

Introduction.

The Oprah Winfrey Show: a popular phenomenon.

‘It was a mascara runnin’ kinda day!’ Talk show host Oprah Winfrey makes this declaration in a show dedicated to the celebration of inspirational teachers. The words are spoken in response to a clip shown of a previous programme in which we see Winfreyⁱ in a tearful reunion with her fourth grade teacher, a woman who had been hugely influential for her young pupil. We learn that the teacher had been inspirational for Winfrey not only in fuelling the desire to learn, but also in helping her during difficult emotional times such as when her best friend killed herself. The teacher – Mrs Duncan – is brought onto the stage, introduced to the audience and is read a letter written by Winfrey. The letter reveals how much the older woman has meant to Winfrey, the profound impact she had had on her life, and the debt of gratitude felt as a result. Many hugs and tears mark the reunion. Looking back on this clip, Winfrey declares, ‘It was a mascara runnin’ kinda day!’ and represents ‘one of my all time favourite *Oprah* moments’. The image of running mascara underpins much that is associated with *The Oprah Winfrey Show*: female centredness; emotional display; disclosure of intimate moments; a self laid bare. This reunion precedes and frames the salutes to teachers offered by audience members as they both actively endorse Winfrey’s own sentiments as to the value of inspirational teachers and become a central element of the show itself.

Of course, the show is only one of a kind and belongs to genre that attracts vilification in academic writing as well as in the media. Nonetheless, in America, as in other countries, the daytime television talk show is an extraordinarily popular phenomenon. Phil Donahue is credited with being the first television talk show host whose show, *Donahue*, became the paradigmatic form for those that were to follow. *Donahue* first aired in 1968, after which the number of talk shows has proliferated; by 1995 ‘an average of fifteen such shows were being aired in the major U.S. TV markets’.ⁱⁱ The genre’s format requires invited guests to disclose the most intimate aspects of themselves, recalling past and present difficulties and revealing often horrific life experiences to the camera, studio and home audiences for close scrutiny and judgement. Frequently a guest therapist will offer a diagnosis of a situation, at the same time promoting a recent publication; the shows depend on a cultural acceptance of the validity of talk therapy. The conventional movement of the show is towards a resolution of emotional conflict, coinciding with the closure of the show, but with the anticipation that a new trauma, following the same conventions, will be delivered tomorrow or the next week.

The Oprah Winfrey Show first aired in 1986; the show and its host have since achieved iconic status. Although Oprah courts controversy – particularly over the ways in which she addresses, or fails to address, ‘racial’ issuesⁱⁱⁱ – she has attracted a dedicated

fan base, many members of which claim that she has enriched their lives. Although Oprah's show is female-centred and the majority of her fans are women, she is of significance to male viewers also. Keith Warren posted a message on the fan website, Oprahwinfrey.de, saying that

Every time I am inspired by Oprah I think that it can't get any better than this, but then I will catch another show and she outdoes herself once more with her inspiration. She is truly a gift from God to the world...^{iv}

The same website cites *Vanity Fair Magazine* stating that 'Oprah Winfrey arguably has more influence on the culture than any university president, politician, or religious leader, except perhaps the Pope'.^v This is a huge claim to be made of an individual whose rise to prominence was through a form of television often described as trash TV. The success of *Oprah* has ensured that not only is Winfrey the 'undisputed queen of television talk shows [but also] the self-declared richest black woman in the world on the strength of it'.^{vi} The show does not just produce a fortune for its host; it is a lucrative commodity for its syndication company King World, generating about half of its profits - \$180 million - in 1994.^{vii} Jane Shattuc writes that

in May 1993 the *Oprah Winfrey Show* attracted a greater number of women viewers than network news programmes, nighttime talk shows, morning network programmes, and any single daytime soap opera. More than fifteen million people were tuning in daily to watch Oprah Winfrey and her female studio audience debate personal issues with as much fury as an old-time revival meeting or the balanced-budget deliberations in the 1990s congress.^{viii}

By 1997, *Oprah* was watched by one in ten Americans and syndicated to 120 countries worldwide.^{ix}

Selfhood and *Oprah*.

The central claim that this book makes is that the *Oprah* offers a construction of selfhood that is both recognisable to its audience, reflecting the fragmentation and dislocation characteristic of contemporary culture, but which also holds the attractive potential for a positive and meaningful existence. And, that the contradictions and conflicts inherent in this model are embodied by Oprah and contained through her performance of talk show host. Although *Oprah* does not deal solely with the traumatic and distressing – the mundane and banal often constitute programmes such as 'Dog Extravaganza' (22.5.96, BBC2) and 'House Detectives' (26.7.96, Sky1) – the show is most readily associated with scenes like the one in 'Teachers Salutes' described above. The programme most frequently presents a selfhood that emerges from relating stories of experiencing/overcoming problems of varying degrees. The revelation of a trauma is often accompanied by testimonies of endurance and survival that hinge on an individual's ability to transcend difficulty leading to a state – or partial state – of self-realisation.

Repeatedly, it is Winfrey's self on display as she offers confession and testimony for public gaze and consumption, practices that are then mirrored by her guests or members of the studio audience as they recount their individual stories.

The show pivots on stories of invited guests that, firstly, reveal examples of a self under siege to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune and secondly, the struggle to triumph over this adversity. Given this, an understanding of the ways in which self and identity are articulated on the show will lead us to better understanding of its appeal to a mass audience. Therefore, the central questions addressed in this book are: What *are* the versions of selfhood that are serially represented on the programme? In other words, what models of self are constructed through the ways in which individuals are presented? A second, related question is: given that *Oprah* is a complex text that constructs versions of selfhood with widespread cultural impact in the United States, what kinds of cultural practices and traditions give rise to such a phenomenon as this show? In order to understand a cultural artefact, it is important to situate it within the social and historical context within which it emerges. For this reason it is important to position *Oprah* within a wider frame in order to identify the cultural practices embedded within the programme and which combine to produce the version(s) of self that is (are) displayed and articulated. Through these means we will be able to understand its appeal to a mass audience in the United States.^x

It is also important to understand what *kind* of text *The Oprah Winfrey Show* is, and so Chapter 1 outlines the debate on television talk shows the genre more generally. A number of critics do discuss *Oprah* specifically, but in order that we understand the concerns and issues that are related to these shows, the critical commentary encompasses a range of programmes.

Within this body of work Foucault's formulation of confessional practice is frequently cited in order to explain and describe a paradigm of power relations that is observable within the programmes and in the subject positions that are formed through these. Foucault offers a tool for thinking about the process of confession, the spread of the confessional mode from the church and its employment in a series of relationships: 'children and parents, students and educators, patients and psychiatrists'.^{xi} He shows that the technique of confession has been appropriated by psychological models in which sexual 'truths' are seen as central to the 'truth' of the self. This then posits an essential or natural self that is discoverable through self-disclosure.

However, as Foucault argues, the idea of an essential self is problematic, and it is not my contention that the therapeutic strategies employed on *Oprah* work to uncover the truth of any individual. Rather, I am looking at therapeutic discourse as a cultural practice, one that appears both in academic writing and as a device in popular culture for the articulation of certain kinds of selfhood. Drawing on Foucauldian readings, the show may be seen as a technology for the production of subject positions. However, in analysing *Oprah*, we need to extend our attention beyond the technique of confession. There is a need to consider, for instance, the role of the equally complex cultural practice of testimony. I have noted that testimony is a textually important element of *Oprah* in that

individuals articulate self-realisation and self-esteem; and, as Susannah Radstone has indicated, ‘testimony needs to be mapped alongside and in relation to confession’.^{xii} This is undeveloped in the existing literature on the genre of talk shows. Those commentators that have appropriated Foucault -such as Jane Shattuc (1997), Jane Landman (1995), Mary de Young (1996) - do so with the aim of analysing the degree to which public confession works to normalise dominant social codes, and/or represents liberation from restrictive social practices (such as licence to speak the unspeakable). Useful as this approach is, it produces a polarised debate which, at present, hinges on a talk show-as-good-space/talk show-as-bad-space dichotomy. In order to advance our understanding of the show, I want to move beyond this dichotomy through a more nuanced recognition of the combination of cultural practices at work in the show.

My own study accepts the popularity of *Oprah* as given and explores it from this position in order to understand the dynamics of the show and, therefore, its appeal to a mass audience. To reiterate my central questions: what models of self are represented on *Oprah*, and what kinds of cultural practices give rise to it? Because the show is a complex construct of conflicting traditions, cultural techniques and discourses, Bakhtin’s notions of carnival and grotesque realism, dialogism and heteroglossia offer a way into thinking about the constellation of cultural practices that form the programme. The point at which Bakhtin becomes most useful is in my analysis of the Oprah persona in Chapter 5. His theory of the ‘grotesque’ opens up ways of thinking about Oprah, her body and her performance that stand at the heart of the programme. For this reason, I draw on Bakhtin’s dialogic model of carnival - and related ideas of the grotesque - to explain the convergence of discourses on a television programme that has elements of what can be called ‘grotesque performance’ at the heart of it. This therefore does not represent a totalising model for this book, but can be used to address elements of *Oprah* that are as yet not fully recognised in contemporary accounts of the programme. The primary concepts drawn from Bakhtin are introduced here.

Firstly, the idea of dialogism is important to an understanding of the carnivalesque dynamics of *Oprah*. It acknowledges human interaction as creative, social, ideological and, crucially for my purposes here, historically specific. The dialogic approach sees language as a generative process that stems from social interaction:

subjectivity is thus produced on the '*borderline*' where inner experience and social world meet, and they meet in signs - words ... This borderzone of continuous interaction between individual consciousness, itself comprised of signs, and an outer world of signs is the location of all creative activity.^{xiii} (emphasis in original).

If we take this model and broaden its application to incorporate a system that includes the non-verbal, it becomes possible to apply it to *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. The discourses produced on the programme are a result of a dialogic engagement between the discursive practices that shape the show - the television industry, entertainment conventions, the celebrity system, therapeutic sensibility and bourgeois expertise - and the individual

everyday experiences of those who speak on the show and who watch from a distance at home.

Heteroglossia refers to the 'conflict between 'centripetal' and 'centrifugal', 'official' and 'unofficial' discourses ...[It] foregrounds the clash of antagonistic forces'.^{xiv} Heteroglossia, therefore, destroys the possibility of any unitary meaning in language. Official consciousness represents that which is in accord with stable, fully formed social values of morality, laws, of class and world view; unofficial consciousness is also socially and historically determined but is incompletely formed, even as inner speech. Unofficial consciousness has therefore the potential to be livelier than the official and contains the possibility to 'ultimately burst asunder the system of ideology'.^{xv} Pam Morris argues that the dialogue/conflict between official and unofficial consciousness lies at the heart of Bakhtin's theory of carnival.

I argue that *Oprah* operates as the borderzone in which the dialectical relation between the multiple, official discourses that both surrounds and structures the show (including Oprah's persona), and the unofficial discourses of the participants is played out. As a borderzone, the show offers a space of interaction between the outer social world with its norms, laws and values and the inner world of private experience. The discourses of the dominant culture meet and combine with those of the folk and the everyday to produce the (carnavalesque) process through which new forms of subjectivity are created, which are in part informed by hegemonic forces but which are also separate from them.

Bakhtin's work focuses on the Mediaeval Renaissance period, the transition of pre-modern to modern society, that produced a flowering of culture through the advent of the printing press, and through travel which resulted in new global relations. However, Bakhtin's assertion that every age brings about its own official speech lends a flexibility to his idea of the carnivalesque that enables a critique of contemporary cultural practices.^{xvi} As aesthetic activity is the product of a dialogue between individuals, it is clear that the meaning given to any art form will have a cultural and historical specificity that marks its place in time. 'A new type of communication always creates new forms of speech or a new meaning given to old forms.'^{xvii} I am not proposing here that *Oprah* is the recreation of a televisual carnival, but that carnivalesque principles are in play on the show, enabling a folk language to be articulated as well as the official discourses of the dominant culture. This is particularly important when we consider the body of Oprah that is at the centre of this aesthetic activity. In turn, a consideration of Oprah-as-grotesque allows me to offer a formulation of *Oprah* as carnivalesque.

Cultural histories and cultural practices.

Chapter 2 examines the cultural context in which the programme is produced and consumed. I argue that *Oprah* presents a paradigm of self that has its origins in black American culture and that the programme should be understood in relation to (and arising out of) the oral and literary traditions associated with that culture. This then combines with two other cultural practices evident in mainstream American culture to produce a text that is hybrid in form: confession and therapeutic cure, and, commodification and the system of celebrity. I argue that one of the models of selfhood offered by a body of black

American feminists is more deeply insinuated within *Oprah* than has been hitherto acknowledged. And that this model of self – in which individuals are placed in relation to others – is articulated with cultural practices of commodity and consumerism, the therapeutic and confession to produce a dynamic specific to the show.

In doing this I turn to the fiction of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker because Winfrey is associated, through her acting roles in the film versions of their novels - *Beloved* (1998) and *The Color Purple* (1985) respectively. This has led me to explore the academic writings of these authors as well as scholarly work that adopts a similar position such as Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* (1991), bell hooks' *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (1991) and Darlene Clark Hine (*Hine Sight: Black Women and the Reconstruction of American History* (1994).^{xviii}

I have already employed the term 'tradition' in relation to established cultural practices. However, this is a term that has to be used with caution. As Paul Gilroy points out, the idea of tradition signals what he describes as 'cultural insiderism' representing a cluster of 'rhetorical strategies' that supply a sense of absolute ethnic difference, national identity and cultural kinship.^{xix} This then suggests the possibility of a stable, rooted identity set within distinct, unchanging and non-porous boundaries. Through his concept of the black Atlantic, Gilroy demonstrates the fluid exchange of ideas and practices that occurs between nations and between groups of peoples. The black Atlantic therefore represents the 'rhizomorphic, fractural structure of [a] transcultural, international formation' which works against the (narrow) nationalistic address common in both English and African American studies.^{xx} Further, and with a relevance particular to my work, Gilroy argues that the legacy claimed by African Americans is only partly their 'absolute ethnic property'. Read through the concept of the black Atlantic, it is evident that this legacy also has significance for peoples of the Caribbean, Europe, Africa and America.^{xxi}

I have indicated that I will be drawing on the nexus of cultural ideas and practices that emerge from within one African American tradition that foregrounds the possibility of active agency. This is not because I refute Gilroy's claims, but it is of significance that on her show Winfrey frequently describes herself as an African American. Through her film roles and her promotion of and admiration for work by black feminist writers such as Walker, Morrison, and Maya Angelou, Winfrey positions herself alongside people who articulate a particular view of self. This formulation of individual identity is then located within a shared history and experience. I need now to explain my use of the term 'tradition'.

I use tradition to signal the sets of experiences explored and explained by a group of people who see themselves as connected to one another. This is not to say that this book is drawing on a set of ideas that are exclusively the province of African Americans, or that the cluster of ideas used represents an impermeable membrane isolating the individuals that it surrounds: claims of essentialism are limiting and reductive. However, with all of the above qualifications in mind, I draw on a body of work and practices that emerge from within a particular group of people who define themselves as African American. This represents a methodological tool that I use as a 'chronotope' – 'an optic

for reading texts as x-rays of the forces at work in the culture system from which they spring^{xxiii} – through which to examine *Oprah*.

Oprah Winfrey is a woman who calls attention to her (black) skin colour not only on her programme, but also in extra-textual interviews that take place in a variety of media. For example, in a show that discusses her belief in the importance of spiritual wealth in relation to material wealth ('You Too Can Realise Your Dreams' 14.7.98, Channel 5) she says 'I was a Negro child. Now I'm an African American woman'. Reminding her audience that they 'know all the stories', she nonetheless reiterates the fact that she 'came from the most segregated state – Mississippi'. This has a specific resonance, as the civil rights movement's struggle to overturn the Jim Crow laws is an element of recent American history. In another programme - 'Problems with Parenting', (2.7.98, Channel 5) - she declares that as a child she thought that 'all white children were terrible', demonstrating a process of Othering premised on skin colour. During a television interview with Michael Parkinson, a British celebrity chat show host, (19.2.99, BBC1) in which she was promoting the film *Beloved*, she discusses an incident that took place while on location in southern America and in a store. Waiting to be served, she realised that the colour of her skin rendered her invisible to the staff who worked there - until her face was recognised. Although the colour of her skin is not the sole way in which Oprah Winfrey defines herself, it clearly constitutes a significant element of her sense of selfhood.

The model of self articulated by these black feminist scholars can be juxtaposed with an alternative view of selfhood that has emerged from within the canon of American cultural criticism. I am placing my investigation of *Oprah* within the context of this work because it enables us to think through issues of commodity and consumption and their relation to ideas of the therapeutic. The relevance of this lies, in part, in the ways in which *Oprah* - and television talk shows - have been evaluated as the commodification of individual distress. In addition, the dominant discourse of this criticism also posits a disempowered self in relation to the social harm effected by the mass consumption of television shows more generally. Both of these positions are tied to the financial prerogatives of the television industry. The discourses of social harm and cultural anxiety are important for two main reasons. Firstly, the process of commercialism *does* influence the shape of the programme and the presentation of individuals within it. Secondly, in order to understand something of the construction of the Oprah persona, we need to acknowledge the part that economic systems play in creating a figure with mass popular appeal. This latter point is key as the Oprah construction lies at the core of the programme and therefore our understanding of *Oprah* depends, largely, on our understanding of Oprah.

This body of work articulates a generalised cultural anxiety that is tied to the culture of consumption, commodification, technological advance and the fragmentation of self-identity. It emerged from a group of intellectuals who fled from Europe in the 1930s and whose influence (through the dissemination of their ideas in universities) is mainly felt in two areas: the Frankfurt School and in psychoanalysis. Key intellectuals within the Frankfurt School, such as Theodore Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, have been highly influential in the debate concerning mass culture and high culture; those within the field

of psychoanalysis, such as Eric Fromm and Erik Erikson, influenced observers of the national (social) character. The work on ‘national character’ by intellectuals such as Philip Rieff, David Riesman, and Christopher Lasch emerges from the former two schools of thought and engages psychoanalytic theories in the service of examining the American personality in relation to the apparent debilitating effects of mass media and consumerism.

Much post-World War II writing concerning American culture within this body of thought conveys a sense of nihilism and attendant loss of agency. These writers argue that there has been a loss of human individuality and difference amongst the sea of image-producing technology that has reduced life to the flat ‘one-dimensional’ surface that is (re)presentation. While consistently deploring the ‘triumph of the therapeutic’^{xxiii}, these influential post-war American cultural critics have variously deployed psychoanalytic models of mind to explore and articulate their argument. Tracking this particular line of thought will enable me to delineate a sense of anxiety that is evident from before WWII, but that appears to have increased in the post-war years. My particular focus will be on the model of self that these writers construct. However, these writings are present as objects of critical and historical analysis, and do not represent methodological prototypes for my own argument. I will not be drawing on psychoanalysis for my own examination of *Oprah*. Rather, I am following on from Mimi White, who does not advocate a psychoanalytic approach to cultural criticism but who suggests that the

profusion of the therapeutic in everyday and popular media culture might be seen as one manifestation of a larger cultural interest that is paralleled in the academic sphere in psychoanalytic and psychological discourses. In this light, the two spheres can be played off one against the other, mutually interrogating and illuminating, without subsuming one within the other.^{xxiv}

Thus, I am interested in identifying both the influence of psychoanalysis on the show itself and the way in which it has been evaluated.

A textual analysis of *Oprah*.

The two conflicting traditions of thought discussed above will inform my textual analysis of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. This will enable an examination of the versions of self articulated on the show and their relation to a wider set of cultural practices. I draw on a sample of 58 *Oprah* shows that were broadcast in the UK between October 1995 and July 1996.^{xxv} The sample programmes that form the basis of my analysis constitute a random selection and have not been selected for any specific purpose – such as the examination of a particular recurring theme. This is done in order that I may investigate a broad and typical cross-section of shows that reflect the viewing experience of a regular audience. However, it should also be noted that these programmes were broadcast on British television. This means that the place occupied in the daytime schedule may well differ from that for American broadcast. In addition, a significant number of the shows I taped were broadcast on BBC2, a non-commercial television station, and so do not have the commercial breaks that form a part of the overall viewing experience for American

audiences. Nonetheless, these limitations do not represent a substantial difficulty. Firstly, the shows in my sample are a part of the daytime television scheduling in Britain as they are in America, and secondly, evidence of commercial breaks within the programmes remain even when broadcast on non-commercial television. The reason for this is that Winfrey frequently signals the beginning of an advertising break and marks the return to the show through her reintroduction of that show's topic, in addition to supplying home audiences with information about conversation that has taken place while the show has been off air.

Textual analysis: confession, testimony and narrative.

Conducting a textual analysis enables me to concentrate on (a) the form of self-expression that arises through the discursive practice of confession and the subject positions that are produced in relation to it, and (b) the narratives spoken by the guests. Chapter 3 focuses on a single programme, offering a detailed analysis of the confessional discourse that is central to *Oprah* and which functions as the foundation to the relationship between Oprah, her guests and the audience. In discussing this show, I draw on Foucault's discussion of confession as an 'agency of truth and power in Western society'.^{xxvi} White argues that 'confession and therapeutic discourse centrally figure as narrative and narrational strategies in television in the United States ... Problems and their solutions are narrativized in terms of confessional relations ... Self-identity and social recognition ... hinge on participation in the process of mediated confession'.^{xxvii} Examining its history, Foucault argues that confession is a technology that is used in a range of practices. 'The confession has spread its effects far and wide. It plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of life ... Western man has become a confessing animal'.^{xxviii} The act of confessing itself displays the power relations inherent in a process that operates to make visible, define, judge, codify, normalise and to exclude.

The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console and reconcile; a ritual in which the truth is corroborated by the obstacles and resistances it has had to surmount in order to be formulated; and finally, a ritual in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises salvation.^{xxix}

The 'ritual of discourse' that takes place between Winfrey and her audience, and between the guests and Winfrey will be familiar to participants and audience alike - as White says 'All [television] viewers are always already inexorably caught up in the confessional mode...'.^{xxx} Winfrey is the authority within the 'power relationship' to whom confession is offered, but she also moves from this position to that of confessor. By putting herself in this one-down position - the means by which an individual can be seen to be placing themselves in a position of less, rather than more, power - she effaces her star persona,

conveying a sense of equality. Although both she and her audiences are aware that this is a fictitious relationship, it contributes to the sense of intimacy engendered by the confessional exchange and validates Winfrey's claim to be Every Woman - a declaration she makes of herself in the shows. In addition, this shift endows Winfrey with another form of power and authority, one that derives from personal experience: I know because I have been there too.

Related to this is the practice of testimony that is also a key aspect of the staging of individual narratives – this is addressed in Chapter 4. A small sample of *Oprah* shows is used to examine closely the structure of the guest's narratives and the placement of self within them. Here, I look at the ways in which stories are used to position the speaker, and at the positions adopted. Although parts of the narratives supplied by Winfrey and her guests may concern feelings of worthlessness, fear or shame, the expression of this is not always confessional in nature as redemption and exoneration is often neither sought nor offered. Thus, it will become evident that on *Oprah* the practice of confession is more tempered by testimonial discourse than has hitherto been acknowledged, and that the practice of testimony is key in the enactment of empowerment. This occurs through the claiming of knowledge and, subsequently, self-esteem.

Jane Shattuc discusses the testimonial nature of the discourse heard on such programmes in relation to the emancipatory practices of feminism and the links to religious practices:

Because the shows are public arenas they do not evoke the intimacy and thoroughness of therapy or even consciousness raising groups. But because of their ties to a social ideology such as feminism, their discursive structure involves testimonials rather than confessions ... The testimonial or witnessing has a long history in American fundamentalism and media evangelism. And it has been reinvigorated in the twelve-step movement, a secular model of witnessing. The original religious sense of the practice means the public testimony given by Christian witnesses to Christ and his saving power. Within evangelism the act of standing up and speaking one's religious experience is a social obligation...^{xxxii}

Although reciting one's story is clearly not therapy; the engagement of the guest expert/therapist within the narrative is merely a *representation* of therapeutic practice. However, Shattuc's reflections on the testimonial are pertinent here. The tradition of evangelism is what gives form and meaning to the testimonials heard on *Oprah*, albeit in a secular mode. The speakers stand and bear witness to the healing powers of self-renewal and regeneration. The history of religious confessional and testimonial practices is long and complex and will not be discussed here. However, I will be making links between the practice of testimony in the black church along with the call and response paradigm, demonstrating that it offers a useful insight into the dynamics of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. My argument is that the process of confession and testimony offers the means of voicing a self that is empowered. This opens up a way of thinking about *Oprah* as a forum for 'talking back' described by bell hooks thus:

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonised, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side, a gesture of defiance that heals,

that makes new life, and new growth possible. It is the act of speech, of 'talking back' that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of moving from object to subject, that is the liberated voice.^{xxxii}

It is important to note here that in the guests' narratives, self-realisation and self-esteem mark the movement from victim to survivor; this is a repeating pattern of the stories recounted on the show. Although not of direct influence, Vladimir Propp's structural account of recurring narrative patterns in folktales^{xxxiii} has suggested a way of thinking about stories and the meanings that are inherent within a repeating form. So, rather than undertaking a content analysis of the guests' stories, I look at the emergent patterns that the narratives form over a series of shows and how they work to create an overarching meaning.

Textual analysis: celebrity and Oprah.

The construction of the Oprah persona that is presented on the programme itself and enhanced through extra-textual material is examined in Chapter 5. It is my contention that the persona of any talk show host supplies an inflection to an otherwise formulaic product and is therefore central to the meanings generated by that programme. The Oprah persona is highly complex and structured to provide a meaningful point of reference to a 'racially' mixed audience. She embodies a series of conflicting and contradictory cultural formations: the constructions of self that arise from the African American community with which she aligns herself, the culture of anxiety and the therapeutic. These are all bound up with the system of celebrity that operates as a manifestation of the power and mobility of capital in the interests of consumerism and profit. I examine the ways in which Oprah negotiates these conflicts and the contradiction of being simultaneously extra-ordinary (a celebrity) and ordinary. I will reflect on the degree to which the notion of spectacle, with all its postmodern connotations, impacts on the presentation of self on *Oprah* and on the ways in which this is informed by the African American concepts of self-identity.

In considering the Oprah construction, I use Bakhtin's notion of 'grotesque realism' - the symbolic imagery of carnival - and which he insists is 'deeply positive'. This term is helpful in understanding the ways in which the conflicting, contradictory discourses combine to produce the Oprah persona and which produce the meaning(s) of the show itself. Ambivalent in its imagery, carnival is the affirmative articulation of the dual processes of death and becoming. Degradation, the essential axiom of grotesque realism, is the lowering of all that is high and ideal in order that something new may be born: grotesque imagery is a reflection of transformative possibilities. So, the principles of growth and regeneration are articulated not through the biological individual or bourgeois ego 'but in the people ... who are continually growing and renewed'.^{xxxiv} The grotesque body is that which is expressive of the death/birth cycle, is the embodiment of transformation and becoming.

Taken all together, carnival - with its dialogic relationship between official and unofficial culture, its frank language and behaviour, the authority of the folk and the creation of something new based on old forms - provides a framework that offers a way of thinking about the cultural practices, and their relations, that are mobilised during *The Oprah*

Winfrey Show. At the centre of the show is Oprah's (grotesque) persona that is tied to the practice of sharing private experience, thereby broadening the base for a power that is political.

Notes to Introduction

ⁱ Throughout, I employ the name 'Oprah' – as distinct from Winfrey – to signal the construct that is her TV persona.

ⁱⁱ Jane Shattuc. *The Talking Cure: TV Talk Shows and Women*. New York: Routledge. 1997. p1

ⁱⁱⁱ See for example Tammy Johnson's online article 'It's Personal: Race and Oprah' in which she argues that despite her influence, Winfrey still cannot transcend the 'boundaries of race and power in America... she safely reduces all things racial to the personal, sidestepping the hard questions of institutionalized racial oppression and white privilege'. In *Colorlines*. Vol. 4 (4) Winter 2001-02.

^{iv} Message posted March 14, 2003,

<http://members3.boardhost.com/Oprah/msg/1612.html> [Accessed 12.03.2003]

^v <http://mitglied.lycos.de/Oprah/> [Accessed 20.03.2003]

^{vi} Garth Pearce. 'When It's Not So Good To Talk'. *Sunday Times*. 7 February, 1999. p10

^{vii} Shattuc. p53

^{viii} Shattuc. p2

^{ix} Pearce. pp10-11

^x Although the viewing figures cited above show that *Oprah* has an appeal that extends beyond the United States, it is beyond the scope of this study to address its attraction in a global context

^{xi} Foucault. p63

^{xii} Susannah Radstone. 'Social Bonds and Psychological Order; Testimonies.' *Cultural Values* Vol. 5 (1), January 2001 pp59-7

^{xiii} Pam Morris. *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev and Voloshinov*. London: Arnold, 1994. p12

^{xiv} Morris. pp248-9

^{xv} Voloshinov cited in Morris. p9

^{xvi} It is recognised that Bakhtin's writing presents a critique of Stalinist Russia of the early 20th century; his dissertation on Rabelais remained unpublished until 1965. See Morris, *The Bakhtin Reader* and Simon Dentith, *Bakhtinian Thought: An Introductory Reader*. London: Routledge, 1995.

^{xvii} Bakhtin. p16

^{xviii} In order to signal an awareness of the slippery and problematic usage of terms such as 'race', I frame the word with inverted commas.

^{xix} Paul Gilroy. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London: Verso, 1993. p3

^{xx} Gilroy, 1993. p4

^{xxi} Gilroy, 1993. p15

^{xxii} Mikhail Bakhtin cited in Gilroy, 1993. p226n2

^{xxiii} This with reference to Philip Rieff's influential *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1966.

^{xxiv} Mimi White. *Tele-Advising: Therapeutic Discourse in American Television*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992. p. 20

^{xxv} These shows are all the copyright of Harpo Productions and syndicated by King World. When the shows are broadcast in Britain they do not contain the title ascribed by the production company and so I have assigned the titles myself based on a frequently used tag line that is pertinent to any one show. So, 'Second Chance' is the name of the show that appeared on Sky1, 12.7.96, during which viewers were given a second chance to do something that they had failed at the first time around - such as a woman who missed her own graduation ceremony, or another whose father had been too ill to attend her wedding ceremony. The situations were all re-staged in order that they get 'a second chance'. Further, the broadcast dates that I have signalled are in relation to the shows that are aired on British television; there appears to be only two or three months between the taping of the show and its distribution to other countries. In one of the shows dedicated to children's letters shown in Britain on 22 July 1996, we have a group of children who had responded to an earlier programme that was aired to mark the birth date of Martin Luther King Jr -15 January - from which a clip is shown. The copyright date on both of these shows is 1996, so we can assume that following its broadcast in America, a show will be seen as part of its international syndication very shortly after. This is verified by a show, which is not in my collection but was viewed by me during the time of Bill Clinton's

impeachment hearing in 1998, that discussed the (in)advisability of conducting affairs with work colleagues in direct reference to Clinton's own conduct.

^{xxvi} Michel Foucault. *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality Volume I*. (Trans.)

Robert Hurley. London: Penguin Books, 1978. pp58-63

^{xxvii} White, 1992. p8

^{xxviii} Foucault, 1978. p59

^{xxix} Foucault, 1978. pp61-62

^{xxx} White. p183

^{xxxi} Shattuc. p130

^{xxxii} bell hooks. 'Talking Back' in Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T Min-ha,

Cornel West. (Eds.) *Out There: Marginalisation and Contemporary Cultures*.

Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1990. p340

^{xxxiii} Vladimir Propp. *Morphology of the Folktale*. (1928) (Trans.) Lawrence Scott. USA:

University of Texas Press, 1968.

^{xxxiv} Mikhail Bakhtin. *Rabelais and His World*. (Trans.) Helene Iswolsky. Cambridge,

MA: MIT Press, 1968. p19

Notes to Chapter 1