The Dialogic Genres of Oprah Winfrey’s “Crying Shame”

Kathleen Dixon

Over a decade ago, Lawrence Grossberg wrote of the “indifference of television,” by which he meant a number of things, including that “there is little relation between the TV’s being on and either the presence of bodies in front of it or even a limited concentration or interpretive activity invested in it” (133). Nonetheless, he acknowledged television’s ability to call forth intense emotions in the viewer. This in spite of his belief that television is “constructed from intersecting discourses; it is an assemblage of segments that . . . have relations to other displaced segments” (132). He concludes that television’s “economy may be an empowering one for many of its viewers precisely because it is not ideological” (144). If television is to be involved in “active struggles,” it will do so only “through indirectness” (144). Scholarly critics of The Oprah Winfrey Show have not heeded Grossberg’s words. Instead, they are drawn to Oprah’s words and those of her guests in analyses that privilege language, e.g., one male Marxist critic of Oprah decries feminist “celebration” of Oprah’s “feminine talk” (Cloud). In contrast, Grossberg’s theorizing about television as a medium foregrounds its visual effects: relying heavily upon Baudrillard, he chooses Miami Vice—“all surfaces”—as exemplaric television fare.

However various their methods or perspectives, Oprah scholars assume that The Oprah Winfrey Show has a presence that matters. Janice Peck, for instance, charges Oprah with producing “a popular discourse about race” that “defines, signifies, and problematizes racism within liberal, therapeutic, and religious frames of meaning deeply embedded in Western history” (89-90). My own sense of the postmodern, and of television’s contribution to it, is that it features an interplay of “post” with “modern.” The Oprah critics tend towards modernism, locating linguistic meaning relatively unproblematically within the Oprah show. I would like to offer a combination of the two approaches, looking closely at both the compelling language of an Oprah Winfrey Show as well as its segmenting and intertextuality. I will be arguing that Oprah Winfrey has mastered a television discourse that it would be well for cultural critics
to understand, if it really is the case that they would like to contribute to "active struggles" using television as a medium. Specifically, Oprah knows how to "segment" for her own purposes and to make judicious use of what I will call dialogic genres. However, Oprah's television acumen does not guarantee stable meaning as a result.

I will employ J. L. Austin's notion of the perlocutionary speech act to insist upon language as action or effect, in addition to its propositional content. Even more important will be M. M. Bakhtin's language philosophy. Meaning's proliferation begins at the level of the utterance. The term "utterance" will take on Bakhtin's elastic definition (an utterance can be one word—as in the case of the exclamation, "Oh!")—or an entire novel). As well, his term "stratification" will help us identify dialects, regionalisms, professional jargons, and folk languages inflected by age, class, and so on. Another characteristic of every utterance is the "ideologue," which expresses "a particular way of viewing the world" (Bakhtin, "Discourse" 333). An ideologue betrays the speaker's social class but also every other differentiation possible; it is highly individualized as well as socially constructed. A major advantage of employing Bakhtin is his insistence on dialogism. Every utterance (genre, etc.) is a response to previous utterances; as well, it anticipates response.

Any form or function of language is subject to Bakhtin's concept of dialogism. Especially interesting to us will be the dialogism present in and among genres. I will pose again the question first raised by folklorist John Dorst: "What [are] the observable forms of interaction . . . when the point of view that is one genre encounters the point of view of another? . . . Bakhtin's conceptualization prompts us to consider how genres engage one another in varying degrees of integration and exchange" (Dorst 416). The novel, Bakhtin's favorite literary genre, "is thus best conceived either as a supergenre, whose power consists in its ability to engulf and digest all other genres (the different and separate languages peculiar to each), with other stylized but non-literary forms; or not a genre in any strict, traditional sense at all" (Holquist xxix). We will see something of this novelistic phenomenon in Oprah's "Crying Shame."

To get the best view of this generic dialogism, we will need to focus on one episode of The Oprah Winfrey Show. Indeed, more multi-generic possibilities than we can fully examine will arise in our analysis of this one program. I have chosen "Crying Shame," an Oprah episode on a topic of widespread public (and not only feminine) concern, that is, youth violence. It belongs to one of the sub-genres of the afternoon talk show, the issue-oriented program, the type analyzed by Peck and Jane Shattuc. "Crying Shame" is a particularly striking example of the Oprah show that contributes to public discussion of matters of high seriousness.
Unlike the television newsmagazines from which she frequently borrows, Oprah tries to address the “whole” person. While this invocation of (feminine) subjectivity can only be a fiction, and a fragmented one at that, the same is true of the rational (masculine) subjectivity assumed by news reporting and commentary. If postmodernity creates free-floating emotions or emotions of extremity (as the increased interest in violent films and public support of capital punishment may suggest), Oprah may be at least slightly more attuned to the times, able to consider and exploit this phenomenon. Finally, “Crying Shame” is an exemplary work of television artistry, combining elements of “high” and popular culture, the lavishly produced and the spontaneous, most adroitly. As is typical of The Oprah Winfrey Show, this episode brings into dialogic relation primary (“unmediated”) and secondary speech genres (“they absorb and digest primary . . . genres” (Bakhtin, “Speech” 62). Strictly speaking, all of television belongs to the secondary speech genres, as it is highly mediated, often scripted and carefully edited. However, we can see on Oprah a relation between a kind of spontaneous speech (or perhaps only its representation) and other, more obviously determined forms.

Such terms as “docudrama” and “infomercial” attest to television’s capacities for adapting and blending genres taken from television’s own history as well as from oral culture, radio, film, print, and recently, computer media. At the forefront of generic innovation, in media theorist Elyane Rapping’s estimate, would be the talk show: “the most dynamic and elastic of all nonfiction on TV, the most likely to push the limits of hegemonic thinking in all directions” (120). Brian Rose confirms her observation, noting that “the versatility of the talk show in being able to straddle virtually the whole of television, from journalism to soap operas to sports, makes it an unusually interesting example of how modern generic forms can feed off one another to create new combinations” (330). This combining and blurring of genres is Oprah’s high achievement. She uses it to respond effectively to the “indifference of television,” which includes the fact of the mobile viewer (Oprah’s audience may be tending to household chores while the show is on) and the ubiquity of channel surfing. On The Oprah Winfrey Show, reportorial speech alternates with pathetic appeals, epigrammatic delivery with didactic uses of print journalism and scholarship—all within a recursive structure that is never an exact repetition. The “indifference” of the viewers is belied by high ratings (at one point, her show “snar[ed] an unassailable 35 per cent of the audience” in her time slot) and Oprah’s potent celebrity status (Squire).

The theme of “Crying Shame” is that of violent crime committed by children. Although the episode’s use of this topic is not merely sensa-
tionalistic, it still might be judged by the sociologist, journalist, and child welfare advocate Donna Gaines as "media porn." Her definition: "The misrepresentation of young people's social activity. Popular images of kids as 'thugs,' 'animals,' drive-by shoot-outs, gangsters, and teenage crack moms rocking in the free world, jock gang rapists, parricide perps, low math and science scorers, zombies without morals" (Gaines, "Border" 231). One of the subheadings of Gaines' essay is "The Negation of the Social Contract between Young People and Adults." This she describes in the language of the young: "Your parents, teachers and even the priests can rape you, rip you off and no one will believe you, if they do they won't care or do much about it. You're on your own" (230). Gaines' ethnographic account of "heavy metal" youth culture, Teenage Wasteland, was published in 1991. Although they come at the phenomenon from different perspectives, both Gaines and Winfrey are acknowledging a cultural theme of the 1990s. After decades of enjoying a privileged status, "youth" is now a troubled category.

The "live" portion of "Crying Shame" is filmed on location in Detroit at the Fox Theatre. On stage sit the guests, primarily adult victims of youth crimes or parents of violent youths, a district attorney, and a social worker. In the theater seats are the studio audience, varied in terms of race and gender, with a high adult to youth ratio. Also on stage, elevated well above the guests, is a large screen, which projects a variety of images, from those of the off-location guests (i.e., two boys in prison) and all pre-filmed portions of the show, which include home videos and family still photos from the guests, stills of newspaper headlines and brief typed quotations from sociological journals, and film-shorts on the topic of youth violence. Finally the opening and closing of the show are also pre-recorded; they lend to the program an almost feature film quality. As usual, the program is interrupted from time to time with commercial segments. Oprah is the central figure in the sense that she initiates all utterances and genre-switching with the exception of the opening and closing of the program. She of course interviews the guests and makes direct appeals to the studio audience. Although we may already sense some straying from the typical afternoon talk show, it is also clear that Oprah will in some way conform to the "unspoken rules of talk television": "The talk show is host-centered, forged in the present tense, spontaneous but structured, churned out within the strict formulas and time segments of costly network time, and designed to play to the hottest topics of the day" (Timberg 269).

Announcing the location of the show at the Fox Theatre in Detroit is certainly a performative. Perhaps the Fox Theatre literally dramatizes a shift in ideologeme from television's white, mainstream perspective on
race and crime: blacks are the perpetrators, whites the victims. Here, blacks are the victims of crime as well as concerned citizens who have gathered together with whites to seek a solution. Oprah does not provide the historical background that surely at least a few viewers know, that Detroit is a city ravaged by the phenomena of “white flight,” race riots, and the economic shift away from heavy manufacturing. The refurbished Fox Theatre is a standing reminder of a prouder past, ironically, a time before desegregation, when viable black urban neighborhoods were not a rarity. Perhaps Oprah’s speech act is an attempt to reinstate the black middle class as moral leader and morale-booster, but this time, not just within black neighborhoods. In “Crying Shame,” Oprah does not present herself as celebrity but rather as a prominent member of the black middle class. Always, Oprah’s membership in a class of women is important. In “Crying Shame,” Oprah is perhaps the “first citizen” of both groups. The setting also shifts genre expectations from the afternoon television talk show, a kind of private, gossipy, feminine space to something more public, with roots in the agora or town hall meeting. For this segment of the Oprah Winfrey Show, the transformation is manifold: not only the talk show genre but the home audience—comprised heavily of women, mainly white women, aged 18-54 (Peck)—has been transformed, required to take itself seriously as representatives of the polis. The physical setting also suggests a courtroom, a large church, a state funeral—as well as the underside of these venues: the kangaroo court, the mob scene.

Setting the scene in Detroit’s Fox Theatre is accomplished in dialogic relation to another, virtual, scene. The two young prisoners appear to us via remote from their North Carolina prison. One of the boy’s parents as well as his victim have been flown in from North Carolina. The district attorney, too, is North Carolinian. North Carolina comes to us courtesy of its early and harsh response to the phenomenon of juvenile crime and the public outcry against it. If the effect of the initial performative of locating “Crying Shame” in Detroit is read as an utterance, the virtual location of North Carolina appears to be its response. And if the Fox Theatre poses the problem of how blacks and white can come together to solve the problem of youth violence, the effect of the virtual scene is to provide an answer. Needless to say, the “virtual” ideologeme is anything but progressive.

To the home viewer, the opening of “Crying Shame” doesn’t present itself as a stage production; rather, the show opens like a feature film. One by one, four young teens are posed standing before a brick wall, as if on the kids’ home turf. Three of the kids are white and three male; the white males wear baseball caps turned sideways. The camera films them from chest up, as if in a mug shot, but a speaking mug shot:
My name is Adam; they call me Wicked J on the streets; I'm 14 years old. Probably the worst thing I've ever done was I robbed a old couple one time and that kinda bothered me for a little while but now that's all over with, you know.

All four narratives last barely one minute, but the segment is thick with emotional appeal. One way of parsing the fear and fascination that might attend the typical Oprah viewer would be to recall the terms from Gaines' "media porn" portrayals of youth: "thugs," "animals," and "par- ricide perps." Clearly, Oprah achieves the effect that she must achieve in the opening speech act: stay tuned to this program! Generically, this opening might be termed variously The Mug Shot or The Confession. Again, we find an ideologeme that does not appear to be politically pro- gressive.

Yet if Bakhtin is right about nature of the word—that it is "shot through with . . . alien value judgments"—we will want other readings of this sequence. The larger genre of the TV cop show is evident in the pre-filmed opening segment; maybe also we can sense elements of the recent films depicting urban street culture. The kids' speeches appear to be tightly scripted, as the structure of each story is invariable. No doubt these are examples of secondary speech genres, imitative of some primary speech genre. However, even oral language can be heavily formu- laic. Labov's classic study of inner city street language might be helpful here, especially his portrayal of a particular "speech event," that of "the system of ritual insults known variously as sounding, signifying, woofing, cutting, etc." (297). Of course, the Oprah kids are not sounding, exactly, but I suggest that what they may be doing is participating in a speech event that, while highly scripted by Oprah's writers, nonetheless bears some resemblance to speech events that they are familiar with that are formulaic and competitive in nature. I am further suggesting that the actual kids against the wall on Oprah may not be taking seriously what linguists call "the propositional content" of their scripted "confessions." As Labov points out, "[r]ituals are sanctuaries; in ritual we are freed from personal responsibility for the acts we are engaged in. . . . Ritual insults are used . . . to manage challenges within the peer group" (352-53). Further, these young people no doubt are familiar with the speech events of television culture. Surely, the scripted version of street lan- guage on Oprah would draw hoots and hollers from an audience in the know. For them—and here, I don't just mean street kids, but many youth who have in one way or another dissociated themselves from the main- stream—"talking back" to Oprah would be a way of talking back to adult, mainstream America as a whole. Perhaps the show's script intends to frame youth culture as perverse, but the ideologemes are multiple and
continuously produced in the moment, subject to interaction with others. Cop culture and street culture collide even as the TV genres of the cop show and the talk show merge and offer contradiction.

The opening utterance calls for a response, and Oprah has one: “If you think it’s not your problem to worry about, that it’s a black people’s issue, or it only happens in big cities,” Oprah chides the audience, as we move from the pre-filmed sequence to Oprah on stage at the Fox, “your opinion should change after hearing what violent young children have done to my guests today.” Frequent viewers of the Oprah Winfrey Show may note that she stratifies her own language quite deliberately (see Haag), sliding from a very well enunciated standard dialect into African-American English. Sometimes this move serves to shift her persona from celebrity to “just folks.” But here, Oprah’s AAEV stress pattern and “attitude” is expressed through a genre I will call Reading, after Alice Childress’ phrase, “I read you thusly.” Childress’ short story depicts a black maid setting straight her white female employer who has announced benevolently that she considers the maid “part of the family.” This genre is a racial one whose effect white women might “get” in part even without much knowledge of African-American culture. If the position of the talk show host is to remain neutral and “white,” Oprah has transgressed.

Simultaneously, the viewer sees a still shot of several newspaper clippings that curls down at the lower right corner to simulate the actual reading of a page of a newspaper or journal. These are the headlines: “2-year-old shoots his 7-year old sister,” “Boy, 10, held in shooting of 5th-grader at school,” and “5-year old fires gun at school.” The image is held for a few seconds, long enough for the headlines to be read, while Oprah provides the Documentary Voice-Over: “The public says it has had enough of the sickening headlines. A recent Gallup Poll shows that 60% of the people surveyed think that a teenager convicted of murder should get the death penalty. If you think it’s not your problem... .” If there has thus far been the suggestion of the cop show genre, stratified as low prestige, Oprah now makes use of high prestige genres taken from a high prestige medium, print. She foregrounds clippings from what are clearly legitimate newspapers (the Associated Press by-line can be seen on one) and also by citing the Gallup Poll in her voice-over. Such use aligns her with the higher prestige television genres, news programs generally and newsmagazines like “60 Minutes”—all of which have their roots in the television and film documentary, a highly authoritative genre. The speech act is clearly listen up, this is important, trust us: we know what we’re talking about. But while Oprah draws from authoritative genres emphasizing rationality, she hasn’t the leisure for reasoned debate or
formal presentation of evidence. Oprah may be quoting the Associated Press but her borrowing from the print media follows the form of pulp journalism. The quick and easy movement from the brick wall scene to the newspaper clippings elides the contradictions, even gaping holes in the logic, that appear upon closer observation. The kids against the wall were teenagers; the children in the headlines are aged 2, 5, and 10. Because of the focus on kids as perpetrators and adults as victims, we might find it difficult to recall that most of the victims (excluding Adams”) were children, too. “The public” may be outraged by teen violence, but who can be blamed when a two-year-old kills? Will the focus of responsibility devolve to adults? If such questions are to be considered at all, it will be by means of Oprah’s questions and guests’ answers, in consultation with their personal experiences.

Oprah next introduces her guests. They include a young white woman who was raped by a 13-year-old black boy; a middle-aged white man, a shopkeeper who was robbed and critically-wounded by a 15-year-old black boy; the 15-year-old boy and his parents; a black woman whose pre-teen daughter was shot and killed accidentally by a pre-teen black boy who hit the wrong target during a gang hit; a white man whose four-year-old son was stoned to death by a 10-year-old boy in the neighborhood; and a white couple, the parents of a pre-teen boy, who, together with a friend, shot a homeless man numerous times, killing him. This selection of guests does exhibit some variety in terms of race and class, and although victims predominate, we do have two sets of parents of violent children. The diversity among the guests may belie the emphasis placed in the entire show on black-on-white crime, disproportionate to the actual reported incidence. But the reason for this is curious: more air time is allotted to an imprisoned black youth who makes a compelling case for himself.

The nearer “Crying Shame” approaches to the genre of the afternoon talk show, the closer we come to primary speech genres. Although editing of these segments has occurred, I would want to place much of the transcript below into the category of primary speech genre. A different kind of dialogism permeates primary speech; it is more free form and represents multiple subjectivities in a less digested form. Oprah’s editors and Oprah herself as emcee act as shapers, but they do not invent characters wholecloth or satirize the language and perspectives of the guests in the way that Dickens does in his social comment novels (to mention one of the novelists Bakhtin admires). In the transcript below, the speaker identified as “DA” is one of Oprah’s guests, a district attorney; “SA” signifies the studio audience. Adam, one of the speakers in the opening mug shot sequence, reappears as a lone spokesman for youth convicted of crimes.
[Close up on Michelle, a young white woman, who listens to a 911 tape recording of her rape by a 13-year-old black boy; she wipes tears from her eyes with a handkerchief; police mug shot of assailant is projected onto screen at back of stage; it remains there for a few minutes.]

Oprah questions her, then says, "Your accused attacker, Andre Green, will be the first child offender tried under a new North Carolina law that permits children as young as 13 to be tried as adults."

SA: [applause]
Oprah: [turns to studio audience, to the kids who were filmed in the opening brick wall sequence] How—You guys are booing, why? [She brings the microphone to Adam, camera follows her.]

Adam: Because.
Oprah: Because? [Oprah smiles]
Adam: That's not fair.
Oprah: That's not fair that he should be tried as an adult?
Adam: No.

SA: [some clapping, murmurs of disagreement: "Why not?" can be heard]
Adam: Cuz he's only 13 years old.
Oprah: Cuz he's only 13 years old.

Michelle (?): Who cares how old he is, what if he beat you in the face like he did me?

Adam: Well, he ain't . . . as old as you.

Oprah: [gets Adam to stand] But is it, is it, rape is rape is rape, is it not?

Adam: Yeah. But still he's not fully grown and mature. He still has time—

SA and guests: [sounds of disagreement, "adult crimes" can be heard]

Adam: He still has time to, he still has time to rethink his actions.

Oprah: He still has time to rethink his actions [draws in her breath, audibly, then turns to the DA on stage]. Well, Frank, what do you say?

DA: I say if he's gonna do an adult crime, we're gonna try him like an adult, and he will get the adult punishment. [The DA speaks in a Southern accent.]

SA: [applause]

Oprah: And this young man, Andre Green, will be tried as an adult.

DA: These are the victims of adult crimes that you're seein' here, of robbery, of rape, and, ah, I would send the message out, that if you're thirteen years old and we can do that, we're gon' try you for the crime that you did, not for the age that you are.

SA: [applause, whistles]

Oprah: This teenager is serving a hundred and fourteen years in prison for rape! [headshot video appears on screen]

Oprah: What drove him to commit a brutal crime at the age of fifteen? We'll talk about that next. But first this graphic reminder about what violence can do.
As in every segment of "Crying Shame," this one begins with an emotional exclamation point (the recorded phone call to 911), a speech act intended to keep the viewer tuned to Oprah. Surely this is sensationalistic, but not necessarily in comparison to other television fare. Nor is it far from the experience of Second Wave feminists in CR groups, encounter-group participants, or participants in any sort of therapy group, more numerous 20 years ago than today, but still in existence, especially in the form of self-help groups. The somber atmosphere of the Fox Theatre and a host who forgoes badgering the victim with questions, dignifies the situation somewhat. Still, one is put in mind of the True Crime TV genre where wrongs done to ordinary people are made right by the diligent detective work of law enforcement officers, concerned viewers who call in promising leads, and the authoritative host, e.g., Robert Stack. But as the 911 call and Michelle’s tears take center stage at the Fox, they seem to become evidence in a courtroom drama.

It is all too obviously a kangaroo court—there is little Adam could say to quell the crowd’s anger and desire for vengeance. The television audience may be watching Oprah in segments, perhaps missing the opening of the show, where Adam introduced himself via the Mug Shot as a young petty criminal who doesn’t care about his victims. Or the television audience might share in the studio audience’s more modernist experience, recognizing Adam and placing him within that earlier rhetoric. Because Adam is a recurring “character” in the show, it is difficult to know whether the studio audience boos him because of what he is saying or what he has said. In any case, neither Oprah herself nor the show has offered him the grounds to stand on to make his case get heard. As a result, the DA gets an easy “conviction,” the studio audience as “jury” applauds to enact its “verdict.” Yet Adam is invited to speak, and some may find his words reasonable. Furthermore, the show’s recursive nature guarantees a return of some kind to Adam’s position.

The DA speaks in a Southern accent, perhaps invoking (in the idiom of TV history) a postmodern South, reconstructed, we might say, from the days of the Civil Rights Movement when Bull Connor got to stand for white southern masculinity in resistance to integration. Now a clean-cut district attorney utters rhetoric stylistically similar to Johnny Cochran’s (“We’re gon’ try you for the crime that you did, not for the age that you are”). Oprah herself makes the Civil Rights reference explicit a few minutes later, at the end of a frustrating interview with the “teenager serving 114 years in prison for rape!” His bland politeness (“No, ma’am”) in response to her pointed, tendentious questioning makes his chosen genre of Stonewalling all the more effective. Oprah deftly escapes by suggesting a topic she thinks he’ll accept. In doing so
she also acts as an improvisational artist, putting together a new theme around which the previous anti-youth narratives might re-group. We seem to have a shift in ideologeme.

Oprah: And so, when you left, you didn’t think about any consequences, right?
Michael: No ma’am.
Oprah: What did you think? You know, we talked to Shaun earlier, and he said, when he turned 15, right after that, he thought he’d probably end up in prison. Is this where you thought you’d end up?
Michael: Well, I had a dream when I was younger that I’d end up in prison.
Oprah: Wow! That really saddens me, you know when you say, “I have a dream,” you think of Martin Luther King. Don’t you all think of that? [Looks out to the audience] And I think, this is not what he would have wanted.

The ambiguity of the last sentence—what’s the “this”?—makes unity possible: we can all assent to something here. Most of the audience will easily reference King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. Perhaps many will remember that violence in general was shunned by King. But surely Oprah is making a more pointed racial reference. For King, prison was a necessary step in achieving his dream of civil rights for blacks. His “dream” was the outcome of a political project, whereas for Michael and Shaun the “dream” of prison is the result of an uncontrollable personal trajectory. Oprah’s reaccentuation of Michael and Shaun’s and MLK’s words allows a historical perspective on race and justice to be articulated in “Crying Shame,” even if only obscurely. Furthermore, Oprah, once the prosecutor/angry parental figure grilling the teenage Michael Hale, now becomes King-like, generous, sympathetic, full of grief about a loss that goes beyond the specific losses of the victims of violent crime. The loss of Michael Hale, and all of his kind, is now available for public acknowledgment—here at the Fox Theatre in Detroit, where, in a virtual sense, we have all gathered. This is a modernist moment, created by Oprah in dialogue with her young guest.

But a postmodern moment is to follow: commercial interruption. Oprah does her best to mitigate its effects by competing with the very television commercials that provide financial support for the show. That she accomplishes in various ways throughout “Crying Shame.” She introduces each new segment of the show in tabloid language to “hook” the viewer. But she also includes pre-filmed segments that are in many ways indistinguishable from commercials. She sometimes follows real commercials with “commercials” for the upcoming segments of her own show. In the case of “Crying Shame,” Oprah’s “commercials” are
somber in mood and contrast with the upbeat nature of the real commercials. But both feature quick movement, stylishness, and entertainment in a concentrated dosage. After her come-on for the Michael Hale interview ("What drove him to commit a brutal crime at the age of 15?"), she introduces another pre-filmed, commercial-like segment: "But first this graphic reminder of what violence can do." It is shot in black and white. The scene is a hospital emergency room, where medical staff are struggling to save the life of a black youth, apparently suffering from gunshot wounds. He dies. The final shot in the scene is that of a gurney, banging like a cannon shot against the wall.

This "commercial" belongs to the genre of the PSA, the Public Service Announcement. As a PSA, it probably ought to be aimed at the youth audience who commit the crimes. Like the PSAs on drug use of the 1980s and early 1990s ("This is your brain"; an egg is cracked above a frying pan; "This is your brain on drugs"; the egg fries; "Any questions?"), this one has the tenor of a parent lecturing a misbehaving child. Most young people I have known satirize PSAs mercilessly; they appear to be rather ineffective in achieving their stated purpose. However, it may be that, through indirection, the adults that are Oprah's core audience are the proper addressees. There has been an odd crossing of genres and intermixture of strata. On the one hand, we have the DA, a public figure charged with the task of reducing crime and meting out publicly-sanctioned punishment to the citizens who have broken laws promulgated by the polis. His language is the language of public discourse. But both the DA and Oprah have made a point of underlining that the recipients of extremely harsh punishments ("114 years in prison!") are not voting adult citizens, but children. The usual discourse of the Oprah Winfrey Show and most talk shows is a peculiar version of the language of the private, the personal. Thus we experience the merging of the genre of the parental lecture with that of the prosecutor's address to the jury. It is as if the boy serving 114 years in prison were being sent to his room with no dinner, but mom and dad are really mad this time. The genre that mediates between the everyday and the extraordinary is the Tabloid Report and its sensationalist rhetoric, echoed by that of the silent PSA.

But this particular PSA is dialogically related to other genres. The seriousness of its theme is set in the choice of the black and white film—artsy, but also the choice of older documentaries, "truthful" accounts of past events of concern to a great number of the citizens of the polis. It should be stratified as an utterance of the elite, certainly more highly-placed on the scale of social class than the PSA on drug use. Like an artistic film, it has ramifications beyond the usual PSA, which is generally intended to give a simple message. The film tells the story of a
youth’s death from the point of view of the adult professionals in the emergency room. Unlike the DA, these adult professionals are charged with saving a life, and the youth’s death is in part their failure. The slow motion rolling of the gurney and the cannon-shot sound as it bangs against the wall might be the expression of the heartache they feel. And so we have a second reading of the ideologeme of this PSA: the film is “dressed up” in black and white, as it were, not just to signify “high” culture, but to symbolize its funereal quality. Oprah’s studio and home audience can be expected to share in the moralism of the PSA message but also they will likely be moved by its elegiac content.

This segment exploits narrative in the manner of the best commercials. Cultural narratives are referenced, miniaturized, and concentrated upon a single message, but frequently the messages are in conflict with each other. Nancy Reagan’s snappy response to drug use, “Just Say No” competes with a perhaps more successful commercial message, “Just Do It.” That message is combined with an effect of free-floating desire, so that one cannot always be sure the result will be the purchasing of, in this example, Nike shoes. Oprah attempts to meet this competition of dreamy consumerism with another, perhaps free-floating emotion: grief over a loss unspecified. Throughout the show it is unclear whether the audience is invited to grieve the loss of individual victims, the loss of the class of young black men in prison or dead, the loss of youth generally (Generation X), the loss of a more communal and/or civil society. Lest anyone believe that the dialogic between the modernist message and the postmodern “empty” segment is unimportant, we should listen to the voice of the 16-year-old convicted felon Shaun Smith, speaking from the North Carolina prison where he is serving a 30-year sentence. “I was too confused. And my head was too empty, you know, and when you say you should have thought about what you could of done to this man or his wife or his kids or his other family, nobody my age dis day ever thinks about that. Nobody does. When you go out and do it, you think, Just Do It. You don’t think about the consequences.”

Recurring through a number of segments of “Crying Shame” is the story of Shaun Smith. Unlike Michael Hale, Shaun responds fully and articulately to the questions Oprah puts to him. In two different, separated segments, Shaun is put in dialogue with his victim, Bill, a middle-aged white shopkeeper in North Carolina. This story holds special interest as the only one featuring perpetrator and victim—face to face, one is tempted to say, but of course Shaun speaks from prison while Bill sits on stage at the Fox Theatre. First, Oprah interviews Shaun’s parents, trying to put Shaun’s actions within the context of the studio and home audience’s values. To Shaun’s mother, she asks, “Would you say that you
were quote: Middle class family, good values, church-going?" And indeed, Shaun's mother says that her son attended Sunday school. Oprah turns to Shaun, who appears to the studio audience on the large projection screen with the printed legend identifying him as a prisoner. Sometimes the camera moves back, and we see that he and Michael Hale are wearing prison clothing, but usually we see only his "talking head."

When we return to the Oprah Show after a commercial break, we see the following message filling the television screen (for the studio audience, it appears to be projected onto the screen on stage):

The typical 16-year-old has seen more than 200,000 acts of television violence including 33,000 murders. Source: AFA Journal. [Oprah reads this aloud while this still is on the screen.]

Children, especially young ones, will pattern themselves after violent behavior as easily as they imitate good behavior. Source: AFA Journal.

What "AFA" stands for we are never informed. In fact, although Oprah reads these quotations with the same outraged tone she used to introduce "Crying Shame," there is otherwise no interpretation. Later, when Oprah interrogates Shaun about why he shot Bill, Shaun refuses to lay blame on the movie "Menace 2 Society" though Shaun's father— noting that Shaun watched it obsessively for the period of time before the shooting—does. Although sometimes acting as an objective reporter offering the audience more than one perspective on an issue, Oprah does appear to harbor a preference for testimonials of personal responsibility. Still, it is not at all easy to "read" Oprah or the effect of her show. Carrying across the several segments featuring Shaun are criss-crossing ideologemes, utterances countering utterances, without explicit mediation or interpretation.

Several visuals are available simultaneously: the projections from the print media ("AFA Journal") in the foreground, Oprah on stage with her guests, an enormous head shot of Shaun Smith projected above and beyond the guests. As Shaun answers Oprah's question, his head claims the whole of the television screen.

Oprah: Shaun did you feel loved by your parents?
Shaun: Yeah.
Oprah: Are you sorry for what you did?
Shaun: [wry smile] Every time it come up, it's like, a little core in your heart, right? You know, cuz, when I was there, and I finally got the gun out, that's when it all hit me. You know, it's like, fillin' up a bottle with water to the
point that it’s ready to burst. That’s when I found out that somethin’ was really wrong. I don’t know, it’s an empty feeling about it. I try not to think about it.

Oprah: I think you should think about it.

[Oprah and Shaun now on split screen]

Shaun: This ain’t the place... .

Oprah: [Turns to studio audience] We think you should think about it.

SA: [applause]

There are a number of recursive elements in “Crying Shame.” The re-imposition of the opening Confession—“The worst thing I ever done was... and I don’t feel sorry about it”—appears again in this interview with Shaun. This segment moves closer to a primary speech genre than did the opening one, allowing Shaun, clearly endowed with rhetorical abilities, to provide a fuller, more “realistic” account of what’s it like to be a violent youth (again, we are drawing from the True Crime genres as we make this move into the criminal’s interior). As in the case of Adam in an earlier segment, Oprah urges the audience to chastise Shaun. But as Shaun tells his story here and in other segments, a certain sympathy for his position is likely to build among the audience even though his very presence is a fraught racial genre—young, black, male, and violently criminal, a threat to white America in its fantasy—and especially to white women, the core audience for Oprah. The ideologeme of the opening segment, which featured white, and a possibly bi-racial, youth, has been transformed in the body of Shaun into the usual stereotype. Shaun does differentiate himself from the stereotype through the establishment of his authority (“This ain’t the place”) and his deft use of language. The language is AAEV; it is not street language. Indeed, there is something about the tone that is almost philosophical, and becomes increasingly so the more he speaks. Shaun sounds like Everyman’s Existentialist.

Given what might be the show’s over-arching ideologeme (expressing the point of view of an adult victim, or adults who fantasize themselves as victims of youth violence, or parents of children who might become violent), Shaun’s victim Bill should be an especially sympathetic guest. He is a middle-aged man who answers Oprah’s questions respectfully and cogently. But in the dialogic between Bill and Shaun, sometimes depicted by the camera in a split screen “face off,” one can see how genres shape utterances and achieve rhetorical effect. Here is the way Bill describes the fateful encounter with Shaun:

Shaun and a friend of his came into the store and pulled a weapon on me. And at that time I backed away and tell ’em to take what they wanted. At that time,
they directed us to the back of the store, where we were directed to lay on the floor. And after they emptied the cash register, they opened a .3800 automatic into the back of my friend and myself.

Oprah: And why are you here today, sir?
Bill: By the grace of God.

By the end of this segment, Bill speaks in the genre of the Baptist testimonial, prompted by Oprah. This draws audience applause. But the narration of the event is offered to us in the genre of the Police Blotter, familiar to those who read that section of the newspaper, watch cop shows on TV, or courtroom dramas. In preparing their clients for trial, lawyers may well build on these genres as they rehearse for court performance, and such may have been the case with Bill. Even so, I would stratify the genre as working-class male; I think Bill could have produced this genre, as I have heard other working class men do, spontaneously. The rhetoric of this genre relies heavily upon an appeal to authority—the authority of the law and the authority of fact. If the Oprah Winfrey Show were based upon monologic authority, Bill’s rhetoric might carry the day. But of course, it is not. It features individual story-telling, mediated by Oprah’s questions and commentary. There is an art to securing audience attention.

Oprah: Shaun, why after he had given you the money—this is what we don’t understand about you young criminals today—he had gone to the back, why not just leave the man alone?
Shaun: Well, when I first put a gun on him, he tried to go for his gun, you know, kept swayin’ for it. And once I finally got him into the back, the other man that was with him, I think, suggested why don’t they lay down. And I said, Go ahead. And I turned my back. And when I saw the other man start runnin’ for the door, I turned around and I see one man startin’ to come up on his knees, reachin’ around the back of his leg like he had some-thin’ and the first thing that I did was panic. And once I squeezed the first time, the gun, you know, it seemed like, the trigger got lighter every time. And you start squeezin’ and squeezin’. And you can’t stop until the last bullet is out, and you know, there’s nothing left in it.
And you pause, you think, and you’re like, damn! I’m stuck. It’s too late to turn the clock back now. So you try to run and you try to scramble and save what you can save.

Oprah: How can you be saved? Is there anything to save you?
Shaun: Yeah, there’s one thing that’ll save me. One, God, but mainly me: I’m gon’ save myself.

SA: [applause]
[During Shaun’s description of the robbery and shooting, Bill glares for the first time.]

Bill cannot hope to compete with Shaun rhetorically, and regardless of how stacked the deck seems to be against youth, competition for audience attention is definitely in play. Shaun captures the attention of the camera and of Oprah not just because his story is lurid. Any of the guests could have provided that. Shaun speaks for a much longer time than anyone else does because he speaks in a compelling manner. He is the only one who can match Oprah’s communicative skill. A rhetorical analysis of Shaun’s “story” (as it would be called on *Oprah*) shows that Shaun knows how to use repetition, rhythm, simile, and metaphor to good effect. He knows how to end a cadence. “You see it over and over. You learn it.” “Every time it come up, like, it’s like a little core in your heart, right?” “You know, cuz, when I was there, and I finally got the gun out, that’s when it all hit me, you know, it’s like, fillin’ up a bottle with water to the point that it’s ready to burst. That’s when I found out that somethin’ was really wrong.” Shaun has the capacity not only to narrate a scene compellingly; he knows how to move the discourse to the next level, which is highly metaphorical and reflective: “So you try to run and you try to scramble and save what you can save.” Oprah even takes the cue from Shaun’s language: “Is there anything that can save you?” His reply plays on the Baptist language of Bill and Oprah, but Shaun’s testimonial is closer to existentialist than Christian. With it, he draws his own audience applause.

However, there is more at work here than Shaun’s verbal dexterity. His choice of genre is key. I will call it the Hero Narrative. Though Shaun is more likely to have learned it from contemporary cultural utterances, it has been with us since the beginnings of western literature. The male protagonist embarks upon a journey of adventure and enlightenment, experiences conflict, which momentarily foils his plans and lands him in the slough of despond, and finally emerges victorious with new knowledge that he brings back to the community from whence he came. One of the reasons Shaun’s narrative is more compelling than Bill’s is that the subject position of the active hero is more engaging than that of the passive victim, perhaps for cultural reasons that some would call masculinist. Recent literary works and films offer anti-heroes, who operate outside of the values of the community or protagonists that are as much victims of their fate as they are heroes. Hemingway novels offer highly masculinist characters who nevertheless have all they can do to stay alive, psychologically. As men from the dominant culture experience a loss in their power as subjects, men and women outside the main-
stream have attempted to claim their subjecthood for the first time. Malcolm X put a premium on what he called “manhood” for black men. But Shaun’s “journey” so far seems to recapitulate the old, broken trajectory of the black adolescent’s attempt to reach adulthood that Richard Wright captures in the story of Bigger Thomas. (It may not be coincidental that Oprah Winfrey acted in and bankrolled a film version of *Black Boy.*) The gratifying action narrative, told in gritty realism, is a feature of countless other writers of tough-guy stories. But the electric chair awaits Bigger Thomas for a violent act that was born of fear and confusion—and racism, some would say.

*The Oprah Winfrey Show* is comprised of so many contradictory ideologemes that it is difficult to determine securely an overriding political message. Surely we can see what Janice Peck saw. There is “a popular discourse about race” that “defines, signifies, and problematizes racism within liberal, therapeutic and religious frames of meaning deeply embedded in Western history” (89-90). But among and within each of these “frames” and “discourses” are numerous individual utterances containing ideologemes at issue with themselves, not to mention the external “struggle” occurring between speakers of differing ages, races, genders, professional allegiances, and so on. As well, Oprah may not have personally approved of Shaun’s ideology, but because the generic requirements of her program favor compelling narrative, Shaun’s linguistic talent enabled him to advance his views on a popular, nationally-syndicated television program. Perhaps he was able to represent himself to some extent outside of the prevailing discourse Gaines called “media porn”—yet not without recourse to another potentially debilitating one, that of the masculine Hero Narrative. That the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, feminine in style and sometimes feminist in its politics and aiming at a core audience of white women, should tout a young black criminal as masculinist hero is not as surprising as first it might seem. Successful commercial television plays continually with and through standard cultural narratives, and we have seen how, in a complicated way, “Crying Shame” does so. The inter-relation and contradiction of meanings and ideologies constitutes the overall effect of an *Oprah Winfrey Show*.

The ending of “Crying Shame” tempts one to see the entire program as an utterance that shares much with the mourning stories Karla F. C. Holloway describes, where the memory of “lost” black children persists in African-American literature and popular culture. The pre-filmed sequence, over which the credits roll, is in black and white. A collage of stills and moving images feature ordinary Americans of all ages and
races, commenting upon youth violence. We hear snatches of dialogue: “Shoot 'em, Don't give 'em a trial. They didn't give him one.” “We should take a little more time with our youth.” “Get a role model.” “There's gotta be somebody in that world that loves you.” The final image is of a black boy bicycling with a friend on the handlebars, down a littered city street, pedalling along in slow motion. In the background all the while, at first quietly and then insistently, we can hear the somber strains of Samuel Barber’s “Adagio for Strings.” The modernist attempt at conclusion seems to invite an expression of grief over the loss of a generation of children and perhaps the loss of the kind of civil, communal society that would protect them (and us) from senseless violence and early death.

Then, a much louder voice-over: “Two hours of laughs come your way tonight, starting with ‘Boy Meets World’ followed by ‘Ellen’!” However humorously jarring this juxtaposition, practiced television viewers understand that we are not to read this announcement as a rejoinder to any utterance of “Crying Shame,” except that the audience for “Oprah” has been judged to be interested in the family-oriented “Boy Meets World” and the woman-oriented “Ellen.” The funeral collage of “Crying Shame” is experienced in dialogue with the voice of commerce, the network’s peppy self-advertisement. The dialogue between these two genres, tonally so at odds, is perhaps the defining one of the entire episode. The network’s own use of segmenting is designed to render invisible the boundaries of one program from another. “Crying Shame” has likewise engaged in this use of segmenting, attempting to hold the viewer through interruptions and across commercial breaks. But the feature film ending of “Crying Shame” is an attempt to provide an elevated sense of closure—in the grand style, as a rhetorician might say. The tensions that result in this dialogic interchange are complex. They are the relations between “high art” and “low,” the tragic and the comic, the desire for wholeness or depth and the surfaces of which Grossberg speaks, the expression of anger and sorrow and the expression of hyperbolic cheerfulness. Very likely the viewer will laugh.

One could argue that Shaun's 15 minutes of fame might help to change the minds of some viewers who demonize young black males and roar for ever more stringent punishment for young people who commit crimes. I am more inclined to agree with Grossberg that television's political effect is likely to be indirect. If we laugh at the network's appropriating gesture at the end of Oprah's "Crying Shame," are we not laughing at the institution of television itself? And might not this laughter puncture the indifference of television? Or, on the other hand, will it
prevent us from holding in mind the language and images necessary to propel us to political action, thereby proliferating the indifference of which Grossberg speaks?

Works Cited


Kathleen Dixon is an associate professor of English at the University of North Dakota, where she teaches rhetoric and rhetorical theory, women’s studies, cultural studies, and media studies courses. She is the author of Making Relationships: Gender in the Forming of Academic Community (Peter Lang Publishing, 1997) and Outbursts in Academe: Multiculturalism and Other Sources of Conflict (Heinemann-Boynton/Cook, 1988). Her next book will analyze media literacy in both local and global contexts.