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# A Million Little Pieces, Incorporated: How Oprah Winfrey Maintained Her (Non)Capitalist Media Empire

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*A Million Little Pieces, Incorporated:*  
**How Oprah Winfrey Maintained Her (Non)Capitalist Media Empire**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in **Literary and Cultural Studies** from  
The College of William and Mary

by

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*A Million Little Pieces*, Incorporated:

How Oprah Winfrey Maintained Her (Non)Capitalist Media Empire

“It’s not just about trusting you [James Frey, author of *A Million Little Pieces*], it’s about trusting the publishers, it’s about trusting Oprah for trusting you... you know, she’s a very powerful woman.”

~Amy, *Oprah after the Show* January 26, 2006.

The power of Oprah Winfrey’s iconic status in American culture, and the legitimacy of that power, has hardly been questioned in the past fifteen years. Winfrey’s life has not been easy: as a child and teenager she suffered sexual abuse, a miscarriage, drugs, battles with weight, and questions of faith. Today she is one of the richest Americans on the planet with a net worth of over one billion dollars. Her influence on American culture cannot be overstated. She commands a daily television audience of millions. Copies of *O, The Oprah Winfrey Magazine* can be found in any grocery store checkout line. And, in 1996, Oprah Winfrey inaugurated one of her most celebrated institutions to date: Oprah’s Book Club. The Book Club achieved what few publishers, academics, and authors thought possible: it got America reading again—in droves. Any title selected for the Book Club, including its first pick, the previously obscure *Deep End of the Ocean* by Jacquelyn Mitchard, rocketed to the top of the best-seller lists. Though some critics raised concerns over the Book Club’s adverse affect on the “high tradition” of literature, the endeavor has largely been celebrated as a positive cultural institution. Cecilia Konchar Farr, in her approving *Reading Oprah: How Oprah’s Book Club Changed the Way America Reads* calls it a “leap for literature, a leap into cultural

democracy.”<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Rooney, in her similarly themed *Reading with Oprah* writes, “Winfrey has provided everyone concerned with literary culture—and culture in general—with an opportunity to look closely at the construction of taste, thereby exploring what we value, what we disparage, and how we differentiate between the two.”<sup>2</sup> Donna Dunbar-Odom, finally, cites Oprah’s Book Club as an institution from which more traditional literary pedagogues can learn how to increase literature’s appeal: “Winfrey offers a kind of third way to ‘serious’ fiction... a way that both models reading and offers a sense of community.”<sup>3</sup>

It is surprising then, that Oprah’s Book Club should have become the site of one of the most talked-about *Oprah* controversies. In September 2005, Winfrey announced her latest Book Club pick: James Frey’s memoir *A Million Little Pieces*. Frey was the first contemporary author selected since 2002, and *A Million Little Pieces* became one of the most popular Book Club picks of all time. In January 2006, however, celebrity gossip website *The Smoking Gun* published a six-page article exposing various parts of Frey’s memoir as fiction. Winfrey made what in retrospect she claimed to be a grievous error in judgment when she defended Frey and the “essential truth” of *A Million Little Pieces*. The backlash from her audience was immediate, and Winfrey soon apologized in an unprecedented live episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Furthermore, she condemned publishers for not fact-checking memoirs and encouraged Frey to apologize for “betraying” her and the readers of Oprah’s Book Club.

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<sup>1</sup> Cecilia Konchar Farr, *Reading Oprah: How Oprah’s Book Club Changed the Way America Reads* (Albany: New York State University, 2005), 101

<sup>2</sup> Kathleen Rooney, *Reading with Oprah* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2005), 211.

<sup>3</sup> Donna Dunbar-Odom, *Defying the Odds: Class and the Pursuit of Higher Literacy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 117.

The *A Million Little Pieces* controversy is valuable not for its (brief) besmirching of Winfrey's reputation, but for its exposure of the mechanics of her otherwise well-sutured media empire. While ostensibly the controversy was about issues of truth, genre, and corporate accountability, it cannot be fully understood outside the context of Oprah Winfrey and the organization, *Oprah*, which she heads.<sup>4</sup> This organization, like any capitalist institution, exists to make profit, but much of its success can be attributed to the fact that what it claims to sell is not just books or magazines, but the way of life endorsed in its media outlets and embodied in the persona of Oprah Winfrey. The validity of this product and Winfrey's legitimacy to provide it depend upon a disavowal of capitalist practices in favor of the highly personalized media image of its chief avatar, Oprah Winfrey. The stakes involved in the *A Million Little Pieces* controversy were thus far greater than a memoir's truth or untruth. At risk was a corporate media empire's ability to maintain the carefully crafted illusions with which it sustained its crucially non-corporate appearance.

Doubleday Books published James Frey's memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*, on April 15, 2003. The book chronicled Frey's harrowing experiences with drugs and alcohol as well as his eventual, excruciating recovery at the famed Hazelden Clinic in Minnesota. The book was the world's first mediated introduction to James Frey and it is worth at least briefly extracting from it a few of the qualities Frey ascribes to himself. For the first half of the memoir Frey fashions himself as a stoic anti-hero; a man literally on

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<sup>4</sup> I distinguish here between Harpo Productions, Winfrey's official corporation, and what I will continue to refer to as *Oprah*. The latter might for now loosely be thought of as signifying the products, media, and people which have contributed to Winfrey's media empire. These aspects will be discussed in detail in the second half of this thesis.

the brink of death who still, in the classic tradition of the lunatic, manages to laugh in the face of it. He is the “Cool Hand Luke” of drug addiction. He’ll pick a fight rather than be forced to clean a bathroom stall. He’ll write that his dream is to be a “Laker Girl” rather than submit to the false aspirations encouraged by Hazelden. He trades the Twelve Steps for the *Tao Te Ching*. And like any great (anti)hero, he is capable of enduring intense and prolonged pain: in the book’s most iconic scene Frey, literally strapped to the dentist’s chair (think *Clockwork Orange* or *Marathon Man*) undergoes two root canals without anesthesia, yet like any world-weary action hero declares: “I’ve been through worse.”<sup>5</sup>

Analogies between Frey’s text and clichéd moments in film are not unprecedented. In her review of *A Million Little Pieces*, Janet Maslin of the *New York Times* wrote (in parody of Frey’s own minimalist style):

Maybe you have heard this story Before.  
 Maybe it sounds like Movies.  
 He ingested Substances for a long time and was very soused.  
 But somehow he ingested those movies too.<sup>6</sup>

There is a dichotomy between Frey’s perpetual state of physical incontinence—he vomits routinely for the first several chapters—and his verbal precision. Again fulfilling clichéd expectations, Frey is diagnosed as a near-death addict, but also as a man of high intelligence, according to the Hazelden staff (at least, as Frey tells it). Furthermore, the memoir reveals, Frey is more than capable of love as demonstrated by a romantic subplot

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<sup>5</sup> James Frey, *A Million Little Pieces* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), 64.

<sup>6</sup> Janet Maslin, “BOOKS OF THE TIMES; Cry and You Cry Alone? Not If You Write about It,” *The New York Times*, April 21, 2003, Books Section.

involving “Lily,” another patient at the clinic. Their story, due to forces beyond Frey’s control, ends in tragedy, but not before Frey leads a climactic charge into the urine-soaked, drug-infested ghettos of the Twin Cities to rescue Lily from a near fatal overdose. Ultimately Frey overcomes his addiction through raw, individual willpower. He proves to be his own destroyer and savior, and, of course, publicist.

Early reviews of *A Million Little Pieces* were generally positive. Memoirist Pat Conroy called it “the *War and Peace* of addiction,”<sup>7</sup> but even without such superlative praise the book jacket has no trouble citing several reviews including *The New Yorker* (“A frenzied, electrifying description of the experience”), *Entertainment Weekly* (“Thoroughly engrossing... Hard-bitten existentialism bristles on every page”), and *Elle* (“Frey will probably be hailed in turn as the voice of a generation”).<sup>8</sup> There were some early critics, as well. The previously mentioned Janet Maslin was no fan, nor was David Kamp, also of the *Times*, who opined “it’s evident that the sober Frey still digs the supertough, supersick baddie he was... ‘A Million Little Pieces’ exudes the poseur scuzziness of bad indie films and MTV’s ‘Jackass.’”<sup>9</sup> Such criticism would be rendered moot when, two years after its debut, *A Million Little Pieces* attracted the attention of the most powerful literary figure in America, the Queen of Daytime Television herself, Oprah Winfrey.

In September 2005 Winfrey chose *A Million Little Pieces* as the newest selection of Oprah’s Book Club (OBC). The memoir marked the Book Club’s return to contemporary authors for the first time since 2002. Before that, from the mid-90s to

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in David Kamp, “Step 13: Write a Book,” *The New York Times*, June 8, 2003, Books Section.

<sup>8</sup> Excerpts taken from “acclaim for James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces*” insert in *A Million Little Pieces*, 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Kamp.

2002, Oprah’s Book Club featured an average of one new book per month, almost all written by contemporary novelists. After the overnight success of Mitchard’s *The Deep End of the Ocean*, OBC became the new Holy Grail of the publishing industry. Whatever Winfrey selected was guaranteed to sell hundreds of thousands, if not millions of copies. Unsurprisingly, publishers plied Winfrey with potential OBC candidates, but according to the talk-show host, she only picked books which close friends had recommended and which Winfrey had personally read. What’s more, Winfrey asked for no percentage of a book’s profits after its selection for OBC.

Because Oprah’s Book Club had developed such cultural reach and “capital,” viewers reacted with “pure, unstaged shock” when Winfrey announced an indefinite hiatus for her book club in April 2002, claiming it had become “harder and harder for me to find books on a monthly basis which I am really passionate about.”<sup>10</sup> The Book Club’s suspension would remain in effect until Winfrey announced the selection of John Steinbeck’s *East of Eden* in 2003. During this second era of the Book Club Winfrey selected only “classic” novels. Though this period could claim some success—even more “traditional” critics could not help but marvel that a Steinbeck novel could top the best-seller lists—ultimately the Book Club was thought to be fading. Winfrey’s summer 2005 selection of three Faulkner novels did not even receive on-air attention, but rather was diverted to online media.<sup>11</sup> Not only was the Book Club losing the support of readers, but contemporary authors complained that the lack of attention from OBC almost singlehandedly destroyed their sales potential and the popular attention given to

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<sup>10</sup> Rooney, ix.

<sup>11</sup> This content, collectively called “A Summer of Faulkner,” can be accessed here as of April 10, 2008: <[http://www.oprah.com/obc\\_classic/featbook/asof/obc\\_featbook\\_asof\\_main.jhtml](http://www.oprah.com/obc_classic/featbook/asof/obc_featbook_asof_main.jhtml)>

contemporary literature. Their complaints were not unfounded. As Richard Butler's study on the economic impact of Oprah's Book Club shows, "The first eleven Oprah picks all climbed to a ranking of four or higher [on the *USA Today* best-seller list] the week they were selected. *None* of these books had been ranked the week previous to their induction into the club."<sup>12</sup> A group of women authors petitioned Winfrey in April 2005 to return to contemporary selections, a petition which Winfrey was "aware of and moved by."<sup>13</sup>

So perhaps breathing a sigh of relief, contemporary authors and publishers learned, after the lackluster performance of the Faulkner novels, that Winfrey had inaugurated the Book Club's third era with her selection of *A Million Little Pieces*. If there had been any concern as to whether OBC had maintained its relevance, it was instantly dispelled as Frey's memoir rocketed to the top of the best-seller lists, becoming the most popular OBC pick ever, selling an estimated 1.8 million copies from its initial selection to the end of 2005.<sup>14</sup>

In a return to the Book Club's original format, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* would feature Frey on-air a month after the *A Million Little Pieces* selection. The episode placed most of its emphasis on an exposé of Frey's biography rather than the text of the memoir itself—after all, shouldn't they be one and the same? In earlier Book Club episodes, where the book was almost always a novel,<sup>15</sup> Winfrey's questioning would inevitably turn towards the text's meaning: What did this passage mean? How did its meaning

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<sup>12</sup> Richard J. Butler et al, "From Obscurity to Bestseller: Examining the Impact of Oprah's Book Club Selections," *Publishing Research Quarterly* Winter (2005): 24.

<sup>13</sup> Edward Wyatt, "Oprah's Book Club Reopening to Writer's Who'll Sit and Chat," *The New York Times*, September 23, 2005, Business Section.

<sup>14</sup> Edward Wyatt, "Several Million Little Dollars," *The New York Times*, March 12, 2006, Books Section.

<sup>15</sup> The few exceptions to this pattern include a trio of children's books by Bill Cosby (announced December 8, 1997) and Maya Angelou's autobiography *The Heart of a Woman* (announced May 9, 1997).

connect to the author's own life?<sup>16</sup> With Frey's memoir the mediating factor of fiction's "meaning" was assumed by Winfrey to be equal to that of Frey's actual life story, and therefore irrelevant as an independent subject of discussion. Thus her questions about the text itself, few as they were, never ran: "What is the significance of the intense physical pain of getting a root canal without Novocain?" Instead, the questions were voyeuristic: they sought to know what went through Frey's mind at the moment of the experience rather than at the moment of telling: "I couldn't understand why you didn't say [during the root canal]—'You know what? I got some, forget about the teeth.'"<sup>17</sup>

I belabor this point because, with the text nullified, the only representation of Frey is that which *Oprah* produces. The memoir, the text about which Frey is supposedly being interviewed (and celebrated), is simply a means to get into Frey's head at a given moment in time. It is not so much a text (I mean this in the full Barthesian sense) as a conduit to—perhaps even an index of—the real. In this episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, Winfrey's concern is not with literature, but rather with the image of James Frey as it relates to the prescribed images of her show.

As to this image: the episode presents Frey as the living omnibus of drug addiction. As Winfrey puts it: "He does it all: freebases cocaine, drops acid, eats mushrooms, takes meth, smokes PCP, snorts glue and inhales nitrous oxide." Frey, "the child you pray you never have to raise," had started down the road to drug addiction in the formative years of middle school, the show informs us, first stealing drinks from his

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<sup>16</sup> Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, for example, was a notoriously "inaccessible" Book Club pick. Complained one reader "I was lost because I came into—I really wanted to read the book and love it and learn some life lessons; and when I got into it, it was so confusing I questioned the value of a book that is that hard to understand." See: Timothy, Aubry, "Beware the Furrow of the Middlebrow: Searching for *Paradise* on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 52, No. 2, (2006): 367.

<sup>17</sup> *The Oprah Winfrey Show* transcript, October 26, 2005.

parents' liquor cabinet at the age of ten and then moving on to marijuana by the age of twelve. In (stereo)typical addict fashion, Frey progressively moved on to more powerful drugs hitting his peak in college, by which time his addiction left him in a state of perpetual incontinence.

While the extent of Frey's abuse is shocking, the episode reinforces the fear that his case is not all that unusual. Winfrey claims that 22.8 million Americans are addicted to alcohol or other substances. Frey grew up in a middle class neighborhood that he likens to "Leave it to Beaver" and "The Brady Bunch." Despite this apparently benign home setting, "James found alcohol and drugs less than a mile away," a graphic on the show informs us. In short, Frey explains, "There are kids like me all over America."

Undercutting the show's scare tactics is the fact that despite spending most of his life intoxicated, Frey appears to be likeable, charitable, and intelligent. In other words, he fits perfectly into the *Oprah* orthodoxy of "how-a-person-should-be." The Frey appearing on camera is not a raging addict, but a soft-spoken adult male, the very man "who kept Oprah awake at night"<sup>18</sup> and is now proudly displayed as an exemplar of Oprahness. Like Winfrey, he is a person espousing a philosophy of hope and self-empowerment. Also like Winfrey, who on previous episodes had discussed her own troubled past, this wisdom is legitimized by a compassion which can only be produced by Frey's own lived experience. In a particularly moving segment, video footage shows Frey visiting "Sandy," a viewer struggling with addiction who had e-mailed Frey after reading his book, at a clinic. Frey's "primary piece of advice" was to "hold on," which, so far as the episode reveals, Sandy has. The episode concludes with Winfrey returning to older OBC

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<sup>18</sup> A phrase taken from the episode's title.

forms and matching Frey's magnanimity by donating the "\$50,000 Angel Network Book Club Award to the American Library Association. Their Young Adult Library Services Division," Winfrey says, "will set up a special program to give books to at-risk teens in juvenile facilities and alternative high schools, so your purchases at our online boutique help us fund this award, so I thank you very much for shopping there. This is where your money goes."

Oprah's Book Club was back.

On January 8, 2006, two months after Frey appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, celebrity gossip website *The Smoking Gun* published an investigative article titled "A Million Little Lies: Exposing James Frey's Fiction Addiction." The report was unusual for *TSG*, a website perhaps best-known for posting celebrity mug shots and contract clauses, in that it was written as a feature-length investigative narrative. According to William Bastone, *TSG*'s chief editor, a reader had requested Frey's mug shot be added to the website. One problem: *TSG* could not find a mug shot of Frey. Strange, considering he had claimed to have been arrested at least fourteen times. *TSG* journalists searched police records in the counties where Frey claimed to have had his run-ins with the law. Almost every time, the journalists found, Frey had grossly exaggerated the circumstances of his arrest or had never encountered law enforcement at all.<sup>19</sup>

No doubt recognizing that they had an actual "story" on their hands, the journalists broke with their "mug shot" tradition and wrote a six-page article chronicling as much the efforts of their own investigation as Frey's actual deceptions. In short order, the

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<sup>19</sup> Brian Keefer, "William Bastone on James Frey and the Smoking Gun," *Columbia Journalism Review*.

website concocted a different portrait of Frey; no longer a recovered bad boy, but a celebrity rat caught in *TSG*'s investigative cage:

Frey refused to address the significant conflicts we discovered between his published accounts and those contained in various police reports... Frey, now a publishing powerhouse, replied, "There's nothing at this point can come out of this conversation that, that is good for me."<sup>20</sup>

The report aligned Frey with the cloistered "rich and famous" who are the usual subjects of the website's investigations, pointing out that Frey was so "rattled" that he hired a high powered attorney whose law firm represents "A-list celebrities." The attorney, Martin Singer, in turn wrote a five page letter to *TSG* "threatening a lawsuit (and the prospect of millions in damages) if [*TSG*] published a story stating that Frey was 'a liar and/or that he fabricated or falsified background as reflected in 'A Million Little Pieces.'"<sup>21</sup> If Frey had embraced the windfalls of Winfrey's popularity, he was now forced to bear the burdens of her caliber of celebrity.

While the writers at *The Smoking Gun* may have taken some license with the way in which they framed the importance of their report, there is no question that it sent shockwaves through the pop and publishing communities. Major news outlets picked up the story over the next two days and the "true portrayal" of James Frey would now be contested: was he an Oprahfied saint or a con man out for a quick buck? And even more importantly, what did Oprah have to say about it?

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<sup>20</sup> William Bastone, ed. "A Million Little Lies: Exposing James Frey's Fiction Addiction," *The Smoking Gun*, January 8, 2006.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

Frey's response to *The Smoking Gun* was prompt. Three days after the publishing of the report, he appeared on *Larry King Live*—a program at least casually known for its non-confrontational interview format—to explain his actions in light of *The Smoking Gun*'s report. Frey's focus was on the implications of calling a text “memoir” as opposed to another genre. For Frey, memoir was a form of non-fiction, but one which was expected to have embellishments or inaccurate “memories.” He likened *A Million Little Pieces* to works like Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*—a title which Frey asserts was a prototype of the memoir. Memoir, Frey pointed out, was a relatively new genre and its boundaries were far from firm. Nevertheless, if there was a key phrase from the interview, it was that Frey stood by the “essential truths” of *A Million Little Pieces*.<sup>22</sup>

Yet as the (no doubt boring to at-home viewers) debate over genre played out, King kept nudging towards another subject of interest: Oprah Winfrey. Throughout the interview, King notes that Winfrey had as yet made no comment on the Frey controversy. King asks Frey if the author has had any contact with Winfrey since *The Smoking Gun* story broke to which Frey replies, “I think if Oprah wants to talk to me, she will let me know she wants to talk to me.” Frey goes on to add that being anointed into Oprah's Book Club comes with obvious costs. “I don't know if any memoir in the history of publishing has ever been so, so carefully vetted so long after its publication. That's what comes with selling a lot of copies and being part of Oprah's Book Club. That's what comes with success, and it's been incredibly difficult.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *Larry King Live* transcript, January 11, 2006 provided by CNN.com.

<sup>23</sup> But not quite as difficult, one assumes, as recovering from a life-threatening addiction to drugs and alcohol.

King spends little time sympathizing with Frey's plight, and returns instead to the *real* question on every viewer's mind: "Do you think Oprah might be forgiving, that she'll say something publicly?" Frey again claims he cannot speak for Winfrey, but adds, "I've had a wonderful experience with Oprah Winfrey. I'll cherish the experience I had with her the rest of my life." Similar questions and answers are repeated throughout the call-in section of the show. A caller asks if Frey thought Winfrey would support him and he repeats the "cherish" line almost verbatim and King "reiterates" that Winfrey has not yet made a public statement. Despite this, when Lynne Frey, James' mother, appears on the show, King once again asks, "Do you expect to hear from Oprah?" One might complain that much of the interview is an exercise in redundancy and that King would have much rather had Winfrey on his show than Frey. If so, King would soon get his wish.

As the hour winds down King informs Frey that "I have about a minute left" for Frey's final word to viewers. Frey speaks once more to the "emotional truth" of the book when King interrupts (at last!) with more important news: Oprah Winfrey is on the line.

Speculation as to whether Winfrey would defend the man whose fame and fortune she helped create and sell was about to cease. The phone call to Larry King would prove to be one of Winfrey's greatest missteps, but, as I will demonstrate more fully in later sections, it was not entirely out of keeping with her touted principles. Winfrey begins by confirming what Frey had said, that indeed her producers had been in contact with him and had fully supported him. She then goes on to explain her personal view (as if it were distinct from the view enacted by her producers) on the controversy. "So the truth is this," Winfrey says, "I read and recommend books based on my connection with the

written word and its message... I rely on the publishers to define the category that a book falls within and also the authenticity of the work. So I'm just like everybody else." In this statement, Winfrey assumes a "personal" critical stance—her evaluation of a text's words is not based upon an abstract standard of criticism, but on an expressly personal one. The abstract definitions—like definitions of genre—are entrusted to those institutions which value and negotiate such definitions (the publishing houses). It is also worth noting that, in contrast to the October 26<sup>th</sup> show, this is the first time Winfrey acknowledges a distinction between the book's meaning and Frey's actual lived experience.

Winfrey's assertion that the definition of genre belongs to the publishers might well have appeased *Oprah* viewers, and as we will see viewers and Winfrey alike would have no problem placing much of the blame for the controversy in the publisher's lap, but Winfrey's succeeding statements would prove far more disturbing. In her call, Winfrey ceases to ponder the fuzzy differences between genre and truth and instead considers the delineations between fact and truth. She continues: "Whether or not the car's wheels rolled up on the sidewalk or whether he hit the police officer or didn't hit the police officer is irrelevant to me. What is relevant is that he was a drug addict who spent years in turmoil, from the time he was 10 years old, drinking and— and tormenting himself and his parents." In those words, Winfrey falters. There is a difference, at least for *Oprah* viewers, between making no claim for the truth of "genre" as opposed to the truth of historical fact. Genre belongs to a more abstract system, and what defines the ontology of genre is in large part the convention of specialized intellectuals: academics, critics, publishers, and authors. The right to define historical fact and lived experience, on the other hand, is claimed by a much broader population—and no doubt the audience of

*Oprah*, inculcated in an expressly personal discourse, felt they had as good a claim as any to define exactly what proved relevant to defining “true” experience.

Nevertheless, Winfrey repeats in her conclusion: “If you’re an addict whose life has been moved by this story and you feel that what James went through was able to—to help you hold on a little bit longer, and you connected to that, that is real. That is real. And it’s—it’s irrelevant discussing, you know, what—what happened or did not happen to the police.” Winfrey’s point is clear and logical and sympathetic. Her genuine concern seems to be for the incontrovertible realities of “22.8 million drug users,” not the falsified testimony of one. But again, by asserting that the *facts* of Frey’s episodes are “irrelevant” Winfrey miscalculates. It is important to remember that almost all that is *Oprah* is claimed to be true (barring, perhaps ironically, its fictitious Book Club selections, though even there a strong truth value is placed in the novels’ “message”).<sup>24</sup> Winfrey herself, it is presumed, presents a real person; her history—the childhood trauma, the battles with weight—is expected to have really happened. Historical fact absolutely is relevant when the central mechanism of your discourse is anecdotal—people sharing their life stories for the benefit of others.

It is therefore understandable why Winfrey’s audience—well known for their loyalty—should react with indignation immediately after the *Larry King* interview. In the following days Winfrey received “thousands” of emails protesting her assertion that “the truth does not matter.” As a result, two weeks later, Winfrey reversed herself in perhaps the only way she knew how.

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<sup>24</sup> See: Aubry.

On January 26<sup>th</sup> Winfrey broadcast a special live episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* entitled “James Frey and the *A Million Little Pieces* Controversy.” The show begins in unorthodox fashion with Winfrey, alone, addressing the audience directly and somberly. After recapping the events of the past weeks Winfrey states, “I made a mistake and I left the impression that the truth does not matter. And I am deeply sorry about that, because that is not what I believe.”<sup>25</sup> The show would prove to be a spectacle almost as controversial as *A Million Little Pieces* itself.

In the episode, Winfrey replays key moments from the Frey saga including a recording of part of her phone call to Larry King. Notably, the recording she plays does not feature her comments on the “irrelevance” of historical fact—the most egregious of Winfrey’s statements—but rather the benign statement that Winfrey relies on publishers to define genre. The episode begins, then, less than earnestly; it already plants the seeds of a retelling of the Frey controversy crafted entirely by Winfrey and her producers, which places the blame squarely on the corporate shoulders of Doubleday. Yet in attacking the corporate irresponsibility of Doubleday, Winfrey also exposes just how corporate her own organization is, despite attempts to conceal its corporate nature with repeated references to the “personal.”

While I do not dispute Winfrey’s claim that she reads and picks books on a personal basis, that she connects directly to a “text and its meaning” and is a reader just like anyone else, it is clear that these personal picks are carefully vetted and that legal communication occurs between publishers and Winfrey’s production staff. As the episode informs us, eight days after the *A Million Little Pieces* selection, Winfrey’s

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<sup>25</sup> *The Oprah Winfrey Show* transcript, January 26, 2006.

producers were contacted by a counselor from the Hazelden clinic who challenged the book's authenticity. Winfrey then recounts to Nan Talese, Frey's publisher, what her producers did to pursue this claim:

We contacted your [Doubleday] representatives, and we were told by them that the claims that [the counselor] was making, we were assured that there was no validity to those claims. And we asked if you, your company stood behind James's book as a work of non-fiction at the time, and they said absolutely. And they were also asked if their legal department had checked out the book, and they said yes.

The anecdote dispels any notion that Winfrey is unaware that her Book Club picks are more than merely "personal." True, her production staff was duped by the publishing house, but the fact that Winfrey even has fact-checkers of her own at least partially dispels the idea that Winfrey-the-individual-reader was duped (as the "average" reader in Winfrey's audience might claim); rather, her entire media organization had been outfoxed by another. The point of highlighting this behind-the-scenes deal-making is not to judge whether or not this makes Winfrey any more or less innocent or naïve: it is rather to expose the fact that Winfrey's individualized persona is, in fact, highly produced and regulated. Something as "personal" as her relationship to a "book and its message" is nevertheless mediated by a bureaucratized corporation which generates billions of dollars in revenue.

From the rest of the episode, however, you would never know that Winfrey is the frontwoman for a billion dollar empire. Instead, the verbal pounding of the "evil capitalist publishing house" continues by various journalists invited to appear on the show:

Maureen Dowd: It's just very disappointing that the publishing house doesn't care; they're counting their money.

Stanley Crouch: Is he a liar alone, or was he coerced by Doubleday into becoming a bigger liar? That's the real question.

While demonizing Doubleday, these same pundits glorify Winfrey, not as a corporate icon, but as a private citizen. Richard Cohen names her “Mensch of the Year, for standing up and saying you were wrong.” When placing blame, Cohen insists that publishing houses are “not little shops anymore... you're part of a large corporation” but when placing his sympathy with Winfrey he is clearly speaking to an individual, not a corporation: “it was a betrayal of you.” Likewise, Frank Rich of the *New York Times* makes the inevitable analogy of Doubleday to Enron while celebrating Winfrey, personally, for admitting her mistake: “I think it's great that you stood up and... took a stand.”

Thus a dichotomy is established between the unforgivably corporate empire of Doubleday and the sympathetic, even heroic, “individual” response of Oprah Winfrey. This dichotomy, which the episode works so hard to establish as fact, is one which James Frey is forced to navigate. As the structuring of the episode dictates, Frey must choose between admitting his mistakes and asking forgiveness or maintaining his petulant defenses and having his “boney, lying, non-fiction butt kicked out of the kingdom of Oprah.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Maureen Dowd, from the January 26, 2006 *Oprah* transcript.

It is clear what Winfrey wants Frey to do. Throughout the episode while she criticizes the corporate failings of Doubleday, Winfrey time and again returns to the “personal” actions of Frey. “I think you presented a false person,” Winfrey says. At first Frey squirms with his old defense from *Larry King*: the concept of genre is fuzzy; he maintains artistic license to alter characters, for their protection of course. He admits: “I’ve struggled with the idea of it [the dentist episode],” to which Winfrey responds triumphantly: “No, the lie of it. It’s a lie. That’s not an idea, James, it’s a lie.” If Doubleday is cast as a corporate Mephistopheles, Frey is its almost-innocent victim, the sinner who must choose whether the shame of his public confession is worth Winfrey’s promised redemption.

Ultimately, healing hearts and minds across the nation, Frey chose *Oprah*. In the episode’s saccharine conclusion Frey begins his confession at the personal, gut level: “This hasn’t been a great day for me... and it certainly hasn’t been a great couple of weeks... but I come out of it better.” Momentarily forgetting that her entire episode has been devoted to the logic that truth is absolute, Winfrey opines: “Maybe this is the beginning of another kind of truth for you.” Frey agrees, admits to lying (not without some coaxing from Winfrey), and concludes with a sentiment plucked from the litanies of sorry schoolboys: “If I come out of this experience with anything, it’s being a better person and learning from my mistakes and making sure I don’t repeat them.”

For a time it seemed that this episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* would conclude the *A Million Little Pieces* controversy, at least as far as public scrutiny was concerned. There were, certainly, corporate ramifications at Doubleday. The memoir was

henceforth published with author's and publisher's notes. Frey's note reproduces the reasoning he displayed on *Larry King*: "I embellished many details about my past experience, and altered others in order to serve what I felt was the greater purpose of the book. I sincerely apologize to those readers who have been disappointed by my actions"—far from the mea culpa wrung forth on *Oprah*.<sup>27</sup> Likewise the publisher's note apologizes "to the reading public for any unintentional confusion surrounding the publication of *A Million Little Pieces*." Perhaps neither written apology reads as satisfyingly as the conclusion to the *Oprah* episode, but then perhaps this is because for Frey the scandal did not need a conclusion. The closing lines of his note to readers, while surely as sentimental as anything to have appeared on *Oprah*, read inconclusively:

I am deeply sorry to any readers who I have disappointed and I hope these revelations will not alter their faith in the book's central message—that drug addiction and alcoholism can be overcome, and there is always a path to redemption if you fight to find one. Thirteen years after I left treatment, I'm still on the path, and I hope, ultimately, I'll get there.

According to Frey, he has not reached his destination, his closure—whatever that may be. I cite Frey here not to suggest that his note is any more sincere than what I have transcribed from *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Rather, even if his message is contrived, it is elusive. For what it's worth, by Frey's account, unpressured by a live television interrogation, he has not reached a conclusion as simplistic as "lying is bad; good people—*Oprah* people—don't lie."

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<sup>27</sup> James Frey, "a note to the reader," *A Million Little Pieces* 2004.

Neither, it turns out, had his publisher, Nan Talese. In May of 2007 a settlement was reached by Random House (Doubleday's parent company) to refund up to 2.35 million dollars in book sales for those who claimed to have been defrauded by the marketing of *A Million Little Pieces* as memoir.<sup>28</sup> But in late July 2007, the media would again be reminded that not everyone was quite through with the Frey controversy. At the Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Writers Conference during a question-and-answer session with author Joyce Carol Oates, an audience member raised the issue of the *A Million Little Pieces* controversy. Nan Talese, attending the conference, took the opportunity to defend her actions and criticize Winfrey's.

Talese's primary grievance was just how "produced" the January 26<sup>th</sup> episode had been. Talese claimed that she initially refused to appear on *Oprah* (her logic being that a publisher should remain "behind the curtains") and only agreed to do so when *Oprah* producers informed her that Winfrey would be doing a show on "Truth in America" and that Talese would be appearing alongside noted columnists Frank Rich and Richard Cohen to discuss the issue. Moments before the broadcast, however, Talese was informed that in fact the show would be re-titled "The James Frey Controversy." Furthermore, according to Talese, Winfrey informed Frey that the following interview would be "very rough, but at the end there will be redemption."<sup>29</sup>

Talese would go on to call out Winfrey's own capitalistic hypocrisy, citing Winfrey as telling Frey after the show, "I know it was rough, but it's just business." Talese continued: "So I really, really am bothered by the sanctimoniousness of Oprah

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<sup>28</sup> Motoko Rich, "James Frey and His Publisher Settle Suit over Lies," *The New York Times*, September 7, 2006, Arts Section.

<sup>29</sup> Hilary Hilton, "Oprah vs. James Frey: The Sequel," *Time*, July 30, 2007.

Winfrey because it simply does not exist... it's a business experience." The accuracy of Talese's comments will most likely never be confirmed, but it is the purpose of this thesis to explore and establish their validity. In short, despite all the references to truth, memory, and redemption that this chapter has chronicled, could it be that there was, at a capitalistic level, no controversy at all? Is the real lie of the *A Million Little Pieces* controversy that things were anything more than business as usual?

One of the most significant moments in *The Oprah Winfrey Show* occurred in 1986 when, on an episode about battered women and incest, Winfrey began to cry on camera and recounted to her guests and audience that she had been sexually abused by members of her own family. The next day, the news media covered the unprecedented confession of the talk show host, ignoring the already familiar confessional formula of the talk show guest. This confession marked the beginning of an increasingly "personal" depiction of Oprah Winfrey. Later dramas included her struggles with weight, her tenuous relationship with Graham Stedman, revelations of past drug abuse, a miscarriage, and even a lawsuit by the Texas beef industry. All of these were not just attributed to Winfrey, they were confessed and published by her. In a stroke of genius, Winfrey—for the most part—even outdid the tabloids when it came to exposing her personal secrets. But Winfrey did not reveal her failures for shock value alone, she used every instance therapeutically; every misstep became a personal, if public, life lesson. In the words of cultural critic Eva Illouz: "One of the central differences between Oprah and other stars is

that while most media stars are visual icons—of beauty and youth—Oprah Winfrey is first and foremost a *biographical icon*.<sup>30</sup>

The “therapeutic biography,” to borrow Illouz’s term, can be seen not just in Winfrey’s story, but in the stories of the various guests invited into the *Oprah* media. *A Million Little Pieces* is in essence the story of a man who made terrible mistakes which he overcame and learned from. That basic story had already been told by none other than Winfrey herself. Ten years before inviting Frey on the show, Winfrey had revealed, on-air, “I relate to [that guest’s] story so much because of what Patrice just said about being introduced to drugs by men in your life... In my 20’s, I’d done this drug [cocaine] and I know exactly what you are talking about.”<sup>31</sup> Winfrey connects to guests’ stories in other ways as well. In the March 2008 issue of *O, The Oprah Magazine*, she interviews American actress Sally Field who tells the story of her childhood: “I was raised in a working-class Hollywood family... It’s a real hard life... I had to keep acting. It was what I did to stay sane... it was about revealing the parts of myself I couldn’t reveal anywhere else... Some day I’ll write the book, or not write the book, I don’t know.”<sup>32</sup> Field also talks about her relationship with her abusive step-father—a man at times loving, at times violent—and one can’t help but draw similarities between this tale of abuse (and the eventual overcoming of abuse) and Winfrey’s accounts of molestation.<sup>33</sup>

In each of these cases the hardship or personal failure is overcome and the worth of the confessor is validated—quite literally—in their personal fortune or celebrity:

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<sup>30</sup> Eva Illouz, *Oprah Winfrey and the Glamour of Misery*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 30.

<sup>31</sup> “Oprah Reveals on Her Talk Show She Smoked Crack Cocaine During Her 20s,” *Jet*, January 30, 1995.

<sup>32</sup> “Oprah’s Cut with Sally Field,” *O, The Oprah Winfrey Magazine*, March, 2008.

<sup>33</sup> Specifically, “By the time she was fourteen, she had been raped by a teenage cousin, sexually abused by an uncle, and had run away from home,” according to Illouz, 25.

“What doesn’t kill you only makes you into a multi-millionaire.” Validation of this kind, however, can only be established by the *conclusion* of the story. We can only know that things turned out all right for the individuals who suffered such hardships because we see on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* exactly that, people who seem now to be doing just fine. While the tautology may appear self-evident, it has successfully captivated millions of *Oprah* viewers for over twenty years. In fact, to say that Winfrey showcases “life stories” at all is somewhat misleading. In almost every instance, the guest’s interview occurs after the fact: Frey has already overcome drug addiction; Field has already moved beyond and forgiven her stepfather’s abuse. The interview is in fact a *re-view* of traumas and triumphs which are extracted, shared, and commended in an often cathartic moment of therapy. Rarely, however, do we see a guest return a year later to update Winfrey’s viewers on his or her life’s progress.

The *A Million Little Pieces* controversy, importantly, provides an exception to this rule. The first Frey episode appears to have concluded neatly: Frey reaches out, at least symbolically, to all the other Americans struggling with drug addiction while Winfrey, also in part symbolically, donates fifty thousand dollars to a teen addiction program. The lessons are learned, the values imparted, the lights go down on the set, but as we know the Frey “narrative” was at the time not only unfinished, it was also patently false. As such Frey had to reappear on the show, values had to be re-extracted, and another conclusion had to be put in place. Both Frey and Winfrey had to confess their wrongdoing, officially re-subscribe to the value of absolute truth, and for good measure condemn the gluttony of corporations like Doubleday. Perhaps this re-extraction proved

successful, but by the standards of the *Oprah* formula, it was an extremely drawn out affair.

The Frey controversy created narrative dynamism where the structures of *Oprah* did not usually allow it. By bucking the *Oprah* formula, Frey inadvertently exposed its existence. Tracing the story outwards from the two Frey episodes we recognize that this formula is not limited to the structure of a television program, it is rather the command structure for Winfrey's entire media empire. Every life story featured on *Oprah*, including Winfrey's own, shares not just a familiar "narrative," but a familiar set of values. Beyond the therapeutic value of confession, an astute *Oprah* viewer picks up on messages of hard-work (Field threw herself into acting), compassion (Frey reached out to fellow drug addicts), and entrepreneurship (despite her childhood poverty, Winfrey became one of the wealthiest Americans). The values espoused by Winfrey's guests also become part of the *Oprah* formula.

Rarely does one see a guest on *Oprah* who fails to espouse these values. A recent case in point involved the rapper Ludacris (aka Chris Bridges) who appeared on an *Oprah* episode to talk about Paul Haggis' film *Crash*. Ludacris complained, "She edited out a lot of my comments while keeping her own in... Of course, it's her show, but we were doing a show on racial discrimination, and she gave me a hard time as a rapper when I came on there as an actor."<sup>34</sup> Rap stars 50 Cent and Ice Cube, neither of whom had appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, echoed Ludacris' complaints. These celebrities have also found ways to market their life stories. 50 Cent, for example, like Frey and Winfrey, has had a personal history with cocaine, but the critique has long been

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<sup>34</sup> "50 Cent Dismisses Oprah's Take on Rap," *Associated Press*, April 28, 2006.

that rappers glorify, rather than confess to or repent, their transgressions. Of his “reputation” 50 Cent proclaims: “I don’t mind it. I’ve actually accepted it.” He has produced and sold it as well. The lyrics to the song “Cocaine Dreams” begin “I got X / Meth and slabs of cocaine / So the feds wanna search / It’s like Arabs boardin’ the planes” and concludes “Order of protection? From who? Who I need an order of protection from, nigga?” Of course, the tough-guy attitude marketed by 50 Cent and other rappers is no different than that which Frey expresses in *A Million Little Pieces*. Both draw from a tradition of machismo which obviously sells books and albums alike, but absent from 50 Cent’s comments is the turn to salvation and forgiveness necessary for admittance to the *Oprah* ethos.

Some critics, like Trysh Travis and Kathryn Lofton, have argued that this ethos is religious in nature, albeit “a hybrid faith, one whose roots, perhaps, lie in the black church, but whose distinctive and quite visible flowers most closely resemble the New Thought religions that developed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.”<sup>35</sup> But both critics also agree with Talese that, whatever its spiritual nature, *Oprah* is still a “business experience.” Writes Travis, “Winfrey, the CEO and sole owner of Harpo Entertainment, Inc., a multi-million dollar global media corporation, operates within a hypercapitalistic frame of reference.”<sup>36</sup> Earlier in this thesis, I alluded to instances where *Oprah*’s corporate structure became apparent—such as when Winfrey mentions that her producers contacted Doubleday to ensure that *A Million Little Pieces* had been fact-checked—but these rare references to her official corporation—Harpo

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<sup>35</sup> Trysh Travis, “‘It Will Change the World if Everybody Reads this Book’: New Thought Religion in Oprah’s Book Club,” *American Quarterly*, 59, No. 3 (2007): 1018.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 1018.

Productions—only betray the fact that *every* aspect of *Oprah* is incorporated into a hypercapitalistic, money-making, multi-media empire.

“*Oprah*” refers to far more than a weekly television program—even the “#1-rated talk series... [which] airs on 216 stations representing 99% of the country,” according to CBS.<sup>37</sup> Though *The Oprah Winfrey Show* remains her flagship, Winfrey’s other ventures have also proven successful. Oprah’s Book Club was her first step into print media—albeit its products were not overtly Winfrey’s—and in 2000 *O, The Oprah Magazine* debuted, quickly culled 1.9 million subscriptions in its first year of print, and today remains a staple item on newsstands. Amy Gross, the magazine’s editor and chief, remarked, “This magazine originates in the persona, values and image of Oprah... We’re speaking to a set of values, not a set of demographics.” Added Cathie Black, President of Hearst Magazines, “We’ve just capitalized on what she stands for.”<sup>38</sup>

Winfrey has also dabbled in film. Aside from her debut performance in Steven Spielberg’s *The Color Purple* Winfrey undertook the project of producing and starring in the Toni Morrison adaptation of *Beloved* in 1998 and more recently a made-for-TV film *Oprah Winfrey Presents: Mitch Albom’s “For One More Day”* in December 2007. Winfrey also co-founded Oxygen Media, parent company of the Oxygen cable television channel which also debuted in 2000. In 2007 the network was purchased by NBC for \$925 million.<sup>39</sup> More recently Winfrey’s reality game show *Oprah’s Big Give* premiered

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<sup>37</sup> Statistics taken from CBS Television Distribution website:  
<<http://www.cbstd.com/shows.aspx?showID=16>>

<sup>38</sup> Quotations and statistics taken from Noreen O’Leary, “O, Positive—*O, The Oprah Magazine*, profile—Statistical Data Included,” *Brandweek*, March 5, 2001.

<sup>39</sup> Winfrey had distanced herself from Oxygen claiming that it “did not reflect my voice.” In 2008 it was announced that Winfrey had made joint plans with Discovery Communications to launch her own cable network in 2009. Winfrey will be responsible for the network’s “programming, content and creative vision,” and well she should. After all, the network is to be called “The Oprah Winfrey Network,” or (too

on ABC to the tune of 15.7 million viewers.<sup>40</sup> The show features contestants working to innovatively give away as much money as they can to the needy. And, in a move which Winfrey claimed was unlike any she had ever made before, Winfrey endorsed and stumped for Barack Obama during the 2008 Presidential primaries.

Winfrey manages, organizes, and unites these disparate media elements through what several critics have collectively dubbed “Brand Oprah.” More than just an icon, though it is that too, this brand is the metaphorical flag which Winfrey plants on every corner of her empire. It is what Gross describes as “the persona, values, and image of Oprah.” As to persona, Winfrey claims Barack Obama is her “personal,” rather than political, choice for President. As to values, instances of Winfrey’s spirituality are found in every one of her products—including *A Million Little Pieces*. As to image, every issue of *O, The Oprah Magazine* features a photograph of Winfrey modeling some ecstatic pose. And as to brand itself, every Book Club selection is literally branded with the instantly recognizable “O” icon.<sup>41</sup>

But Winfrey has achieved more than just a direct and literal branding of her many products and mediums. More potently, “Brand Oprah” also refers to a kind of incorporation. As I stated earlier, the biographies of Frey, Field, and Winfrey embody both the values and the proper narrative structure of the *Oprah* ethos while the values and narrative structure of celebrities like Ludacris and 50 Cent do not. In Frey’s case, he reaped wealth and publicity for espousing *Oprah* values, but in so doing he had to accept

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perfectly) just OWN for short. (Edward Wyatt, “Oprah Winfrey and Discovery to Create New Cable Network,” *The New York Times*, January 16, 2008, Television Section.)

<sup>40</sup> David Bauder, “‘Oprah’s Big Give’ Gets Big Numbers,” *Associated Press*, March 4, 2008.

<sup>41</sup> It is worth at least briefly mentioning the other term most popularly used in Oprah studies, “Oprah Effect,” in contrast to “Brand Oprah.” The former has been used by critics to describe Winfrey’s ability to turn seemingly any product (or person) into a commercial success, the latter—the focus of this thesis—refers (perhaps pejoratively) to the means by which Winfrey actually produces the Oprah Effect.

incorporation into the *Oprah* empire. Barring some kind of absurd redaction, *A Million Little Pieces*, the (partially true) story of James Frey's life, will forever be a part of the *Oprah* canon. Even as new editions of the memoir are printed, sans the "O" seal, the "mark" of *Oprah* will long remain because it is exactly that mark, that incorporation into *Oprah*, which propelled Frey's success. Critics may have had little sympathy for Frey when he complained to Larry King about the hardships of his level of celebrity, but that level of celebrity and the incorporation into *Oprah* which fomented it are nevertheless real phenomena.

The case for the reality of this incorporation can be strengthened by an example of its failure. In September 2001 Jonathan Franzen's critically acclaimed novel *The Corrections* was announced as the latest Book Club selection. The book had already received significant critical acclaim and strong sales for a novel, but, as was well known, being picked for OBC guaranteed otherwise unattainable fame and fortune. These benefits came with a price which, as he describes in his essay *Meet Me in St. Louis*, Franzen was not quite willing to pay. As Franzen recounts, *Oprah* producers had sent a camera crew to film him revisiting his childhood home of St. Louis, Missouri. The plan was to create a short biographical montage to be played when Franzen appeared on the show, a format replicated during the segments describing Frey's youth on the October 26<sup>th</sup> *Oprah* episode. The "produced" nature of the filming bothered Franzen. The *Oprah* crew encouraged him "to look around curiously, as if [he] hadn't been here for a while"

and asked for other contrived shots to the point where Franzen exclaimed, “This is so fundamentally bogus!” To which the cameraman replied, “You’re right!”<sup>42</sup>

Franzen made further comments during an interview with *The Portland Oregonian* which expressed further ambivalence towards becoming part of the *Oprah* empire: “The first weekend after I heard I considered turning it down... I see this as my book, my creation, and I didn’t want that logo of corporate ownership on it.” Then in an interview with National Public Radio Franzen said, “I feel like I am solidly in the high-art literary tradition,” which did not necessarily mesh with the “schmaltzy, one-dimensional [books]” which also found their place in the Book Club. Winfrey’s response was to the point: “Jonathan Franzen will not be on the Oprah Winfrey show because he is seemingly uncomfortable and conflicted about being chosen as a book club selection. It is never my intention to make anyone uncomfortable or cause anyone conflict.”<sup>43</sup> *The Corrections* would remain a part of the Book Club, its author would not.

Most critics sided with Winfrey during the controversy. Franzen’s colleagues critiqued the author’s ambivalence. Harold Bloom stated, “It does seem a little invidious of him to want to have it both ways... to want the benefits of [Oprah’s Book Club] and not jeopardize his high aesthetic standing.” Rick Moody commented: “If you are being published by one of the big houses, you can’t object that you are not commercial in some way: what book doesn’t have the publisher’s logo on the spine?”<sup>44</sup> The critique of Cecilia Konchar Farr in her book *Reading Oprah: How Oprah’s Book Club Changed the Way*

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<sup>42</sup> Jonathan Franzen, “Meet Me in St. Louis,” *The New Yorker*, December 24 2001, Life and Letters Section.

<sup>43</sup> All quotations taken from David Kirckpatrick, “Winfrey Rescinds Offer to Author for Guest Appearance,” *The New York Times*, October 24, 2001, Business Section.

<sup>44</sup> Both quotations taken from Farr, 77.

*America Reads* is particularly unsympathetic to Franzen. Farr takes a populist/feminist position stating: “Clearly, Franzen could only have feared the loss of a certain type of reader. Thanks to Oprah, there was a moment in the fall of 2001 when vast numbers of soccer moms and waitresses in the Midwest were reading the very same thing the New York intellectuals were reading.”<sup>45</sup> Franzen himself would later admit that it was a “Mistake, mistake, mistake to use the word ‘high’”<sup>46</sup> in describing his particular “literary tradition, but the damage had been done and the champions of “cultural democracy” claimed victory.<sup>47</sup>

But Farr pushes the point beyond matters of high-brow elitism. She goes on to write, “The real news was that [Franzen] crossed a line in questioning Oprah’s economic clout, calling the Book Club seal a corporate logo,” and later, “Americans, even the most elite, are notorious for not arguing with success. That’s where Franzen miscalculated.”<sup>48</sup> To back up her claims that Oprah’s Book Club, at least, is non-corporate Farr rhetorically asks:

Who was (and still is) making money from that “corporate O”? Not Oprah. It was, from the beginning, the publishers who requested permission to integrate the seal into the cover art of their books and keep it on when the novels were reprinted well after they had had their day on Oprah... Oprah always does better in the ratings with celebrity and expert shows than she does with the Book Club; she willingly loses ratings points to continue its meetings.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 76.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 76.

<sup>47</sup> The term “cultural democracy” is Farr’s.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 77.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 77.

Farr fails to appreciate the “hypercapiatlist” nature of the *Oprah* empire which spans multimedia and, furthermore, she seems not to understand the central mechanic of incorporation, of “Brand Oprah,” which unites that empire. Farr acknowledges that Winfrey is a successful capitalist, but deflects any capitalist impulses away from the Book Club because there is little to no direct profit.<sup>50</sup> Like Winfrey did on the January 26<sup>th</sup> James Frey episode, Farr places the “morally” dubious notion of profit squarely on the shoulders of the publishers.

But the very nature of a diffuse, multimedia empire (*Oprah*) is that it obfuscates clear and direct modes of profit-making. If we adopt, as Travis claims Winfrey has done, “a hypercapitalist frame of reference” of our own, we recognize common components of the *Oprah* corporation. In every piece of its media we discover the same brand (“O”), the same persona (Oprah Winfrey), and the same product (the *Oprah* value/structure) whether the specific media is a book, magazine, or television episode. Whether or not the particular medium, guest, or material product generates the same amount of direct profit is hardly the point; there is no question that *Oprah* is a profitable empire. To claim that one McDonald’s restaurant only sells half the hamburgers of another McDonald’s restaurant three miles down the road is not to claim that the less-profitable restaurant is any less a part of the McDonald’s corporation.

However, Farr’s deflection of the capitalist nature of Oprah’s Book Club only mimics Winfrey’s own disavowal of the capitalist nature of her entire empire. Essential to Winfrey’s success is her ability to accrue a level of cultural legitimacy that allows her to effectually transcend her profit-driven foundations. This “transcendence” is manifested

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<sup>50</sup> Even this is somewhat unfair on Farr’s part as no doubt the clout created by the Book Club spurs advertisements from publishers in other *Oprah* media.

literally in the New Age philosophies Winfrey has adopted. In 2007 she featured the spiritual self-help book *The Secret* on her show multiple times and in 2008 she selected Eckhart Tolle's equally spiritual *A New Earth* as the latest OBC pick. This religiosity is only a crystallization of a broader effort to legitimate Winfrey as less a businesswoman and more a spiritual or cultural guru. While regularly being featured on the *Forbes 400* list, Winfrey's real goal has been to establish legitimacy not as a venture capitalist, but as a venture culturalist.

Despite the vastness of the *Oprah* empire, this legitimacy resides, I believe, in the ongoing biography—presence, being—of Oprah Winfrey herself. I have already argued that the life stories of Frey and Field, for example, share themes and values with Winfrey's, but this "sharing" is not exactly mutual due to the mechanics of incorporation. *Oprah* "brands" *A Million Little Pieces*, but *A Million Little Pieces* does not similarly "brand" Winfrey's autobiography. Instead Frey's story merely gestures to Winfrey's. The values contained within Frey's memoir are independent—truth, forgiveness, self-empowerment—until they are incorporated into the world of *Oprah* and branded with the Book Club seal at which point they become *Oprah's* values of truth, forgiveness, and self-empowerment. This branding allows the consumer to recognize that Frey's story is, in terms of values and basic "therapeutic" narrative, like Oprah's. Similarly, in the Sally Field interview, the actress explicitly relates her life experience to Winfrey's: "I mean, you [Winfrey] are the prime example of the person who gets into the arena... whose blood actually spills out of their body onto the arena floor... That's yours. You own that. Your courage." Thus by always gesturing towards Winfrey's own life, every guest and

every story reinforce the legitimacy of Oprah Winfrey to be the vanguard of the *Oprah* ethos—the core product of the *Oprah* empire.

The repeated, successful marketing of Winfrey’s biographical legitimacy—through interviews with celebrities, book endorsements, etc.—expands a kind of “democratic” legitimacy. While the endorsement of a single celebrity is a powerful asset, real “American” power can only be attained through the endorsement of the masses. Every time a reader purchases an OBC pick or *O Magazine* or a viewer tunes in to *The Oprah Winfrey Show* that consumer endorses Winfrey. In this light, the “consumer” of Winfrey’s products is in turn employed by Winfrey to establish (and at times re-establish) her authority to recommend such products and the values they entail.

Winfrey’s command of popular legitimation proves more “valuable” than her generation of direct profit. Consider, for example, *O, The Oprah Magazine*. Though hugely popular, it does not have an audience nearly as large as *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Yet an early readership study of the magazine cites that “Some 11 percent of respondents never watch [*The Oprah Winfrey Show*], while another 43 percent of respondents watch less than half the time it’s on the air.”<sup>51</sup> The Book Club similarly expands Winfrey’s cultural reach at even less cost (and less profit) than her magazine. While I might concede to Farr that Winfrey makes relatively little profit from Book Club sales, hosting the Book Club never costs Winfrey anything more than a percentage of a single day’s television audience. This cost is outweighed by the benefits manifest in Farr’s own exalting language: “Oprah is shaping and advocating cultural democracy in her push to get America reading again. Using her TV talk show, she advances on Old World

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<sup>51</sup> O’Leary.

privilege and elitism with her guerilla force of women readers behind her.”<sup>52</sup> These kinds of endorsements—from Farr, but also from Winfrey’s guests, audience, and the kinds of pundits featured on the January 26<sup>th</sup> Frey episode—congeal to produce cultural capital which Winfrey can then invest in ever more projects like the aforementioned *Oprah’s Big Give* and even, historically, her first-ever endorsement of a political candidate.

But for two weeks in January 2006, the juggernaut that was Winfrey’s cultural legitimacy seemed tenuous. Her phone call to Larry King called into question the values which Winfrey had espoused (marketed) as her own for so long. The story of James Frey which, like every other incorporated story gestured towards and legitimated Winfrey’s own, was proven false. And not only that, but Winfrey had defended its falsity! Could it not then be said that contained within the *A Million Little Pieces* controversy was a challenge to Winfrey’s legitimacy? An apparent moment of rebellion by her notoriously loyal fans that confirmed Farr’s prediction that “Whether Ozymandias, Oz, or Oprah speaks, Americans will insist on being free to challenge their authority (sometimes even as they tremble and despair—or run out to buy the book)?”<sup>53</sup>

Winfrey herself felt the word “challenge” was apt: “To everyone who has challenged me on this issue of truth, you are absolutely right.” But what kind of challenge was there? Americans did run out to buy the book, and the book after that, and the next issue of the magazine, etc. We might adopt Illouz’s argument and claim that Winfrey’s ultimate handling of the *A Million Little Pieces* controversy was yet another instance of her “therapeutic biography” in progress. She began the show, after all, by confessing and

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<sup>52</sup> Farr, 107-108.

<sup>53</sup> Farr, 107.

apologizing to the audience. Of course, Frey ultimately admitted wrongdoing too, yet in the end Winfrey was nominated for “Mensch of the Year” while he was left, at best, looking like the weak-willed pawn of the corporate publishing houses with an ensuing multi-million dollar lawsuit.

In proportion to the total *Oprah* empire, the “challenge” viewers raised was miniscule at best: after all, they were defending the core values of the *Oprah* ethos. By contrast I would argue that the real “challenges” came from Winfrey and Frey: one the founder and vanguard of *Oprahness*, the latter one of the most popular literary figures ever incorporated into *Oprah*. When they variously dismissed or distorted the value of historical fact Winfrey and Frey directly challenged the *Oprah*-incorporated value of absolute truth. We might imagine how *this* challenge could have opened up all kinds of discourse and auto-critique. Winfrey, Frey, the invited media pundits, and the audience could have engaged in a debate concerning the meta-value of truth. Instead the second James Frey episode amounted to little more than a witch hunt.

The disparity between these two alternatives can be explained by one further modification to the “economics” of Winfrey’s empire—an economics which produces both financial and cultural “profit.” I have so far stated that the transaction between consumer and product (I buy *A Million Little Pieces*) is compounded by the transaction of consumer and idea (I buy *Oprah’s* ethos). I posit now that these first two transactions are compounded by a third between consumer and the celebrity herself (I buy Oprah Winfrey). This third transaction is no innovation of Winfrey’s. Jackie Stacey, adopting a film studies approach in her chapter “With Stars in Their Eyes: Female Spectators and the Paradoxes of Consumption,” writes that the celebrity “is selected because of a

recognition of resemblance with the spectator... thus star selection involves female spectators looking for themselves (in every sense) in their star ideals.”<sup>54</sup> Stacey, writing on Hollywood celebrities from the 40s and 50s, emphasizes a Lacanian image recognition, but in Winfrey’s case, the sharing of her biography rather than appearance provides the link for the spectators to “recognize” themselves in Winfrey—just as Sally Field recognized her own willingness to “get in the arena” as part of Winfrey’s persona as well. Stacey adds that aside from the spectator recognizing herself in the celebrity directly, “Female spectators remember Hollywood stars through their connection with particular commodities and the ways in which they were worn or displayed.”<sup>55</sup> Winfrey has integrated her celebrity with the commodity with even greater efficacy than Hollywood. As an (auto)biographical icon, her product lines are not merely associated with fashion and body, but also spirit and mind.

While Winfrey has mastered this integration of celebrity and commodity, she is obviously not the first to do so. Athletic endorsements come to mind. The famous slogan “Be Like Mike”<sup>56</sup> is an even more self-aware example of the marriage between celebrity and commodity than perhaps Stacey’s Hollywood celebrities. The slogan speaks for itself: buy Gatorade and be like Michael Jordan. The idea of actually “attaining” *Jordanness* is fantastic, in fact, an ad campaign for the shoe line “Air Jordans” featured Spike Lee famously asking Jordan “Is it the shoes?” which grant his incredible athleticism. Jordan’s response is of course, “No.” Just as successful as the “Be Like

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<sup>54</sup> Jackie Stacey, “With Stars in their Eyes: Female Spectators and the Paradoxes of Consumption,” In, *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader*, edited by Sean Redmond and Su Holmes (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2007), 316.

<sup>55</sup> Stacey, 317.

<sup>56</sup> An ad campaign for Gatorade sports drinks circa 1992.

Mike” campaign, the Air Jordan commercials are aware of their inherent fantasy. Both ad campaigns make explicit demands of the consumer which can then be explicitly refused: “Be Like Mike? No, thank you.” But Winfrey’s “command” is more diffuse. She does not tell the viewer to explicitly “Be Like Oprah,” but instead, via the *Oprah* value set, merely tells the viewer to be good, to be happy, to be his or herself. But, as film and celebrity theory tells us, to be one’s self is to be the celebrity with whom we identify. Likewise, to deny or challenge the celebrity with whom we identify, is also to challenge or deny the self.

I have operated under the assumption that the iconicity, the celebrity, the “brand Oprah,” is a channel for the consumer to acquire the core product, the *Oprah* value set. Winfrey is merely the cultural authority who points her consumers to this product, just as Michael Jordan is the “athletic authority” who points consumers to footwear or sports beverages. But what has largely gone unsaid is that the converse is true as well: the value set acts as a channel for the spectator to consume/achieve Oprah the celebrity.

In light of this I return one last time to the *A Million Little Pieces* controversy. I have already cited the lack of any meta-discourse on *Oprah* as indicative of the lack of any real challenge to Winfrey’s cultural legitimacy, but it remains to be said formally that this lack also indicates the audience’s inability to truly challenge Oprah herself. Instead of bringing my attention to the formal part of the episode “James Frey and the *A Million Little Pieces* Controversy,” I would like to cite a moment from *Oprah after the Show*—a special program aired on the Oxygen Network which features viewers talking with Winfrey and her guests in an open-mic forum. After the Frey episode, the audience’s questions and reactions were directed entirely towards Frey. Some viewers defended him

while others condemned his actions.<sup>57</sup> Of the latter, one audience member, Amy, a recovering addict, describes herself as “disappointed and betrayed” and finally brings Winfrey’s role under scrutiny: “It’s not just about trusting you [Frey], it’s about trusting the publishers, it’s about trusting Oprah for trusting you... you know, she’s a very powerful woman.” This moment of awareness on Amy’s part, however incidental and anecdotal in nature, seems key to me. The relationship between spectator and celebrity is not equal. Winfrey’s cultural power far exceeds Amy’s. Farr’s assumption is that the mass of spectators, united as a group, can overcome the singular power of the celebrity, but the likelihood of this occurring is reduced by the fact that the spectators as a group exist as such only via their mutual connections to the celebrity. Without Oprah Winfrey, there is no *Oprah* audience. Thus for the spectators to truly usurp Winfrey’s power they would in turn dissolve their group status.

The ramifications of this dissolution cannot be underestimated. It has been through Oprah that these spectators have acquired a value set and a way of life which they hold in high esteem. It has been through Oprah that these viewers have found resemblances to themselves in the lives of celebrities, entrepreneurs, and everyday heroes. Oprah has encouraged her audience to be more informed, more spiritual, and more confident. She has opened doors and book covers to millions of Americans.

After Amy makes the comment on Winfrey’s power, the following exchange occurs:

OPRAH: So you were upset with me too?

[*pause. laughter from the audience.*]

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<sup>57</sup> From *Oprah after the Show*, air date January 26, 2006. Transcribed by author.

OPRAH: You can say it.

[*Amy extends her hand palm forward towards Oprah in a 'stopping' gesture.*]

AMY: At first I was... when you went on *Larry King* I was not happy with you at all... But I was so happy when you came out here [*pauses. places hand on her chest*]... I was like, you know, that's awesome. I mean it is awesome, it's world awesome, it's global awesome.

The hyperbole of Amy's closing statements expresses not the "awesomeness" of Winfrey's apology, nor the "awesomeness" of the events of the *A Million Little Pieces* controversy. While both would make the headlines, neither could objectively be said to register on a "global" scale of awesomeness. The "globe/world" being referred to is not the planet Earth, but the world of Oprah Winfrey—the world which Amy and millions of other viewers wish to be part of, wish to access through the consumption of television, magazines, books, and New Age values. Amy, as she speaks directly to the woman whom she has thus far only accessed through the conduits of the *Oprah* media, has achieved that which is most awesome for the dedicated *Oprah* viewer: an immediate Oprah experience. But as instantly as that immediate experience occurs, a transformation takes place. The cameras roll, the microphones pick up the dialogue, the editors cut the film together, and the webmasters post the clip to Oprah.com where I and millions of other viewers can access it. Amy's immediate experience is thus transformed into just one more of the "million little pieces" of media which constitute *Oprah*. Amy has been incorporated into the *Oprah* pantheon just like James Frey, Eckhart Tolle, Sally Field, and the numerous guests before them. The instant Amy attains the "globally awesome" is the instant she becomes mapped, demarcated, and permanently inscribed upon the face of that globe; the face of *Oprah*.

The *A Million Little Pieces* controversy was ostensibly about truth and accountability. If so, it would appear that it did little to stem the tide of fabricated memoirs. In 2008 alone, Margaret Jones' memoir *Love and Consequences* (2008) about a half-Indian Los Angeles drug dealer was revealed to have been written by one Margaret Seltzer, a white, middle-class woman who grew up in San Fernando Valley and attended a private Episcopal school. Only a week prior, Mischa Defonseca's Holocaust memoir *Mischa: A Mémoire of the Holocaust Years* (1997) was outted as well. Defonseca (aka Monique De Wael) claimed to have lived with a pack of wolves as a child while hiding from the Nazis. Her story had recently been turned into a French feature-film, *Suivre avec les Loups*, when it was discovered that she in fact had survived World War Two in the comfort of her grandfather's home in Brussels.

Though both memoirs warranted attention from major news outlets, neither provoked the same level of outrage as *A Million Little Pieces*. Nor did the fake memoirs uncovered prior to Frey's, including Benjamin Wilkomorski's *Fragments* (1995), another bogus Holocaust memoir. Nor did Rigoberta Menchú's fictionalized account, *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (1983), of atrocities in Guatemala. In fact, Menchú—who won the Nobel Prize in part for her memoir—was defended by academics who felt her story still provided an important account of the Guatemalan struggles.<sup>58</sup>

In terms of outlandishness Frey's root canals and fourteen(ish) arrests seem tame when compared to Defonseca's adventures with wolves. In terms of social importance, no one ever nominated Frey for a Nobel Prize, nor did his story "borrow" the actual deaths

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<sup>58</sup> Robin Wilson, "Anthropologist Challenges Veracity of Multicultural Icon," *The Chronicle of Higher Education: Colloquy*, 1999.

of six million Jews during the Holocaust. Yet it is Frey's name which, at the time of this writing, remains most synonymous with embellishment and fakery, not thanks to the extent to which he bent the truth, but rather to his association with Winfrey. One might say that, when it comes to matters of truth, the real news is not he who lied, but she who believed him.

After the *A Million Little Pieces* controversy Winfrey announced her selection of the next OBC title: Eli Wiesel's Holocaust memoir, *Night*. According to Winfrey, *Night* had been selected prior to the publication of *The Smoking Gun* report but not announced, because "there was such great interest in James' book, we let him have six more weeks of, you know, the publicity and all the build-up from... the book club," and, perhaps even more dishearteningly, "because I didn't think people would want to read *Night* during the Christmas holidays."<sup>59</sup> Apparently, truth, like eggnog, is only appropriate for certain seasons.

My purpose has been to point the criticism of the *A Million Little Pieces* controversy away from its explicit content—truth—and towards the discourse in which that content is constituted—the media of Oprah Winfrey. This discourse has been claimed by critics like Farr to be democratic in nature, a forum where readers and viewers are instilled with values of self-empowerment which enable them to make informed, yet independent, choices on matters of art, philosophy, and politics. Unfortunately, *Oprah*—like any capitalist enterprise—is first and foremost the guarantor of its own existence. Meta-discourse is allowed only under the rarest (and most intensely regulated) circumstances. Even then, as was the case with Amy, the meta-discourse is immediately

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<sup>59</sup> *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, air date January 26, 2006.

constellated in the *prima facie* discourse of the media: independent discussion about Oprah is re-positated as *Oprah's* discussion (about Oprah). By incorporating even those who critique her, Oprah can recreate criticism as a therapeutic discourse; a discourse perfectly formatted for her original success: the talk show.

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