MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY

The death of postfeminism : Oprah and the Riot Grrrls talk back
by Cathy Sue Copenhagen

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English
Montana State University
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Abstract:
This paper addresses the ways feminism operates in two female literary communities: the televised Oprah Winfrey talk show and book club and the Riot Grrrl zine movement. Both communities are analyzed as ideological responses of women and girls to consumerism, media conglomeration, mainstream appropriation of movements, and postmodern "postfeminist" cultural fragmentation. The far-reaching "Oprah" effect on modem publishing is critiqued, as well as the controversies and contradictions of the effect. Oprah is analyzed as a divided text operating in a late capitalist culture with third wave feminist tactics. The Riot Grrrl movement is discussed as the potential beginning of a fourth wave of feminism. The Grrrls redefine feminism and femininity in their music and writings in zines. The two sites are important to study as they are mainly populated by under represented segments of "postfeminist" society: middle aged women and young girls.

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

Master of Arts

in

English

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY
Bozeman, MT

May 2002

N378
C7904

APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

Cathy Sue Copenhagen

This thesis has been read by each member of a thesis committee and has been found to be satisfactory regarding content, English Usage, format, citations, bibliographic style, and consistency, and is ready for submission to the College of Graduate Studies.

Dr. Susan Kollin _____ 4/17/02
(Signature) Date

Approved for the Department of English

Dr. Sara Jayne Steen _____ 4/17/02
(Signature) Date

Approved for the College of Graduate Studies

Dr. Bruce McLeod _____ 4-19-02
(Signature) Date

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the ways feminism operates in two female literary communities: the televised Oprah Winfrey talk show and book club and the Riot Grrrl zine movement. Both communities are analyzed as ideological responses of women and girls to consumerism, media conglomeration, mainstream appropriation of movements, and postmodern "postfeminist" cultural fragmentation. The far-reaching "Oprah" effect on modern publishing is critiqued, as well as the controversies and contradictions of the effect. Oprah is analyzed as a divided text operating in a late capitalist culture with third wave feminist tactics. The Riot Grrrl movement is discussed as the potential beginning of a fourth wave of feminism. The Grrrls redefine feminism and femininity in their music and writings in zines. The two sites are important to study as they are mainly populated by under represented segments of "postfeminist" society: middle aged women and young girls.

INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on popular forms of feminist tactics in a so-called postfeminist era. It began, in part, from conversations with young female students during the Spring of 2001 in an academic setting. Universally, these students refused to be associated with feminism or the word feminist. I chose to explore this rejection in an examination of popular movements rather than academic theory. This decision reflects my own rejection of the assumption that Third Wave feminism has moved into the academy and in its theoretical base has no conception of how women in the "real" world develop feminist tactics. I focus on two segments of the female population that are often understudied and underrepresented in mainstream media: middle aged women and girls. Which middle aged women? and which girls? are larger questions that I explore addressing how feminist popular tactics cross race and class lines.

The two sites I examime, the televised Oprah Winfrey Show and the Riot Grrrl zine movement, both have roots in second-wave feminism. The syndicated "Oprah" talk show is the most watched and discussed daytime television show today and is targeted at women, the traditional daytime television market. The Riot Grrrl zine movement is a loosely organized network of young girls associated with the Riot Grrrl punk music scene. The "Grrrls" communicate via music and the self-published zine. While both sites are grounded in second-wave feminism, the Oprah show operates on a late capitalist third-wave philosophy and the Riot Grrrl's methods of operation may be the beginnings

of the fourth-wave of the feminist movement.[1] Both sites are fraught with ambiguities and contradictions surrounding femininity and feminism; as such, both provide a valuable place to explore feminist transformations since "a fundamental tenet of third wave feminism is to navigate its contradictions" (Orr 35).

It would be impossible to discuss either of these sites without a glance at the era in which they operate, a recognition of the cultural forces that have produced them, and an examination of the effects of consumer culture and media intervention on today's women and girls. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall emphasizes the need to examine popular culture not only from within the classes, but through the period in which the culture operates. This method of examination focuses on what Hall names "periodisation" and takes into account outside forces. One of the most important outside factors to examine, according to Hall, is the monopolization of the culture industries (Hall 442). And, in fact, late capitalist society has never been more conglomerated. (Late capitalism is defined as capitalism operating at its highest level.)

The current era has moved from big government control to big media and big box control.[2] Big media control is defined as corporate control of one of the most important sites of power: the communications sphere. Big box control is the term often used to describe the corporate monopoly of consumer choices. These forms of control operate in a fashion that narrows information and consumer choices. In addition, this type of control attempts to appropriate and commodify popular cultural forms in a way most beneficial to dominant ideologies.

The communications sphere, often considered one of the primary sites of democratic power due to its regulation of discourse, has not been exempt from corporate control. The mainstream media has moved from hegemonic cultural apparatus to a conglomerated state that offers a distorted form of information based on only a few sources. The narrowing of sources has resulted in a forum for a few dominant ideologies in the political, social, literary, and cultural spheres.

The role that the communications sphere has played in "manufacturing consent" in many crucial conflicts was brought to the forefront in the mid 80s due to the "inept and disingenuous reporting on US interventions in Central America" (McChesney and Nichols 11). Despite the calls for media reform based on the recognition of how the conglomerated media garners support, the effects of media deregulation and corporate control has resulted in ten multinational corporations owning the majority of the means of production.[3] The top ten own many of the imprints and offshots of media production, and this "several headed vendor" sells Americans nearly all the movies, TV, radio, magazines, books, music and web servers today (Miller 19).

One of the places the media has been most successful in "manufacturing consent" is in feminist ideologies. For example, "In a 1998 piece for the New York Observer, Erica Jong noted that *Time* has claimed feminism was dead at least 119 times since 1969" (Baumgardner and Richards 93). As current media choices have narrowed, control rests with a predominantly patriarchal forum. Patriarchal control has resulted in some fancy ideological footwork in contemporary media representations of feminism and femininity.

In her bestselling study *Backlash,* Susan Faludi outlines the ways media representations based on political changes and patriarchal media control have affected feminism over the past twenty years. In addition, Faludi addresses conservative ideologies rooted in patriarchy that have moved to the forefront in certain social/political arenas. The fundamentalist, Moral Majority, neo-conservative, Focus on the Family, antifeminist backlash that emerged in response to the women's movement in the 1970s has defined third wave feminism by a different set of historical events and ideological movements than the second wave (Garrison 2). Faludi provides examples of mainstream media coverage reflecting these "ideological movements" which have assured women that, among other things, a woman's "natural" place is in the home; feminism has only made a woman's life worse by having her both work and take care of children; or to truly be a feminist one must be a man-hating, overweight dyke.

Jennifer Baumgarden likewise notes the effect of contemporary media representations in *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future.* She writes that the mainstream media operates in two ways: by either proclaiming feminism dead or turning feminists against each other. Baumgardner writes "Unfortunately, most of the books that have been published about feminism in this generation have tried to convince readers that young women are somehow lacking in activism and are even antagonistic to the feminists who came before them" (xxvii). The quietness of Third Wave feminism presupposes the notion that the ideology the media is force-feeding modern women has been internalized. Foucault discussed this type of internalization in his theories regarding morality. In his theories, the subject is hailed by the ideology of repression and confession as a means of

controlling desire until the dominant definition of morality is internalized. This Foucaultian internalization as a result of media representations has contributed to the modern notion that feminism is a "dead" movement with only a few unfeminine feminists holding on.

Another mis-representation of modern feminism is found in the accusation that third wave feminism has moved into the academy where the movement has no application for "real" people. In my research I found the third wave described as "an academic construction, used to mark the development of postmodernist critiques of second wave feminism" (Alfonso and Trigilio 2). For many young women that didn't witness firsthand the gains of second wave feminism, academic feminist theory may seem to be irrelevant.

Baumgarden writes that the young women who are out in the streets demonstrating feminist tactics and the feminists with the "traditional intellectualism" of the movement have not met. She goes on to say that even feminist voices operating in popular culture are suffering from "battered women's movement syndrome" using the rocky history of *Ms.* magazine as an example (xviii). There is a generation gap in today's feminist movement as much as a gap between academic feminists and feminists operating in popular culture.

Traditional feminist intellectuals may seem to operate with a backward looking agenda, which could be a strategy of retaining their power in a theoretical field. However, while it is important for the academic feminist to understand feminist theory, the theories need to be translated into practice. "Academics may be surprised that even feminist history is heaped onto the revile pile dubbed 'master narratives'" (Orr 33). This heaping

onto the revile pile has given the illusion of "killing" off feminism in the same way that media representations do. These misrepresentations of contemporary feminism make it crucial to look to feminist responses in popular culture. The ideologies of academic intellectual hegemony have begun to be questioned by mass culture as the academy becomes more corporate and access becomes more difficult. While the postmodern academy aims to be more inclusive in its curriculum, the division between the academic world and popular culture remains.

Stuart Hall's notion of the cultural escalator helps explain how popular forms move up and down in cultural prestige. The dominant culture polices the boundaries determining what is culture and what is not. The escalator functions as a means of marginalizing forms deemed unsatisfactory to the dominant culture while promoting those ideologies it approves. Forms are appropriated and transformed by the dominant culture or labeled as bad mass culture (Denning 58). (Mass culture poses a threat to dominant ideologies in the potential it holds to change cultural forms and power structures.) We have already seen the way feminism has been "bumped off" the escalator by dominant forces. However, educational theorist Henry Giroux has claimed that in today's cultural environment the intellectual elite no longer policies the boundary to determine what is considered culture. Today, according to Giroux, the market acts as the policing force (Giroux 2).[4]

According to Giroux's theory, popular culture responds to the market ideology of culture rather than the academic/intellectual ideology. There is an ongoing debate about the "dumbing down" of culture and the "cultural duping" of consumers in the marketplace

in response to the market control of culture. The way market control has regulated information is apparent in the consolidation of the communications sphere. The new media appears to have moved out of the traditional "exchange" mode of capitalist operation. For example, Jean Baudrillard, the foremost theorist of the media economy "(c)haracterizes the relationship more in terms of passive consumption, or really more in terms of an inverted, vampirelike consumption where the media economy consumes or engulfs its spectator subject in the gigantic black hole of wildly reproducing simulations of mass culture" (Baudrillard qtd. in Masciarotte 82). Third wave feminism, in contrast to second wave feminism is defined not as much by age, class, or race as by "a cultural historical period marked by the 'logic of late capitalism' in which the commodification of resistance is a hegemonic strategy" (Garrison 3).

U.S. feminism comes more and more to resemble third world feminism in an era when multinational corporations have the potential to hold more power than small governments. Women are welcomed into this corporate world in a "free market" feminist fashion in which to be feminist means adopting the dominant paradigm. Counterculture movements are quickly co-opted by a corporate culture, both to dilute the movement and profit from it. Women especially are targeted by the corporate media as consumers based on unreal representations of beauty and fashion.

Feminism and many other unified movements have suffered as a result of these cultural transformations. However, to assume that all citizens have become passive cultural consumers in response is to negate the power that each individual holds. In a so-called postfeminist era, alternative forms of feminist tactics have developed based on the

social marginality of women who "are caught in the crisis of late capitalist conditions" (Garrison 5). Where there is containment by the dominant culture there will always be resistance. Resistance, however, takes different forms depending on the containment of the era. For example, typical protest methods including marching and picketing are quickly suppressed today by an oppressive legal force that has developed as a result of conservative ideologies. In addition, as mentioned earlier, counter-culture movements are diluted by media intervention, co-optation, and/or ridicule. Today's resistance is quieter due to the nature of the constraints. The cultural angst of what has been called the postmodern dilemma is closely related to conglomerated cultural industries. Loss of public sphere, loss of a democratic means of protest, fear of being diluted and co-opted, and fragmentation of movements are the results.

Kathleen Hanna, a young feminist quoted in *Manifesta* describes this dilemma, "I read that *Time* issue, which said feminism is dead, it failed...And I felt like I had to get a bullhorn and tell everyone, because what about all these fourteen-year-old girls all over the country who believe that it's over? What if they believe that it's already happened?" (Baumgardner and Richards 90). Fortunately, Hanna has a bullhorn: she is active in the Riot Grrrl movement and leader of the popular band Bikini Kill. She is a prime example of containment met with resistance in popular culture. And while Oprah is firmly embedded in a conglomerated media world, she too retains a sense of control by owning her production company and offers a means of resistance to her viewers in the multiplicity of female issues she examines and the democratic forum she provides for this

exploration. The Oprah Winfrey and Riot Grrrl zine movements provide excellent illustrations of some of the many ways feminism "lives" today.

THE OPRAH WINFREY TALK SHOW AND BOOK CLUB

The talk show does not promise forgiveness, or even cure; and it does not value the private self. Perhaps its fixing is in the promise of citizenship in the public voice, thus making intimacy the ideological lure of the 1980s as sex was in the 1960s.

Gloria-Jean Masciarotte-*Genders*

I love the women who watch Oprah. They get no respect in our culture, because they have no sexual power and nobody cares about them. But there are so many of them! Who knows what would happen if they all got together!

Debbie Stoller-*Bust* magazine

The Oprah Winfrey show is the country's consistently top-ranked talk show and winner of 25 Emmy awards. The show has an estimated 15-21 million viewers worldwide, the majority in the key reader demographic of women age 18-54. Winfrey is one of the richest women in America, and in 1997 was named the most important person in books and media today (Kinsella 2).

There is probably not a person today, male or female, who is more firmly imbedded in current discursive practices and the powerful communications sphere. For example, when Winfrey chooses a book for her on air book club, the book becomes an instant bestseller, making her currently the most influential person in modern publishing practices. *The New York Times* in 1999 commented on Winfrey's influence, "More than a marketing phenomenon, Oprah's Book Club is a vast experiment in linked literary imagination and social engineering. Toni Morrison calls it a 'revolution,' because Winfrey's rapport with the camera cuts across class and race. Women from the inner city to the suburbs rush out

each month to buy Oprah's pick" (Max 4). As a result, Oprah leads the way to an understanding of cultural, political, personal, and literary issues for her viewers every weekday.

The Oprah Winfrey show operates on many levels and is a divided text ideologically, as Winfrey herself is. Her show investigates a mixed bag of cultural or personal issues, and she herself embodies a woman divided. She publicly discusses weight, fashion and home decorating issues, or fawns over movie stars on air, in the same fashion that she discusses rape, hunger, or the women of the Taliban. Yet, interestingly, given who she is, race is not an issue directly addressed by Winfrey. While she may feature footage of Martin Luther King on Martin Luther King Day, or include shows like Women of the Ku Klux Klan, Winfrey seems to address issues of race more through the voices of her viewers and in her choice of issues for the show than in her own voice.

The archives of past Oprah shows illustrate the mixing of issues: weight loss, relationship, and beauty shows are featured alongside such issues as violent teenage boyfriends, women of Afghanistan, and hunger in Africa. Everyday Oprah leads what has been called her "adoring flock," of mostly female viewers, through the pressing, usually female, issue of the hour. Viewers seem to tune into her religiously or shun both her show, and the books she picks for her televised book club.

Like all televised talk shows, the Oprah Winfrey show has been accused of sensationalizing cultural issues. However, the show is elevated from the level of tabloid TV by Oprah's strategy of uncovering the issues and the power she personally holds in that exposure. If Oprah needs an expert, such a figure is just a phone call away. If she

needs a publisher to reprint one of their backlist titles that she has chosen for her book club, it can be done tomorrow. No one is seemingly exempt from her summons; even president-elects Gore and Bush have appeared on her show. The one person that publicly declined to appear as an author on her monthly book club show, did not actually decline but was disinvited publicly by Oprah. Jonathan Franzen, this year's National Book Award winner for his novel *The Corrections,* was disinvited from appearing on the show after he made comments to the mainstream media that his book was "too high of a literary form" to be included as an Oprah pick (Kirkpatrick 1). Although Oprah was criticized for not letting Franzen appear on the show, the point is she doesn't have to-the show is hers alone.

Winfrey started Harpo (Oprah spelled backwards) Productions in 1986, bought her syndicated show, and is free from her producer's demands. She holds the type of power in an important communication sphere that is usually held by white men. In response to her power, the dominant culture has labeled her show as bad mass culture, her book picks as "chick" lit, and has emphasized her personal weight issues in the tabloid and mainstream media over her political activism. This labeling has led to the association of her show with lowbrow culture. Many women themselves refuse to admit that they "read" the Oprah show or the books picked for the book club for these reasons.

Conversely, "Many feminists regard today's talk show as a new, or counter, public sphere, based on the ideas that talk shows don't require a bourgeoise education to participate and understand the issues ...about average women" and might provide a forum for the disenfranchised individual "who is not represented in the current

knowledge-based commodity culture" (Shattuc 171,172). Gloria Jean Masciarotte in "C'mon Girl: Oprah Winfrey and the Discourse of Feminine Talk" writes that the television talk show seems to be the one place that is not passive in the current flattening out of the cultural currency of the media and that "talk shows are the lever in the dislocation of universal, natural difference" (91).

The shows actually seem "extravagantly participatory" with lively interaction between the host, the show's experts, the studio audience, and the television audience (Masciarotte 81). While some feminist and cultural critics celebrate this "active audience," others see this "veneer of participation" thinly covering the reality of an audience as "a passive mass led by commercial interests and self promoting hosts" (Shattuc 171). Talk show audience participation, it is argued, leads to a loss of self and a consumption of participants. These critics view Winfrey's show as a voyeuristic means of using people's individual stories for nothing more altruistic than consumer gain. In this model Winfrey is viewed as a "capitalist tool imperialistically colonizing one of the last frontiers of privacy" using the hegemonic medium of television (Gitlin and Kubey qtd. in Masciarotte 82). Others would argue that Winfrey's show provides a democratic forum for the disenfranchised voice of mass culture and altruistic exposure for issues otherwise ignored by popular media and social institutions. I would argue that Winfrey's show is a good example of the way that female issues continue to be addressed despite the pressures of late capitalist forces.

However, one of the issues Oprah has been most criticized for by mainstream voices is her televised, sensationalist, self-help confession strategies as a so-called feminist

tactic.[5] Emily White writes that "During the 80s, feminism diverged along two major courses: into the academy, where it became increasingly clouded in jargon, or into the pop psychology industry, where every conflict could be resolved from 'within,' every rupture healed through therapy" (White 25). The Oprah show, indeed, operates on a self-help philosophy. Guests are encouraged to publicly explore their victimization(s) on the show. Talk show participants are speakers of stories whose voices are often privileged over the expert voices on the show. The supposed democratic forum of the talk show favors "'the authentic" voice of the everyday people, or street smarts of the working class" (Masciarotte 87). Experts are called in only to verify the opinions the guests bring to the show.

For example, in February of 2002 the Oprah Winfrey show was devoted to what has been called the Rape Kit Controversy. Oprah followed the lead of ABC's 20/20 show aired the previous week that reported on the current backlog of DNA rape kits in police departments across the country. The kits are left untested due to the cost of testing even though they may prevent a future rape or identify a rapist. The viewers for this show were women who had been directly involved in the controversy and had been through both the ordeal of rape and the testing. Many of the women interviewed on the show were middle aged or low-income women and publicly related their traumatic experiences to the audience.

Oprah summoned both the investigative reporter from 20/20 and the former Police Commissioner of New York to answer the audience's questions on why the kits remain

untested. She also had a female rape expert, author Andrea Parrot, on the show to discuss her book *Rape 101*. The illusion is that the "experts," along with Oprah, will "listen" to the victims' voices in contrast to the social institutions that won't. Illusion or not, after an issue appears on the Oprah show, public visibility cannot be denied. While Oprah's methods may be criticized, her power in exposing women's issues cannot.

The privileging of the storied voice on the Oprah talk show format "stems directly from the experience of gendered and oppressed identity as it was popularized by the American women's movement and articulated through its rallying cry of the personal as political, in contradistinction to the analytical as political" (Masciarotte 89). The method of discourse on Winfrey's show has its roots in the women's movement and consciousness raising resistance through talk. Based on this theory, women face their political issues and personal problems united around talk. Many viewers feel empowered by the confessions of audience members. Others feel uncomfortable at the public nature of the confessions, and the talk show forum in its use of self-help formula remains widely criticized as the consciousness raising of second wave feminism does.

Julia Martin in "Mars 2, Venus 0: Exploring Self Help Books" expands on the self-help logic of the modern television talk show in her explanation of what she calls the mind cure tradition, "a movement that emphasizes individual empowerment and simultaneously removes it" (Martin 1). Martin views self- help (especially the self help book market) as particular to "capitalist, bureaucratic, democratic systems [that] have given rise to the 'age of the calcuable person,' the person 'whose individuality is no longer ineffable, unique and beyond knowledge, but can be known, mapped, calibrated,

evaluated, quantified, predicted, and managed" (Martin 1). The tendency of the individual to self-help is appealing in a capitalist culture that focuses on the individual, because specific problems have universal answers; therefore, the individual is made conscious of his or her individual qualities, "while at the same time encouraged to adopt a homogenous view of self hood" (Martin 1). Martin points to this way of defining selfhood as an example of specific techniques for the regulation of the self that are so integrated into western society that they are sometimes difficult to identify (Martin 2). One of the criticisms of Oprah viewers is that they do not form an "oppositional self;" they are viewed as simply pawns in a system that tells them what to believe, what to read, and how to respond to cultural pressures.

Martin's model of how self-help operates in the public sphere relies on Foucault's theory of the cultural role of the confession, "one of the main rituals we rely on for the production of truth" (Foucault 78/59). She focuses specifically on how the self help book grounds itself in the "'truth' of the author's personal experience and case studies of fellow sufferers" and points to how the public confession can actually be an "apolitical passive approach to problem solving" (3). As she goes on to explain, "Despite the emphasis on individual empowerment, and 'you are all you have' mantras, central in all the mind-cure traditions is the presence of a pastoral figure. There is always a movement leader who acts as interpreter of his/her own message. The pastoral figure acts as the force which synthesizes the tensions between the individual and a collective identity. "[T]he pastors, whether it be [Oprah]...[or self help authors]--exercise this power by convincing people that they know their innermost lives"(Martin 3).

Winfrey operates in this fashion, and her background, along with her compassion, gives her credibility and authority with her audience. Added to her role as compassionate hearer of confessions is her Horatio Algier rags-to-riches biography. Winfrey's stories of growing up poor on her grandmother's farm in Mississippi or with her struggling mother in Milwaukee, the victim of incest and sexual abuse at an early age, and as a black woman in a white world add to her audience's feelings of intimacy with her. She is the voice of the masses. [6]

Winfrey fits nicely into the category of pastoral figure, and in fact, much of the criticism surrounding her popularity stems from her seemingly evangelical type of power over her viewers (Feldman 1). "Here is the cultural pleasure and ideological danger of talk as the host tells stories herself in order to cajole stories out of others" (Masciarotte 86). Winfrey's show, which operates on the self-confessional, encourages audience members to confess in turn. The show operates as self-help in the public sphere in the nature of discussions led by Oprah as therapist and with the weekly appearance of a male psychologist that often does confront audience members. The show uses empathetic listening or confrontational confession to elicit stories from audience members. However, Oprah's approach is much less confrontational than her male counterparts, Geraldo Rivera or Morton Downey Junior, for example. [7]

The public confession of private experiences has accelerated in the daytime talk show to a frenzied level posing ethical questions, especially for someone with as much authority and power as Winfrey. She has been accused of forcing confessions

on her show since one confession often gives other audience members the courage to confess their story, thereby providing entertainment in a type of evangelical catharsis.[8]

However, Winfrey's use of the talk show format is wildly successful and her influence is phenomenal. In fact, Winfrey's success in using her show as therapy in the public sphere has led to a widespread cultural penetration of the public sphere and the rise of the cultural terms "the abuse excuse" or the "Oprahfication" of culture. Dan Lungren, Attorney General for California, comments on the influence of the media and especially Oprah regarding crime: "people have become so set on viewing things from the Oprah view...that they bring that into the jury box with them. And I think at base much of that tends to say, We don't hold people responsible for their actions because they've been the victim of some influence at some time in their life" (Hill and Zillman 2). To some critics, Oprah's "new" confessional style uses the appearance of personal honesty as a form of evasion (Steyn 3). To others, Oprah is opening a new conversation on both the criminal and the criminal justice system. In either case, this influence, combined with Winfrey's commercial success, renders her one of the highest holders of modern cultural authority.

In examining the discourse surrounding The Oprah Winfrey show and the level of her influence in the public sphere, media expert Jane Shattuc asks "As the events of the 1990s bring into the political arena an angry African American underclass, gay activists, and working women, might the Oprah audience be the newest incarnation of the public

sphere?...Are daytime TV talk shows simply sensational commercialism, or could they be a new form of political [and literary] debate?" (168). Shattuc argues that in the current age of information technology and global communications, an independent public arena where political opinion can be formed free from the taint of government control as well as that of corporate capitalism is threatened. Shattuc waxes nostalgic for the public town meeting that the average citizen rarely attends anymore. "If TV has become the central communicator of information in late capitalist America, no other forum replicates the town meeting's democratic sensibility more than the first generation of daytime TV talk shows..." (168). However, can these shows, "the children of corporate media interests, "be considered public arenas where the 'people' form opinions freely?" (Shattuc 169).

Masciarotte doesn't think so. She feels that the radio show is more representative of the public sphere where opinions, not intimate personal stories are aired. As she explains, "...the lure of the radio call-in show depends on the invisible voice. It depends on the hidden face, the privacy and secrecy of the airwaves. Mythologically, the radio call-in show is more like the Catholic confessional, where a screen is used to hide the face and so free the soul from earthly constraints and retributions...Giving body to voice is the perversion of the radio call-in program" (Masciarotte 84). In contrast, the televised talk show delineates the line between person and privacy. In the "media culture's vampirelike need for stars" all guests become a star as they tell their intimate stories to millions of viewers in a fashion more like the Protestant testimony or witnessing before the group (Masciarotte 84). This organization of the speaking subject orally and visually, like religious testimony or witnessing before the group, suggests a sense of selection into

and creation of a community. Marxist theorist Cornel West writes that a "recognition of the negotiated structurality of identity could turn constraints into opportunities. [Following his formulations it could be said that] ...while Oprah Winfrey's show does not demonstrate radical political practice, it begins to articulate a significantly different politics of the subject which re-inscribe the 'making of a self' in terms of mass subjectivity" (Masciarotte 83). Winfrey's televised confessional may seem a perversion of feminist consciousness raising tactics. However, the way the monthly book club functions as a type of self-help provides a framework for further discussion of her tactics affecting the construction of mass subjectivity and community through her show.

Winfrey's wildly successful monthly book club show has not only affected the literary marketplace and literary discourse, but also uses literature in a way that has created a new discourse surrounding interpretation and analysis. The fact that most of Winfrey's authors are women writers, and most audience members are women, points to the potential Winfrey has to affect contemporary female discourse. I would argue that the televised Oprah Winfrey book club is a feminist ideological response to cultural conditions and changes in mainstream media practices, even as it uses them.

Like all daytime programs, Oprah is designed and marketed for a predominantly female audience. The Oprah Book Club has "coalesced a national audience of women readers highlighting the often hidden gender and racial dynamics of popular literary culture" (Young 186). The success of the club and Oprah's influence are both remarkable and threatening to a society accustomed to authority being invested in a white male dominated publishing industry.

In the literary sphere, this authority has been widely questioned due to the self-confessional style of the books that Winfrey chooses for her book club as well as the way they are interpreted on the show. By operating her book club show like all of her other shows Oprah chooses novels that mimic the issues. Most of the books chosen feature either violence, sexual abuse, or dysfunction related to women and girls. To some critics, using books in this manner is her biggest crime since the book continues to remain a "legitimate embodiment of culture despite the leveling in the market process" (Radway 172). Not only has she colonized privacy, according to some cultural critics, but she has colonized "the book" in her attempt to encourage mass culture to read.

Winfrey interprets and discusses the fiction she chooses in the same manner she discusses the self-help titles she features. D.T. Max questions the use of novels as "springboards for public reflection" in a place as public as the televised literary sphere in the *New York Times Magazine* "Aren't novels about stepping outside one's experience?" (4). Winfrey's "therapeutic canon" however, is widely popular based on her success in using books as a means of knowing oneself. "The reason I love books'" Winfrey keeps reminding her audience, "is because they teach us something about ourselves" (Max 5). In an attempt to illustrate the power of reading, Winfrey relates to her audience how books were her friends during her difficult childhood. She uses the public confessional to relate the brutalities of her own life and points to the ability of authors to act as role models in both their writing and their personal biographies. Winfrey tells her audience during one show how she related especially with Maya Angelou as a young girl and how Angelou's story and consequential success gave her possibility for her life. "When

Winfrey says, 'Reading changed my life,' millions who see where she has gotten listen" (Max 4,8). Winfrey has become the type of icon that inspired her during childhood as "author" of her show. Consequentially she inspires many women in the same way Angelou inspired her as a child.

And in fact, Winfrey merges the real and the fictional on her taped book clubs. For example, the show for the novel *White Oleander,* about a young woman in foster care, had as guests a foster care parent, a social worker, and two guests that grew up in troubled homes. "The lives of our guests this month seem to come right from the pages of *White* Oleander, Winfrey began [the show] as if this was not her doing" (Max 100).

The shows play heavily on emotional identification with the texts and their characters to the point of wondering about the authority of Winfrey to question her guests in such a fashion as guests "eyes glisten" or guests actually break down sobbing. Oprah uses show business tactics that are often associated with evangelical religion to get her audience interested in the titles she picks, and critics claim that Winfrey has effectively turned novels into TV. "At the end of each book-club show, Winfrey announces the name of a new book she has just read and loved. She doesn't just name it. She sings it out: 'PAR-A-DISE.' CAN YOU ALL SING WITH ME? 'PAR-A-DISE'" (MAX 2). This approach makes cultural critics cringe. These critics believe that Oprah is merging the high art of literature with her media spectacle image. However, Oprah's media spectacle image is one of the main components of her success and has attracted many viewers to both her show and reading for the first time.

What is possibly most threatening about Oprah and her show is the nature of her success. The book club, which Winfrey started in 1996, has had 44 authors featured, (35 female, 9 male) all of whose books have become bestsellers after an appearance on the show. The show consists of a taped session of the month's selection with Winfrey, the author, and three or four guests that have been chosen on their submitted comments. The taped show is then shown to the live audience and discussed. The show has been effectively promoting self-help books of non-fiction guest authors for many years. The exposure dramatically increased the authors sales, and producers, noticing the ratings of these shows, suggested Oprah start a fiction club. She didn't think it would work but agreed because of her goal of getting people to read.

Gayle Feldman points out in "Making Book on Oprah" that Winfrey as successful business tycoon is also "an attentive student of popular culture being well aware of the rise of book clubs in the 90s and the potential for her show" (Feldman 2). Oprah recognizes her influence: "It's one thing to win an Emmy, but it's another thing to influence somebody who hasn't picked up a book since they were forced to in high school to read *Song of Solomon* and start thinking differently about their own life as a result of that" (Kinsella 3).

On the success of her televised confessional book club, Winfrey is the largest seller of books in today's contemporary marketplace. Her club, established in 1996, sends no books in the mail, gives no preliminary reviews, requires no membership, but uses instead the medium of television to promote individual titles. "Winfrey has taken considerable cultural authority away from publishers" (Young 181) "and publishers are

scrambling to target her taste" (Max 1). Gary Feldman in the *New York Times Book Review,* commented on Oprah's commercial success and also the phenomenon of her influence in the publishing world: "The club has ... made manifest that Ms. Winfrey is the most powerful book marketer in the United States. On a really good day, she sends more people to bookstores than the morning news programs, the other daytime shows, the evening magazines, radio shows, print reviews, and feature articles rolled into one" (Young 188). Winfrey also has convinced publishers to donate 500 copies for her studio audiences and 10,000 copies to libraries. In addition she has convinced publishers to lower prices on new hardbacks that her (constituents) have complained are too expensive. And most incredible is the intricate marketing strategy that accompanies an Oprah pick. Once she has chosen a book, the author and publisher are notified and sworn to secrecy. Bookstores all over the country order cases of the book that remain unopened until Oprah announces her choice on television. "The whole thing is surreal," says an editor, "You're producing and shipping 600,000 copies of a book under an oath of silence" (Max 15). Oprah has an indirect power over publishers that an author could never have "as she redraws the lines among art, commodity, publisher, and reader" (Young 188).

Courting Winfrey's taste has influenced what publishers look for in submissions, and it is fair to say that the Oprah effect has changed the type of fiction being published and marketed today. This type of cultural authority and influence on the market is seldom found in an individual. It is especially unusual for a single individual to act as a literary gatekeeper, especially a black woman operating in popular culture. Winfrey's power is not only suspect but also frightening to the dominant culture. Even the publishers seem

suspicious. While Winfrey is responsible for huge profits for the publishers, an executive at a large publishing house was quoted, "As an industry, we are both in awe and uncomfortable with someone holding so much power... No one could name another industry that delegates the creation of so many of its new stars to a single personality" (Max 17).

And Ms. Winfrey is a star. "The Modern Library and the Book-of-the-Month Club in the 1920's, the quality paperback revolution of the postwar years-all these ventures were undertaken to bring the masterpieces of modernism to a mass audience. Ms. Winfrey, in the postmodern culture of celebrity and on a scale made possible by the reach of television, is following in the footsteps of wily literary entrepreneurs... 'And this is the problem. The Oprah book Club, like the Book-of-the Month-Club before it, represents a triumph of the middlebrow' " (Scott 2). Again, the suspicion of middlebrow mass culture by the dominant culture leads to labeling and discrediting popular culture movements like the Oprah book club.

Oprah has been credited with sending people to bookstores that haven't read a book in years and reaching audiences through the book club that are usually confined to the soap opera media. " Nielsen market ratings show that her appeal crosses wide educational and income levels" reflected in "the sales surges she produces, which booksellers say, defy regional or economic differences...Most importantly, Ms. Winfrey's book club is apparently reaching non-readers whom nobody and nothing else can touch" (Feldman 2). In this scenario, Winfrey is exposing the masses to a new form of literature that increases their literacy in her use of the novel as therapeutic canon. On the other hand, her

influence could be said to be diluting the literary choices in the market and defiling literary criticism. Winfrey's focus on personal and emotional explication of the texts breaks tradition with a scholarly approach thereby depreciating both the texts and her use of the public sphere according to this critique. Critics claim that discussions of texts and characters within the rubric of talk-show topics damage the vital political subtext of many of the works (Young 182). Oprah readers become passive, feminized consumers like the subscribers to the Book-of-the-Month Club were accused of being and promote what a *New York Times* reporter calls "a new kind of dumbness" in an example of dominant culture categorization (Shattuc 171).

One of the exceptions to relating to the texts on a purely emotional level was the screening of Toni Morrison's *Paradise*. Readers had such a difficult time understanding this complex work that Winfrey had Morrison hold a televised "master class." What resembled academic literary criticism took place during the class, possibly because Morrison is a professor at Princeton, or possibly because the text required this type of analysis. For whatever reason, millions of viewers saw Oprah and her guests working hard to understand the intricacies of Morrison's writing. Oprah claimed that she loved this episode; however, it "was one of the lowest-rated book-club shows to date" (Max 12).[9] Regardless of occasional low ratings, Winfrey's appeal stems from her ability to speak to "the real person" on many different levels, including scholarly, while academic intellectuals and feminists often remain sealed off from women's "real" problems in the nature of their discourse.

After three appearances on the Oprah book club, Toni Morrison has become the most "dramatic example of postmodernism's merger between canonicity and commercialism" (Young 181). Morrison holds the authority of Nobel Prize winner, bestselling author, a professor AND appeals to the mass audiences via Oprah. According to John Young "Through her association with Winfrey, Morrison occupies *both* spheres, remaining visibly public as a producer of high art yet simultaneously discussing and marketing it through a mass culture medium. Rather than writing off Winfrey's viewers as nothing more than dull housewives, Morrison builds her textual authority precisely through this popular audience" (Young 182).

Morrison seems untroubled by the appropriation of her texts for therapy by the criticized medium of the confessional Oprah book club. While the show may change her literary personae, it also credits her "with a new kind of social authority. By constructing an audience built through popular, ostensibly low culture for her serious novels, Morrison explodes the high-low divide that still holds for much of post modern art" (Young 182). Morrison brings cultural capital to the Oprah Winfrey show by merit of her authorship status and increases her own visibility at the same time. Morrison presents "an image of cultural authority which grounds itself, like jazz, as a sophisticated discourse aimed at both a specialized and popular audience" (Young 199).

Young writes that Morrison has effectively changed the author reader (or author consumer's) relationship to textual authority through her appearances (182). He claims that the textual aura (a text's material signifiers which place the work in time and space) "changes significantly for 'Oprah's Book Club' reprints, as these books readers find the

original textual auras written over by the new incarnations. The 'Oprah' editions are thus less 'authentic,' in Walter Benjamin's terms, than the first editions, but also more expressive of the postmodern turn toward reproductions or copies as the constitutive forms of popular culture" (182).

A product that sells to the degree of the Oprah picks is a sure thing in the commodified, conglomerated publishing world. Therefore, the reproductions of the novels Oprah chooses are all stamped with her logo/brand in an increasingly corporate consumer economy based on brands. Not all authors feel the way that Morrison does regarding being an Oprah author. Jacquelyn Mitchard whose novel *The Deep End of the Ocean* was chosen by Oprah admits after low sales of her later titles that weren't chosen: "You learn quickly Oprah's the brand name, not you" (Max 18). Once an author appears on the show and is left to his or her own devices, the author's popularity often drops. Max writes "this feels strangely appropriate. In the end, a book-club author is merely a stop on the voyage of self-discovery Winfrey leads each and every day. The author is just another guest" (18).

A major appeal of the book club, as mentioned before, is the way Oprah operates as pastoral figure interested in leading "real" women to read a literary work about "real" issues. The membership in the club operates on a celebration of mass subjectivity in the same manner that feminist consciousness raising has in the past. However, mass subjectivity at the expense of individualism assumes the payoff of belonging to a community, in this case, to be part of the Oprah community.

Regarding the book club, Oprah says she is not selling the book: "Don't send me a check, please don't send me your credit card numbers"(Young 189), but this is true only in the narrowest sense according to critics. She creates consumer desire by assuring her audience that they have been taken care of: "We called the bookstores early so they'd all be stocked up for you," [and] "the greatest desire in buying membership in Oprah's book club is thus to feel a personal connection to Winfrey" (Young 189). Bookstores who have reported heightened sales to new readers (customers they have never seen before) report that people who are shopping for Oprah recommendations are shopping as if "my friend Oprah recommended this" (Kinsella 3); and indeed, Oprah assures her audience that she personally chose and loved every book she suggests. Winfrey's use of language clearly illustrates her concept of her audience as community especially through the use of the pronouns you, I, and we. "She invokes the audience as a larger social collectivity: 'When I first heard this, I wondered, like everybody' or 'I am speaking for the audience here and the audience around the world listening to you'" (Shattuc 174). However, even with the use of inclusive language and Oprah's changing stance from sole authority to member of the audience, (she even sits in the audience) "her authority is never relinquished" (Shattuc 174). Shattuc claims that shows like Oprah "move from personal identification to larger group identification in order to be popular as a broad commercial medium. For all their individualized narratives, the show speaks in social generalities" (174).

Mary Pipher addresses the falseness of televised communities in *The Shelter of Each Other: Rebuilding Our Families.* Pipher bemoans the loss of community in our new electronic culture. We know celebrities but they don't know us. The new community is

not a reciprocal one like earlier ones. "David Letterman won't be helping out if our car battery dies on a winter morning. Jane Fonda won't babysit in a pinch, and Tom Hanks won't scoop the snow off your driveway when you have the flu" (Pipher 13). While Pipher, like Shattuc, may wax nostalgic for a sense of community that is irretrievable in a postmodern late capitalist culture, it is obvious that Oprah and her literary taste and seemingly caring attitude cannot extend to all of her viewers. While her success revolves around the individual familiarity of a talk show, she may, in fact, destroy community by luring her audiences into a false relationship with her every afternoon at 4:00 rather than with real live people. In fact, Mark Steyn points out in "Comic Oprah" how the town of Amarillo actually banded around Oprah when she was sued by the local beef industry for a comment on mad cow disease that sent local beef prices plummenting. "In an Oprahfied America, no politics is local and most of life is televisual" (2).

However, while Oprah's guru type celebrity status prohibits her from personal contact with her "subjects," D.T. Max visited Detroit book clubs as part of her research and found that "not everyone in Detroit was reading Oprah books, but nearly everyone was reading Oprah-type books. Communally, they are engaged in enormous conversation, with books at the center" (19). Max felt that what was going on in the clubs that met at homes around the country involved a literary inquiry that "wasn't as searching as Toni Morrison's master class, but it certainly dug deeper than the average Oprah Book Club segment" (Max 20). She noticed in the groups a personal working through of issues of race, class, sexuality, and gender on a deeper level than normal that discussion of the text had initiated. "Not only does viewer give-and-take occur as part of the shows, but

discussions continue on the news, in the workplace, and at home: the popularization of current political, social, [literary] and theoretical topics" (Shattuc 170).

Despite the many positive influences of Oprah, her power over the literary market and her divided image of bringing literature to the masses v.s. her influence on the dumbing down of culture through her literary choices and method of interpretation remain highly suspect. The high culture/low culture argument has intensified in the Oprah debate just this year in the mainstream media. Jonathan Franzen, the disinvited author of *The Corrections*, was quoted by the mainstream press: "She's picked some good books, but she's picked enough schmaltzy, one dimensional ones that I cringe" (Deconstruct 1). The literary world was divided on the issue with some regarding Franzen as a cultural snob in judging his audience and a fool for foregoing the prospect of selling an additional half a million copies of his book via Oprah's televised endorsement. The other camp applauded Franzen's reluctance at submitting his novel to the Oprah stamp. (Franzen won the National Book Award so his book has already been "stamped" in a manner). Many readers that would never consider reading an Oprah pick flocked to read Franzen's title in an ironic show of resistance and support. These readers were even willing to overlook the fact that the most recent copies of *The Corrections* didn't escape the Oprah stamp since she had already made the selection and publishers had printed a preliminary run of new copies.

That Franzen refused to be on the show illustrates how some white male authors distance themselves from the vulgarities of the media hinting at the romantic aura of the solitary genius. Like male victorian novelists, James, Melville, and Hawthorne for

example, that were writing novels, a form not considered high art, Franzen has been applauded for his refusal to barter with the marketplace by appearing on Winfrey's show. David Kirkpatrick wrote in the *New York Times* that the controversy shows "that if there was ever a time in the book business when authors wrote to impress critics and their peers without regard to book sales, getting caught in that posture is now almost embarassing"(2). On the other hand A.O. Scott wrote in *The New York Times* "It is comforting to divide the world into categories-to celebrate the vitality of popular culture against the ivory-tower sterility of high art, or to disdain the vulgarity of the masses in favor of the refinements of serious culture. The genius of culture, however, and of the people who make it, is to demolish such distinctions" (3).

In addition, according to Janice Radway who was interviewed by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* this year regarding the controversy, "Over the last 25 years, those categories of high and low have broken down" (Deconstruct 1). Radway notes how the literary world is actually firmly behind Oprah since she has popularized reading again no matter how the texts are interpreted on the show. Radway writes that judging the way Oprah interprets texts for her audience seems like pointless criticism since poststucturalist theory demonstrates how a book can be read in many ways. She points out, "People are always thumbing their noses at women's reading" reminding that women have historically struggled to be included in the canon and the market and how women's reading and writing have been either belittled or seen as a threat (Deconstruct 1).

Indeed, "the opposition between integrity and Oprah holds especially...for white male canonical authors" according to Young (186). Young writes that the proliferation of comments published surrounding the Oprah Book Club that assure purists "that dying literary breed...don't expect *Ulysses* or *Gravity's Rainbow* to show up anytime soon [as an Oprah pick]" reflect "the extent to which high culture remains a white-male preserve in the popular press with Joyce and Pynchon too 'pure' " [to be included] (Young 186). "As Michel Berube notes of Pynchon's general abstention from popular culture, "Pynchon's non-participation in his cultural transmission is a cultural position utterly inaccessible to minority writers, alien to their literary culture" (Young 201). These authors set themselves apart from the mechanics of the market and can afford to do so, in no small part, due to differences in gender and race (Young 199).

Both Franzen and Oprah represent ideological responses to cultural conditions in a divided fashion. "Everything on Oprah is not the kind of pop schmaltz that she often gets characterized as producing. But she often gets turned into as much of a caricature as Franzen has. He's the high art lit snob, and she's the big-business representative of no-brow taste. Neither is true" (Deconstruct 2). I would argue that Franzen suffers from a male narcissistic form of cultural alienation. In a 1996 article "Perchance to Dream" published in *Harper's* magazine Franzen wrote about his frustrations "as a novelist in a culture dominated by the banal ascendancy of television" (Kirkpatrick 1). Franzen has tried to apologize for his derogatory comments, but his 1996 article, besides criticizing television, disparages book clubs for "treating literature like a cruciferous vegetable that

could be choked down only with a spoonful of socializing" (Kirkpatrick 3). Franzen appears alienated both from himself and his audience and, in fact, his novel *The Corrections* is filled with characters that are suffering from the effects of modern culture's obsession with consumerism and media intervention.

While Franzen appears alienated by cultural changes, Oprah adapts to them and actually appropriates modern media forms in a feminist fashion. Oprah's confessional self-help tactics, combined with her community building efforts, are reminiscent of second wave consciousness raising feminist tactics. However, in her adaptations and appropriations, Oprah is a divided text demonstrating a third wave response as she navigates the contradictions of postmodern feminism.

Despite her many contradictions, Winfrey's success stems in part from a level of distrust by (mass) middle class culture toward social institutions that many people have felt alienated from since the social cutbacks and corporate takeovers that began in the 80s. "The people on these shows are an emotional vanguard, blowing the lid off the idea that America is anything like the place Ronald Reagan pretended to live in" (Glynn 1). In a time when a college education is financially out of reach for many, music and literature are accused of being produced rather than created, and the President in office isn't the one the masses voted for, it seems obvious that culture will turn to icons for representation, especially an icon that overcame obstacles to become so seemingly in control of her life and successful. On the other hand, it is difficult in times of feeling powerless and alienated by culture for an individual to be consumed by Oprah, to have her act as therapist, and choose books and issues in mass fashion.

While the Oprah Winfrey show may operate in a late capitalist corporate media environment, Winfrey seems free of the compromises that many other entertainers must bow to in owning her means of production. In addition, Winfrey acts as philanthrophic and political entertainer, and in 1991 she initiated the National Child Protection Act by testifying in front of the United States Judiciary Committee to establish a national database of convicted child abusers. In 1993 Clinton signed the "Oprah bill" into law. In addition, in 1998 Winfrey co-started a woman's interactive network and cable channel, Oxygen Media Inc. However, despite her political involvement and assumed independence from corporate media control, Winfrey remains suspect in her organization and representation of the masses by operating in a larger system that is not trusted and in holding so much power.

Ironically, the mainstream media that Oprah operates in has a lot to do with this suspicion and labeling. Oprah is what has been called a "media friendly feminist." This type of feminist is often criticized both by other feminists and the mainstream media. For instance, Eve Ensler, the creator of the world renowned *Vagina Monologues* is the type of feminist that operates in a mainstream fashion. Ensler practices the same type of community building which empowers women that Oprah does. The *New York Times* recently ran an article on Ensler nearly ridiculing her for her "lofty" goal of ending violence to women and criticizing her for staying in luxury hotels while traveling to put on the *Vagina Monologues* (Dominus).

At the same time, when Oprah has strong females on her show, the media often finds a reason to criticize them. For instance when Madonna appeared on the Oprah show in 1996 the media reported that the two women were antagonistic to each other. An online discussion group questioned how antagonism between the women could be reported: "To me, this accusation most likely is another example of the way that the tabloid (and mainstream) media loves to attack strong women. Watching two strong women bond, unite and empower themselves and each other over their independence from men appears to be too threatening to male marriage-centered observers. Too bad for them. This interview was a great show" (All 1).

Ensler, Madonna, and Winfrey operate on a type of feminism addressing the question "What needs to be done?" (Alfonso and Trigilio 3). This type of feminists operates in what has been called a "media friendly" or "media spectacle" contradictory feminist fashion, but the bottom line is, they are getting things done in their contacts with women. Oprah addresses cultural angst and feminist issues in an increasingly fragmented culture- and provides a public female forum, Madonna has rearticulated femininity on her own terms, while Ensler directly addresses violence to women worldwide in the production of her monologues.

Jerry Heron writes in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that the controversy surrounding the Oprah Book Club especially "is really a debate about the role that literature plays in our society and who has the right to adjudicate the quality of the literature and to promote literature"(Deconstruct 1). For the first time in literary history, one person, a black woman operating in popular culture, is acting as that authority, a

move that is uncomfortable to a bourgeois public sphere whose authority has been white, academic, and male. However, Oprah has also been praised for encouraging more people to read than at any time in the history of American society, without any contact with the so called authorities. "Who needs literature professors? We've become absolutely irrelevant" (Deconstruct 2).

Some critics would argue that Winfrey has become one of the "so called authorities." Ms. Winfrey, who has been called "the high priestess of self help," has reminded the world of the pleasure of reading, for whatever reason, ironically through the low medium of television (Feldman 4). She has become the foremost literary gatekeeper and the power of that position frightens some. "The feverish obeisance that she exacts and is paid by those who produce and sell books says a lot about how distorted our book culture, like so much else, has become" (Feldman 4).

However, on some levels, and for some people, Winfrey acts as an ideological response to "the distortion of our culture." She may provide the comfort and compassion that organized religion offers in some interpretations, but may also act as the opiate of the masses in others. The second interpretation assumes that the masses are individuals easily led and fooled. An excellent place to extend this conversation is to look at the way that youth culture is responding to the "distortion of culture." Again, I would like to use a female literary framework, the Riot Grrrl Zine Movement, focusing on issues of cultural authority, individualism and community, and feminism.

Like the Oprah phenomenon, the Riot Grrrl Zine movement operates on many different levels, often contradictory. However, major differences between the movements

include the way the Riot Grrrls redefine femininity, their refusal to have a pastoral figure, and the way they respond to mainstream media intervention. While many Oprah viewers appear willing to look beyond Oprah's capitalist patriarchal mode of production as a means of providing a female public forum, girls associated with the zine movement are engaged in a struggle against those forces, and reject them in their feminist networking tactics.

THE RIOT GRRRLS

zines (noun): these homemade, xeroxed, independent publications are the communications arm of the DIY (do-it-yourself) punk scene, the DIY women's scene, and other revolutionary groups. In the early nineties, Riot Grrrls learned about one another from loose zine networks where a dollar and a couple of stamps meant a young feminist writer or artist would send you the news of her community and her own life. Decades earlier, similar mail-order publications, such as *The Furies* and *First Things First,* connected women to the burgeoning radical women's movement.

From: *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*

I am sixteen years old and have been involved with Riot Grrrl since I was thirteen, although at the time I didn't understand exactly what it was, only that it was a bunch of girls like myself who were tired of laws society has forced on women for...well, forever.

Jamie Rubin: Riot Grrrl

Riot Grrrl is an alternative subculture built around opposition to presuppositions that young (usually white) U.S. girls and women are too preoccupied with themselves and boys to be interested in being political, creative and loud. The tensions between this expectation and the political desires of members offers a powerful opportunity to learn different ways of resisting in a consumer-oriented culture.

Ednie Garrison: *Feminist Studies*

The girl zine movement accelerated in the early 90s, in part as a response to the struggles of reclaiming feminist subjectivity in late capitalist society. The movement developed alongside the Riot Grrrl movement that grew out of the alternative punk music scene in Washington D.C. and Olympia, Washington in the early 1990's. While the group has no proclaimed "leader," Kathleen Hanna of the punk band Bikini Kill and a group of young female musicians (approx. ages 14-25) issued a two-page manifesto outlining a

commitment to solidarity among girl bands and their fans. The "girls" called for a feminist revolution in the independent music scene under the slogan "Revolution Girl-Style Now" (Wald 6). The movement responds with an angry growl "grrr" to the misogynist, sexist, and racist practices of the male dominated especially punk, music scene.

The Punk music scene was originally a pro-feminist movement until it was commercialized around 1977, and "its ideals became assimilated into the mainstream patriarchal system" (Garofalo and Rosenberg 810). Jennifer Miro, from the mid-seventies band *The Nuns* describes this exclusion in an interview. "[I]t became this macho hardcore thrasher punk. There were a lot of women in the beginning. It was women doing things. Then it became this whole macho anti-woman thing. Then women didn't go to see punk bands anymore because they were afraid of being killed" (Garrison 14).

Feminist ideals fit with punk's original do-it-yourself [DIY] ethic of self-empowerment and independence from authority. The Riot Grrrl movement responds to the misogyny of the modern movement and attempts to reclaim a female voice as both performer and fan. The movement advocates predominantly female bands as well as control of the means of production in the girl bands owning their own labels. The manifesto states "We seek to create a revolution in our own lives every day by envisioning and creating alternatives to the bullshit Christian capitalist way of doing things" (Long 3). The Riot Grrrls are fighting the contradictions of being a girl in a subculture in which the larger male dominated culture labels and categorizes them as

either commodity or consumer. They recognize the importance of owning their means of production: "Because we want and need to encourage and be encouraged in the face of all our own insecurities in the face of beergutboyrock that tells us we can't play our instruments, in the face of "authorities" who say our bands/zines/etc are the worst in the USA" (riot 1).

Girl bands for the first time have followings of female fans in numbers that previously have been associated only with boy bands. Concert goers are often entertained by "girl lyrics," and some of the bands offer girl-only mosh pits or require male attendees to wear dresses. The girl zine movement that reflects in writings the principles outlined in the Riot Grrrl manifesto gathered strength from the music movement. Zine makers are encouraged to set up tables and sell/trade/give away their girl zines at concerts (Friedman 117). A network of Riot Grrrls has been created as a result of the communications network the zines put in place. "Chapters were started across the country. Girls held conventions where Riot Grrrls met and exchanged zines, bands performed, and workshops were held on topics such as eating disorders, rape, abuse, self-mutilation, racism, self defense, and zine production" (Garofalo and Rosen berg 810). While zines have been produced for many decades, like contemporary publishing, it has been a male dominated movement. However, zine production among girls has exploded since the early 90s and is being practiced by girls from all segments of the population even if not directly associated with the Riot Grrrl movement. Categories of girl zines often include politics, music, personal, body images in an approach that "integrates static categories like race, class, and sexuality" (Green xiv). While the Riot Girls are predominantly white

middle class girls, (the punk music scene has always been predominantly white), the zine movement operates in different race and class categories due to the democratic means of production and distribution, which I discuss later.

Many second and third wave feminists reject what Debbie Stoller of *Bust* magazine names "the reclamation strategy" of Riot Grrrl philosophy, which throws femininity in your face. "Perhaps because it was based on the punk scene, Riot Grrrl is much angrier than was the second wave of feminism in the 1970s. Riot Grrrls are loud, and through their zines, music, and spoken word, express themselves honestly and straightforwardly" (Garafalo and Rosenberg 810). For example, Kathleen Hanna of the girl band *Bikini Kill* has taken her top off on stage while screaming "suck my left one." According to Emily White "Such acts probably confuse and terrify the young boys in the audience who've been waiting for this moment, but they make more and more sense to a generation of young women who are coming to understand that contradiction might be the most powerful feminist tool yet, creating a kind of paralysis, or night blindness, in the man/boy imagination"..." (23). Riot Grrrls often perform in what has been labeled "kinderwhore" fashion: baby doll dress with shaved heads, black army boots, and slut written on their bodies in their rearticulation of girlhood. Likewise, their zines are often inflammatory and unapologetic in their fluid definitions of girlhood.

Riot Grrrl tactics may seem anti-feminist to critics. However, Vanessa Long analyzes the theories of feminist scholars Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler which recognize the ways gender is linked to larger systems of power and how the tactics of the Riot Grrrl's resist that power. Judith Butler interprets the performance tactics of the Riot Grrrls as a

form of resistance to cultural constructions of gender that can be compared to drag. Butler cites drag as a form of resistance that "demonstrates through parody the plasticity of gender, and highlights its borders and taboos, thus revealing its cultural rather than 'biological' origins" (Long 2). Butler's theories view gender, rather than female sexuality, as the means of culturally constructing subordinate female subjectivity. This subjectivity is self-disciplining and internalized in a Foucaultian manner by women. Butler's theories emphasize the fluidity of gender and call for a dismantling of dominant cultural ideologies that marginalize women.

Feminist theorist Luce Irigaray's theories, on the other hand, define the Riot Grrrls' gender blurring tactics as a rejection of female subjectivity that is based on the denial of female sexuality and desire by the dominant culture. (Carol Gilligan defined female adolescence as the time when a girl's confidence drops based on the recognition of the cultural expectation of suppressing desire and the associated restrictions of womanhood.) It is true that at the crux of the Riot Girl movement is the rejection of the cultural expectations and contradictions that womanhood require. "The riot girl movement charges that if womanhood within the dominant culture requires passivity and subordination then they don't want a part of it. Better to stay girls. Better to remove yourself from the dominant culture and actively resist" (Long 3). The Riot Grrrl movement is more about staying outside of society than taking it over in contrast to the Oprah strategy of reform from within. The Riot Girl celebrates the "inherent anarchy of the little girl...She is as far from the self-sacrificing nurturing woman as you can get" (White 28). Irigaray's theories advocate that if women are to be speaking from more than

the margins in a politically transformative nature, they must "actively resist the system itself through removing themselves from it and thus rediscovering their own non-linear sexuality, language and discourse on their own terms" (Long 2). The Riot Grrrls have been accused of essentialism and have addressed the issue in their meetings and writings. Some members actively support male participation, while others feel that to truly have a voice in meetings that address abuse, attendees must be female:

> "I've said to boys, 'you should come to the convention.' And they say, 'They'd all cut my dick off.' They have preconceived notions of what it is...."
>
> "Riot Grrrls shouldn't be limited to just girls. Rape and sexual abuse are girl issues, but Boston has a boy's group [Boy's for Riot Grrrl]. There can be no revolution with half a population."
>
> "Exclusion doesn't accomplish anything"
>
> "I agree. I've seen relationships where the woman dominates. That's not revolutionary. That's the same screwed-up power dynamic. Feminism is about equality" (Garafolo and Rosenberg 834).

The Riot Grrrls recognize essentialism and the problems of labeling their struggles a "subculture" problem and operate on both an exclusive and inclusive fashion. In addition, the movement focuses on girls' behavior towards each other. The manifesto states: "BECAUSE we are unwilling to let our real and valid anger be diffused and/or turned against us via the internalization of sexism as witnessed in girl/girl jealousism and self defeating girltype behaviors" (riot 2).

The means of expressing personal issues in Riot Grrrl music and zines have roots in second wave feminism as the Oprah Winfrey show does. However, a difference in interpretation according to Emily White in "I enjoy being a grrrl" is that the Riot Grrrls

don't wallow in their "victimization" or even try to heal themselves. For example, Riot Girl music and writing "regularly explores themes of incest, the violence of heteronormative beauty culture, and the patriarchal infantilization and sexualization of girls:...themes that conjure not a lost innocence, a fall from childhood grace, but an innocence that was not owned or enjoyed, a grace that was denied" (Wald 7). Like the discussions surrounding the texts discussed on the Oprah book club, the writing operates on catharsis and confession. However, "They [the Riot Grrrls] aren't using confession as a psychological tool but as a political tool...They aren't indulging their rape fear so much as identifying it as the ultimate oppression, a dictator that must be overthrown. The Riot Girls are reliving, or imagining sexual abuse over and over in order to bring their ranks together and to recognize each other as part of a subculture-a community sociologists have ominously labeled 'rape culture' (White 28). These girls are overthrowing the dominant censorship of female abuse among themselves in their texts as a means of protest. It is hard to imagine a loosely organized group of young women as seemingly more political in their tactics than the mainstream media Oprah movement. However, it is important to recognize how girls create their own networks of power free from adult intervention in their lives.

The Riot Grrrls like the Oprah show operate on "the personal is the political"; however, a difference in their operation is that they are the producers of their movement. While they have appropriated punk as Oprah has appropriated the dominant media, the Riot Grrrls are leading their own movement outside of the mainstream. In their attempt to disengage from mainstream media, the copy machine rather than a celebrity "serves as

the central icon of power" and a means of gaining subjectivity through discursive practices (Chu 8). Riot Grrrls "have a distinctly symbiotic-an interfaced-connection to technology. As Donna Haraway has suggested: "The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment" in DIY practices like the zine movement (Garrison 4). In contrast, the Oprah book club operates on a confessional psychological and political level led by a pastoral figure. The Riot Grrrl network has no single pastoral figure; power remains in the hands of the producer. And producers, in this means of production, are free from the compromises of publishing. In the zine movement, the readers are just as often the writers in the exchange nature of the movement.

However, the women who participate as readers in the Oprah club may feel as actively part of a movement as the young girls that are reading and producing their own zines and forming their own bands. The grassroots book clubs that have sprung up in response to Oprah's literary lead can be usefully compared to the way the zine movement has the potential to weave together a network of young women and the power those communities hold for feminism. While Oprah leads confused second and third wavers through the pitfalls of modern culture, these girls are attempting to understand the contradictions of being a girl in modern culture and their place in that culture on their own terms through their writing and music.

And, in fact, young girls that are writing and singing today are more politically effective than it seems. Girls are *leaders* of bands, *producers* of their zines, and at the *forefront* of the movement in defining what it means to be a girl, More than being as tough as a boy, girls reject "add woman and stir" feminism, and actively question and

challenge in an "in your face" fashion how modern culture defines and shapes young people. "At a time in their life when girls are taught to be silent, Riot Grrrl demands that they scream" (Garofalo and Rosenberg 810).

Both the music and writings of the young girls associated with the movement have been labeled "screaming," again reminiscent of the Victorian label that continually attaches itself to woman writers as a "damned lot of scribbling women." Oprah books are described as "chick lit" and Riot Grrrls as screaming from the margins as defined by the dominant media. Girls especially have been categorically ignored as a segment of the population with a voice. Ann Magnuson writes in the introduction to *A Girl's Guide to Taking Over the World*, "When I think of how much benefit my teenage self could have gained from the multitude of zines that have proliferated over the past decade, I weep for all the lost potential. Except for Joan of Arc or Anne Frank, the thoughts of teenage girls have rarely been taken seriously" (xv). What is possibly so empowering about the girl zine movement is its accessibility to girls of all races and classes and the means of filling the gaps that publishing has left in literature's interpretations of young girls' experience.

Zora Neale Hurston in the 1950 essay "What White Publishers Won't Print" wrote that "as the accredited representatives of the American people, publishers would only accept novels which perpetuate the unspoken premise that all non [-] Anglo-Saxons are uncomplicated stereotypes" (Hurston qtd. in Young 184). The Oprah effect on modern publishing can be credited with exposing and contributing to the success of women writers of color as well as addressing racial absences in literature. However, the field is still dominated by white male authors as discussed earlier. Zines provide unrestricted

access and a forum free from modern publishing's compromises and discrimination.

One of the most prominent girl zines, *Bamboo Girl,* started six years ago by Sabrina Margarita Alcantra-Tan was the result of her frustrations of being a "queer mixed blood Asian girl" confronting issues of racism, homophobism, and sexism. Alcanta-Tan writes of her frustrations in facing these issues and her search for publications that spoke to her in "The Herstory of Bamboo Girl." Not finding any publications, she at first thought that her voice was too specific, or wrong. "I was looking for a fierce Asian women to look up to so I could read and feel validated, and it would have been even cooler if she was of mixed race like me"...[no luck...Most magazines] "showed Asians as kitschy, cute, funny, as porno sex kittens and martial artists" (1). Disillusioned with the punk movement in which she had found a voice in the past, (she feels the movement is now focused on clothes and looking the part excluding many people of color) she began to write. Although Alcantara-Tan wanted to be able to someday "speak up" about the harassment she faced on the streets and the categorization or the exclusion of mainstream media "I thought I should at least start somewhere. And that place was through writing" (2). [11] Alcantara-Tan started her zine to "get things off her chest" handing copies out to friends and has been amazed at the response from all sectors of readers. Now that her readership is larger and her zine is professionally published, she focuses on herstory, cultural facts, interviews, and articles for self-empowerment. She credits her early zine writing as a place to vent her rage, thereby keeping her from acts of frustrated violence and out of jail, as well as exposing her to a community of readers and writers with whom

she can usefully exchange ideas (3). Many zinesters do not write for an audience initially. Like *Bamboo Girl*, they "originate from a need for expression, a need girls have to discover and create the truth about themselves and their lives. Through zines, we can see young women uncensored and free to discuss their realities" (Green xiii).

To most girls Riot Grrrl means a community and emotional support. Riot Grrrl Madhu of Massachusetts interviewed as a member of a project by Jessica Rosenberg and Gitana Garofalo for the 1998 special edition of *Signs* on Feminisms and Youth Cultures sums this up: "Through Riot Grrrl, we can get with people with similar problems and interests, and constructively try to change our world. It's a community, a family" (810). Rosenberg and Garofalo write that while other feminist movements have been focused on political action, Riot Grrrl goes beyond politics as a unifying force and "focuses more on the individual and the emotional than on the marches, legislation, and public policy. This creates a community in which girls are able to speak about what is bothering them or write about what happened that day" (810).

Like the Oprah movement, the zine movement fills a need for both female public sphere and community. Every afternoon at four o'clock many women tune in to Oprah, while many girls check their mail boxes for zines. The zine network has become what has been called "an underground with no Mecca, built of paper" (White qtd. in Garofalo and Rosenberg 811). The most common form of communication among the Riot Grrrls is the zine. "Zines are so important because so many girls feel isolated and don't have other girls to support them in their beliefs. Zines connect them to other girls who will listen and believe and care if they say they they've been raped or molested and harassed"

(Garofalo and Rosenberg 810). Witknee Hubbs, publisher of AWOL, Youth for Peace and Revolution writes "while your average teenager is out partying all night, there are a whole slew of kids overtaking the copy shops and crowding mailboxes for the love of the zine and the hope and action it inspires" (Chu 6).

The zine movement is reminiscent of the pen pal program; it provides the same magic and excitement in opening the mailbox and being connected with a world not your own, but somehow the same. From the way the stamp looks to the relation of experiences that are foreign in their setting, but unifying in their truths, zines bind together communities of uncensored young women. Often the zines answer each other's questions, but also act as a means of exposure and identification for girls separated by geography, race, or class much as the Oprah Winfrey show does.

While zine publishing may be defined as whining from the margins in comparison to the far reaching effects of the *Oprah* show, anthropologist Julie Chu points out that zine publishers are attuned to the link between power and communication. Zine makers, in their show of independence from the mainstream construct an "oppositional self" (Chu 10). (This is one of the criticisms of the Oprah viewers: they have not formed a self which is free from the interference of the power of a figure associated with a mainstream form.) "There are somewhere between 10,000 to 50,000 zines, mostly traded or sold through mail to an estimated readership of one to three million, [thousands of which are girl zines]. These estimates do not take into account self-published works on the Internet, better known as 'e-zines,' which have rapidly proliferated in the past few years" (Chu 11). The difficulty of tracking zines and actual figures of authorship and readership is actually

one of its strengths in the eyes of the producers. Most zine publishers do not want to be discovered or to be "tracked" by the political or economic infrastructure. Like the Russian samizdats that circulated during Communist Soviet regimes (Chu 3), many political zines attempt to function as an underground subversive press, while other categories function as a way for youth culture to maneuver around the attempt to have their tactics appropriated by the mainstream media.

Often named the "The Passion Press," zines are amateur hand made publications that require only a photocopier and the mail to publish and distribute. According to Seth Friedman of *The Factsheet Five Zine Review*, a trusted independent zine review, "Zine makers are driven to publish their ideas purely for the sake of communicating, generally with complete disregard for money, let alone profit" (8). The mainstream media has discovered and attempted to co-opt and expose this "quirky" movement. However, while some zines have grown into standard glossy magazine format, the majority of the movement operates on a handmade publication (handwritten or home computer) and barter, trade, and mail distribution. The zine world operates in a network of "mutual reviews and trades" which is the lifeblood of the zine community (Friedman 9). The proliferation of girl zines in the movement has become highly active in the past twenty years. Sarah Dyer started the Action Girl Newsletter in 1992 in response to the need for a listing of girl zines. Dyer was sending out issues of her action girl comic and *Mad Planet* zine and realized she didn't have a way of accessing the network of girl zines she knew existed. "Not that I don't want to read guy zines, just that I was looking for other girls writing about their lives" (Dyer 1).

The Riot Grrrl and associated zine movements fight to remain anonymous to the all seeing corporate eye. While the mainstream magazine *Sassy,* with a readership of 3 million, largely contributed to the exponential spread of girl zines through its zine features and reviews, most girls want to remain undiscovered operating outside of the mainstream loop. Many girls become acquainted with the Riot Grrrl or zine movement through mainstream sources like *Sassy* rather than through direct association with the punk rock underground. Some members feel that the mainstream press has distorted the original Riot Grrrl message, while others see it as a tool to get the word out (Garofalo and Rosenberg 810). In fact, Kathleen Hanna of *Bikini Kill* admits that she told a L.A. weekly journalist in the early nineties that there were Riot Grrrl chapters in cities around the country when there really weren't. "Within a year of the article, the cities all had chapters in a show of a subversive use of the mainstream press to incite a movement---or riot" (Garrison 13).

In either case, the girls associated with the movement only wish to be associated with the mainstream media in the most limited fashion. And while some individuals have disassociated themselves from the punk movement in general or the Riot Grrrl movement for what they define its "selling-out," independent zine production continues to rise.

"Zines have long, multifarious roots. Their historical lineage can be traced back as far as 1517 when, on the brink of the Reformation, Martin Luther posted a 'zine,' his famous 'Ninety-five Theses,' on the Castle Church door at Wittenberg" (Chu 3). "Riffraff authors" in eighteenth century France likewise self published protest literature against the elite, while the samizdats of the Communist Soviet regimes were some of the most

overtly political zines ever published. Some critics claim that today's Zine movement stems more from the Science Fiction fanzine movement of the thirties, the literary chapbook of the Beat Generation, or the underground newspapers of the 1960's and 70's and belongs to young people (Chu 3). What is evident from the history of modern self-publishing is that the method provides a forum: a place to have a voice in the larger world free from the censorship and compromises that the printing press brought with it.

While late capitalist forces (including the Oprah book club) have appropriated authorship as a marketing tool, zines, by their organization, are a return to the pre-publishing trends of writing. Zine self-publishing efforts are actually reminiscent of the artist in the garret theory of authorship; however, this time women are included. "What threads these zines together is that they are real and very much from the heart. They don't have advertisers to please, and they weren't created for financial success. They originate from a need for expression, a need girls have to discover and create the truth about themselves and their lives" (Green and Taormino xiii). Two common "for love, not profit" practices are constantly noted in the zine movement: the anti-copyright policy and the barter system (Chu 7). These practices provide a democratic means of access and encourage readers to become writers. Copyright is seen by many zinesters as a government control which, along with corporate appropriation, strangleholds creativity.

The rejection by the zine movement of dominant culture interference remains a constant struggle. In fact, the companies that produce Riot Girl music operate under the "straight edge" ethic: no meat, no alcohol, and no drugs (White 24). Illegal drugs are viewed as a government engineered "murderous commerce" that is a cover for stripping

away youth freedom. The guarding of the body of the straight edge ethic is different than the radicals of the sixties. Today there is a deep sense that "the system is not only working on the body from the outside but is something you ingest" (White 24).

To understand this fear, and assuming that today's zine movement belongs to youth, Julie Chu points out that we need to contextualize the era that serves as the zine's historical marker: the 1980's. She quotes Gunderloy of *Factsheet Five* who writes " the Reagan years, with their legacy of a tattered safety net, have encouraged people to depend more on their own talents for everything from survival to entertainment" (4). Like the community that bands around Oprah as leader, the zine community is an ideological response to cultural transformations, especially the loss of the public sphere and corporate takeover. There is a widespread disillusionment with school, work and politics by youth culture. For youth, the public sphere was the school, or the public basketball court; however, schools have been corporatized and programs aimed at youth have been cut.

Jerod Pore writing on zines for *Factsheet Five* expands on the problems associated with large scale corporatization and government cuts: "The mid-1980's saw a fairly large number of young disaffected, reasonably well-educated...people consigned to temporary jobs thanks to rapid growth in various corporations, leveraged buyouts, and such with little or no hope of advancement. Deregulation of the media industries took place under the Reagan administration leading to corporate mergers and the results of bills like Proposition 13 signed in 1978 led to a decrease in funding for public meeting places for youth and increased police enforcement of loitering" (Pore qtd. in Chu 4). Corporate

mergers in the workplace led to dead end jobs for youth just entering the marketplace and a definition of a slacker or lazy generation. Contemporary youth culture finds itself either marginalized by the dominant culture as producer, or targeted relentlessly as consumer. Girls especially, their bodies targeted and commodified by advertisers, and their entry to the workplace still vulnerable, faced extreme frustration and alienation.

Participation in the media by the youth zine movement is either dismissed (like rap music and graffiti) or is appropriated and sold back to youth through corporate channels. Zines, for instance, have recently been "discovered" as yet another target of the mainstream. "In the past few years, these self made publications have received increasing coverage in the press for their 'quirky,' 'irreverent,' 'hip,' attitude--in short for their subjective stance. *Rolling Stone* declared zines to be 'a novel form of communication'. *Time* praised them for making words on paper radical again" (Chu 6).

There is a great amount of disdain for zinesters that "sell out" to be co-opted into a glossy corporate magazine as there is for musicians that sell out to a major label. Riot Grrrl Jake Greenberg explains it: "This is my piece of work. If you want it, I'll give it to you. It's not profit driven. It's driven by the desire to get ideas out. Magazines are driven by getting money" (Greenberg in Garofalo and Rosenberg 827). Like independent record labels, The "Passion Press" is the last place some segments of the young population feel free from the corporate gaze. Chu argues that "these self-published works provide one of the only independent sites for tens of thousands of youth voices in a media environment otherwise dominated by corporate adult interests" (2). Riot Grrrl Spirit notes that many of the most productive chapters went into hiding in the

mid 90s "in order to prevent the possibility of 'exploitation, misquoting, and such' " (Garrison 12).

The Merchant of Cool video first produced by PBS in 2000 illustrates the insidiousness of the corporate appropriation of youth. The video shows MTV advertising representatives actually entering young people's homes to look in their closets while asking numerous personal questions trying to target their taste. The narrator of the video attempts to show kids as the passive disenfranchised : "Kids these days don't feel understood. Their parents don't understand them, their teachers don't understand them, only their corporate sponsors understand them" (Frontline). Like Oprah viewers, youth have often been dismissed as passive consumers influenced by the media messages as they seem to be emulating what is seen on television or at the cinema. Most research done on youth and media is about how youth decode these messages being sent to them through the media rather than how they use the media to their own means or actually produce their own media. The Internet has made a huge difference in communication tactics for all segments of society, but traditional Zinesters shun this form of communication as part of a larger system that comes increasingly under government and advertiser control. This control brings more and more restrictions and compromises. As a result, young people continue to self publish paper zines.

Today's young females are under the all seeing panoptican eye of the corporate advertisers and an adult culture that has labeled and categorized them as lazy, sluttish, anti-feminist, and apathetic. However, as Foucault pointed out "Eras of increasing surveillance and repression ...often give rise to a multiplication of discourses rather than

a plain and simple imposition of silence" (Foucault qtd. in Chu 5). A new mode of youth discourse has risen in the zine movement. For example, *V is for Voice* includes pictures cut and pasted from the glossy mainstream *Elle* magazine. The pictures are ads of three women: one with a bootprint on her face, one with a tire track running across her forehead, and one with a bruised face and the annotation: "what the fuck? is domestic violence sexxy now?" Cultural theorists, educators, and academics have all addressed the problem of violence in advertising; however, the spheres these professionals operate in are mistrusted and the message has been diluted. The conversation for youth becomes serious when it surrounds the trusted medium of the self-published zine.

The same is ironically true for the Oprah show on a certain level. While her medium is largely mistrusted, her viewers trust her as intermediary between the dominant ideologies and her viewers. While Oprah operates in a corporate world, she does not operate in a government sector and gains authority through having "been there and done that" and owning her means of production. In a time when access to the academy becomes increasingly financially out of reach for a large segment of the society, authority begins to shift. For example, an academic can often attempt to assign and deconstruct literature with little response; however, if Oprah "assigns" the title many students will rush to read it and interpret it. Reading an Oprah pick is not always based on ease of interpretation but on participation in a more democratic forum.

To recognize the Oprah and zine movements as feminist sites of popular culture is to recognize that people are building networks independent of big business, big government, big media and corporatized academia. While a few corporations continue to dominate the

media channels, "there are plenty of holes between their coverage where the dedicated and passionate small publisher can make a difference. Most zines start out with the realization that one need no longer be a passive consumer of media" (Gunderloy in Chu 8).

To recognize feminism in youth popular culture, media friendly feminism and in the academy is to give the feminist movement the cohesiveness that it currently lacks. A great example of this merging is Garofalo and Rosenberg's scholarly paper that describes theoretically the feminist tactics of the Riot Grrrl movement, but goes on to interview girls actively participating in the movement. The interviews are a large part of the paper and show, rather than tell, how young girls are actively participating in their own culture.

As modern culture separates, labels, and categorizes consumers into markets, youth culture recognizes cultural appropriation and the watering down of counterculture movements. Feminist scholars Jo Trigilio and Rita Alfonso write that the Riot Girls never "managed to gain momentum because they were quickly co-opted and merchandised" (5). However, the interviews mentioned above were done as recently as 1998, and all of the girls interviewed seemed actively involved. "I get so much pleasure when the media types go, 'Oh, Riot Grrrl, that's passe.' There were nine conventions last year. Did you hear about that, Mr. Media?" (Garofalo and Rosenberg 829).

To dismiss a movement based on its mainstream visibility is to play a part in a larger cultural force that labels, categorizes, and looks for conformity the same way that to label media friendly women as anti-feminist is. Foucault notes this categorization in his theories and the reason for categorization by the dominant culture as a means of

intervention. We can see this process in the intervention of the media in response to second wave feminism as Susan Faludi points out in *Backlash*. Both Oprah viewers and the Riot Grrrls are exercising power in their networking tactics. Oprah exposes a lot of key issues, making the dominant culture uncomfortable, which she interweaves with extremely personal, often uncomfortable, self-confessional shows. Girl zines are often labeled "crude" in their personal rants, while many operate on a strictly impersonal political form. In the multiplicity of forms, as well as mediums, female power is exercised. As Barbara Findlen writes in her introduction to *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation,* "Generation X, thirteenth generation, twenty-something-whatever package you buy this age group in-one of the characteristics we're known for is our disunity. Maybe we're not as unified as the generation that preceded us. Maybe we're just not as categorizable" (Findlen qtd. in Green xii).

Neither Oprah viewers or the Riot Grrrls are categorizable. Possibly what is so threatening about the movements is their fluidity. While the Riot Grrrls are predominantly white, their manifesto and tactics attempt to be inclusive, and many offshoots of the movement are diverse. Oprah's viewers cross wide age and race categories. She operates as media spectacle in a power position that is usually associated with a white man. This power makes her suspect to many feminists on the argument that to recognize her tactics would be to essentialize based on gender and/or race. However, on deeper analysis, Oprah offers an opportunity for the creation of an oppositonal consciousness for her viewers. In her mixing of issues on her shows she exposes her, often marginalized, viewers to issues that can directly complicate and effect their lives

offering exposure and validation. When she exercises her power to summon experts that will answer questions revolving around current volatile issues, or authors to explicate their works, she has the potential to change the way viewers decode their own female subjectivity.

The Riot Grrrls and Oprah operate under what Ednie Garrison names "oppositional technologics." Garrison builds on Chela Sandoval's idea of an oppositional ideology praxis that has developed in Third *Wave* feminism based on Third *World* feminism that asks the question: What women? This question takes into account the many different categories that make up the term "woman." This praxis makes possible "a 'tactical subjectivity' in which multiple oppressions can be confronted by shifting modes of consciousness as various forms of oppression are experienced" (7). An oppositional ideological praxis understands that many groups of women develop tactics that resemble "survival skills" adapting to pressures and changes in a form of affinity politics rather than identity politics. Female consciousness becomes more fluid and encompassing in response. Garrison writes that networking is a critical component of the feminist network and describes today's means of networking as technologic communication.

Technologic communication is a mode of resistance that responds to the postmodern condition and the fragmentations of that condition. This type of communication recognizes the ways that information travels and the way discourse has become a cultural milieu that is steeped in technological and media networks. It invites "a creation of temporary 'unified' political groups made up of unlikely combinations and collectives... the combining of diverse technologies to construct powerful cultural expressions of

oppositional consciousness (i.e. music, lyrics, zines, musical instruments, videos, production technology, CD booklets, the Internet), and the construction of feminist politics of location (weaving between and among the spaces of race, class, sexuality. gender, etc., that we inhabit)" (9). The Oppositional ideology praxis operates within the communication system of technologics creating the hybrid "Oppositional Technologics." This type of communication tactic is crucial to the work of feminists acting both in and outside of the mainstream and provides an important means of transformation and understanding of future feminisms. Oprah and the Riot Grrrls recognize this importance. In the words of Riot Grrrl Jamie Rubin: "I hear people say, 'Oh, she just heard about it [Riot Grrrl] about a year ago through *Seventeen*. She's a cheerleading type.' I say 'Welcome to the club. Now we've got a lot of work to do' " (Garofalo and Rosenberg 829).

Notes

1. First wave feminism is associated with the Suffrage movement of the late 1800s, second wave feminism with the women's "liberation" movement of the 1960s, and third wave defines current feminism. As the definition of femininity and feminism becomes more fluid, there may in fact be a fourth wave cresting.

2. Big media control is demonstrated by the current control of the media by the top ten corporations. Big box is the term attached to the current control of consumer culture. It began as a description of Wal-Mart stores, the largest corporation in the world that does not produce a product.

3. These top ten media corporations are: AT&T Corporation, AOL/Time Warner, Liberty Media Corporation, Viacom Inc., Walt Disney Company, Sony, Bertelsmann, Vivendi Universal, General Electric, and News Corporation.

4. Giroux gives the example of Calvin Klein's abusive advertising campaign which initially appeared as heroin chic which was renamed "art," as a move that helped convince the public to buy that "art."

5. Cultural theorist Michel de Certeau defines a *tactic* as a strategy of the "other" in response to containment by the dominant culture. In contrast, a *strategy* is plan (many times a force-relationship) for containment by the dominant culture.

6. Legends like Winfrey's do not exist for her contemporaries: Barbara Walters or Phil Donahue for example. Very little is known about their public lives and it is assumed that they come from more privileged backgrounds based on their race and class.

7. Masciarotte claims these hosts are "aping ...the nostalgic position of man as uncivilized animal" in a form of tabloid entertainment linked to the manly sport of wrestling as justification for operating in the predominantly female sphere of televised talk shows (107).

8. In 1995, a male guest on the Jenny Jones talk show surprised a male friend that was also a guest on the show by admitting that he had a crush on him. The next day, the guest murdered the "confessor," claiming that he had been humiliated by exposure on national television. Talk shows have since been blamed for being irresponsible in misleading guests (Shattuc 179 note 6)).

9. Oprah made a pledge in 1994 to refocus the show on uplifting meaningful subjects. Archives of past shows demonstrate a liberal dose of light issues including weight loss, love, and decorating sprinkled with more controversial issues like women and rape, an interview with Katharine Graham, or health shows concerning breast cancer or women with aids. It may be argued that mixing her issues is a strategy of keeping ratings up while at the same time fulfilling her pledge.

10. It should be pointed out that Oprah's company makes nothing directly from the sales of the books she chooses.

11. Toni Morrison, occupying a drastically different public sphere in her authorial identity, also wrote a story she wanted to read: *The Bluest Eye.*

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