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If Oprah can make it, what does it say about me?

'Oprah's incessant stress on individual aspiration and self-reliance has endeared her to vast audiences. It's as if she has prodded black people and asked them: "Why wait for society to help you when you can help yourself?"'

Most celebrity endorsements go in one ear and out of the other without pausing at synapses. Would anyone rush out to buy Rich Prosecco, a canned champagne-like drink, because Paris Hilton gave it her seal of approval (even if she was naked when giving her assent)? David Beckham, probably this century's most formidable pitchman, can move razors and sports gear off shelves, but could he change our spending habits when it comes to felt tip marker pens? There are limits. Well, for most people, there are. Only one can incite the Oprah Effect.

"Oprah Winfrey can get people to read Tolstoy, sell millions of magazines and turn a mail-order canvas bag into a hot item just by naming it one of her favorite things," observed Martha T. Moore, of *USA Today* (October 22, 2007). She's also helped sales of certain brands of popcorn, soap, reading tablets and dozens of other consumer items – not by appearing in advertisements, but just by mentioning them as among her favorite things. Jordan McAuley and Susan Harrow have even written a marketing guide with the prescriptive title *How to Get Booked on Oprah, in O Magazine, and on Oprah's Favorite Things*.

But could Oprah sell a president? Oprah, who for years had been a close friend of the emerging Illinois senator, reaffirmed her support for Obama's presidential candidacy during an interview on CNN's *Larry King Live* in March 2007. It was the first time that Oprah had endorsed – not to mention thrown her brand behind – a political candidate. By fall 2007, she had helped raise \$3 million for the campaign. Obama was chipping away at the lead of Hillary Clinton in the polls for the Democratic nomination. Endorsements didn't guarantee votes, of course: at the time, *USA Today* reported: "More than six in 10 adults say endorsements aren't that important in deciding whom they'll support for president" (October 22, 2007).

Even so, there is this cliché they use in business circles about the power of synergy. You don't have to believe that the interaction of two or more agents produces a combined effect greater than the sum of their separate effects to

realize that Oprah+Obama made a convincing, synergistic unit. Oprah's segue into politics – and I mean segue, i.e. an uninterrupted transition – happened over a period of time, though her “We *need* Barack Obama” speech at Des Moines, Iowa on December 8, 2007 was pivotal.

“I am not here to tell you how to think,” she told the 10,000-strong crowd. “I am here to tell you *to* think.” Distancing herself from partisan politics, she reminded the audience that she had voted Republican as many times as she had Democrat and that her conviction was personal. “I feel compelled to stand up and speak out for the man who I believe has a new vision for America.” Oprah scattered references to “American Idol” and “Dancing with the Stars,” and even jokingly reflected on whether she would have the same effect on politics as her book selections and “favorite things.” But any hint of trivialization was removed by a closing reference to Ernest J. Gainer's 1971 novel *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, which tells the life-story of a woman born in slavery at the end of the civil war. The book recounts how each time a new baby was born, its mother would take it to Jane Pittman, who would hold the baby John the Baptist-like and wonder aloud whether the child would be the deliverer of black people: “Is you the one?” Oprah polished the grammar, changed the context and answered affirmatively that Obama was indeed The One.

Oprah's forceful endorsement was less like one person's approving another; more like Apple admiring and applauding Rolex – a brand recommending another brand. If she was as uncertain of the true power of her endorsement as she said, she would have seen tangible evidence over the months that followed: Obama was elected president in November 2008. The Oprah Effect seemed every bit as puissant as the Midas Touch.

What exactly did Oprah add to the Obama brand? In fact, what does any celebrity with no political experience add to the campaigns of aspiring politicians? Rajan Nataraajan and Sushi Chawla's 1997 study was about “fitness” – not, in this instance, the condition of being physically healthy, but the suitability to fulfill a particular role, or task. Although the research was about the suitability of celebrities to endorse commercial products, their conclusion is relevant: source credibility sits at the top of a hierarchy of properties that affect whether consumers will take notice of the endorser. Credibility is, according to the researchers, a “multidimensional variable,” the main dimensions being “expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness” (p. 120).

Michael Basil's earlier research in 1996 uncovered another factor: “Identification occurs when an individual adopts an attitude or behavior from another person when that attitude or behavior is associated with a satisfying self-defining relationship with that person” (p. 479). In other words, buying something (or presumably voting for someone) “being advocated by that celebrity can be seen as a way of ‘hitching your wagon to the star.’”

Hillary sought credibility when she recruited former senator George McGovern, who ran for president on an anti-war platform in 1972. McGovern

was, she speculated, trusted. Hillary was trying to convince voters she would end the Iraq war. Republican John McCain, a former Vietnam prisoner of war, who was basing his appeal to voters on his military and national security credentials, was supported by four former secretaries of state including Henry Kissinger, as well as several retired generals in Iowa. Expertise was the valuable resource.

Oprah couldn't legitimately boast experience or, for that matter, credibility – at least not political credibility. She did, however, have other properties. For instance, she was attractive: not in the sense of being overtly sexually alluring, but she had beneficial qualities or features that induced her followers to accept whatever she offered. And people certainly associated with her and the causes she pursued, and perhaps more importantly regarded themselves as sharing similar characteristics or styles of thinking. In other words, they identified with her in the manner Basil's research indicated was important – adopting attitudes.

So what Oprah lacked in credibility, she more than made up for in identification. This still doesn't tell us why she worked so effectively for Obama. Jib Fowles provides a clue. "As the star's image cycles back into popular culture, it does so with the new accretions of inferences from the commercial detour," wrote Fowles in his 1996 book *Advertising and Popular Culture* (p. 131). On this account, there is a kind a feedback loop in which qualities acquired in one medium transfer to another, which then transfer back and so on. The very fact of Oprah's appearing in a political campaign added new properties to her persona and enhanced her reputation, which then transferred to Obama. Rather like the process of osmosis. Oprah became more magisterial, while Obama gained respect and the warm approval of Oprah's countless followers.

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Let me save space: CNN, Fox News, *Time Magazine*, *USA Today*, and umpteen other media have decided that Oprah is the most influential woman of the past quarter-decade. When *Vanity Fair* concluded she has more influence than any "politician, or religious leader, except perhaps the Pope," it should have reflected on the fact that there are only about 1.14 billion Roman Catholics in the world.

The woman who elicits these acknowledgments was born, perhaps not entirely adventitiously – who knows? – in 1954, the year of the historic Brown vs. Board of Education decision that ended legal segregation in public schools. She lived on a farm in Kosciusko, Mississippi (population: 7,372) with her grandmother until aged six, when she moved to Milwaukee to be with her mother. Here she was sexually abused by several relations and friends, an experience she was later to disclose in front of tv cameras. An unruly adolescent, she was sent to live in Nashville with her disciplinarian father, Vernon, who instructed her to read one book per week. He also taught her the value of individual advancement. At a time when many were proposing the historical, ethnic and cultural oneness of black people and the urgent need to unify, Oprah opted to pursue a more solitary venture.

Aged 14, Oprah gave birth to a premature baby, who died shortly afterward. Under the tutelage of her dad, she studied diligently and began to entertain ambitions of a career in journalism. Her first job was at radio WVOL, “Nashville’s Heritage station,” as it describes itself. At 19, she moved to television at WTVF-TV and built a reputation as a reporter and news anchor. Three years later, she was offered a job as co-anchor at the Baltimore tv station WJZ-TV. *People Are Talking* was a daytime talkshow that effectively showcased Oprah’s distinct style of interviewing.

In 1984, Oprah switched to another talkshow, this time WLS-TV’s *AM Chicago*, which was changed to *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and, in 1986, went national. The program moved to the epicenter of popular entertainment and remained there for 25 years – and 4,000 shows. Its highlights included Michael Jackson’s response to the question, “is your skin lighter because you don’t want to be black?” in 1983, Tom Cruise’s manic cavorting in 2005, and Whitney Houston discussing her drugs of choice (crack “leveled off with marijuana”) in 2009. By the time of the last show in 2011, Oprah’s personal wealth was estimated at \$2.7 billion.

Television talkshows used to be little different from radio interviews, with hosts asking the questions and guests answering them. Oprah, whether by design or just impromptu, changed this format. Her interviews were chats, relaxed conversations between two friends, often about matters that would, at the time, qualify as personal, if not intimate. It was as if Oprah was inviting viewers to become innocent eavesdroppers. When she talked to the camera, it was not as a tv host but as a confidante, someone with whom they could share a secret and trust them not to repeat it. These stylistic features are commonplace today, but in the 1980s they were innovations that were perfectly in sync with wider cultural shifts. I’ll write more about these shifts later, but suffice it to say for now, that they involved public figures appearing less exceptional, more ordinary.

Oprah’s ordinariness was palpable: viewers didn’t so much watch but shared in her discussions of sex abuse, addictions and infidelity. They participated in her reuniting with long-lost family members and former schoolteachers. Many lived vicariously through Oprah’s attempts to diet her way to a svelte body, before just giving in to nature. And countless viewers were emboldened to make new starts, especially after hearing her wax psychologically about the limitless power of the individual.

Oprah used her early success on tv to leverage several business enterprises: her Harpo Productions (spell Oprah backwards) in 1988 took full charge of the show. By the late 1990s, the company had annual revenues of about \$150 million with about 200 employees. O, *The Oprah Magazine* started in 2000; its circulation is now around 2.4 million. It was in this period that the Oprah Effect, or the O-Factor, came into force: there was nothing, it seemed, she couldn’t do. She even appeared in Steven Spielberg’s film of Alice Walker’s book *The Color Purple*, in 1985.

Presumably emboldened by her early success, Oprah ventured into dangerous territory. For example, in 1987, she filmed an item in Forsythe County, Georgia, where there had been no black residents since 1912 when three black men, all of whom were hanged, allegedly raped a white teenager. Oprah's bold attempt to assess the mood of the people made for challenging television. Her 16 million viewers daily were testimony to this. Capitalizing on her audience, she ran book clubs and consumer products recommendations, converting sometimes obscure titles or little-known commodities into bestsellers.

In a memorable show in 1996, Oprah examined the then panic-inducing mad cow disease (bovine spongiform encephalopathy, or BSE) and announced that the scare had stopped her eating burgers. The stock market took note and the cattle-feeding industry lost an estimated \$87.6 million in days. Cattle producers filed suit against Oprah for false disparagement, though a jury eventually found in favor of Oprah.

The risk-taking element of capitalism was never more evident in Oprah than when she took the enormous professional gamble of launching her own cable television station, OWN: Oprah Winfrey Network in 2010. It was a novel idea: an entire tv channel built on the brand of a single personality. The fare was anything but novel, comprising reality, food, health and self-help shows. The British *Guardian* columnist Hadley Freeman pointed out, "it is arguably precisely this kind of soupy self-help that made Winfrey's talkshow look increasingly dated" (December 31, 2010). By the time of the final Oprah show, its audience had fallen to seven million, under half its peak.

Part-owned by Discovery Communications, the cable channel had unimpressive audience figures initially, and, on closing her Chicago-based show, Oprah moved to Los Angeles to take a more active role in running the network.

For the first few years of her striking rise in popularity, Oprah was *noli me tangere* – someone who couldn't be touched, less still criticized. Her nightmare childhood behind her, Oprah had bootstrapped her way through America's social order, defying all her putative impediments. But in 1989, Barbara Grizzuti Harrison raised doubts about the purpose and intent of Oprah.

"The importance of being Oprah" was one of the (if not, the) first critical evaluations of someone who, by 1989, was approaching icon status; "an Horatio Alger for our times," as Grizzuti Harrison called her. Was she a "role model for black women?" Oprah rejected both descriptions. Grizzuti Harrison quoted her "born-again capitalist" response to bellyaching African Americans: "A black person has to ask herself, 'If Oprah Winfrey can make it, what does it say about me?' They no longer have an excuse" (p. 130).

If *they* no longer have an excuse for failing to advance, what were whites supposed to get out of Oprah's excursions into sensitive areas, particularly

race? “Oprah Winfrey has always promised her guests ... the opportunity for them to ‘release the guilt.’ And she promises audiences the opportunity to ‘see themselves in others’ so as to sidestep guilt,” was Grizzuti Harrison’s answer (p. 134).

Grizzuti Harrison points out that “exploring people’s feelings ... is not equivalent to changing them. There are no guaranteed and automatic epiphanies” (p. 134). “We are encouraged to believe we are doing something, embroiled in something; whereas in fact we are coddled in our passivity” (p. 134). Oprah allows “audiences to feel superior to blatant, uneducated racists, while cherishing their own insidious subtle racism” (p. 134).

By watching Oprah and sharing in her disgust, anger or whatever emotion she expresses, whites could find comfort and assuage their guilt, while blacks could remind themselves that the racist barriers were largely illusory. From this perspective, Oprah expedited the “dissociation from past sins” that Shelby Steele believes is central to the post-civil rights experience. Oprah’s greatest service was to penitential whites.

In this early critique, nothing is as it appears: Oprah offered an inauthentic “salve to whites’ burdened consciences,” and a “quick fix” that provided a temporary feeling of contentment; one that became addictive in the years that followed.

Grizzuti Harrison’s article was published in 1989, remember. Denzel Washington was picking up an Oscar for his role as a runaway slave in the civil war drama *Glory*. *Driving Miss Daisy*, in which Morgan Freeman played a chauffeur to an elderly Jewish woman, was winning the best picture award, and Spike Lee’s account of inter-ethnic tensions in Brooklyn, *Do the Right Thing*, heralded a wave of cinematic portraits of the ghettos. On tv, *The Cosby Show*, then in its fifth year, was all-conquering, and *Miami Vice*, which featured a partnership between a black and a white detective, was in its designer pomp. Michael Jordan was treading his immaculate path to sports consecration, while Mike Tyson was still a few years away from damnation.

Miss You Much by Janet Jackson, then rivaling her brother in record sales (this alone sold 4 million copies), was dominating charts all over the world, and Madonna’s scandalous good-and-evil video *Like a Prayer* proved to be a gamechanger – it was a cultural item that symbolized a change in the way consumers thought and felt about famous people. I’ll explain the reasoning in detail later: for now, let me pull one more quotation from Grizzuti Harrison’s evaluation of Oprah: “There appears to be no membrane between the private person and the public persona” (pp. 30 & 46).

Like Madonna, Oprah had no truck with the old-style division of public and private selves that had been carefully constructed by the Hollywood film industry, which jealously guarded the stars’ personal lives. Oprah opened-up to audiences – she had no inhibitions about revealing her childhood molestation, for example – and urged audiences to be just as revelatory. Vicki Abt and

Mel Sheesholtz addressed some of the implications: “*Exploitation, voyeurism, peeping Toms, freak shows* all come to mind” (p. 182).

The characterization doesn’t sound fierce today, when practically every talkshow is, in some measure, an exploitatively and voyeuristically arranged event, featuring people whose personal lives are made available for public inspection. From the vantage point of 1994 when Abt and Sheesholtz were writing (and when, incidentally, Oprah’s annual income was already \$146 million, more than either Michael Jackson or Bill Cosby earned), shows such as Oprah’s were a “vulgarized version of traditional psychotherapy ... where strangers get to watch and listen to hideous confessions and confrontations” (p. 184).

Stripped out of the discussion are “real contexts of time, place, history, biography and moral judgment” (p. 187). How Abt and Sheesholtz missed all the platitudinizing, we’ll never know; but they had a point about the absence of contexts. They took issue with Oprah’s focus on “the atomistic individual” and her “search for personal satisfaction, good feelings, freedom from blame, shame or social responsibility” (p. 176).

Abt and Sheesholtz gave an example of an 11-year-old boy on the show who blew the whistle on his drug-user mother and her partner. Oprah’s “constant badgering” of the boy “further exploits and exacerbates the family’s pain” (p. 188). Abt and Sheesholtz could have wondered out loud what the boy was doing on the show in the first place. This is admittedly not a strong example, though, and it does illustrate the questionable curative aspect of Oprah and, more importantly, the deceptively attractive, but misleading, philosophy being promulgated.

Oprah is hardly likely to turn to her audience and thunder: “You’re not here for the contextual or any other kind of analysis, ‘cause there really isn’t any. You’re unrepentant, philistine voyeurs, who derive pleasure from others’ misfortunes.” She’s more likely to point her finger and remind her audience, “Pay attention: this could be you.” She promotes a worldview in which individuals are independent, self-reliant and capable of changing themselves. That applies not just to people on the show, but to everyone watching. Perhaps this isn’t so misleading, after all. But it does simplify the power of other people, circumstances and institutions to licence or restrict individual freedoms; and it does eliminate the role of history in influencing how freedom is distributed. For example, in discussing racism, Oprah takes the individualist approach “by defining racism as a psychological ‘illness’ for which individuals, and, by extension, society need ‘healing,’” wrote Janice Peck in her “Talk about race” article (p. 100). “Subjective rather than objective change.” (It’s almost possible to imagine Oprah sitting next to former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, saying: “You were right: there is no such thing as society.”)

Racial issues are not blotted out; far from it. Oprah’s treatment or interpretation of racism implicates everyone either in or watching the show in

a self-examination. The frequently painful excavation of other people's lives and Oprah's own reminders of her lamentable past ensured that the show never flinched.

In every respect, Oprah became the personification of her own philosophy. A rugged individualist who not only preached but practiced self-help, she began as survivor and continued that way, adapting to her changing environments. As Patricia J. Williams commented in her 2007 article "The audacity of Oprah": "Oprah reinvented herself by sheer will and rose against all odds to the very top of the phantasmagorical bubble machine we call the entertainment industry" (p. 8).

While Oprah didn't openly espouse the "lifting as we climb" maxim of the National Association of Colored Woman, she clearly practiced something similar, helping others to help themselves. There is much to admire in this stance. Much to criticize too: opprobrium has multiplied in recent years. One of the sharper censures is Tarshia L. Stanley's "The specter of Oprah Winfrey," which argues that, in her passion to extol the virtues of individualism, Oprah just hasn't grasped the limits of self-improvement. "Although it is true that we are all responsible for ourselves, it is also true that there are real and inherent hurdles in society that effectively work to thwart the efforts and undo the bootstraps of certain individuals as they attempt to struggle upwards" (p. 47).

Many share the sentiments: Oprah's conception of racism is similar to Robert Johnson's – like rain. The instruction is not to stay indoors or gripe about the bad weather, but to grab an umbrella and get on with life. For some, this makes Oprah a symbol of conservatism. "She can never admit the need for systematic structural change and collective political activity," grumbles Dana L. Cloud (p. 129).

Maybe Oprah doesn't "admit" it because she identifies the individual rather than the collectivity as the catalyst of change. If so, she invites a related criticism, this time from Valerie Palmer-Mehta: "By favoring the individual over the social, Winfrey is not only acquiescing to the status quo but also promoting it" (p. 73).

To repeat an earlier point, Oprah coddles consumers into passivity, but not inertia: people are encouraged to recognize some of the more unpleasant and disagreeable aspects of American society and work toward changing them. It's how Oprah's philosophy translates into action that's drawn the fire of recent critics.

Oprah implores her followers to remake themselves, not the world around them. Critics may thrust their fingers in their mouths and pretend to be sick when they hear her entreaty "dream it, do it," but Oprah's incessant stress on individual aspiration and self-reliance has endeared her to vast audiences. It's as if she has prodded black people and asked them: "Why wait for society to help you when you can help yourself?" Or: "Why waste effort trying to move

mountains when you can move your own butt?" Oprah didn't ask these exact questions, but the inquiry is implicit in everything she's done as a public figure.

This is an enormously convenient motif, politically speaking. It discourages the type of mentality that fed black political alliances of the 1950s and 1960s; movements that eventually changed America's social landscape. Individuals acting *ad hominem* couldn't have done this. It averts the kind of thought promoted by radical Black Power activists, such as Eldridge Cleaver (1935–98), who identified white-dominated institutions as the causes of blacks' subordination. And it most definitely deflects any philosophy resembling that of the Nation of Islam, which saw all whites as incorrigibly evil and insisted on a separation of all black people from whites. Oprah's politics, such as they were, were based on practical rather than moral or ideological considerations. Obviously, time changes the direction of political winds.

It's also convenient in a different, more disguised way. For Timothy Aubry, there is "a paradoxical double gesture" at work. Aubry means that, by engaging with Oprah's show and her various other enterprises, whites familiarize themselves with and immerse themselves in the travails of black people, investigating, commiserating, even empathizing. "Employing a liberal ethos of individualism [whites] can deny the barrier of racial difference in order to identify with black characters," writes Aubry in his 2006 article, "Beware the furrow of the middlebrow: Searching for paradise on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*" (p. 362).

This has an ideological suasion: it permits a miniaturization of racism, reducing its scale to insignificance. It also raises doubts about the potency or even virtue of measures intended to benefit black people. Why have affirmative action or related policies, when racism has almost disappeared and the only thing holding black people back is themselves?

We saw in chapter 1 how Earl Ofari Hutchinson suggests how Tiger Woods has been fabricated as "final proof that America is a colorblind society." He might suggest that Oprah was first evidence. Certainly, she offers a kind of narrative, a visible account of connected events, each leading to her present exaltedness. When Oprah urges individuals to take control of their individual lives, or control their own destinies, she isn't issuing maxims: she backs up her claims with her own story, demonstrating that everything she preaches, she has practiced. In this sense, she is functioning, circulating proof that the racism remaining in America is annoying, but not necessarily deleterious.

Palmer-Mehta goes even further, arguing that Oprah's effect is "to place the blame for problems such as poverty and crime on individual failings" (p. 75). So, the only impediments to attaining the goal, or the "dream," are individual weaknesses. Malin Pereira believes there is even a strategy designed to protect this ideal from errant attacks. Her detailed inspection of Oprah's book club concludes that some of the literature reviewed was critical and occasionally troublesome to contain in the framework of the tv show. "The narrative

of possessive individualism that sustains the idea of the American Dream as accessible is increasingly challenged,” wrote Pereira, who argues that skilful editing served to “evacuate or suppress” critical elements. In effect, the book club delegitimized critical evaluation of America.

On these accounts, Oprah and the order she personifies help perpetuate a popular impression of America as inclusive, embracing a multitude of ethnic groups, respecting difference and diversity and relentless in its effort to eradicate racism. She personally attests to its success in this effort and confirms that, if traces of prejudice still exist, they are like revenants – returning from the dead. If blacks continue to underachieve, it is their own fault. I repeat: this has ideological suasion. Even if you don’t accept Steele’s thesis in *White Guilt*, you can understand the concept that propels his argument: whites of whatever generation are reminded daily of their connivance in a great historical abomination. Oprah’s presence, her life story and her messages help assuage the shame associated with this.

Where is the method, then? We can respect the force of Oprah’s overall narrative: everyone can dream, everyone can follow that dream, everyone can overcome what remnants of racism are left behind in the trail of civil rights. We can appreciate the guiding philosophy that individuals are makers of their own destinies and, as such, shouldn’t succumb to any kind of theory, metaphysical or sociological, that suggests there are forces compelling us to think and act in certain ways. And we can acknowledge that individuals work best when they work as individuals, each with their own identity, and not as anonymous members of groups, movements or other kinds of collectivities. This is all part of the realization or fulfillment of one’s talents and potentialities that Oprah encourages us all to pursue – self-actualization. But again, where is the method?

In the Introduction to their book *The Oprah Phenomenon*, Jennifer Harris and Elwood Watson offer an answer: “Winfrey links the need to value oneself with the consumption of goods.” They go on: “This message of uplift via consumption is ... if I am self-actualized and work hard, good things will come to me” (p. 8).

The argument echoes the one I will convey in subsequent chapters: that African American celebrities, wittingly or not, advance the intoxicating prospect that a particular form of the good life is available to all. It is an admittedly narrow conception of the good life, one based on the value of commodities. But Oprah both lives it and embodies it. She lays the scent of consumerism and her acolytes follow it.

Buying products, especially ones that radiate success, is a way of asserting one’s own worth in a way that, as Harris and Watson put it, “proclaims taste and sentiment.” And perhaps in a way that proclaims racism has been, if not defeated, then bypassed, dodged or in some way got around. Oprah promotes personal change, but the real change she instigates is in spending habits. Not only does she market her own tv network, magazines, DVDs and

miscellaneous other items of merchandise, but, in a way, she markets a way of life. This is probably the most telling effect of Oprahization: devotees are so dazzled by the glamor and opulence of Oprah that they confuse their pursuit of self-actualization with the pursuit of commodities. In the process, they become absorbed in a narcissistic search for inner happiness and disregard wider issues that impinge on their lives and the lives of others.

Oprah, in common with other celebrities who will appear in this book, is of her time, both a product and producer of a culture that seems to promise universal consumption and an endless supply of must-have items. More fundamentally, it is a culture in which anything – literally anything – can be bought in the marketplace. That includes the end of racism; or, more specifically, an end to the effects racism has personally on any consumer who can afford to follow Oprah's advice.

"How can you say racism is still a big problem in America?" has begun to look like a rhetorical question. The mere presence of Oprah is an answer of sorts. To recap her own submission: "If Oprah Winfrey can make it, what does it say about me?" It's a hypothetical reaction, but one with too much credence among whites and blacks to be dismissed entirely. When Christopher Holmes Smith in his analysis of Diddy-like hip-hop moguls wrote: "His trade is purely in the realm of socially mobile aspirations – the quintessential pixie dust of the postwar American dream," he hinted at why all African American celebrities seem to exercise an influence and authority that appears disproportionate to their status (p. 80). "Pixie dust" was the magic powder that enabled humans to fly in J.M. Barrie's fantasy *Peter Pan*. In the book, it worked. In reality it's just another commodity.