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Author(s): R. Mark Hall

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The “Oprahfication” of Literacy: Reading “Oprah’s Book Club”

R. Mark Hall

Oprah is to be credited for encouraging human-scale literary activity. Most people are reading more books than at any time in the history of American society, without contact with the so-called authorities. Oprah has done a brilliant job of encouraging people to do that. Who needs literature professors? We’ve become absolutely irrelevant. (B4)

—Jerry S. Herron

I propose that we listen to the signals that come through the walls of our classrooms from the outside. (276)

—Anne Ruggles Gere

Reading groups, or book clubs, became a prominent fixture in middle-class American life during the mid-1800s as the spread of education combined with an increase in leisure time. According to sociologist Robert D. Putnam’s *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, then, as now, such groups attracted mostly women readers interested in intellectual self-improvement, self-expression, and friendship. Such groups became increasingly engaged, not only in literary activities, but also in community service and political activism (149). Oprah Winfrey continues, but also changes, this tradition of promoting literacy as a means of individual and cultural advancement with “Oprah’s Book Club,” a book-discussion group that aired as part of the *Oprah Winfrey Show* from 1996 through 2002.¹

Approximately once a month, Winfrey announced a new book club selection, and then the following month she and the author, along with a few carefully chosen

R. Mark Hall is assistant professor of rhetoric and composition and literacy studies at California State University, Chico. He directs the university writing center and writes about composition, literacy, and writing center theory and practice.

viewers, joined together, sometimes over dinner, to discuss the book. Highlights from these prerecorded discussions appeared on the show. From the start, both critics and viewers praised Winfrey, and ratings of the book club episodes remained high. At the same time, publishers credited her with revitalizing the book-selling industry. According to Richard Lacayo in a 1997 *Time* magazine retrospective of the previous year's "Twenty-Five Most Influential People," "Oprah Winfrey, the greatest force in television, has practically saved the alphabet. It's simple. Oprah selects a title for the book-discussion club [. . .]. Then everyone in America buys it. This gives her the market clout of a Pentagon procurement officer" (70). According to Daisy Maryles of *Publishers Weekly*, all of Winfrey's selections have impressive track records. Jacquelyn Mitchard's *Deep End of the Ocean*, Winfrey's first pick, for instance, went from 100,000 to 915,000 copies in print. Likewise, Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Winfrey's second choice, went from 300,000 copies in print to 1,390,000 ("Behind the Bestsellers: The Oprah Scorecard" 18). Almost all of Oprah's books have "enjoyed double-digit tenures on the weekly bestseller charts and went on to sell upward of 750,000 copies each" (20).

Although the influence of "Oprah's Book Club" has been well documented in the popular media, it has received little attention from the academic community. Its enormous influence suggests, however, that "Oprah's Book Club" deserves the attention particularly of literacy specialists. As Brian Street points out, scholarly interest in theoretical perspectives concerning literacy has increased in recent years. We have moved beyond questions about literacy acquisition and the supposed differences between orality and literacy to consider literacy "as a social practice." Street explains, "Within this framework an important shift has been the rejection by many writers of the dominant view of literacy as a 'neutral,' technical skill, and the conceptualization of literacy as an ideological practice, implicated in power relations and embedded in specific cultural meanings and practices" (1). As John Trimbur has noted, this "redefinition" of literacy "has raised a series of further questions concerning how literacy is used to maintain social networks, exchange social identities, and distribute (and redistribute) power and cultural capital" (5). "Oprah's Book Club" invites us to develop this conceptualization of literacy as an ideological practice by investigating the manner or content of thinking about reading and writing associated with it. What values and assumptions about literacy were advanced on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, and how are they implicated in power relations and ingrained in specific reading practices? As an example of literacy as a social practice, "Oprah's Book Club" is significant to literacy studies, not only because it might help us advance theories about the ways in which literacy is always already embedded in and embodying the practices, beliefs, and values of a culture, but also because, as Beverly Moss asserts, understanding the literacy goals and practices of nonschool communities and institutions can help teachers to connect with students' literacies

and lives beyond the classroom (180). As posts to the book club Web site show, “Oprah’s Book Club” attracted a large number of readers, some well-educated, who do not regularly read fiction on their own and are not motivated by the desire for the rewards of academic literacy, including economic and social mobility, critical thinking, and access to information.

As an example of literacy as a social practice, “Oprah’s Book Club” invites us to examine how and why people read and write outside of school and work. To that end, Deborah Brandt’s “Sponsors of Literacy” helps to theorize the relationship between literacy as an individual development and literacy as a broader social—and, in particular, economic—development. She does so via the concept of the “literacy sponsor.” Such sponsors, according to Brandt, assume responsibility for another person or a group during a period of instruction, apprenticeship, or probation. And like sponsors who finance a project or an event carried out by another person or group, especially a business enterprise that pays for television programming in return for advertising time, the literacy sponsor profits from the transaction. Winfrey is such a literacy sponsor. Brandt argues that “[s]ponsors are a tangible reminder that literacy learning throughout history has always required permission, sanction, assistance, coercion, or, at a minimum, contact with existing trade routes” (167). I examine the club as a literacy delivery system, asking how literacy takes its shape from the interests of both Winfrey and her readers.

One year after she announced the start of her on-air reading club, Oprah Winfrey appeared on the cover of *Life* magazine. In a smart red suit, she smiles broadly, looking directly at readers, holding an antique leather-bound volume with pages edged in gold. The title announces, “The Secret INNER LIFE of America’s Most Powerful Woman: OPRAH Between the Covers.” As its title suggests, the article that follows is meant to do more than simply promote “Oprah’s Book Club.” Like so many other accounts of her life story in the popular media, this one, too, is meant to promote a particular story about Winfrey’s life, what Laura Haag calls her “personal legend” (225). The title alone presents the major themes of Winfrey’s Cinderella fairy tale: secrets, intimacy, power—and books. Turning to the story, however, one is confronted with a very different image from the confident, relaxed, and happy adult Winfrey on the magazine cover. Filling the entire first page is a stark black and white kindergarten class photograph of Winfrey, grim-faced, staring blankly at the camera. Filling the page opposite, against a black background, is a quotation in white lettering from her interview with *Life*’s Marilyn Johnson. Her words offer a revelation characteristic of Winfrey: “No one ever told me I was loved. Ever, ever, ever. Reading and being able to be a *smart girl* was my only sense of value, and it was the only time I felt loved” (45). By contrast to the other words on this page, “Reading” and “the only time I felt loved” receive special emphasis because they are highlighted. In the center of these two pages, in red, and joining them together, is the

article's title: OPRAH WINFREY: A LIFE IN BOOKS. This article illustrates that, in a sense, Oprah is herself a book. Or, rather, her life is a narrative.

Winfrey's literacy narrative of progress is told and retold in popular newspaper and magazine articles such as that in *Life*, television shows such as her A and E Network biography, and unauthorized biographies such as Norman King's *Everybody Loves Oprah! Her Remarkable Life Story* and Nellie Bly's *Oprah! Up Close and Down Home*. Reading is a prominent theme in these accounts of Winfrey's life story. Though they were not readers themselves, Winfrey's father and stepmother encouraged Winfrey's love of books. According to *Life* magazine, "Oprah says they regularly took her to the library [. . .] and they expected her to write reports on the books she borrowed. 'Getting my library card was like citizenship, it was like American citizenship,' she says" (Johnson 48). Comparing her own childhood to that of Francie Nolan, the main character of Winfrey's favorite childhood book, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, Winfrey confides, "'My most vivid memory of growing up is a sense of loneliness, of being alone [. . .]. Feeling like I was going to have to do it myself, whatever it was'" (Johnson 53). As an adult, Winfrey read Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. According to Norman King, Walker's novel "hit her like a ton of bricks. She was so pleased with it that she handed out copies to all her friends" (134). In one account, Winfrey explains, "'I remember getting out of bed, going up to the mall and buying every single copy that they had in stock. I read it that day. I was devastated, overwhelmed, empowered. All of that. I gave the book to everybody I knew. I couldn't have conversations with women who hadn't read *The Color Purple*'" (Johnson 54). So began Winfrey's career as a literacy sponsor. And Walker's is one book that did, quite literally, change Winfrey's life. A few years later, she would appear in the film version of *The Color Purple* as Sophia. In 1986 she was nominated for an Academy Award, and her top-rated talk show was syndicated to 120 stations nationwide.

Taking up this theme of transformation through books, the *New York Times* ran an article announcing Winfrey's award nomination: "Troubled Girl's Evolution into an Oscar Nominee." It begins with a familiar confession from Winfrey concerning her poor self-image: "When she looks in the mirror, she sometimes sees a poor little girl with ugly, butterfly-rimmed eyeglasses" (C1). It ends with the equally familiar transformation and triumph that characterizes Winfrey's literacy narrative of progress, a narrative peopled with literary talent: "In her heart, she said, the little girl with the ugly butterfly glasses keeps the memories of other powerful black women who have overcome personal tragedies or overwhelming obstacles: Maya Angelou, Sojourner Truth, Madame C. J. Walker. 'I believe those women are a part of my legacy and the bridges that I crossed to get where I am today'" (C1). As Winfrey has gradually revealed this life story on her show and in the popular media, fans have learned, over time, how literacy freed Winfrey herself, making possible her enormous fame and fortune. Books provided education, friendship, and solace, and helped to build a

bridge to the past. As readers, her fans are encouraged to read what and how Winfrey herself reads and thus to become similarly liberated.

Another photograph in the *Life* magazine article shows Winfrey sitting like a queen in the elegant Brunswick Room of the St. Ignatius Prep School library in Chicago, the mistress of all she surveys. Again, she holds an antique volume, this time a fatter one, on her lap. The suggestion of intimacy is unmistakable. Winfrey's full but closed-lipped smile seems to say, "Come hither." Her eyes invite readers "between the covers" and into her "INNER LIFE," which is filled, like the library, with books. Her inner life is also filled with secrets, which she shares on her show and in the popular media in order to establish a sense of intimacy with her viewers. Intimacy takes the form on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* of shared stories. Viewers are drawn in, not just by the cozy sets, the overstuffed chairs, and the warm lighting, but also by the shared narratives. "Intimacy," in Oprah's case, involves closeness, companionship of a strange sort, intimacy once removed, if you will, not intimacy as it is typically experienced as close acquaintance, association, or familiarity. Television scholars refer to this imagined or *constructed* intimacy as a "para-social" relationship between a viewer and a television personality or character because although it is not actually interpersonal interaction, for many people, so the thinking goes, watching a favorite television personality functions as a replacement for actual social relationships. The notion of "para-social interaction," from the 1956 study of the talk show and its host by Donald Horton and Richard Wohl suggests that talk television is potentially harmful to viewers because, conditioned by intimacy associated with family and friends, spectators may be fooled into believing that the closeness they feel with a television personality is, in fact, real, unmediated. The television talk show, then, may be experienced by viewers as more "real" than, say, a dramatic show (213). But as Wayne Munson points out in *All Talk: The Talkshow in Media Culture*, Horton and Wohl's conception of the illusion of intimacy has gone largely unexamined. According to Munson, one problem with Horton and Wohl's argument is that it posits a passive viewer who can't tell the difference between the interpersonal conventions of television and "real" social relationships. "The privileging of 'real' interpersonal communication at the expense of the talkshow's 'simulation' of it has continued as a dominant strain in the empirical research into the talkshow," Munson notes (117). Munson finds troubling the very distinction between "real" and "imagined" relations between viewers and television personalities, and argues that "[Horton and Wohl] would like to separate out and define that which has actually become inseparable. They atavistically long for a clear 'fourth wall,' a reestablishment of the defining either-or aesthetic boundaries between performer and text and spectator, a renewal of the clear distinction between public and private" (117). This breaking down of boundaries is central to my view of the ideological work of talk television. Rather than traffic in either/or dichotomous thinking, to use Munson's words, "the talkshow

loosely adheres to [a] new set of ‘rules’ in the expanded field of a postmodern image economy whose productive instability—its *play* with established boundaries—is exactly how it *works*” (147). How does *The Oprah Winfrey Show* play with the boundaries between “real” and “imagined” intimacy? How does the show work to create this confusion?

This illusion of intimacy is important because it plays a central role in granting Winfrey the authority to tell millions of viewers what to read. The *Life* article vividly enacts this familiar gesture of intimacy building that viewers have come to expect from Winfrey. *Life* takes us inside the private life of the talk show host who has turned confession into an art. Equally important, the article tells the story of Winfrey’s transformation through books, a story of uplift that her loyal fans know well, and one that helps to determine how literacy is defined and deployed on her show. As Deborah Brandt argues, “literacy sponsors” “are any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way” (166). One way that Winfrey establishes her authority as a literacy sponsor is first to construct the appearance of intimacy with her viewers. She does this, in part, by sharing the personal details of her life, including her literacy narrative of progress. Sharing the details of her life transforms Winfrey into a trusted friend. Just as Winfrey carefully selects the books for “Oprah’s Book Club,” so she carefully chooses which details of her life to share, details that illustrate how she has overcome obstacles in her life. Winfrey’s goal is to use her narrative, not only to promote herself, but also to show her audience by example how they too can overcome difficulties. Winfrey’s audience, like anyone in search of a good book, then reads what this trusted friend recommends. Winfrey also uses her influence as a prominent celebrity to persuade participants to take up the books she selects.

As she has risen in popularity, Winfrey has disclosed more and more details of her life, more and more secrets. These details highlight her extraordinary success against daunting obstacles, while at the same time they emphasize her human frailty. As a result, viewers feel that Oprah may be one of television’s richest entertainers, but she is also “just like me.” A 1986 *Woman’s Day* article quotes Winfrey as saying, “People out there think I’m their girlfriend; they treat me like that. It’s really amazing” (Tornabene 50). Likewise, popular biographies of Winfrey such as Bly’s also serve to promulgate her personal legend and reputation for intimacy. Bly quotes the *Washington Post*, among others, who highlight Winfrey’s distinctive style among talk show hosts: “If Jane Pauley is the prom queen, Oprah Winfrey is the dorm counselor [. . .]. People want to hold Barbara Walters’ hand. They want to crawl into Winfrey’s lap” (52). Readers of such biographies know, for example, the “inside” story behind the public story of Winfrey’s weight-loss battle. They know not only the Winfrey who dragged a wagonload of beef fat across stage as a symbol of the 67

pounds she once lost, but also the Winfrey who secretly binged on a package of hotdog buns bathed in syrup. Winfrey uses different voices to communicate the illusion of intimacy with her audience. Haag explains, “Viewers recognize the serious Oprah, the playful Oprah, the empathetic Oprah, the angry Oprah, the ‘just folks’ Oprah” (119).

Winfrey also enters the personal spaces of guests, touches them, sustains lingering eye contact, and listens closely when they speak. Such behaviors, according to Haag, mark the communication patterns of female friends and establish a sense of sympathy and sociability between Winfrey and her guests and viewers. Viewers invite Winfrey into their homes—their own private spaces—and in return she brings them the private lives, not only of her guests, but also of herself. In short, Winfrey uses intimacy strategically to attract and maintain audience interest and loyalty. Telling a secret about oneself, as Winfrey sometimes does, for instance, can breed affection and loyalty because such a revelation both reflects and engenders trust. Not only do viewers feel they can trust Winfrey because of the intimacy she constructs, but they may also feel flattered, in a sense, and therefore closer to her, because she trusts them with the details of her personal life. In this way, the illusion of intimacy establishes a moral bond between Winfrey and her viewers, a bond Steven Shapin calls “trust” (7). This trust is critical to Winfrey’s success as a literacy sponsor.

In promoting herself, Winfrey promotes books, and, in promoting books, she promotes herself. This is a simple formula that, for Winfrey, has resulted in success, and a formula that she suggests will work for others. In short, one tells stories to save one’s life, to overcome what makes living difficult, to transform one’s life for the better. The *Life* article, like other popular accounts of Winfrey’s life—and the book club itself—turns upon the theme of transformation through literacy. Turn the page of *Life* and Winfrey is, quite literally, transfigured. No longer the poverty-stricken Kosciusko, Mississippi, kindergartner with the long face, Winfrey becomes, Cinderella-fashion, a full-color glamorous celebrity talk show host in a low-cut clinging red dress, slim legs crossed over one of her beloved cocker spaniels, with the other by her side in a plush wingback leather chair. All traces of Winfrey’s dreary past are gone. She is bathed in light, both from the front and behind. As a result, her skin glows golden maple, the color of the highly polished leather chair and the intricately carved woodwork of the library bookshelves. Books cover the wall behind her from end to end and floor to ceiling. Winfrey’s *Life* story is a story about being empowered by books. In this page-and-a-half-photograph books are—both literally and figuratively—the power behind this successful icon.

Accordingly, the elegant dinner parties staged in the early years of “Oprah’s Book Club” helped to remind readers not only that they knew Winfrey intimately, but also that her taste was worthy of their trust. Lavish displays glamorized reading, associating it with both intimacy and consumption. As “food for thought,” books

took on the delicacy of crab cakes flown in from Maryland to Chicago for a book club dinner party at Winfrey's house with author Toni Morrison. "Members" of "Oprah's Book Club" gained entrée not only to Winfrey's dining room but also to that intensely private and solitary activity, reading. On more than one occasion Winfrey has gone even further, taking not only a good book to bed, but also her most loyal fans, giving gifts of "Oprah's Book Club" pajamas to guests on the show. Readers thus become "members of the club," Winfrey's cozy community of sophisticated intellectuals, sharing ideas and clinking glasses of champagne with celebrity authors such as Maya Angelou. On the episode featuring her memoir *The Heart of a Woman*, for example, Angelou was joined by Winfrey and select viewers at the author's own home, where all of the women sat about discussing the book in their new book club pajamas.

Mobilizing intimacy, together with the dynamics of celebrity, Winfrey constructs reading as a spectacular, personal mark of good taste. "She's like the friend you trust, the one you know has good taste," says a fan in a *Los Angeles Times* article (Braun 81). The intimacy Winfrey establishes with her audience is the result not just of her nurturing persona, but also of the enactment of that persona in the talk show setting. According to Jeffrey Decker, "By collapsing inside (home) and outside (world), foreground (self) and background (scene), TV allows viewers to inhabit the space of audience and celebrity simultaneously" (117)—what Jean Baudrillard terms an "ecstasy of communication" (126). In Winfrey's case, it might be more aptly called an "ecstasy of intimacy."

Winfrey's aesthetic system thus reflects neither the values and assumptions of a high culture aesthetic, nor a more popular aesthetic. Instead, she combines something we might call a "celebrity aesthetic," one that celebrates the good taste of the rich and famous, with an "aesthetic of intimacy," one based upon trust in the recommendations of a close friend. Furthermore, Winfrey's success suggests that, if followed, her recommendations may make one similarly successful. Although the setting for each book club dinner is a carefully constructed staging of Winfrey's good taste—both gastronomic and literary—her authority to select the right books for her viewers is established by naturalizing that good taste, by making it appear easy and unstudied. Though she may serve yellowtail tuna crusted with pistachios, followed by herb-roasted pork with pea risotto, Winfrey is careful, nonetheless, not to construct her book discussions as too highbrow. In a *Wall Street Journal* article, Amy Gamerman recounts Winfrey's backstage dispute with senior producer Alice McGee at the taping of a book club dinner party at Riverside Public Library in Chicago. McGee suggested the Bulwer-Lytton quotation carved over the library entrance as the toast for the evening's dinner: "There is no past as long as books shall live." Winfrey scoffed, "That's so highfalutin! I'm not saying that [. . .]. 'To books,' that's the toast!" (A20). Likewise, when one viewer wrote to chide Winfrey for clinking

glasses during the after-dinner toasts, Winfrey pooh-poohed such high-toned manners and announced that the clinking would continue, in spite of Miss Manners's admonition against it.

Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* offers a theoretical framework for interpreting viewer trust in Winfrey's judgment:

The ideology of natural taste owes its plausibility and its effects to the fact that [. . .] it naturalizes real differences, converting differences in the mode of acquisition of culture into differences of nature; it only recognizes as legitimate the relation to culture [. . .] which least bears the visible marks of its genesis, which has nothing "academic," "scholastic," "bookish," "affected," or "studied" about it, but manifests by its ease and naturalness that true culture is nature—a new mystery of immaculate conception. (68)

"Oprah's Book Club" invites viewers into Winfrey's world of celebrity and glamour, but at the same time Winfrey must appear down-to-earth if she is to maintain her appeal to an audience of mostly working-class women. As Patsy, one book club participant, puts it, "I had forgotten how fun it is to really get to know characters and have them 'with' me for days or weeks [. . .]. Reading isn't a hobby of mine; it's hard to know what's good and what's not. I don't know the person writing the review in the paper, but because I have watched Oprah for years and feel like I know her and trust her taste, I'm confident in pursuing her suggestions" (qtd. in "Must-Read TV" 5). The success of "Oprah's Book Club," then, results from both Winfrey's long-established and carefully cultivated intimacy with her fans and their resulting trust in her good taste. But Winfrey is no Charlie the Tuna. She understands that viewers demand more than a host with good taste. Remember that the friendship Winfrey found in books as a lonesome girl is central to her literacy narrative: "Oprah's Book Club" succeeds because the friend viewers already love and trust offers not only to share her own dearest friends—books—but also to participate with readers in a familiar and intimate setting to get to know and enjoy those new companions. The online magazine *Total TV* suggests that Winfrey's construction of her book club as a closeknit community of friends has been crucial to its success:

It's no secret how America's premier talk-show host feels about reading. "I loved books when I was growing up," she says. "When I didn't have friends, I had books. One of the greatest pleasures I have now is to be reading a really good book and know I have a really, really good book after that." Though Oprah has always supported books on her program, novels have never done well. "Every summer we do the best books of summer and then another show around Christmas time. But we'd just go down the toilet; the ratings would die." (4)

Ratings remained consistently high, however, not simply because Winfrey recommended a title, but because she has carefully constructed a community of friendly readers. Furthermore, "Oprah's Book Club" gives her readers permission to plea-

sure themselves. Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* offers a theory for understanding why readers are drawn to "Oprah's Book Club." Radway explains that readers value the activity of reading romance fiction because it offers both pleasure and the challenge of new information. On the one hand, readers assert their right to self-indulgence; on the other, they justify this guilty pleasure by linking it to the culturally sanctioned value of learning. "Oprah's Book Club" tapped into these same values of pleasure and learning.

As a literacy sponsor, the teacherly Winfrey has carefully constructed reading as entertaining, but, equally important, she emphasizes that reading teaches. The success of Winfrey's role as teacher, as well as that of the book club itself, depends upon the trust fans place in her, for, as Shapin argues, "learning presupposes trust in the reliability of knowledge-sources" (13). Winfrey relieves viewers of guilt over the self-indulgent pleasure of reading (and watching television) by selecting books that instruct, some of them culturally sanctioned classics such as Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *The Bluest Eye*. Though she constructs reading as a pleasurable entertainment, Winfrey emphasizes the transforming possibilities of serious fiction. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, when asked by an audience member to assign a "light and funny" book, the serious, teacherly Oprah replied, "I don't read anything light and funny" (Gamerman A20). Rather, Winfrey's message is that serious reading can change one's life for the better. Radway's "The Book-of-the-Month Club and the General Reader: The Uses of 'Serious' Fiction" identifies such change as an important function for general readers: "Indeed," Radway writes, "literacy may still serve primarily as a tool or a technology for such people, which is to say a device for doing something, for bringing about change, for accomplishing some purpose" (277).

Fans of "Oprah's Book Club" seem likewise attracted by the possibility of change. The book club was added during a time of change for the *Oprah Winfrey Show* itself, when Winfrey was restructuring her show, moving away from the tell-all, knock-down-drag-out daytime talk format of competitors such as Jerry Springer. She sought to reinvent the *Oprah Winfrey Show* "so that it would be more inspirational" (Lowe 34.) Soon after, came "Oprah's Angel Network," a national effort to encourage viewers to make charitable contributions and do volunteer work. Since the restructuring, doing well by doing good has been a persistent theme on the show and the success of the book club results, in part, from the ways it is carefully woven into the program's existing fabric of entertainment, self-improvement, and social reform. Winfrey's celebrity thus combines with the ideologies of self-improvement and cultural uplift to promote this fantasy of transformation.

Books are central to this theme of self-improvement. Though media and public interest in Winfrey has often centered on her appearance and especially her battle to keep her weight down, the "lifestyle makeover" of both herself and her show—including the addition of "Oprah's Book Club"—suggests that self-making within

an electronic media culture can be realized, not just along the surface of the body, but through the cultivation of the mind and spirit. While Decker laments the passing of the traditional post-World War II Horatio Alger figure of the self-made man, he rightly points out that “[t]oday’s self-made woman is not only required to make money but—in order to be perceived as in control and therefore successful—must look good while making it” (119). Decker is mistaken, however, to argue that “the manufacture of self-styled success in the form of celebrity forecloses the central concern behind old-fashioned narratives of uplift: the cultivation of inner morality made manifest in the character of the entrepreneur” (132). “Oprah’s Book Club” and the accompanying literacy narrative of its host sought to breathe new life into the idea that the cultivation of the mind and character is a prerequisite to doing well.

As with her own literacy narrative of progress, the book club dinner party featuring Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, in particular, is a good illustration of how Winfrey’s authority as a literacy sponsor is established and maintained by uniting the themes of intimacy, self-improvement, and good taste. This is the only book club dinner to have actually taken place in Winfrey’s own home, where four women were invited to discuss Morrison’s novel. In this personal setting Winfrey cultivates her para-social relationship with fans, offering a rare peek at her glamorous surroundings and—vicariously—a seat at her dinner table. (Later, however, Winfrey confessed that the camera crew had wreaked such havoc on her Chicago penthouse that she constructed a replica of her home library in the studios of Harpo Productions, where book club dinners have since been staged.)

Morrison’s book club discussion is unusual, too, because, unlike other episodes, it takes place in two parts. Part 1 is the second half of a show entitled “How’d They Do That?” about behind-the-scenes Hollywood special effects. As viewer trust in Winfrey’s book choices became firmly entrenched, however, the book club quickly turned from short segments on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* to full episodes. Winfrey addressed this need to establish viewer trust when she explained why she chose Morrison’s novel: “I do think it was a little daring to do it as the second book for the Book Club. Because I didn’t have enough people who were followers who could trust me. That’s why when I did it, I said trust [Morrison], even if you don’t trust me” (“How’d”).

Part 1 includes only highlights of the dinner, while the second part, which aired two weeks later, adds a layer of intimacy by taking viewers “Behind the Scenes at Oprah’s Dinner Party” for an entire episode. Like the *Life* article, this dinner takes the audience inside the secret “INNER LIFE” of Oprah Winfrey. Viewers see inside Winfrey’s lavish house, meet her personal staff, and witness the dinner preparations from food, to flowers, to table setting. Winfrey’s power and authority are on display. Here we see how Winfrey governs her staff and makes things happen. Draw-

ing upon the commonplace that fiction provides both escape and entertainment via the imagination, Winfrey persuades viewers to join "Oprah's Book Club" by inviting them into her personal fantasy kingdom.

Part of this fantasy involves the promise of transformation or cultural uplift. In Part 1 of this dinner episode, Winfrey teases her audience with a revelation that she promises to make at a future time. Then, two weeks later, during the first minutes of the "Behind the Scenes" program, Winfrey takes viewers behind the scenes of her own psychic life, as promised, in the spirit of revealing yet another secret: "I can count three extraordinary things that have happened to me in my lifetime that made me deliriously happy," she says. "One was making *The Color Purple*. The other was Maya Angelou reading poetry aloud to me at her home, both of us in our pajamas, on the floor. And the third took place just last month. It was my Book Club dinner with Nobel Prize author [. . .] Toni Morrison." Then Winfrey points out, "Now all three are book-related—interesting" ("Behind"). Interesting, indeed. This hobnobbing with Angelou and Morrison shows Winfrey herself in the making. Surrounding herself with two of the most prominent members of America's literary elite, African American mother figures to Winfrey who are probably more successful in her mind than she thinks herself to be, Winfrey shows how she herself is working on her own improvement.

In Part 1, then, Winfrey builds viewer anticipation by promising to show how reading has altered not only her own life, but also the lives of the other women who joined her for the dinner discussion: "It was—something really incredible happened among us all," she says ("How'd"). Later, Winfrey announces this theme again, a theme that defines how literacy is employed on the show, when she labels this "[a] dinner that transformed our lives" ("Behind"). Since it was early in the book club's history, however, and Winfrey could not yet bank on an audience who had read the novel she selected, Winfrey suggested that her talk show itself might, in a sense, stand in for books, metonymically, to accomplish the same goal of transformation: "And even if you haven't read the book," Winfrey offered, "it could help change yours." Later in the show, Morrison herself echoes this theme of uplift through reading when she says, "[T]he key to [uplift] is the experience of reading a book." That is the theme of this and all of the book club shows. But, again, if you haven't read the book, the message is that the *Oprah Winfrey Show* can have the same effect: "Even if you haven't read the book, *Song of Solomon*, you haven't heard of Toni Morrison," Winfrey insists, "there's still so much wisdom that you can get out of this dinner, as I did. [. . .] But if you're more into party planning than life lessons, you can get some great tips on planning a dinner party, too." Morrison agrees in her description of her novel: "I guess I'd say, you know, it's about—on the one hand, it's about a man [. . .] who learns how to fly and all that that means. But it's also about,"

she goes on to say, “the ways we discover, all of us, who and what we are” (“How’d”). This strikes at the heart of how Winfrey uses reading on “Oprah’s Book Club”: as a teaching tool, a means to self-discovery.

Winfrey labels this most privileged reading practice the breakdown that leads to a breakthrough: “None of us had any idea what an emotional roller coaster we were in store for. It was just an unbelievable evening,” she says. “You’re going to see laughter and tears,” she promises, “and a breakdown that turned into a breakthrough” (“Behind”). Such breakdowns, or what Winfrey sometimes calls “bingo moments” or “aha moments,” are prized on the show. They are the gold that makes her version of talk television glitter. They’re precious because they open the door to self-help. At this book club dinner, the breakdown occurs as Morrison reads a passage from *Song of Solomon*, the passage in which Pilate reacts to the death of her granddaughter, Hagar. As the author reads aloud, Celeste Messer, one of the chosen guests, begins to weep off-camera. Quickly, Messer is given center stage. Like other moments of tears on talk shows, this is a privileged moment, made even more ready-for-daytime-talk because it is accompanied by another familiar gesture revered in this medium: self-disclosure. Messer explains her tearful reaction to the death of Pilate’s beloved granddaughter this way: “That’s the first time since probably my first—I have a son, a first-born, he was a stillborn.” As a result of reading, Winfrey’s guest here becomes like Winfrey herself, disclosing a painful secret on national television, a secret that bears a striking resemblance to one of Winfrey’s own. The other women, including both Winfrey and Morrison, then offer comforting words. Messer struggles to make her “breakthrough”:

And I—even though—I mean, that’s sixteen years ago, I never held him. And I wish now I did, but I didn’t want to see him as a child. I wanted to just—I wanted to stay separate from it, because that was the way I’ve kind of dealt with things in my life, is keep myself separate. And I didn’t want to see that he was a baby. And when you went through all that—and I—I have not sobbed—sobbed honestly, since that day.

As promised, the experience of reading a book leads to a transformation. Messer’s honesty, Winfrey teaches, is key, the first step in Oprah’s self-help program. Though another guest, Melinda Foyes, arrives at Winfrey’s home with her copy of Morrison’s novel filled with comments and marked with color-coded sticky notes, prepared to discuss the content of the novel at length, it is not she, but, instead, Messer, crying and self-disclosing, who receives the most camera time at this dinner. While Winfrey does not actively discourage intellectual responses to books, this example illustrates that in the daytime talk setting deeply personal, affective responses are more highly valued because they are more consistent with the values and assumptions underlying the show, where sharing one’s feelings gets top billing. As she frequently does at book club dinners, Winfrey takes on her teacherly persona to sum up such moments

into a neatly packaged sound bite: she says of Messer's realization, "So if you won't feel the pain, you can't feel the joy. What a great lesson." Here, the uses of serious fiction are not primarily academic, but aimed, instead, at self-help and healing.

During the discussion of *Song of Solomon*, the teacherly Oprah becomes the preacherly Oprah, another aspect of her authority as a literacy sponsor. For, as we have seen from her literacy narrative, books are not simply transformative; they can be redemptive. This role is highlighted when Morrison reads another passage from her novel:

This here is what a man can do if he puts his mind to it and his back in it; stop sniveling, it says. Stop picking around the edges of the world. Take advantage, take disadvantage. We live here, on this planet, in this station, in this country right here. Nowhere else. We got a home in this rock. Don't you see? Nobody's starving in my home. Nobody crying in my home. And if I got a home, you've got one, too. Grab it. Grab this land. Take it. Hold it, my brothers. Make it, my brothers. Shake it. Squeeze it. Turn it. Twist it. Beat it. Kick it. Kiss it. Whip it. Stomp it. Dig it. Plow it. Seed it. Reap it. Rent it. Buy it. Sell it. Own it. Build it. Multiply it. And pass it on. Can you hear me? Pass it on.

This passage brings to mind Winfrey as a young girl in her father's Nashville church, reciting the story of Daniel in the lion's den or a poem from James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*. The alliteration, the repetition, the sound of Morrison reading her own words aloud all bring to mind the preaching style characteristic of the southern African American church. Calling the dinner a "revival meeting," Winfrey takes up the "calling," answering Morrison's sermon: "Amen," she implies, when she says, "That's my passage because I believe that that's what we're all here to do, is to take it and nobody—you know, we've all been bought and paid for. And you—and you pass it on." With this, Winfrey underscores the commonplace theme on her show, that doing good leads to doing well. Books take on the power of the blood of Christ, buying and paying for our redemption. Winfrey's lesson is that viewers should model Christ's generosity—as she herself has done: pass it on—that's the lesson of this dinner, just as Winfrey herself once handed out copies of *The Color Purple*. Spread the Word that books can redeem, or as Morrison puts it, "The crown has already been bought. It's already been placed on your head. All you have to do is [read]."

Winfrey clearly uses her celebrity status to construct her role as literacy sponsor. On the one hand, Winfrey constructs herself and the book club dinners as sophisticated; on the other, she is careful to seem down-to-earth, so as not to alienate her mostly working-class audience. For instance, as she surveys the elegant dinner preparations, Winfrey explains, "This is a very formal dinner. This is—this is like the White House. We didn't have this many pieces of silverware at the White House." Later, Winfrey advises—without a hint of irony in her voice—"So when you have a

Nobel Prize winner coming to your house, make sure the other guests arrive first.” Though few in her audience are likely to have occasion to put such advice to use, they can easily relate to the down-to-earth anxiety-filled host, anxious to impress an important visitor. Winfrey establishes this feeling of intimacy and familiarity when she becomes the “just folks” Oprah, downplaying her authority and good taste as she slips into the nonstandard English familiar to viewers at such moments: “As you will find out,” she confides, “I didn’t do none of this by myself, because I don’t know nothing about planning no party.” Again, distancing herself from her half-a-billion-dollar star status, Winfrey later combines her teacherly persona with the “just folks” Oprah as she shows how to decorate a table: “See,” she assures viewers, “good taste doesn’t mean spending a lot of money.” Then Winfrey demonstrates how to turn an artichoke into a votive candleholder. “So we’re trying to out-Martha Martha [Stewart] today,” she says. This is the Oprah viewers can trust when she tells them what to read.

In “Im’us, Oprah, and the Literary Elite,” Martha Bayles argues that, rather than pander to the lowest common denominator, Winfrey succeeds as a literacy sponsor because she offers a promise of uplift to her viewers. She gives them what the literary elite fails to deliver: “The secret of Winfrey’s golden touch is her willingness to shoulder the mantel of cultural authority [. . .]. She can do this because her appeal to viewers has never been based on the exploitation of their social and emotional problems (in the manner of Jerry Springer) but on self-help: a trendy term that nonetheless subsumes older and more deeply ingrained notions of self-improvement and (yes) moral uplift” (7). But Winfrey gains something as well in her transaction with book club participants. As Brandt points out, literacy sponsorship is a two-way street: sponsors lend their resources and credibility, and in return they benefit from their success (557). In her reciprocal relationship with book club participants, Winfrey offers her credibility, with the promise of self-improvement and moral uplift. In exchange, Winfrey gains both ratings and revenue when readers find the fulfillment they seek in “Oprah’s Book Club.” Brandt’s conception of the literacy sponsor helps us recognize the central role of power relations in literacy practices. It also sheds light upon the ideologies that saturate those practices. For example, Winfrey’s attempts to “out-Martha Martha Stewart” not only serve to establish her credibility and good taste as a literacy sponsor, but they also bring to mind nineteenth-century sponsoring arrangements through which women in the United States were allowed to acquire literacy and education. Seated at the head of her book club dinner table, Winfrey represents the perfect hostess, reinforcing the sanctioned role of women as homemakers, responsible for feeding and entertaining others. Her lesson on how to set a table brings to mind the traditional female duties associated with childrearing, including instruction in good manners. Winfrey performs the role of traditional mother, teaching not only good manners but also mor-

als. Furthermore, proclaiming the redemptive power of serious fiction, Winfrey reinforces traditional female identities associated with religious faith and education. Her “Remembering Your Spirit” segments encourage the idea that, among her mostly female audience, interest in literacy is, as it was during the nineteenth century, largely spiritual. The *Oprah Winfrey Show*, then, by connecting reading with duties associated with domestic care giving and religious faith, supports traditional female identities. In short, even as Winfrey frames reading in terms of female empowerment, “Oprah’s Book Club” depends upon fundamentally conservative forces in the history of literacy sponsorship for women in this country.

Valuing literacy for transformation, as Winfrey does, means that other ways of reading—and consequences of literacy—don’t register on “Oprah’s Book Club.” As a result, popular conceptions about literacy may be limited in important ways. For example, on the book club episode featuring Ernest Gaines’s *A Lesson Before Dying*, Winfrey concludes with scenes from Louisiana’s Angola Prison, the largest maximum-security prison in the United States. Angola is home to some five thousand of the state’s toughest criminals, most serving life sentences. On the show, the warden and four unnamed prisoners offer testimonials to the good that books can do to reform even the worst offenders. Like the show, however, its written transcript gives no indication who these men are, labeling them simply “Unidentified Man #6,” for instance (“Oprah’s Book Club Goes to Louisiana”). Not until I showed this clip to an audience of literacy specialists did I understand the significance of this omission. One audience member from Louisiana recognized “Unidentified Man #6” as Wilbert Rideau, whom supporters call “the most rehabilitated prisoner in America” (Colt 68). On “Oprah’s Book Club,” Rideau confirms the accuracy of this title: “Reading and books,” he says, “can do something that the entire criminal justice system can’t—that is, really change a human being.” Later, Rideau adds, “If I’m going to die here, I don’t want to be what I used to be. I want to be a better person, period.” Since he began serving a life sentence for murder in 1962, Rideau has become a renowned journalist, author, and advocate of prison reform. As he talks, Rideau holds a book, as though he’s been interrupted at his favorite pastime. At fifty-five, he has a handsome, casual elegance in his long-sleeved denim shirt and jeans. Surrounded by books in what resembles a cozy-but-cluttered faculty office, Rideau looks and sounds like a college English professor. He tells viewers, “I’m editor of the *Angolite* magazine. I’m a published author. I’m a lecturer. The man that I am today is not the me who—who existed thirty-six years ago, and all of that is due to reading and the power of reading.”

But there is another story of Rideau’s literacy that does not get told on “Oprah’s Book Club.” A closer look at Rideau’s life reveals that of the thirty murderers who, along with Rideau, entered Angola Prison during the same year almost four decades ago, all have been released. But not Rideau. He has become a powerful political symbol that Louisiana is tough on crime. As George Colt of *Life* magazine puts it,

“[N]o governor could let Rideau slip out quietly and with little fanfare, like the state’s other pardoned murderers. His fame as a writer, editor and criminal justice expert—the very core of his rehabilitation—may be what keeps him in prison” (69). Literacy, it turns out, may have changed Rideau’s life for the better, but his is no Horatio Alger story. Literacy offers a way up—but not out. Quite literally, there is no such thing as “literacy for liberation” for Wilbert Rideau. Winfrey’s construction of Rideau’s literacy narrative, however, leaves no room for the consideration of the downsides to literacy. Nor does it invite us to critique other important aspects of Rideau’s circumstances, including the pattern of racial bias that keeps African American prisoners such as Rideau, whose victim was white, under lock and key. For instance, according to Linda LaBranche, who studied more than one hundred murder convictions in Louisiana, “no black convicted of murdering a white [. . .] had ever been released from prison, while whites who murdered blacks have all received clemency” (Colt 69). Although Rideau has accepted responsibility for murdering a woman after robbing a bank in 1961, according to a recent article in the *Nation*, in 2002 Rideau was set to stand trial for the fifth time in the same Louisiana town where he was first convicted forty years ago (Bach 22). Among other things, an alternative reading of Rideau’s literacy narrative might consider the troubled relationship between literacy and race in this country, a relationship that doesn’t register on the show. Race is present when Winfrey offers her toast to books at Riverlake plantation, Gaines’s boyhood home, but it is conspicuously absent when her cameras turn toward Angola Prison, itself a former slave plantation where 75 percent of the inmates are African American.

At the close of the show, Winfrey proclaims the “lesson” of Gaines’s novel: that “books can do more than bars.” Then she calls upon viewers to join the studio audience, each of whom has brought a book to donate to the prison. The Literacy Volunteers of America, Winfrey explains, will head up the donation efforts. Along with doing well by doing good, Winfrey’s literacy narrative teaches that books can reform prisoners. But her story leaves no room for an alternative offered by Rideau himself. In an interview with *Time* magazine’s Richard Woodbury, Rideau offers the following analysis of the relationship between education and recent government anticrime measures:

Boot camps can help, but often they’re just another feel-good device for punishing criminals. I’d like to see more efforts aimed at really improving people. Crime is a social problem, and education is the only real deterrent. Look at all of us in prison: we were all truants and dropouts, a failure of the education system. Look at your truancy problem, and you’re looking at your future prisoners. Put the money there. (33)

Like Winfrey, Rideau agrees that literacy can change people for the better. But according to his logic, Winfrey’s book donations might be viewed as just another “feel-

good device.” Likewise, *The Farm: Life Inside Angola Prison*, an award-winning documentary co-directed by Rideau himself, suggests that throwing books at men doomed to die in prison is too little, too late. In short, “Oprah’s Book Club” glosses over what J. Elspeth Stuckey terms “the violence of literacy”:

In the United States we live the mythology of a classless society. We believe our society provides equal opportunities for all and promises success to those who work hard to achieve it. We believe the key to achievement is education, and we believe the heart of education is literacy. In a society bound by such a mythology, our views about literacy are our views about political economy and social opportunity. (vii)

We must ask, then, as we examine “Oprah’s Book Club,” not only what ideologies of literacy are privileged on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, but which ones are ignored—and with what consequences? What alternative stories don’t get told? What might be the consequences of Winfrey’s version of the “literacy myth”? As a sponsor, Winfrey has brought literacy to the fore of American popular culture, but how too might her enormous power and influence cast a shadow over other ways of thinking about literacy?

Thus, “Oprah’s Book Club” suggests ways to extend or perhaps complicate current theories of literacy. I’ve used Brandt’s theory to “read” Winfrey’s power and authority to tell millions of people what—and how—to read. But the Ernest Gaines example above suggests a two-way flow of traffic between theory and the object of my analysis: not only does Brandt’s theory help us to understand “Oprah’s Book Club,” but “Oprah’s Book Club” may also suggest ways to reread—or extend—Brandt’s theory of literacy. Might there be, for instance, a negative version of the literacy sponsor—a “nonliteracy sponsor,” perhaps? In his analysis of the education system above, Rideau identifies truancy as a major problem. But as Jonathan Kozol points out in *Savage Inequalities* and elsewhere, maybe truancy is a problem we’re not genuinely committed to solving in the United States. Kozol shows that many disadvantaged inner-city school districts nationwide depend upon high truancy and dropout rates, because if all the students showed up there wouldn’t be enough classroom space to house them. What is consistent among all these school systems, argues Kozol, “is that all of them are serving children who are viewed as having little value to America” (115). Like Rideau, Kozol points to the possibility that school systems and bureaucracies may sometimes serve as “nonliteracy sponsors,” with the same sort of reciprocal relationship Brandt describes among literacy sponsors and the sponsored. Students like those Kozol describes suffer from lack of educational resources and opportunities, while at the same time the systems and communities in which they live suffer when such students grow up, like Rideau, to become criminals.

Furthermore, more research needs to be done in order to understand how “Oprah’s Book Club” and the writing Winfrey supports relate to the history of Afri-

can American women's literacy practices. As Jacqueline Jones Royster shows in *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African American Women*, the acquisition of literacy by elite African American women during the nineteenth century satisfied the need for individual agency and authority, while at the same time helping black clubwomen to fulfill social and political aims (108). As a literacy sponsor, Winfrey continues, but also changes, this rich tradition of middle- and upper-class African American women who use literacy practices to promote personal transformation and social justice.

Finally, "Oprah's Book Club" has important implications for English studies, particularly literacy teaching and learning. Academics, however, may be reluctant to take "Oprah's Book Club" seriously. More than a few of my colleagues have described how they avoid buying a club selection simply because it bears what they regard as a lowbrow talk show seal of approval. Like my elitist friends in the academy who look down their noses at an Oprah selection, Richard Roeper of the *Chicago Sun-Times* blasts "Oprah's Book Club," in part, because he views television as somehow at odds with print literacy. In "Oprah's Sheep Ready to Follow Every Whim," Roeper says of book club fans: "It's wonderful they're reading again. Kind of sad, though, that it took a TV personality to nudge their minds. Perhaps now that they're back in the habit, some of these people are even choosing books that look interesting to them, rather than waiting for their cue from the talk show host" (11). Anyone who has followed the book discussions on the "Oprah's Book Club" Web site knows, however, that participants are not merely empty-headed dupes of the dominant ideological forces of daytime talk. As the epigraph that introduces this essay suggests, what Arthur N. Applebee terms the "extracurriculum" flourished on Winfrey's discussion boards, reflecting the enthusiasm of nonschool readers and forming an important part of their experiences as literate people (12). Roeper's elitist balking is, nevertheless, a useful reminder that Winfrey's position as a literacy sponsor is evidence of the powerful influence of television as one of the most far-reaching cultural forms. Rather than denigrate the most pervasive form of communication in our culture, we ought to examine the literate behaviors associated with "Oprah's Book Club" more closely, seeking ways to join television and print literacies. Thanks to her celebrity status, Oprah Winfrey has become a powerful literacy sponsor, persuading many otherwise reluctant readers to pick up a book. Winfrey privileges reading practices that appeal to the personal and the emotional. As I've come to better understand Winfrey's ways of reading and their enormous popularity, I've developed a greater sympathy with my students, many of whom come to my classes with literacy goals and expectations similar to those advocated on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*. Rather than force them too quickly and exclusively into critical analysis, I'm inclined to think that teachers might do better, first, to meet students where they are, to learn what their literacy aims and aspirations are as we work to help them

learn literate discourses valued in the academy. With her own progress narrative as a model, Winfrey offers literacy as a Horatio Alger story, a way up. In this way, “Oprah’s Book Club” underscores what brings many students to the study—and love—of literature in the first place: the notion that reading makes life better. The enormous popularity of Winfrey’s book discussions invites teachers to consider, by contrast, the ways that the classroom study of literature sometimes dims the joy of reading.

As Bronwyn Williams argues in *Tuned In: Television and the Teaching of Writing*, English teachers might use students’ experiences watching programs such as the *Oprah Winfrey Show* to advantage in the classroom. Too often, however, we miss the chance to draw upon the broad range of rhetorical skills and literacy experiences students bring with them as a result of their familiarity with television. As Williams puts it:

For teachers of writing, mass popular culture in general and television in particular are often the enemy against which we battle in the name of writing, rhetoric, literature and the essay. We see our jobs as enticing students back to the one true faith of print literacy. We rarely think about the nature of the visual and cultural literacies they possess as a result of their long viewing histories [. . .]. (2–3)

Watching television surely has an influence on how our students read and write, and so by understanding the nature of visual media literacies such as those associated with “Oprah’s Book Club” perhaps we can begin to think of creative ways, not just to critique television, but to use it as a way to teach print literacy itself.

NOTE

1. In February 2003, Winfrey announced the return of her book club, but with a change. Tentatively called “Traveling With the Classics,” this new version will feature “classic” works of literature three to five times a year, along with visits to locations associated with the books and their authors.

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