating what Caleb describes as a military, conservative ambience that was buttressed by the region’s strong ties to rural Southern Baptism. Caleb’s cousin was a single, special education teacher at the small town’s middle school and herself the daughter of a Southern Baptist preacher. She shared his guardianship with her sister and her brother-in-law although Caleb resided alone in the house with her. As such, his experiences changed dramatically from a household of alcoholic drug-dealers to the staunch religious conservatism of his new guardians.

While living with his father, Caleb was able to transform the space that housed the family’s television set into a boundary public in their absence. In much the same way Michael used Louganis, Caleb used *Oprah* more generally as a boundary object to do queer identity work through frequently featured openly homosexual guests. Along with Marques and Ray, Caleb used the figure of Oprah as a model to understand his own multiple minoritarian identities – not only his sexuality but also his race (he identifies as

Hispanic) and his class, hailing from a lower-class, rural family. As Gloria-Jean Masciarotte suggests of Oprah, she is herself “a device of identity that organizes new antagonisms in the contemporary formations of democratic struggle” (84). To Caleb, as a boundary object, Oprah was specifically the compass that helped him navigate these identities while to his family, *Oprah* was no more than a silly talk show. “They didn’t understand why I would waste my time watching something factual, like *Oprah*,” he said. “I would watch it as much as possible, whenever it was on. And usually it was rerun at night so if I didn’t catch it at, like 4, it was rerun at like 9 or 9:30.” *Oprah* continued to function successfully as a boundary object for Caleb after he moved to Knob Noster.

Because of her religious beliefs, Caleb’s aunt forbade television in the house because she believed “the devil entered your home through the television.” As a communication tool, television programming had the ability to invade their private home uninvited and to potentially contaminate the strong religious values she was steadfast in upholding. So to eliminate its threat and forbid him from what she assumed was lurid programming more resolutely, she removed all the sets from the house. Caleb did, however, have access to a computer in her home, but it remained in a public space in the house and was, as he says, “highly regulated” and constantly surveilled. However, because *Oprah* again maintained an innocent identity as opposed to explicitly gay websites, as a boundary object he could continue his fandom of the show and continue to access information about plot lines and themes tolerant of homosexuality without concerning his aunt who did not connect his use of the talk show to his homosexuality.

Through all the hardships of his family’s history, Caleb was also undergoing a confusing sexual awakening as his one understanding of acceptable orientation was being challenged by his new feelings. Unbeknownst to him at the time, his grandparents’ decision to move him to his cousin’s house was in large part because of his suspect

sexuality which he was too young to understand that they had recognized. “My grandparents had written [my guardians] a letter before I moved down there that I thought ... that they thought that I thought that I was gay. I don’t know how they even knew. Maybe I had said something or asked a question or something.” Caleb does not remember intentionally outing himself to his grandparents, so it can be inferred that the conversation that originated the outing for him had been seen by him as nothing out of the ordinary. “The whole idea of sexuality was a blur to me,” he says, and the extent of the sex-talk between him and his grandparents was opened and closed by a book they gave him on “a guide to puberty for boys.” So once again, Caleb turned to *Oprah* as an important tool to learn and simplify the discourse of sexuality, particularly homosexuality.

[Sexuality] was kind of discussed in the book – and so I kind of knew the general idea of what sexuality was, but I really wasn’t for sure. So I think that having those discussions [on *Oprah*], and that she even had people on there that were gay or were discussing their issues or issues of the LGBT movement were interesting. ... It was a sense of: Oh, I can relate to that.

Caleb also says that in the process of turning to *Oprah* to learn about his new identity, he also became aware of his own homophobic tendencies, because many of the flamboyant or effeminate gay guests he was being exposed to, not necessarily on episodes related to homosexuality, made him aware of his own learned-responses to deviant sexuality or gender performance. “Quality” or “normal” representations of homosexuality, as discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, gave him a sense of an acceptable homosexual identity he had understood before he learned the language to speak about what made these men different. The quality guests were often the hyper-masculine, upper-middle class, gender-conforming homosexuals who worked to naturalize the notion of homosexuality as the *other* sexuality while effeminate, transgendered, and/or bisexual

guests maintained a kind of exotic deviance that was viscerally upsetting for him. While episodes dealing specifically with homosexuality used gays from the “right side of the tracks” and not the “screaming faggots” found on other shows, as Joshua Gamson puts it (53), *Oprah* in this era began to pick up on the popularity of shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, and hosted flamboyantly gay guests such as Carson Kressley.

Kressley is especially entertaining for the largely straight female audience because through the exhibition of his flamboyance, as Roland Barthes describes of the Other, he is transformed into nothing more than a spectacle whom the audience perceives as a “clown” and whose sexuality is thus non-threatening. Gay audiences, however, especially those who, themselves, are struggling with sentiments of homophobia are not always as accepting of such flamboyant representations.²¹ While Caleb admits to being initially resistant to such displays of homosexuality, he thinks that, on the whole, *Oprah* was the first place he found tolerance and saw people treated with dignity, regardless of who they were or how they acted.

As he settled down in Knob Noster, Caleb started becoming close with more and more people and felt comfortable participating in school activities and making friends with his classmates. For the first time in his life, he experienced a sense of homeness, resting from a nomadic journey from parent to parent that trekked him to almost four school districts every year. In Knob Noster, close-minded and conservative as he claims it was, he had been able to connect to one school district and one group of continuous students. In his new comfort, Caleb told a friend in confidence he believed he be gay. That year as a freshman he was planning on joining the track and field team to throw discus. However by the time the spring semester rolled around and the older track

²¹ For more information, read: Miller, Taylor Cole. “Performing Glee: Gay Resistance to Gay Representation and a New Slumpy Class.” *flowtv.org*. 14.03 (6 Jul. 2011): n.p.

students learned who would be joining, one of the state-placing senior discus throwers quit the team and “he made it known that the reason he was not going to throw that year was because ‘the fag’ was on the team.” Because he does not believe that his mannerisms or behaviors could possibly have alerted this man to his sexuality, Caleb thinks his friend betrayed his trust and started a circle of rumors that spread word of his gayness not just in his school but throughout the community, and he said the response was chilling.

Immediately upon being outed, the people that I had been friends with in the community ... totally turned their backs on me and didn’t want anything to do with me. And then people’s parents would not let them hang out with me. [Because the city] very much had this mindset of, “Follow the Bible to a T, and if you don’t follow it, you’re going to hell.” Pretty much everybody knew at that point.

For the next several weeks, people berated Caleb asking about the rumors which he said he was constantly having to talk about, often in uncomfortable situations. After the initial shock (Caleb was the first person to ever be out in his school’s history), he said he was frequently stopped by people who would say things like, “You’re going to hell ...” or “You’re gay, I just can’t talk to you anymore ...” and snicker behind his back. What was equally as hurtful, he says, was the occasional parent who would come up to him in public spaces such as football games and say they were praying for him. He felt driven underground, but because he had already endured such adversity at such a young age, he was able to push out the new homophobia and repeated to himself about these new people that, “If you can’t love me for me or you don’t accept me for me, then just ... I don’t need you around.” Where other rural queer teens have believed such treatment as deserved as their own personal cross to bear for their failings of good Christianity, Caleb continued to put his faith in the civilization presented on *Oprah* and maintain his feeling of disposition from what he considered an environment of ignorance. *Oprah* allowed him to believe that it was *their* homophobia and not his homosexuality that was the ultimate

failure, and as such, *Oprah* as a text became reparative, a vindicating tool for the kind of hate he was enduring. Eve Sedgwick argues that some youth use media texts to create spaces of self-affirmation and as a kind of comrade to reconcile their queer lives with their hostile environments. "Such a child is reading for important news about [him/her]self, [even] without knowing what form that news will take; with only the patchiest familiarity with its codes; without, even, more than hungrily hypothesizing to what questions this news may proffer an answer" (2-3). Instead of searching for any messages of "It Gets Better," Caleb was operating under the motivation of "It Could be Worse." Unfortunately for him, it was about to do just that.

When Caleb's guardians heard that the rumor his grandparents had written about was true, they thought they had to act drastically to have Caleb's homosexuality treated. Suddenly, Caleb was being stolen away on weekend trips to places like Houston, Indianapolis, and Denver for "pray the gay away" conferences arranged by organizations such as Lou Dobbs and Focus on the Family. Caleb says he and his guardians would leave on Friday and come back on Sunday nights and that the experiences were among the most afflicting of his life. The conferences were held in large churches where upon entrance, parents and teenagers were separated. According to Caleb, the teenagers that were "having issues with their sexual orientation" were put in a room and told to open up a discussion about their sexual preferences. "It was more of a joke to the kids who were there because they'd say things like, 'Well, I'm gay and I'm not going to change for my parents.'" In another room at the church, the parents, Caleb said, were taught a language they could use to speak to their gay children and to prevent them from claiming publicly that they were gay.

At the end of these workshops, both the teenagers and the parents convened in the auditorium where religious leaders in the church would put their hands on the gay youth

to try literally to “pray the gay” out of their bodies. These sorts of ceremonies were especially difficult for Caleb who suffers from haptophobia, that is, the fear of being touched. Where in LGBTQ rhetoric, gayness is an aspect of identity not necessarily localized within the body, for antigay groups or fundamentalist Christian sects, homosexuality is a sickness of the mind that through prayer can be expelled from the body. Although trips to the conferences were the most aggressive action his guardians took, he said other teens who attended such conferences had admitted to being in electric shock therapy programs in order to burn the homosexuality out of their bodies when prayer had evidently failed. Meanwhile, Caleb was out at school, but he was so embarrassed about being forced to attend such conferences, he closeted another portion of his life to mask his shame.

It felt very oppressive. It didn’t make me want to show my face – people would be like where are you going this weekend, and I would try to make something up because I didn’t want to be like, “My guardians don’t really like who I am ...” I had a few friends who were OK with who I was, but the majority of the people were like, “Screw the gays!” “Fuck the Fags!” I kept hearing “Silly faggot, dicks are for chicks.” And so I would try to make up excuses to why I was gone all weekend. And that was the hardest thing – living in this huge lie of life, and just try to wear a smile on my face, even though everything was not OK.

Once again, Caleb’s home life had failed him so he decided to take responsibility to change the situation he was in as he had learned through his constant *Oprah* fandom – to live his “best life.” “I [felt I] just can’t be in this environment anymore, with being told I’m going to hell, and if you’re not going to love me for me, then I’m going to love myself. And do for myself what I need to do.” He began working full time and at seventeen was emancipated as a ward of the court. All he had to do was prove that he could provide for himself, and when he did, he moved out of his aunt’s house and into his

own apartment across town as he continued going to the high school. Along with the move came the purchase of a new television, and once again, *Oprah* entered his life.

“IT WILL GET BETTER – SOMEDAY”

Cultural references to *Oprah* permeate our media landscape. References to the word “Oprah” itself brings to mind certain characteristics popularized by the “queen” of daytime that have become commonplace in our culture. “Oprahfication” or “Oprahization” has come to mean public confession as a means of personal catharsis, and has been staked as an originating parent of many contemporary reality television shows. One of the more common discourses in popular culture is the notion of Oprah Winfrey as an educator and *Oprah* as her classroom, which is not a far stretch from the program’s influence on spirituality and Oprah Winfrey as a religious figure as discussed in the previous chapter. The title of teacher is one Oprah Winfrey embraces, and she constantly praises the profession, hearkening back to her own childhood and the importance of her fourth grade teacher. When she began creating new programming at her fledgling network, many of the shows were premised on the idea of “teaching” America how to live their best lives (e.g. *Oprah presents Masterclass*, *Oprah’s Lifeclass*, *America’s Money Class*). Oprah’s devoted followers, like those discussed above, have used the “scripture” of the canon of her show, and now her network, to be enlightened about relevant social and political issues that they then teach others, or to find sanctuary in the church she has built from the embittered and hostile environments in which they are or were prisoner.

Throughout *Oprah*’s on-air tenure, the series constantly positioned itself as groundbreaking, touting many facts and statistics about how it changed the world. The show and its genre are often credited as helping to have mainstreamed homosexuality by

invading the private sphere of living rooms across America with images of the “normality” of gayness. Through this belief, some LGBTQ communities are a more critical of the show largely because they worry that stereotypes may be enforced through its teachings. As Gamson explains:

Many [gay viewers] watch talk shows like amateur anti-defamation leaguers, to see, as [a respondent] put it in one discussion “what America is being fed about gay and lesbian people.” Often imagining that talk shows are the primary source of information about gay people for “some housewife in Des Moines,” or “the people in Missouri” or “the people in Iowa who believe what they see,” they are worried that only the same old stigmas are being repeated (192).

These sorts of statements all point toward the show’s cultural influence in rural, closeted America as important, but potentially dangerous in disseminating images of homosexuality and shaping opinions about it. This is what Gamson refers to as the “tightrope of visibility” in which arguments about specific media representations struggle to decide if they are doing more harm than good. In my discussion of the kind of spectatorship Michael and Caleb engaged with the show, I do not aim to make a claim that *Oprah* was “positive” or “negative” for either of them, as such an argument would be fruitless. As demonstrated, the show contributed to their feelings of identity empowerment by allowing them to create in their homes boundary spaces they could use to develop their sense of self and to understand their sexuality. But the messages they were taking as “truths” from the show led them toward potentially dangerous decisions that might have, or did result in life-altering consequences. In sum, to respond to the most commonly cited Oprah-ism, “When you know better, you do better,” perhaps the question left unanswered in this argument is, “What is ‘better’?” Ultimately, for Caleb, “better” came when he says he learned through the show the importance of “being true to yourself no matter what adversity comes your way” and that “there’s always a bright side to every situation. If there’s not a good outcome at this one situation, you’ll have a good outcome

at some point. There will always be a good outcome ... at some point.” It *will* get better.
Someday.

Chapter Three: The Truth Will Set You Free ... or Aflame: The Coming Out Imperatives of Sleaze and Spiritual *Oprah*

“It’s really about honoring the truth of who you are, and if you can’t do that, you die a little death every day. Your willingness to be truthful about who you really are opens up enormous possibilities.” – Oprah Winfrey²²

After years of speculation and dozens of awkward interviews, Ricky Martin finally came out of the closet in an exclusive interview on the twenty-fifth and final season of *Oprah* shortly after revealing on his website that he is a “fortunate homosexual man” and “very blessed” to be who he is. In the episode, *Oprah* positions the coming out process for Martin literally as a spiritual journey toward finding his inner “truth.” Oprah herself hailed the coming out ritual as a means toward a better future: “Don’t you think that the more people who come out and are vocal about it gives other young kids who are feeling the same thing not just hope but inspiration?” Before he had a chance to respond, she added, “You know, I think if everybody who were gay were to come out, it would *change the world!* ... would change the world ... would absolutely change the world.”

What followed this declaration was a conversation that confused Oprah when Martin claimed he had had fulfilling sexual and emotional relationships with women. “I’m sure I’m not the only gay man who felt attraction towards women.” Her visceral response was to ask: If he were a homosexual, how would he have been able to engage in heterosexual behavior? She hesitantly trudged into a conversation about sexual fluidity: “All the gay friends that I have – I have a great gay friend who says that the only way he could have sex with a woman is if a man’s picture is on the headboard. So, there’s *that*

²² Quoted in Ward, n.p.

spectrum. And then there's people like yourself who can have sex with both sexes," she said.

Martin: I am not bisexual.

Oprah: You are *not* bisexual ...

Martin: I am a gay man.

Oprah: You are a gay man.

Martin: I am a gay man.

When both he and Oprah reassured the studio audience of his certain homosexuality and his gender, they again applauded for him seemingly relieved. However, the brief moment of sexual uncertainty is received uncomfortably because it clouds and confuses the "truth" upon which talk shows are predicated. Indeed it has the potential of upsetting the entire "coming out" episode because for a moment, Martin straddles closets. Yet, as Joshua Gamson argues, "'the truth' is terribly vexed and unstable on talk shows" (99). Because *Oprah* helped to change the talk show paradigm from using scientific or religious "experts" to rely instead on personal anecdotes and experiential knowledge, it has also worked to breakdown the monopoly on "truth" that those experts would use to talk about homosexuality. "[T]here are so many different, competing, contradictory voices, none much privileged over the other, all apparently 'true' that truth and authenticity are in some serious disarray" (98-100).

In order to clarify helpfully his earlier talking point, Oprah offered: "Were you using ... being with women to cover up your feelings sometimes for wanting to be with a man?" When Martin again answered that his relationships with women were not necessarily disingenuous, Oprah quickly left her line of questioning so as not to alienate or confuse her viewers who had already signaled their approval of his coming out with cheering applause. With few exceptions, this celebratory reception is how disclosed homosexuality was treated on *Oprah* after the show's overhaul in 1994 until its end in

2011. Among the more memorable examples include, as I discussed in Chapter 2, the coming out stories of Ellen DeGeneres and Chely Wright as well as Greg Louganis, who came out as both homosexual and HIV positive. However, episodes in the first eight seasons of the show, back when Oprah was still called the “Queen of Trash,” focused not as much on the personal struggle or “spiritual journey” of one’s sexuality but on the scandal of it and how homosexuals were victimized and abused.

The 1994 overhaul also turned *Oprah* into a bifurcate text, that is, the show’s revamp created two distinct modalities in program format, or what Oprah biographer Kitty Kelley refers to as the “sleaze” years from 1986 to 1994 versus the “spirituality” years from 1994 to 2011 (137). Generally, *Oprah*’s overhaul is thought to have improved the series’ treatment of homosexuality which positively “empowered” her gay viewers at home. GLAAD gave all seven of *Oprah*’s media awards to the series during the spiritual years.²³

On the one hand, *Oprah* sleaze depended upon painting homosexuals as victims of hate and discrimination and as a result, coming out of the closet could have dangerous consequences, scaring some men further into the closet. Yet, in so doing, it helped in the mainstreaming of homosexuality by showing gays as suffering and worked to paint homophobia as the pathology of talk shows and not homosexuality (Gamson 96). On the other hand, *Oprah* spirituality represented the coming out process as a necessary journey toward self-empowerment met not with hateful comments and epithets from the studio audience (and by extension the people around us) but with cheers of celebration and standing ovations. However, in order to arrive at that celebration the homosexual *must* come out and stop “living a lie” because, as Oprah wondered of Martin, in the process

²³ The GLAAD Media Awards ceremony honored the 1989 season and was held in 1990.

they hurt not only themselves but also the people they are “using” to hide their secret. Yet, coming out is difficult and even potentially dangerous for rural viewers anchored to their homophobic communities creating a conundrum. Distinct though they may be, both *Oprah* texts seek to elicit the disclosure of “truths” on national television, presented as either polar viewpoints on a controversial issue or as a means of finding emotional and spiritual liberation, as Martin describes it, through the psychological process of confession. Whether sleaze or spiritual, we ultimately deserve to know the “truth” of one’s identity, and as Michel Foucault argues, sexuality is central to that identity. In this chapter I use both textual analyses and viewer responses to ask: How have rural gay men actually negotiated these *Oprah* modalities, and how have they, for better or for worse, allowed those modalities to influence their own coming out processes?

When I set out to draft my thesis I was struck by the number of people who wanted to hear my ultimate valiative opinion before they wanted to hear the trajectory of my project: “So, are you pro- or anti-*Oprah*?” What I found so troublesome about this question was that it seemed to put an imperative on the taking of sides. You are either for or against a text or if not, you should articulate that you are ambivalent. No one wants to read a movie review in the newspaper and come away without a sense of how the reviewer *truly* felt about the film. Similarly, in order to understand how scholars read texts, we seem to put an emphasis on foregrounding their positionality as for or against a text to be informed by their reading strategies of it. Can those who identify as fans be critical of a text, and/or are anti-fans simply missing the point? All of these desires are ultimately rooted in revealing the paramount imperative, “What is your identity; what is your truth?” which is precisely what the coming out imperative demands on talk shows. In so doing, however, they neglect the variance of subjectivities we as humans are constantly negotiating. If I were to be asked, I would call myself a fan of *Oprah*,

particularly because of all I believe it has afforded me. However, I am just as much an anti-fan of the show as I am both of those things and neither of them. In my interviews with the participants of this project, they were largely celebratory of *Oprah* even while they occasionally demonstrated moments of struggle or outright shame and despair because of it. With that in mind, in what follows it is not my goal to make a valuative claim about which *Oprah* modality is better or worse; to do so would be fruitless and reductive. What I am interested in doing is quite simply asking: When it comes to the paradox of coming out, that is, feeling the need to come out even when it is potentially dangerous, what's a rural gay to do? And perhaps more to the point: How do rural gay men reconcile their conservative cultural and religious geography with the show's call to come out? To set this conversation up, I engage a brief history of the visibility of homosexuality and its old association with deceit to help locate my participants' responses to *Oprah* within their historical contexts.

PRESENTING HOMOSEXUALITY IN OPRAH'S "SLEAZE" SEASONS

Nestled between the ridges and valleys of the Appalachian Mountains on the southern edges of rural Tennessee lies a community of Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) Christians and the former home of the man I will call Logan. He is white, in his late 40s, and describes himself rather quietly as gay and "selectively out." Growing up in the 1970s, Logan explained to me how his struggle with sexuality was shoved into the spotlight as gay visibility on television reached rural parts of the country in the wake of Stonewall and the gay liberation movement. In response to both gay and women's liberation of the 1970s, many corporate SBC leaders enacted the "Conservative Resurgence" of 1979 that reasserted the propriety of what they called traditional gender roles while officially endorsing both heteronormativity and an all-male pastorate ("SBC

Resolution” n.p.). As consequence, many fundamentalist SBC churches, and by extension towns largely settled by them like Logan’s, began to preach even more dogmatically for social conservatism, which fostered an even more homophobic attitude in the congregation.

As I discussed in the Introduction, homosexuality had already been addressed sporadically on television by the time Logan was born in the late 1960s, but mostly through the “educational” sphere of local talk show programs and chiefly as a problem that needed a solution. Shortly thereafter, Senator Joseph McCarthy’s televised Cold War inquisitions led the U.S. State Department to list homosexuals as subversive and a threat to American security on the grounds that they were notorious liars and prone to blackmail, which exacerbated an old association between homosexuals and deceit and put an emphasis on coming out, even if to their own demise (Gamson 68). To illustrate the point, Under Secretary of State James E. Webb wrote, “It is generally believed that those who engage in overt acts of perversion lack the emotional stability of normal persons” (Edsall 277). Under this new understanding of good citizenship, President Eisenhower flexed his executive muscle to create a new ban on homosexuals in the federal government in 1953, creating a forced evacuation of more than 5,000 employees for being suspected homosexuals.²⁴ Now “out” in public, homophobic discrimination became common place, and homosexuals were subjugated, marginalized, and sometimes physically injured. Police frequently raided gay bars, the U.S. Post Office surveilled packages and addresses (Edsall 278), drag queens were arrested for subverting gender roles, and gay men and women across the country were fired, jailed, or institutionalized for their deception and perceived perversions. The result of the flames of McCarthy’s

²⁴ Executive Order 10450, enacted 27 April 1953 was not functionally repealed until President Bill Clinton signed Executive Order 13087 28 March 1998.

cultural sterilization would come to eliminate and devalue social difference and encourage conformity in a “unified” America (Barry 58).

Logan was born into the embers of this cultural climate, which Stonewall reignited shortly thereafter. Post-Stonewall, gay visibility became prevalent not only on local talk shows but also in the news media where televisions brought new, uninvited images into living rooms and homes where the topic of homosexuality had never been broached. As gay rights associations began to organize, many activists realized the potential of television as a mechanism to spread their messages throughout the country to eradicate further what they saw as the symbolic annihilation of homosexuals. Vito Russo declared such invisibility the gay community’s greatest enemy: “It has prevented the *truth* from being heard, and it will continue to do so as long as the celluloid closet is inhabited by lesbians and gay men who serve Hollywood” (quoted in Ehrenstein, n.p., my emphasis). In 1970, *Donahue* premiered in national syndication and from the first season produced episodes exclusively about homosexuality, through which gay rights advocates continued to push the political envelope.

Living in what he describes as the buckle of the Bible Belt, Logan’s evangelical family members and their systems of belief founded on such a conservative denomination made him struggle to learn the finely choreographed dance of masculinity. But when his classmates began picking up on some of the louder media rhetoric of the sin of homosexuality, they bullied him mercilessly for his poorly performed gender, using words such as “gay,” “fag,” “queer,” and “sissy.” Although Logan says he had close friends at that time in his life, he did not feel as though he could confide in any of them what he was beginning to understand as his deviant sexuality. Contrary to urban gay advocacy groups’ calls at the time to “come out,” increasing gay visibility led to more polemical debates about homosexuality, pushing many rural gay men and women further

into their closets. Daniel Harris argues that Stonewall opened up a new, liberal era of acceptance and assimilation, evolving a gay population from an earlier “alienated diaspora” that “strove to efface every identifying mark that might compromise them in the eyes of outsiders,” into a more developed and imagined urban community of embrace and acceptance (n.p.). But for rural gay men like Logan, it was precisely the media visibility accorded by Stonewall that exacerbated his homophobic environment, and drove him to even tighter-lipped secrecy.

A few years before Logan left for college, another major wave of gay visibility hit the media with the emergence of AIDS in 1981. Early theorizations about what appeared to be the coalescing of two old diseases, Kaposi’s Sarcoma and Pneumocystis Carinii Pneumonia, into a new disease called an “outbreak” by *The New York Times*, were based largely on behavioral observations of patients, all whom were homosexual. Even an official with the CDC, Dr. James Curran, tried to calm growing speculation by issuing a statement that said the “new disease” was confined to the gay community and that the outbreak was not contagious to heterosexuals (Altman n.p.)

Discussion about AIDS was largely ignored by the media public after initial panic began to subside. By the end of 1982, a year and a half into the fatal medical mystery, *The New York Times* had run only 10 stories about AIDS, none of which reached the front page. By contrast, as Larry Gross describes, another medical mystery at the time, a lethal infection at an American Legion (Legionnaire’s Disease) killed 29 people, and in a two-week span, the news found its way into the *New York Times* 62 times, 11 of which occurred on the front page (L. Gross 96). AIDS found no media favor because it was a victim of its population – a population of largely rejected and despised gay men. In the newly reformed conservative climate of the Reagan era, unlike a dangerous infection

wiping out straight, white, wealthy men, many saw AIDS as nature conveniently taking care of a problem – and one that was best left ignored.

On television, nightly network newscasts did not begin mentioning AIDS until the summer of 1982, at the tail end of Logan's high school career. However, media frenzy over the epidemic did not gain speed until it started affecting populations outside the gay communities. For instance, in a CBS News special titled, "AIDS Hits Home" correspondent Bernard Goldberg unwittingly participated in this phenomenon when he commented, "For a very long time, heterosexuals, straight Americans, thought [...] AIDS is what homosexuals got. But a scary reality is starting to hit home, that the AIDS virus is out there, and it's not just gays who are catching it" (quoted in L. Gross 98). In the throes of this tempestuous climate, Logan graduated high school and made the decision to attend a small nearby university, also in a rural community, to receive a degree in education so that he could become a teacher. In his new environment, Logan initially felt mildly more comfortable with his sexuality and slowly began emerging from the closet to a very select few friends. "[I] would kind of slip things in to see, to test the waters, to see how much I could share with them. Just by little comments and stuff." But in December 1985, the firestorm that began after Rock Hudson announced he had AIDS and died three months later, the resurgence of homophobia trained Logan to believe he was much safer in the closet.

News stories featuring helpless victims in hemophiliacs, children, and recipients of blood transfusions created another backlash against gay men in which preachers, politicians, and pundits politically activated the epidemic to illustrate how the disease began as a "moral weapon" to eradicate homosexuality, but was quickly becoming a plague infecting the innocent. Conservative columnist and perennial presidential candidate Pat Buchanan first seized AIDS as a political platform, remarking, "The sexual

revolution has begun to devour its children. And among the revolutionary vanguard, the Gay Rights activists, the mortality rate is highest and climbing” (L. Gross 104).

Meanwhile, gay advocacy groups seized the opportunity afforded by the spotlight as an entryway for more public discussions of homosexuality – attempting to shift the discourse away from the “problem” of homosexuality, to the “problem” of AIDS. In the late 1980s, the television talk show circuit once again became a platform from which to address homosexuality, this time on a national and eventually global scale with the most popular syndicated talk show of all time, *Oprah*.

As a college student, Logan was an instant fan and began watching *Oprah* everyday from its beginning. He fell in love with both the program and its message of what he read as overcoming hardship to find personal success – a message read not only through countless episodes but also on the body of Oprah Winfrey herself. Even though the content on her show was considered critically as “trash,” Logan viewed her differently. “I have tremendous respect for Oprah ... where she came from, how she overcame, what she has achieved, and the message she conveys that the world can be a better place one person at a time.” To Logan, Oprah became a symbol of hope. Among a sea of people who could not understand what he was going through, Oprah was someone he thought he could “relate with” or, as I discuss in both Chapters 1 and 2, someone he could *identify* with. He joked, “I’m a black woman in a previous life, I believe, because ... [I loved/related to] Patti LaBelle, Chaka Kahn, Whitney Houston, Diana Ross ... and Oprah!”²⁵

²⁵ Logan’s belief in Oprah’s always already spiritual orientation is potentially demonstrative of the limitations of the memory mining approach. His mental reconfiguration of *Oprah*’s past is indicative of his in-progress identity work, but does demonstrate the way in which “to remember is to place a part of the past in the service of conceptions and needs of the present” as Barry Schwartz argues.

In its beginning, *Oprah* was produced by a small staff— six women and one gay man – that Oprah Winfrey reportedly called “my girls” (Kelley 194). Many of her earlier episodes focused on themes relevant to this staff, and among them were issues sensitive to the gay community. During sweeps week in November 1987, Oprah made one of her first forays into gay culture when she took her show on the road to Williamson, West Virginia, and broached the topic of rural homosexuality through an hour-long special she called “AIDS in America.” Logan was watching.

LOGAN’S EXPERIENCE – “IT CONFIRMED MY FEARS”

The local paper reported that lines filled with many of the small town’s residents stretched around the fieldhouse of Williamson, West Virginia. It was 1987, and the people had come to feed on the buzz of Oprah Winfrey’s new show set to film a town-hall-style episode on a controversial local story that had forced the small community into the national spotlight. AIDS had “hit” the heartland of the West Virginia town, and many of the people of Williamson were eager to confront live on television the man whom they saw as responsible, Mike Sisco. Mike, whose family lived in Williamson, moved away after high school because he had been discriminated against and harassed for his homosexuality. He wanted to be around his “own kind of people” and found a job that took him to Dallas, where he learned that he had been infected with the disease.

When Hudson announced he was dying from AIDS in 1985, fear and panic led to media hysteria as rumors and misinformation about how AIDS was spread moved more quickly than the disease itself. “Household Contact May Spread AIDS, Study Finds,” “Singles Fear AIDS Risk in Kissing,” “Doctor Says AIDS Transferred Through Saliva” read just some of the newspaper headlines while others suggested it could be spread by toilet seats, sneezing, mosquitoes, or even sharing a glass. The *Oprah* special, “AIDS in

America” suggests that perhaps nowhere was this misinformation more widely believed than in small-town America where residents depended largely on the television to learn more about what had come to be called the “gay plague,” and whose discourses suggested AIDS was the divine consequence for the amoral lifestyles of gay men. Their fear made them believe anyone could be infected, which was perhaps best articulated in giant red block letters on the July 1985 cover of *LIFE Magazine* “NO ONE IS SAFE FROM AIDS.”

“I really was so afraid and frightened that when I found out, all I wanted to do was come home and be with my family,” Mike said in the special episode. Soon after arriving back home to die with his sisters at his side, rumors about Mike spread through the quaint little town like wildfire, and his family quickly became ostracized. As his sister Tina described, “This town has done every single one of my family wrong. They have shunned us. I have walked in grocery stores, and people have turned around and left because of this.” Several months before his episode, in the heat of the summer, Mike and Tina, who were poor and did not have air conditioning, decided to go to the swimming pool to find relief from the sweltering temperatures and West Virginia’s infamous humidity. But Mike’s reputation preceded him, and as they walked into the pool to the stares of the people, his sister turned to him and said, “On the count of three you better get in, because we won’t get back in.” As Mike jumped in, he felt the impact of his splash, as several people clamored desperately to climb out, running from the pool as he joked in the episode, like they would run from Godzilla.

The mayor of Williamson, Sam Kapourales, immediately decided to close the pool for a week-long scrubbing, and in a clip in the episode’s introduction, justifies the action by saying, “‘Til more is known about the disease, I don’t feel like we have any other choice.’” In another clip local newswoman for WSAZ News, Kathy Brown, covers

the story, “It seems as though they would do it again, not only because of the fear of AIDS, but because of the dislike of homosexuals.”

As Mike sat quietly in the middle of the gymnasium for the *Oprah* taping, the roving host and her microphone recorded some of the thoughts of his neighbors and once-friends. “I’m against homosexuals. I don’t believe in it; they ought to be to themselves. Just like when people had yellow fever, they were quarantined,” said one older gentleman. “If a criminal killed two or three people, they’d put ‘em in the electric chair. But an AIDS carrier can kill hundreds of people, and there ain’t a thing they can do about it.” An older woman stood up and said, “I believe that he brought it on hisself, as far as that [...] God also said that his way of life is an abomination.” Many of the audience members were openly hostile against Mike for his *homosexuality* every bit as much as his disease and largely because they did not understand AIDS or how it was transmitted. One woman anxiously questioned: “Little kids would go in [the pool] with open sores little cuts on them – what if he had a cut – can you tell me and make sure – to rest assure all of us parents and people that went swimming that day – can you get AIDS from him?”

Oprah mentioned that her producers attempted to persuade local or state health officials to attend the taping to speak to the medical plausibility of the such concerns, but all declined. The episode asserted that no doctors from these small communities were willing to risk the potential consequences their practices would suffer by agreeing to participate on the show, likely because rhetoric had presented AIDS as a sickness born of the sickness of homosexuality. Ultimately, the producers recruited Dr. Woodrow Myers, a public health official from Indiana, to separate fact from fiction regarding transmission: “It’s very important that folks know the facts, and the facts are you get this disease in blood-to-blood contact; you get this disease through sexual contact, and a mother can give this disease to her child.”

Dr. Myers' certainty of the modes of transmission was met with doubt as the people of Williamson looked upon his foreign, urban body with distrust. One mother stood, concerned for the safety of her child who was in the pool with Mike, and said, "The doctors can say, you can't get it this way, but what if they come back someday and say, 'We were wrong'?" In response to the doctor's comments a local firefighter, Jerry, remarked that "the consensus is, that we don't believe the surgeon general; we don't believe the scientists. [...] We're not gonna handle that." Dr. Myers explained to Oprah through the crowd's boos that "this town is like many other towns, they are very early on the learning curve. [...] The reason that you feel that way is that you're afraid, you have a great deal of fear."

At this response, Jerry exploded, shouting as he stood, "I am *not* afraid! I am repulsed by the man's *lifestyle*. I'm repulsed by his *disease*. And I'm repulsed by *him*! [...] I've *had* it!" The audience roared with applause. In a post-show press conference, Oprah defended her decision to film in Williamson:

We came to Williamson because Williamson was symbolic of the way the rest of the country – a lot of the people in the rest of this country – felt. It is not just a matter of being in the hills of West Virginia. If you were to go to New York City or Los Angeles, you would find people who have the exact same views, and who could articulate them just as angrily as the people did here today. [...] It's not just a small town problem.

On the contrary, however, this episode works to do exactly that – to paint homophobia and ignorance as belonging to small-town America, feeding into discourses that suggested rural, heartland parts of the country to be more conservative and close-minded, while urban areas were more accepting and tolerant. Logan said when Oprah returned to Williamson to do a recap in her twenty-fifth season, the images and clips aired from the original episode helped him remember back to the cultural climate the first time he saw Mike's story. "I could relate," he said, pausing to choose carefully his wording. "I could

see some people in my home town possibly acting the same way or having the same strong feelings.”

Because, both geographically and metaphorically speaking, Williamson was not far from where Logan grew up, in that moment, *Oprah* switched in Logan’s mind from his escapist “fun show” that was “entertaining and informative” to one that highlighted the scary reality of the homophobic world in which he lived. His use of the series as an imagined space for queer acceptance was interrupted when the show ventured into his territory and, through Mike Sisco’s story, underscored the devastating plight of rural homosexuals across the country.

The different formal mechanisms the episode works to employ authenticate the difference in culture between rural West Virginia and the more normal, “acculturated” urban American environment of the show’s home in Chicago. Establishing shots of the quaint town, carved into the hills of West Virginia, are narrated by Oprah’s voice, describing how the West Virginia-Kentucky back country in which Williamson sits was once home to the Hatfields and the McCoys and the bloody feud that existed between hills-men. At mention of this feud, the image immediately fades to a sweeping shot of the studio audience as Oprah introduces “their descendants, some of them, still live here.” *Oprah* employs the narrative of the Hatfield-McCoy feud as an allusion to the very lack of diplomacy in which the area’s history is seeped and to foreshadow the lack of civility that would surely be on welcome display during the hour to come.

Audio cues also signal the episode’s desired “folksy” effect when banjo music replaces *Oprah*’s normal soundtrack, which local papers report was played as the show moved in and out of commercial breaks (Browning n.p.); this has been edited out for repackaged episodes. Indeed, Oprah’s own presence as a black woman in a predominantly white town, as well as the nation’s newest big-time celebrity and Oscar-

nominated actress, works to highlight the difference between the culture of her fast-paced, Chicagoan lifestyle and this small, idle-minded town. Through these various formal tools, “AIDS in America” condemns homophobia and the rustic, rural lifestyle, leaving little room for hope for rural gay viewers like Logan. Indeed, by employing the “foreign” urban body of the Dr. Myers, the show positions even local medical professionals as behind the rest of the country in their education on AIDS – there really is no hope.

On the surface, these formal cues appear at once offensive and homogenizing of rural audiences, and, indeed, in the recap, several Williamsonians think the town was portrayed in an inauthentic, negative light. But the episode also validated Logan’s beliefs about his hometown. After viewing the *Oprah* episode and others like it, he believed with even greater fervor that the people around him would not be accepting of his homosexuality and would be just as openly hostile toward him as a homosexual, even though he was not infected with HIV. In this instance, Logan moves from his relation with Oprah Winfrey to identify with Mike, which allowed him to imagine the results of his own potential hometown coming-out scenario. Because of the devastation that he witnessed through Mike’s eyes in the episode, Logan was driven even further into the closet. “I think at that time it just confirmed my fears of coming out. I don’t think necessarily that I was physically in danger, but just ... [that I would be] isolated.” Like with the sympathetic portrayal of Mike, many *Oprah* episodes were focused on the topic of victimization – of all kinds.

A quantitative study conducted by the Harvard Business School found that most of *Oprah*’s earlier-season episodes covered issues related to victimization and confrontation: “Rape victims, families of kidnapping victims, victims of physical and emotional abuse, teenage victims of alcoholism, female victims of workaholism,

obsessive love, and childhood wounds” (referenced in Kelley 139). Many of these episodes programmed a clash between guests on opposite sides of the issues, just as Mike’s hometown (and by extension, rural America) confronted him (and by extension, AIDS and homosexuality). When I asked Logan why he believes producers decided to pursue Mike’s story, he told me he thought the issue was “relevant. It’s definitely a social issue that ... it’s there. It’s the big white elephant in the room for a lot of people ...”

If “relevance” meant that the show was responding to controversial issues confronting the culture at the time without shying away or censoring material, then the sleaze years did indeed produce more “relevant” programming. In relief against the spiritual years, the first eight seasons of *Oprah* often exposed the backlash against gays in the late 1980s and early ‘90s instead of creating a safe and sheltered environment in the studio for them to come out. Throughout its “sleazy” seasons, *Oprah*’s treatment of homosexuality was largely contained within larger themed programs, tackling topics such as AIDS, immorality, and homosexual deceit. These episodes often depicted the real-world homophobia and hate gays were enduring with the sudden visibility of homosexuality AIDS brought to national media attention. Common in the sleaze era was the employment of the “religious zealot” or the “conservative pundit” whose function as the “villain” was to condemn homosexual guests. The elimination of the villain, as Joshua Gamson describes, “opens up a space for the audience to espouse moral objections” (126) as did the people of Williamson.

Even still, early *Oprah* was criticized by scholars like Lynn Spigel, Vicki Abt and Leonard Mustazza in the same way as was *All in the Family*, for making the political personal rather than institutional – that is, giving a sense that the homophobe is a singular person or an isolated group of individuals and not indicative of a greater system of domination and oppression. Additionally, the vitriol such guests endured by the studio

audience scared *Oprah*'s viewers even further into the closet for fear their confession would yield similar results. Logan, for instance, read the hatred for Mike as an especially rural characteristic and made decisions about himself and his coming out journey based in part on what he saw in the episode.

Looking back on the episode, he admitted that he was not sure what its intentions were. He believed at the time it was going to be a useful tool to learn about AIDS but was scared when the focus instead became about criticizing rural homosexuality. "The intent may have been to educate about AIDS, but at the same time, at that time, educating about AIDS ... it was considered a gay issue. So ... by educating about AIDS, at that time, you were also educating folks about gay people." For critics of Mike's episode, *Oprah* exploited a sensitive, small town story for the benefit of winning "rave reviews and rocketing ratings" while she ignored her own intimate association with AIDS when her homosexual half-brother, Jeffrey Lee, was himself dying from the disease (Kelley 210). However such arguments ignore how both gay-issues and AIDS-education episodes became a staple of *Oprah*, appearing in every season. When Logan recently learned about Oprah's gay half-brother and his death, he conversely credits her brother for her constant invocation of gay issues and AIDS themes:

I always felt like she had a deep empathy and did so many shows ... because of the issues she had openly discussed on the show as being present in her family. I guess I just assumed she did the shows focused on gay issues as being a product of her having so many gay friends and staff. This makes more sense as it was also another example of a social issue for which she had experience and first-hand knowledge. Kudos to her.

The "sleaze" years and their "relevance" programming often brazenly forced American audiences to confront the parade of social and political issues they constantly trotted out. Logan said that although the episode was in many ways painful for him to watch,

ultimately it was important because it was one of the first that invited audiences to consider a sympathetic portrait of a gay man living with AIDS – and painted the pathology of the culture not as homosexuality but homophobia. But off the screen, he still felt stifled and scared by the increasingly tempestuous antigay climate.

Logan eventually transferred schools to finish his degree closer to home where he met and fell in love with his partner of more than twenty years, Toby. He began working in the public school district in the community in which he was raised and taught children of many of his former classmates. But the job proved more difficult for Logan than he anticipated because of his constant fear of being outed and the potential repercussions that were sure to follow in such a “conservative community, small community, tight-knit community,” as he describes it. “I wasn’t *out*. I think there was definitely speculation, but I never admitted to any one of my being gay ... actually I denied it if the topic ever came up in conversations. There were a lot of people who probably would have, if I were out, requested their students not be placed in my class.”

Both Logan and Toby blame televisual representations of homosexuality as largely informing and coloring their peers’ opinions about gayness. As Toby says, “Straight people don’t know of gay couples. They see things that they’ve heard on TV ... like we’re all out having sex with everybody else. They don’t see us as having the same kind of roles and responsibilities that they do.” Similarly, Logan’s own fears about public outness are based largely on how antigay or rural audiences, like the town of Williamson, are portrayed as responding to out gay men. “A lot of people form their opinions without even giving anyone a chance. They don’t even want to get to know someone and realize, ‘Hey, they’re really not a bad person.’” But what made “relevant” episodes of *Oprah* complicated for a closeted gay man like Logan was not only that it represented conservative rurality as a harsh environment for homosexuals, but it also condemned

those homosexuals who were not themselves out of the closet and living “honestly.” Such shows reify the old association between homosexuality and deception and, in doing so, instill shame in rural gay men who yearn for the “liberation” outness is suggested to provide but who fear the very real possibility of its dangers. They are damned in and out of the closet, and so they struggle in its threshold as Logan continues to do.

TOBY’S EXPERIENCE – ““WHY TELL US NOW?””

Although *Oprah*’s tendency to personalize and sensationalize political topics the show often sensitively handled real-life, controversial political issues in a language the viewers could understand. To do so, *Oprah* privileged the voices of everyday people over educated authorities. This tendency toward personal truth and the “authenticity of lived experience,” Gamson argues, comes from, “American values of free speech, from religious values of confession, [and] from psychotherapy” (26). For the first time on television, gays and lesbians were allowed to have their own voice, replacing those of experts that had spoken for them for years before. Bronski credits talk shows like *Oprah* for bringing people, “outside the sexual mainstream [into] living rooms across America almost every day of the week,” and the main vessel through which that visibility was delivered, was the coming-out story (“Review” n.p.).

In the 1960s and ‘70s, gay advocacy groups encouraged men and women across the country to come out, not for their psychological well-being, as discourses today suggest, but to lift the veil of invisibility they hoped would fuel the fight for gay civil rights and equality with straights. As part of this campaign, the word “gay” entered the lexicon to push the emphasis away from the act of homosexuality to the identity of it. As Richard Dyer explains, while before, there was a practice of “queerspotting” in the media in which certain elements of a person’s style of dress or mode of speech might

“identify” them, “the gay project wanted a more secure visibility, it wanted to make widespread the face, literally, of homosexuality” (“Gay Icons” 14-15). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s work on what she calls the “epistemology of the closet” remarks on the same phenomenon in which gayness is “knowable” through a certain performance or subversion of gender (“Epistemology of the Closet” 67). Lynne Joyrich (2001) extended Sedgwick’s work to elucidate the ways in which broadcasting depended on and continues to rely on technologies of the closet to present and simultaneously contain homosexuality in the media sphere. Through their continued deployment of coming-out episodes, or the coming out paradigm, talk shows reconceptualized coming out not so much as an activist act, but to a more Foucauldian notion of sexual liberation through confession. As Gamson argues, “the ideology of speaking-the-truth” and the “primacy of personalized authority” is precisely what makes “realities of sex and gender easier to find on talk shows than almost anywhere else this side of fiction,” and in so doing, talk shows position being homosexual as something that needs to be confessed (101). In *The Will to Knowledge* (1976), Foucault writes that “since the middle ages at least, Western societies have established the confession as one of the main rituals we rely on for the production of truth ... [Western man] was authenticated by the discourse of truth he was able or obliged to pronounce concerning himself” (58-59). Confession for Foucault functions not only as a mechanism of articulating but also *making* truth as well as something central one’s own credibility and authenticity. Although Foucault never specifically addressed coming out as we understand it today, the tabloid talk show positions orientation confession as central in Western culture.

Confession on *Oprah*, as it had been through religious penance, was meant to produce the liberating, freeing effect on the confessor that Martin and Ellen had described. Their experience coming out as celebrities, while received as if they were any

other person, should not be confused with coming out stories of everyday people. Because of their financial independence, they are not subject to power constraints others are. Foucault argues that in our desire to achieve the liberation we believe confession will provide, we ignore or are unaware of the shadow of power that constantly overcasts it:

We no longer perceive [confession] as the effect of a power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that the truth, lodged in our most secret nature, “demands” only to surface; that if it fails to do so, this is because a constraint holds it in place, the violence of a power weighs it down, and it can finally be articulated only at the price of a kind of liberation (*The Will to Knowledge* 60).

In the power play of sexual identity on talk shows, when people are called to confess their sexualities, they may wrongly persuade themselves that “confession frees” and that “truth does not belong to the order of power” but rather “shares an original affinity with freedom” (60). However, these mis-recognitions of power are what Foucault calls the “internal ruse of confession” because to gain one kind of self-identificatory power through disclosure, people also hand over another kind of power that allows them to be treated in a different way as out-and-out homosexuals. By outing himself to find personal freedom, for example, Logan feared he would be allowing parents of students to use his homosexuality as an excuse to remove their children from his class.

Talk shows that continuously use gay men, *Oprah* especially, rely on these guest’s confessions as the central axes of their episodes. “Homosexuality on talk shows is the love that is required to speak its name as quickly, clearly, and continuously as possible,” Joshua Gamson argues. “Same-sex desire is here simply a personal truth, and *lying* is the problem. The talk shows are there to stop the lying, to encourage and facilitate – one might even say enforce – the telling of truths” (70). Extending this notion to a reception of *Oprah* because of its reliance on coming out episodes (indeed, anyone who is anyone comes out on *Oprah*), the straight white female audience is invited to expect gay men to

make a grand, public confessional as part of the process of accepting and living in their truth in order to avoid victimizing women in the process. As a quick sidebar, lesbian women and their relationship to coming out functions much differently in the *Oprah* realm in ways complicated enough for further scholarship. Gay women in straight relationships are almost never seen as duplicitous as gay men in straight relationships, and straight men are very rarely victims in the *Oprah*sphere.²⁶

As an example, an early “sleaze” episode of *Oprah*²⁷ features a love triangle involving a straight woman, the man she married, and his new male lover. The show immediately takes the side of the straight woman, who has been hurt by her husband’s deceit and attacks him for not disclosing his sexuality. As Oprah suggested, all might have been forgiven had he only taken the time to explain his “truth” to her: “I don’t know how the audience thinks, but I know what I think, and I usually think like the audience. I think we all think you should have told her.” The audience burst into applause as she continued, “None of this would have taken place if you had been honest with yourself, honest with her, never married her ... you took her trust, you took her caring, and you threw it all away.” In Oprah’s mind, this man’s identity was simple: He always already knew about his homosexuality – knew what gayness meant and that he was indeed gay – but was just afraid to admit it. Both the husband and his lover attempt to explain that in their area of the country, the rural northeast, they did everything they could in order to conform to the culture and force themselves straight, as they were expected. Coming out for them was not simply a matter of articulating a “truth,” which was the naive argument the show suggested (and in many ways continues to endorse). Rather, one’s truth depends on one’s ability *to* identify as gay or otherwise – and that sexuality is a simple, static

²⁶ Except, of course, when they are the victims of “passing” trans-gendered men.

²⁷ As described in Gamson.

identity readily and easily categorized. To close the show, Oprah reasserts the truth imperative of her gay guests: “If nothing else, I hope this show, for all the men and women who are out there carrying a secret, will find a way to come out and be truthful about it.”

Foucault writes that our society believes confession “exonerates, redeems, and purifies ... unburdens [us] of [our] wrongs, liberates [us], and promises [us] salvation” (1976: 60) But none of those attributes are particularly true of many coming-out narratives in more rural areas of the country, where outness can and does lead toward greater isolation, bullying, or in even more extreme instances suicide (as with Seth Walsh in Tehachapi, California) and homicide (as with Matthew Shepard in Laramie, Wyoming). This is not to say that the dangers of disclosure are relegated to the rural, but I mention these examples specifically because they are relevant to my discussion. “Outness” on *Oprah* is optimistically celebrated as an avenue toward a more fulfilling life by escaping one’s own self-repression. But gay visibility can and does set a variety of negative consequences in motion, including governmental and interpersonal oppression. Because the televisual landscape was different in 1987, less competition from cable meant higher audience ratings on the whole for networks, and early seasons of *Oprah* brought in an average of more than 12 million viewers per episode (Guarino n.p.). *Oprah*’s episode pushed not only Mike, but homosexuality in rural America into the spotlight bringing with it new kinds of visibility to closeted homosexuals that had people in small towns wondering about their neighbors.

What he felt as his students’ and fellow teachers’ growing speculation at his school continued to make Logan feel uncomfortable, and he worried that if he continued to work within the system and was discovered as a homosexual, it might have tarnished his image or led to exile from his own community for not being “honest” with them.

Ultimately, he left the profession and began working in a more corporate culture that has made him more comfortable about his life with his partner. But in part because of his history and how he felt his community would respond because of what he saw on TV, Logan remained semi-closeted for his own self-preservation, especially from his family.

Logan and Toby lived together for nearly twenty years before they made the decision to out themselves officially to their parents in 2009. Toby, who is a few years older than Logan and also from his hometown, was raised less devoutly than his partner, and has historically been less worried about public outness. His parents were not regulars in the pews in his childhood, and although he chose to be “saved” and was full-body baptized as a teenager, he left the church later in life because of what he thought was the congregation’s hypocrisy. “Some of them have become more of a business than a worship place to me ... a lot of the people that go there – you go there and say one thing, but you do something totally opposite when you’re not at church. I couldn’t equate that process.” In that mindset, both Toby and Logan decided the double life they were lived in their parents’ presence exhausted them. The time had come to let the cat out of the closet. “We were just tired of ... not lying ... but we weren’t telling them the whole truth. Which is, in a way, I guess a lie.”

All of Logan and Toby’s shared homes throughout their relationship had at least two bedrooms and two baths, which they used as the ruse of roommates whenever their parents would visit. “We had to be careful when we told stories to edit things. When they came over ... to make sure that it looked like there were two lived-in bedrooms,” Logan said. “You had to put away, in the master bath, put everything away so it doesn’t look like two people get ready in that room. Put away any *Advocate* or *Out* magazines and make a sweep through the house and make everything look nice and generic.” Although Toby says he would feel comfortable being out in general, he is selectively out for Logan’s

sake. He says he wanted to tell his family because he was tired of altering stories and self-editing himself so as not to reveal the truth about their lives together, even though both Logan and Toby were very aware that their family implicitly “knew.” “He still doesn’t want to tell certain people ... ‘They don’t need to know because we don’t see them enough’ is what he thinks,” Toby said. Although, as I discuss above, the depiction of homophobic audiences on *Oprah* exacerbated Logan’s fears outness, such phrasing demonstrates the psyche of talk show ideology: that confession is not something we do just for ourselves, but to protect those around us who *deserve* to know the “truth.”

The couple decided to tell both sets of parents the same day, “about twenty minutes apart ... it was an interesting day.” They drove to Toby’s house to tell his parents first. “Basically I just told them, ‘I’m gay,’ and my dad’s comment during that conversation was, ‘Why tell us *now*? What difference does it make what anybody else knows ... it’s your life.’” The ritual of coming out on talk shows, especially *Oprah*, constructs the process as a grand declaration, because as Foucault describes, explicit confession is “the general standard for governing the production of the true discourse on sex” (63). And so although Toby’s parents said they were not “shocked” by his revelation, he was not fully definable as a homosexual by them until he said the words. Toby says his mother had suspected for a long time and asked him questions *around* his sexuality like, “Does Logan have a girlfriend,” but because she never asked him explicitly, he believed his parents, as his father’s comment suggests, did not actually care to hear his confession.

Toby said Logan took a different route with his parents, sitting them down and saying, “You know that old saying, ‘I’m not gay, but my boyfriend is ...’” and waiting for their response. Logan’s parents claimed to be as accepting, but Toby says they stopped short of supporting gay marriage which, he says, they do not condone. Both sets of parents’ reactions reify the Foucauldian notion of the “repressive hypothesis,” which, in

part asserts that sexual relations over the the past 300 years have been thought to be “relegated to the domestic sphere and only heterosexual procreative relations were sanctified” (Barry 94-97). Foucault challenges the assertion that we have “repressed” our sexualities by demonstrating how they have come to be developed into a core feature of our identity, resulting in a proliferation of discourse on sexuality. If, as I argue above, *Oprah* invites heterosexual audiences to expect coming out narratives, then, by the same token, it also places the burden of confession on its gay viewers, who believe the coming out ritual is necessary finally to “live their best life,” per Oprah’s mantra.

FROM SLEAZE TO SPIRITUAL: OPRAH’S QUALITY PROGRAMMING

When Oprah was first beginning her career in the talk show circuit on *A.M. Chicago* (which would eventually be renamed in her honor), one critic joked that the show was the *National Inquirer* of the Air. “It raises the Lowest Common Denominator to new and lower depths. It’s a yeasty mix of sleaze, freaks, pathos, tack, camp, hype, hugs, hollers, gush, fads and tease marinated in tears” (quoted in Kelley 8). In its early years *Oprah* continued that tradition as Oprah Winfrey was often called the “Queen of Trash” reigning over a cheaply-produced court for a constant parade of freaks, sex, and drama. For many of its “sleaze” years, *Oprah* was produced as a live show, and each producer on Harpo’s small staff had to come up with an episode every four days, translating to an urgency to generate show topics which often resulted in unscripted, unrehearsed, and unexpected moments. And because it was live, the series had a less refined quality than episodes in more recent years.

As producer Dianne Atkinson Hudson recalls, “We rounded up guests by any means necessary – like by running plugs at the end of the program: ‘Are you a woman who’s stuck in an abusive relationship? Call the *Oprah* show!’ People would

call!” (*Oprah 25 Years*: 9). After *Oprah*’s popularity eclipsed even *Donahue*’s, stations across the America jumped at the chance to find the next big syndicated talk show, each competing with the last to be the most controversial, the most jaw-dropping, and the most outrageous. Emerging from the pack was Ricki Lake, the twenty-something former “fat girl” whose show had such a youth imperative that it lost all patience for the more “respectable etiquette” of what *had* been called trash in *Oprah* and *Donahue*.

Faced with all new, very successful competition, Oprah Winfrey had a decision to make about the future of her program: Produce even trashier programming to compete or change the trajectory of the series completely. During *Oprah*’s eighth season (1994-1995), media scholar Vicki Abt was invited to appear after publishing her article “The Shameless World of Phil, Sally, and Oprah: Television Talk Shows and the Deconstruction of Society.” Criticisms of *Oprah* as a trash TV text coalesced with, as Abt argues, the “Republican rising tide against the genre [Oprah Winfrey] helped create” (3). This included Reagan’s Secretary of Education, William Bennett,²⁸ who complained that talk shows “parade perversity into our living rooms,” along with Connecticut Senator Joseph Lieberman who said in a press conference that talk shows were “degrading our culture and ultimately threatening our children’s future” (quoted in Gamson 9). Shortly thereafter, Oprah overhauled her program to become less confrontational and to cater to an audience more on the “right side of the tracks” as opposed to the exponentially controversial guests beginning to stumble their way onto *Ricki Lake* and *Jerry Springer*; part of the newer cohort of talk shows targeted toward younger audiences.

As part of *Oprah*’s “makeover” the host left her spot in the audience to assume a chair on stage, took greater control over the trajectory and questioning of the show, and

²⁸ Do as he says, not as he does: William Bennett’s talk show, *Beyond the Politics*, hit CNN’s airwaves in 2008. Additionally, in September 2005, he found his way into national headlines for his *Morning in America* radio show when he said the crime rate would go down if all African-American babies were aborted.

fostered a more tolerant and empathetic environment to make her guests feel more comfortable confessing, setting the stage, literally, for the “spirituality” years. Oprah also discursively positioned her new format as of a higher caliber than competing fare, adopting the term “quality” to describe the improved aesthetics, studio design, and lighting, as well as the more humane, less dissenting studio audience. “The time has come for this genre of talk shows to move on from dysfunctional whining and complaining and blaming,” Oprah Winfrey said. “I have had enough of people’s dysfunction. We’re all aware that we do have some problems [...] what are you willing to do about it? That is what our [future] shows are going to be about” (quoted in Lofton *Gospel of an Icon* 3-4).

I theorize Oprah’s decision to turn toward quality came largely from two sources: First, shortly after the overhaul, Oprah revealed her fandom of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (MTM) which was created, as Kristen Lentz writes, in direct response to FCC Chairman Newton Minow’s characterization of television as a “vast wasteland.” Lentz argues that MTM Enterprises, Moore’s production company “was understood – both in the industry and in the trade and popular presses – as producing television situation comedies that would lend some dignity and prestige to a genre typically dismissed as hopelessly banal” (48). A buzzword of the 1970s, quality was understood as “television readily identifiable by its textured, humane, and contemporary themes and characters” which translated into a kind of sophistication Oprah wanted to adapt for her program to compete with newer *Rickified* talk shows (Hammill, n.p.). In a similar way that Moore used MTM Enterprises to reconceptualize the banal sitcom genre, Oprah used Harpo Productions to retool the talk show format by revamping her program and grooming a

troop of self-help protégés, her “All Stars” to expand her legacy, including Iyanla Vanzant,²⁹ Dr. Phil McGraw, and Dr. Mehmet Oz.

Second, I argue that with *Oprah*’s overhaul, the program began incorporating more and more spiritual elements and religious rhetoric adapted from Oprah’s own autobiography living with her grandmother as the “talkingest child” of the Black Baptist Church.³⁰ In historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s book, *Righteous Discontent: The Black Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (1993), she argues that women in black Baptist churches at the same time as Oprah’s grandmother Hattie Mae Lee, adopted what she called a “politics of respectability [which] emphasized reform of individual behavior and attitudes both as a goal in itself and as a strategy for reform of the entire structural system of American race relations” (187). To be respectable meant claiming responsibility for one’s self by employing a value system predicated on good manners, good Christianity, and good morality. “Respectability demanded that every individual in the black community assume responsibility for behavioral, self regulation and self improvement along moral, education, and economic lines. The goal was to distance oneself as far as possible from images perpetuated by racist stereotypes” (196). Oprah employed this ideology in both her life by distancing herself from her racial

²⁹ As an inspirational speaker and “New Thought” spiritual teacher, Iyanla Vanzant became a favorite *Oprah* guest between 1998 and 1999, the first guest to whom Oprah surrendered the stage for tapings. Vanzant entered into negotiations with Oprah to create her own talk show, which would have been the first *Oprah* spinoff, but decided to reject Oprah’s offers when she was approached to host a new show produced by Barbara Walters. Because of the betrayal, Oprah and Vanzant fell out of communication until Vanzant was invited back in *Oprah*’s twenty-fifth season in which the two reconciled (“A No-Holds-Barred Conversation with Expert Iyanla Vanzant” 16 Feb. 2011). She became a regular contributor to *Oprah*’s *Lifeclass* on OWN and will be hosting her own show on Oprah’s network beginning in the summer of 2012.

³⁰ Oprah frequently claims her career as a talk show host was born in her childhood Baptist Church when she was asked to perform readings in front of the congregation. “The women at church used to say, ‘Hattie Mae, this child sure can talk. This is the talkingest child ... But that talking has paid off’” (quoted in Howard 7).

community as well as in her talk show by dissociating with the onslaught of new, self-interested “trash” programming.

This turn toward a politics of respectability was largely facilitated by Oprah’s own self-transformation into a religious icon with a fan following of steadfast devotion. As Kathryn Lofton writes, “Gospel is a word that means ‘good news’. Oprah says that the good news is ‘you’” (quoted in Blaustein n.p.). When the show reemerged from its makeover in its ninth season, it assumed a place within popular discourse of more quality television. While one might turn on *Maury* or *Jerry Springer* for their daily dose of sex, fights, and paternity tests, *Oprah* embraced a politics of respectability in which people “from the wrong side of the track [were] excluded” (Gamson 191).³¹

After its overhaul *Oprah* began attracting celebrities and guests from around the world who wanted to confess their sexuality to the coming-out queen of daytime because of both the popularity of the show and the empathy and sensitivity with which she handled her guests. In addition to the earlier assumption of public confession as a libertory experience, the spirituality years also encouraged confession as a kind of therapeutic catharsis, which is precisely what the *Wall Street Journal* came to call “Oprahfication” – that is, “public confession as a form of therapy” (quoted in Warren n.p.). Among the very first these orientation confessions was the groundbreaking interview with Louganis in 1995 that changed Michael’s life. As Winfrey explains in Michael’s episode:

I always think that the real point of celebridom – of being known – is that you can use your life in a way to help other people, and I think that Greg Louganis being on the show that day, I felt that when he was here, you know? I always feel when somebody is doing something in earnest that other people will receive that. [in a

³¹ NBC bought *Leeza* to create a rival “respectable” show.

silly voice] I didn't know that it was a little 12-year-old boy!

Two years later, after appearing on the cover of *Time* magazine with the headline, "Yep! I'm gay," Ellen DeGeneres came out to Winfrey's live studio audience the same day her character, Ellen Morgan, was set to come out to her therapist on the sitcom *Ellen* as the first openly-gay series lead. In "The Episode," *Ellen* makes a nod to Oprahfication and the coming out paradigm by casting Winfrey in the role of her therapist.

Coming out during spiritual years of *Oprah* was an altogether different experience than Mike's appearance: Oprah Winfrey assumes her position as the nation's therapist, sitting with the guest on stage and interacting with them personally without the roving microphone. The studio audience members has less stake in the content of such episodes because Oprah Winfrey maintains her position on stage, and only occasionally asks questions of them. In rare instances when audience members are invited to provide dissenting opinions or un-mic'd audience members personally assume the role of the villain by speaking out, they are quickly shot down by the host herself, whose empathy for gayness serves as the champion of "standing in one's truth" even if it is not particularly popular. In so doing, Oprah will often fall on her sword, and then tell everyone about it, as she does when she claims to receive more hate mail from appearing on *Ellen* than for any other thing she did until she endorsed Barack Obama.

One member of the audience on Ellen's episode, for instance, very civilly registers her discontent with Ellen's "public lifestyle" saying her outing sends the wrong message to children. "[My son] should know [about lesbianism], but he should know when *I* am ready to tell him. Why do I have to tell him in the aisle of the grocery store with your pictures right there?" Oprah Winfrey comes to Ellen's defense explaining that this moment is the perfect vehicle through which to discuss people's differences. Later, when two audience members tangle in a heated discussion of homosexuality and

Christianity, Ellen pretends to crawl out of her chair and sneak off stage, loosening the tension of a moment *Oprah* producers just a few years before would have wound tightly. Instead of capitalizing on what could have become a controversial moment in the studio and amping up the sleaze, *Oprah* producers cut instead to a commercial break. By diverting away from a potentially homophobic and controversial encounter that would have scored them points in earlier seasons, *Oprah* demonstrates its new “higher brow” strategy by allowing the audience to breathe. This was not a story about how people were reacting to Ellen, but rather encouraging the viewers by allowing Ellen to share her own story. In so doing, the show created a safe space for queerness because gay guests were celebrated for choosing to “empower” themselves by revealing their sexuality – but they were able to do so in a much more supportive environment.

By consistently tying “coming out” to one’s “truth” the spirituality years also chipped away at hegemonic notions of homosexuality as a choice one can make, as when Oprah supported her decision to appear on *Ellen*. “A lot of people said me being on your show ... was me promoting lesbianism. I simply wanted to support you in being what you believe was the truth for yourself” (quoted in Borden 1998, A77). As with de facto feminism, Oprah positions herself as accepting of homosexuality, a de facto ally, without going so far as to use the words.

In the revelatory moment of coming out on a talk show, the audience is often invited to identify with such guests as *Leeza* executive producer Nancy Alspaugh describes: “It’s not necessary that everyone can relate to being homosexual, but people can relate to having to reveal something to your parents, reveal something to your friends, that’s going to potentially cause problems” (quoted in Gamson 115). The audience’s celebration of the coming out guest, often to standing ovations, creates a false sense of security for gay viewers who look toward televisual representations of coming out to

gauge how their own communities' will react. "Sleaze" episodes of *Oprah* constantly demonstrated the antagonistic response gay men would experience in the revelation of their homosexuality by inviting homophobic guests to react to or condemn those coming out live on air. As a result, Logan spent much of his adult life semi-closeted. These episodes represented the harsh reality and the dangers of coming out that were missing from later episodes in which an ambiance of acceptance gave credence to the idea that America had changed. Younger, rural viewers without access to gay people or gay culture, can embrace coming out stories presented on television, and in so doing, become detached from the homophobic realities of their environments. They may then become susceptible to coming out to their families and friends expecting the kind of treatment often presented on *Oprah*, but be met with a much harsher reality, just as Ray experienced.

RAY'S EXPERIENCE – "I STARTED FEELING THIS GUILT"

As a new high schooler in rural eastern Idaho, new feelings, new sensations, and new confusions about his multiple minoritarian identities grew in Ray that he struggled to disperse but also to reconcile. He suffered in the silence of his sexuality, unable to comprehend how his differences had been damned by his peers. "I felt driven underground," he said, but along with these new images of gay men, Ray longed to connect even more. Because homosexuality was so decidedly forbidden in Rexburg, Ray began to seek out that connection and those gay men in the only way he knew how at the time. When he turned fifteen, he earned a day driver's license, allowing him to travel to larger, neighboring cities that housed porn shops and adult bookstores where he lingered, hoping to be cruised by older men with whom to have sexual contact. Ray could not conceive of the notion of a gay rights alliance organization or any other means to connect

to gay culture. So, as with the stereotype of the disenfranchised gay man, he turned to sexual promiscuity as a means of connecting with a culture media rhetoric had presented as only coming up for air when horny – a sheltered, invisible community he would do anything to encounter.

I would go in the day, and then when I got my night license, I would go at night, too. Then I started making weekend trips, I would drive to Salt Lake, which is the nearest big city, in search of more porn shops or gay bars ... just hope. I'd be terrified, but just to see other people and know that I wasn't the only one.

Fear initially prevented Ray from accepting any offers, but, he said, joking about using the word, he did eventually become *too* successful in his escapades, which started him on an unhealthy and dangerous path toward sexual lechery. It was the identity of gayness that was confusing for Ray because while so many of the practitioners of his church had denounced homosexuality as a deadly sin, many of the men with whom Ray was having sex were active members in the church – followers of the LDS faith who went home after evenings with him to their wives and children and the world to which they proclaimed their heterosexuality.

Through his spectatorship of *Oprah* and by interacting with men who enjoyed having sex with him, Ray was experiencing a variety of deviant sexual identities, the very kind of deceitful “down-lowism” denounced by talk shows like *Oprah* for its

victimization of women.³² Living a double life or being secretive about sexuality, as the men who were sleeping with Ray were doing, was seen by him as inauthentic and disingenuous and was arousing in him strong feelings of guilt and dishonesty for the two-world reality he was building. *Oprah* had taught him

In a 2005 episode featuring best-selling author, Terry McMillan, *Oprah*'s audience is shocked to learn that after six years of marriage, McMillan's husband, Jonathan, told her he was confused about his sexuality. "He said, 'I think I might be gay,'" McMillan remembers. At this revelation the studio audience groans loudly, as if they were disgusted by his deceit. "He claimed he hadn't 'done anything yet.' I said, 'You haven't done anything yet?' 'I swear, I swear I haven't done anything yet.' That's sort of like me saying, 'I'm an alcoholic, but I haven't had a drink yet,'" she adds. If the philosophy of the talk show is that sexuality is static – that it is fixed, if not at birth, then at a very young age – it is Jonathan's own personal responsibility to come out, to *know* implicitly the "truth" of his sexuality, and to be defined by it. By choosing to marry McMillan, he is presented as a man victimizing a woman through trickery and fraud.

³² A 2004 episode about men living on the "Down Low" ("Living on the Down Low" 16 Apr. 2004), that is, men secretly having sex with other men, began with an introduction by Oprah that worked to scare her female viewers with statistics demonstrating how AIDS was being spread to women:

"[A headline in the paper] says, 'AIDS is the leading cause of death for African-Americans between the age of 25 and 44.' That is startling! All my alarms went off. Not only are more black people getting AIDS in record numbers, more women – listen to me now – more women, more college students, and people over 50 are at greater risk than ever before. Today you're going to hear many reasons why AIDS is on the rise again. Here's a shocker! It's one of the big reasons why so many women are getting AIDS. Their husbands and their boyfriends are having secret sex with other men. [Audience moans]. OK, I'll let that sink in for a minute. [Audience laughs.] OK, so this lifestyle even has a name. It's called 'Living on the Down Low.' OK, living on the down low. Listen to these three men who speak out about their double lives on the down low. Now, two of them asked us to remain anonymous."

The featured guest in this episode came back in Season 24 to officially announce that he was gay. To which Oprah's response was, "Duh!"

That was the climate that produced many of the mass-mediated signals Ray was receiving that stressed to him the values of living a true and authentic lifestyle, or his “best life” as coined by *Oprah*. By that time in his life Ray was seventeen and had just begun a relationship with an older man in Salt Lake City, a bouncer at a gay bar and dance club that Ray had frequented in his weekend trips. Because Ray had excelled in academics, he graduated early from high school, moved into an apartment across town, and began attending the junior college that, while still owned by the church, would later become BYU-Idaho. He was a model student his entire first semester, balancing his new secret relationship with a full school schedule, a perfect record, and rigorous practices for the cheerleading team.

As the main tumbler for floor gymnastics, Ray had helped lead his squad to the national championships where he was excited to compete with schools across the country for the title and to interact with a variety of people he had never experienced. Then, “I started feeling this guilt,” he explains. “I felt that, you know, I don’t want to carry this guilt when we go compete because I just want to enjoy the experience of it.” Protocol in the Mormon faith asserts that penance through religious confession is the only way to feel liberated from one’s demons. Disclosure of “truths” in this way is essential for Mormon salvation. So Ray put his confidence in the bishop of his church and told him he was gay. Shortly before finals, the bishop went behind Ray’s back to report the confession to the dean of the college. The dean summoned Ray for a meeting where he was advised that, as a homosexual, Ray was no longer welcome on campus. “They gave me an ultimatum, that either I withdraw from school or they kick me out. [...] It was two weeks before finals, so [my first semester] was all for not, and I wasn’t able to compete, and I had to withdraw from school.”

As a model student with a national competition on the horizon, Ray now suddenly had to explain to his parents why he had withdrawn from school, and the only way he could think to do so was through his “truth.” “There was just no other explanation. [My parents] were very sad, my father became very preachy, because that’s all he knew how to do at the time. It was very depressing for them.” While Ray said his parents’ initial reaction to his coming out was one mostly of shame and disappointment, since he is the youngest of six, a few of his older siblings were not as passive. “Some were a little more violent than others, I had a brother who actually came at me with a fist. It wasn’t a fun time.”

As Ray’s story demonstrates, the latter seasons of the *Oprah* canon depended on Oprah’s “gospel” of self-authenticity, and the show became synonymous with self-help remedies which often involved the disclosure of truths to an inviting, supportive studio audience. Different from its early years, *Oprah*’s later coming out episodes formatted within this spirit of celebration created for her gay fans a televisual reality wherein homosexuality was embraced, and gays and lesbians (often celebrities) were encouraged to come out of the closet – to reveal their truth to the world – in order to achieve their “best life.” Ray was searching for what each and every one of those celebrities said they found through their coming out experience on *Oprah*. Martin described his sexual revelation as a spiritual journey that allowed him to feel “liberated ... that I could finally say ‘I love myself completely.’” Louganis said the experience was “such a relief ... that I could live my life.” And Chely Wright’s father instantly embraced her and told her that everything would be all right, and that he loved her no matter what. Shortly after her outing, Ellen said she was excited. “For me, this has been the most freeing experience because people can’t hurt me anymore. ... Literally, as soon as I made this decision, I lost weight. ... I don’t have anything to be scared of, which I think outweighs whatever else

happens in my career” (quoted in Belge n.p.). The studio audience also applauded dozens of everyday guests as they revealed their orientations to the world. Unlike the sleaze years that frequently depicted homophobia as a part of the homosexual’s life, the spiritual years of *Oprah* created an ethos of safety in the coming out process that some of her viewers attempted to reproduce in their own lives. Boiled down, the formula was simple: come out and be celebrated, or live a lie and as with the quote that opens this chapter, “die a little death every day.”

Oprah also fails to depict what happens outside the studio, when the guests lose the comfortable, protective shelter of invisibility or the safety and protection Oprah Winfrey provided them in her presence. After Ellen’s initial coming out ratings success, subsequent episodes of the show were seen as clinging too tightly to lesbianism, and target audiences did not receive them well so advertisers³³ continued to pull their spots. The show was canceled, Ellen’s unraveling romance with actor Anne Heche dominated the tabloids, and she was launched into a mire of emotional and mental depression from which she says she barely survived. After the public dissolution of their union, Heche left Ellen for the cameraman who had accompanied Ellen across the country to film her standup routine, which sent her into a downward spiral – a dark period in her life people are eager to forget when pointing to her success as a lesbian to tout the benefits of outness.

Suddenly I had become this person that everybody was saying, “Oh, I hate her ...” And I heard about all of it. It just got to be where I couldn’t watch TV without somebody saying something mean. I was the punch line of every joke, like Monica Lewinsky. ... That’s why it killed me so much when I came out. All I wanted to do was make people laugh. That, in turn, gave me so much joy. Then when I decided to be honest with people, it was somehow taken away for a while

³³ Chrysler and, ironically, JC Penny, which hired her as their spokesperson in 2012.

(quoted in Belge n.p.).

By coming out, Ellen believed she would finally be free to claim a certain power over her identity. But as Foucault describes, we never understand the power plays involved in confession, and as such, she surrendered some of her power because people were now able to treat her/condemn her/denounce her/identify her as a lesbian. But Ray specifically mentions Ellen's original episode as influential in shaping how he thinks about coming out. He explains that it is an important first step in crossing the bridge to self-acceptance. In our interviews, while he was briefly reflecting on her appearance, he said, "being true to yourself empowers your future." After he did come out, Ray's life, like Ellen's, stumbled through a series of mazes of confusion and dark alleys that led him to the darkest parts of his world. After a Mormon missionary trip to Germany, he failed the church one final time and was sent home to be publicly excommunicated from the Mormon church. He bounced from city to city, becoming a strip dancer out of Memphis before eventually becoming infected with HIV in a single sexual encounter that changed his life.

BEING GAY IS A GIFT FROM GOD!

Both Caleb and Ray reflected on the 1987 episode of *Oprah* in Williamson, West Virginia, but in a very different way than Logan because they were too young to see the show's original airing. In the beginning of its twenty-fifth season in 2010, *Oprah* returned to Williamson to film a follow-up special with some of the people of the town to see if the original episode had any "positive" impact on their acceptance of homosexuality. Local newspapers reporting on the show's return marked it in stark contrast with filming in the late 1980s because although *Oprah*'s crew would choose to film the episode in the

same venue, the town's fieldhouse, the new programming strategy changed the way in which the episode was produced.

In a scene in *Oprah Behind the Scenes*, the lead-producer of the episode is warned by a gay colleague that the original episode was offensive and served mostly as a platform for homophobic rhetoric to be shouted at a dying man. So, in their return to Williamson, the *Oprah* crew was determined not to re-create that environment. In so doing, the studio audience was eliminated and the filming was closed to the public. Featured were Mike's sisters who reflected on his final days and how they believed the show changed the way people felt thought about homosexuality and about AIDS. A few of the louder, accusatory audience members were also invited to participate, all of whom apologized either out of their own regret or were neutered by Oprah Winfrey.

Among them, Jerry tentatively apologized to Mike's sisters by saying he wishes he would have conveyed himself more compassionately, but the sentiment is hollow because he continues to carry the same beliefs today. Jerry then annoys Oprah when he suggests Mike should have stayed in the city and not returned back to his small hometown where he would not have the kind of care and understanding big cities could afford. What happens next beautifully illustrates the program's generic transition from "sleaze" to "spiritual" as well as how the show imagines a safe space for queerness through Oprah's maternal presence. Mike's sisters are visibly upset by his statements and they begin to raise their voices to argue with him. Oprah Winfrey shuts everyone down before *she* counters. "Who are you or anyone else in this community to say he shouldn't be with his family?" When Jerry continues to tiptoe around a heartfelt apology, Oprah decides for him:

Oprah: So bottom line is, Jerry, you kind of regret it.

Jerry: Well of course. But who hasn't said something in the last 20 years that they wish they had not.

Oprah: [pauses as she glares at him incredulous] Yours was on the *Oprah* show.

The follow-up episode moved Ray deeply. He said it had been incredibly emotional for him because of how brave he thought Mike was to have appeared on the show and to have been so frank with his truth. Although Ray is out to everyone he knows, he has kept his HIV status a carefully guarded secret. He says he can count on one hand how many people in the world know he is HIV positive. “I just thought about how brave [Mike] was. I am not even really out, or disclosed my status, only a few close people know,” he says, seeming almost disappointed in himself. “For him to go on television to do that and then to – the audience was just so wild for him – I remember crying, and I just wanted to protect him, to take the pain away. Hearing the audience enraged me.” He acknowledged that if the show were made today, it would not likely have been nearly as effective at showing the reality of homophobia and hate rural gay men with HIV endured. The episode would not have been as relevant. “Even though we have come a long way, we still need more dialogue. The dialogue kind of died down because the epidemic isn’t so much in our faces. People think out of sight, out of mind, but it’s still a problem.” Michael Gross writes that, “Coming out offers every gay man the chance to make his life new. Before it is a declaration of desire for sex, coming out is a decision to accept one’s desires and a commitment to figuring out how best to live accordingly.” Ray will tell people without a beat that he is happy he was forced out of the closet in the way he was. He says he is not sure where his life would be, or who he would be, had he not endured the fateful day his bishop betrayed his trust. In part because of the disease’s continued relation with the gay community, Ray has felt as though he owes it to the people around him to come out, not only as gay, but as HIV positive – to live his own truth, not just for the benefit of his being free, but also because in doing so, he can perhaps become a

model of hope for others. “I think it’d be great to see more HIV positive role models just out in the public. I guess that makes me sound hypocritical, because if I can’t even be courageous enough to disclose my status ...” he paused. “I’m still dealing with that one.”

As discussed above, early iterations of talk shows that included flamboyant spectacles of homosexuality or even in “sleaze” episodes of *Oprah* when a town confronted a gay man dying of AIDS, it was always the homosexual who was the “freak” and the audience was often invited to consider the bigot’s perspective. Homophobic voices often polluted the studio audience, and rural gay viewers like Logan and Toby saw a glimpse at what would happen if they came out to their families, scaring them even further into the closet. What happened in *Oprah*’s shift toward a higher-quality, more respectable show, however, was that the bigots themselves became the freaks, and so long as gay guests disclosed their homosexuality, nobody was encouraged to take the bigots’ side. In response to the celebration, some rural gay viewers who felt a false sense of safety about coming out underestimated the homophobic cultures to which they were tied. The spirituality years became more and more embracing of homosexuality as visibility increased with a splurge of new gay shows in the late 1990s and early 2000s. More than fifty years after it was first addressed in local talk shows, after all its various iterations, gay visibility took yet another new turn in a 2009 episode of *Oprah*’s “Best Life Week” series, when two “expert” religious figures on an *Oprah* panel looked into the eyes of an African American guest from rural Alabama struggling with his homosexuality and told him that his being gay was a “gift from God.” So as not to diffuse her ideology, Oprah added: “All you really need is the courage to live the life of your dreams, the courage to live the life you were born to, and you cannot do that as long as you’re lying to yourself about anything” (“Best Life Week” 10 June 2009).

Conclusion

"In God I live and move and have my being." -- Oprah Winfrey³⁴

As she stood on the stage at the conference, smiling to the screams of 5,000 of her most devoted followers, Oprah Winfrey began a story about childhood, the church, her understanding of family, and herself:

When I was growing up, my grandmother started teaching me about the bible. And I, in the beginning, took it literally. So people would ask me, because I didn't know my father until I was much older, and they would say, "Well, who's yo daddy?" And I said, "Jesus. Jesus. He's my daddy." And I remember in the first grade, some kids were going to beat me up. "This girl walks around goin' 'Jesus her daddy.'" And they all met me after school, a little gang of 'em. And I started *preachin'*. I started tellin' 'em about Jesus o' Nazareth comin' through on the donkey. How they hung him on the cross. And they said, "Lea that girl alone. Leave her alone. She crazy." Worked for me then ... still workin' (Winfrey, "What Oprah Knows for Sure").

Indeed, Oprah Winfrey's invocation of religion and spirituality, the "Word of Oprah," has appealed to her largely female and gay fan following, which, as Kathryn Lofton argues, is comfortable with her expression of religion because she is atypical in her authority as a black woman. She creates and delivers a spirituality for a demographic left out of institutional or organized religions and offers a space where people can go to find solace and guidance, all characteristic of any culture's turn toward the church and faith systems in search of a "higher power" (Lofton 13 Mar. 2011). Chapter 1 of *"Hello America, I'm Gay!"* followed the lives of two of Oprah Winfrey's so-called "ultimate viewers" as they

³⁴ Oprah strips the "we" out of Acts 17:28, "For in him we live and move and have our being." ("What Oprah Knows for Sure" 15 Oct. 2011).

struggled with their own concepts of religion, rurality, and self worth as influenced by *Oprah*. This interrogation was combined with my textual analysis of Oprah as a star. It explores a reconceptualization of how gay men engage Oprah Winfrey's iconic life as a diva or gay icon figure and elucidates how interaction with her or her cultural products occasionally inspires a transcendent experience.

Chapter 2 picked up this thread of spirituality to elucidate the ways in which two gay youth in very different rural areas of the country struggled with the condemnation of their homosexuality in the home at the hands of strict religious upbringings. Combined with a textual analysis of the show, it sought to complicate Habermasian conceptions of the public and private sphere and explored these boys' use of television to transform public areas of the home into sanctuary spaces in which to do queer identity work while simultaneously interrogating the parasocial relationships they developed with Oprah and her guests. Through various production strategies, set designs, and invited guests, *Oprah* became an imagined safe living-room space in which they were able to envision themselves while they encountered and identified with other representations of LGBTQ people.

Finally, Chapter 3 investigated how *Oprah*'s own makeover, from a sleazy tabloid talk show to a quality hour of "spiritual" programming, influenced the outing process for closeted rural fans of *Oprah*, especially in homes touting old-timey Christian "values" or in communities where members saw explicit homosexuality only through their television sets. The overarching trajectory of this project has been to explore the ways in which religion, regionality, and *Oprah* coalesce in the process of identity creation to form rural gay men's conceptual selves and how they are then informed by that identity formation.

LIMITATIONS OF MEMORY MINING

While the goals for my project seemed initially clear to me, in this process I quickly learned that perhaps far more than any other qualitative method the limits of ethnographic work can be paralyzing to a study seeking to make lucid and coherent claims. As Clifford Geertz writes of ethnographic research, “What we call our data are really our own constructions of other people’s constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to. Cultural analysis is ... guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses” (20). To be clear, this project has attempted to move beyond a basic study to illuminate the daily lives, familial structures, and cultural and religious influences in which these men lived and occasionally endured. However, this is not a traditional ethnography nor could it be. In the service of this study, I have attempted to craft a limited ethnographic approach for understanding the lives of six men who self-identify as gay, and I depend upon their memories to form not only their interaction with the *Oprah* canon but also to paint a picture of their home environment in order to understand the context in which they watched, responded to, and incorporated the series in their lives.

As evidenced by the thread of loneliness, ostracism, and secrecy running through each of their stories, a true ethnographic approach (i.e., involving my personal observation) would not have been possible for this project. Indeed, any semblance of an ethnography on rural gay fandom of *Oprah* would no doubt travel a different path as it would likely depend on out youth who have already identified and defined their sexuality in a way that these particular voices had not. Yet, its reconceptualization of important data redeems this approach: By encouraging the men I interviewed to tell me about their home life and childhoods – to take me there through memory and description – I access a wealth of information about a subjectivity that reveals what the respondents have deemed

important in their memory production of these events (and what they believe is important to me), which is lost by researchers filling in observable data themselves. As Henry Jenkins and Lynn Spigel note that a memory-based approach to culture, “Unlike academic history, popular memory is integral to everyday experience, it is memory for the public, and understood as being contingent and open rather than definitive and closed. [...] It’s grounded in notions of personal identity” (Jenkins and Spigel 117-119). Historical accuracy can become extraneous because memory recall itself is almost never factual. But if collective memory for Spigel and Jenkins is important in the study of our culture, then on a micro level, it is useful to study personal memories to understand how we shape our identities. Identities are modeled on, based on, and reaffirmed by memories of what we *think* happened which is then just as valid and nuanced in the study of identity creation and subjectivity negotiation as a researcher’s presence in the subject’s environment.

Memories are especially important to a reception study of *Oprah* which is different from most films and other television series simply because after first-run airing, the show’s episodes are lost to the public. Myriad clips are available on YouTube, a series of DVD discs featuring clips and interviews from the show was released for *Oprah*’s twentieth anniversary, and OWN repackages show content for Oprah Winfrey’s new series, *Oprah’s Lifeclass*. However, few of these materials are full-length, unedited episodes, making it nearly impossible for a viewer to revisit old episodes after deleting them from the DVR or recording over them on VHS. With 4,561 *Oprah* episodes, there is simply too much material for the whole series to be available like with other media texts, which viewers can constantly re-watch, reengage, and re-negotiate as time goes by, in the process replacing memories with new conceptions of what happened. In this way, the employment of memory-mining as a methodological approach makes sense because

Oprah viewers who claim to have grown up with and been shaped by the show rely on their memories to inform that identity.

Furthermore, as inspired by Judith Halberstam and Mary Gray, I sought to use this project to push back against the notion of metronormativity, which refers to the academy's and queer culture's urban-oriented tendency to depict rural areas and the country life as sad, rustic, and lonely where gays may be thought of as "stuck in a place where they would leave if they only could" (Halberstam 36). It had been my intention to build upon these scholars' work and begin to peel away the confidence we put in the cultural myth of rural or heartland parts of the country as "America's closet." Gray's compelling ethnography of a group of activist queer youth in rural Kentucky sparks hope in a regime of change and progress I hoped had come to the heartland since my departure. Yet, time and time again, the men I interviewed, both older and younger than myself, reiterated the suffocation of the blanket of rurality and the power Christian churches wield in these rural areas. Even within the last few years, as demonstrated by Caleb's story, the coupling of religious condemnation and the small town familiarity of Knob Noster drove his adoptive family to seek radical interventions to cure his sexuality, something which he believes would not have happened within the anonymity afforded by the city. No such conclusions are within themselves stable, nor do I intend to homogenize a people or a culture on the basis of their regionality or religion – neither urban nor rural. However, I do feel comfortable presenting these stories and drawing lines to show their connections to the text in a way that lays the foundation to build a bridge across the gap of queer rurality in academic study.

By seeking out and including rural gay men as sources in my thesis, instead of making claims about this demographic vis-à-vis the heartland mythology, I am helping to destabilize an academic convention that anti-metronormative scholars like Halberstam's

and Gray's work also seeks to challenge. In a way, despite my intentions, this thesis has worked to complicate their assumptions because it interrogates the voices they do not, those of a once-silenced "diaspora" of men seeking invisibility from the homophobia in which they lived. They are distinguished in relief against the out gay sources anti-metronormative scholars depend upon to complicate the myth of the heartland.

CONTRIBUTIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Interrogations into rural audiences and their engagements with media enterprises are simply not being conducted enough, especially as many of those who do venture into the waters of reception studies do so no further than the college campus or online message boards. In drafting this thesis, I went to great measures to reach into all corners of the country to find voices of *Oprah* fans that represented a wide range of ages, classes, and ethnicities even as their claimed sexual orientation and sex identification remained consistent. By creating the memory mining approach, that is, pairing limited ethnography with textual analysis, I contribute to three areas of scholarship informed by cultural theory: rural queer studies, TV studies, and Oprah studies.

Building upon a foundation laid by anti-metronormative work, "*Hello America, I'm Gay!*" challenges queer scholars to recognize the once near-exclusive focus of the metropolis in the field and to investigate the way in which cultural geography is important in shaping thought processes. However, I also contribute to the field by complicating and investigating the oppressed rural or once-rural voices these scholars do not. In so doing, my work does not challenge the myopic authenticity of the "myth of the heartland" which would be a fruitless and potentially homogenizing endeavor. Instead, it pairs their responses with my own textual analysis as a member of the community to question only how our rurality informed our reading strategies and reception of *Oprah*.

This thesis also opens the door to engage with queer readings and disidentification models of voices outside the academy to help us reevaluate and further understand these theories.

My analyses of my viewers use of the television to create a boundary public contributes to TV studies in that it investigates the way in which cultural geography and the placement of the television inside the home can affect access to public and private sphere spheres. I also build upon Gamson's work on talk shows' use of the coming out episode to examine how the coming out imperative has real-world consequences for gay audiences who learn to perform their sexuality as instructed by the media.

Even though, as I have shown, Oprah's audience is an always already integral component to the text of *Oprah*, most scholars neglect reception studies in their textual analyses of the show leaving a gap in research that truly informs *Oprah's* textuality. So, I contribute to Oprah studies by investigating a segment of *Oprah's* audience and analyzing how they navigate certain textual strategies and Oprah's prescriptive hegemony through what Trystan T. Cotten and Kimberly Springer call the Oprah Culture Industries (2009).

What I found most remarkable in my research was that as detached, ostracized, and removed as many of the gay men included here may have been, they all found their way to *Oprah* and engaged with the text in fascinatingly similar ways as it was available to them through the free airwaves of broadcast. Through the example of *Oprah*, I demonstrate the way in which such rural audiences make sense of mass-mediated, broadcast gayness and how they use media texts to navigate themselves toward the idea of a fixed social and sexual identity. But this project is by no means a finish line, and thus the conclusions and insights I walk away with serve only to open up new pathways and possibilities for similar scholarship.

What began as an investigation into *Oprah* quickly pivoted to use *Oprah* as a lens through which to analyze closely a specific rural queer audience. In that pivot, I crafted a methodological approach carefully suited to study rural gay fandom. “*Hello America, I’m Gay!*” opens up new avenues for such reception studies that is moving forward through a convergence of a variety of methodological approaches: observations, interviews, and memory mining, combined with what was once the private-sphere practice of diary writing that has now moved into the false-private, or public sphere of social media. Memory mining and individualistic responses chip away at the idea that there is a universal notion or understanding of some truth and some imagined viewer of a text. They break up assumptions and can challenge overarching or homogenizing ideologies, such as the heartland myth. Data from these approaches also snowball into more research questions and possibilities for future work not before considered from a theoretical *a priori* perspective.

Through this method, even more possibilities are beginning to open up as more and more closeted rural queer youth are plugging into the internet, many of whom may be easily accessed through their social media presences. Even still, scholars still grapple with how to have those young human subjects approved in the consent process, which may halt or discourage authors from writing about the experiences of youth. Perhaps more immediate research then could be crafted through a mixture of both observational ethnography of openly queer youth in the vein of the work of Gray, together with memory and textual analysis-based approaches of these or other youth before they were outed, as I have done, in order to understand how rural LGBTQ individuals make sense of media. For me, that work came from a personal place of activism, wanting to illuminate just how important representations of homosexuality on television had been in finding me sanctuary from the storm of homophobia during my youth in rural America.

Imparting the potential of television as a tool for social change, in 1958 Edward R. Murrow lamented the decline of the quality of television, but he offered a seed of optimism: “This instrument can teach, it can illuminate; yes, and it can even inspire. But it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it to those ends. Otherwise it is merely wires and lights in a box. There is a great and perhaps decisive battle to be fought against ignorance, intolerance, and indifference. This weapon of television could be useful” (n.p.). For so many rural gay youth struggling with their sexuality, fighting to survive in a world that made them fear death, *Oprah* did exactly that. Perhaps to find the best evidence of the space created for both homosexuality and religious tolerance in the *Oprah* canon, one must look no further than the final hour of the show. Just before she steps off the stage for one last time, Oprah Winfrey pays tribute to those who had followed her most devotedly and passionately for twenty-five years. She looks into the camera with tears in her eyes to thank her audience publicly, including her gay viewers and God: “I thank you for tuning in every day, along with your mothers, and your sisters, and your daughters, your partners, gay and otherwise [...] I won’t say goodbye; I’ll only say, ‘Until we meet again,’” this she says as her hands move into a prayer. “To God be the glory.”

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