

What Do Television, Rhetorical Analysis, and Black Men Living on the Down Low All Have in Common? *The Oprah Winfrey Show*

KRYSTEN STEIN

Oprah is a global media legacy with an immense amount of public visibility. According to the article, “Adding It All Up: The Oprah Winfrey Show by the Numbers” from Oprah.com, *The Oprah Show* broadcast in 145 countries (Arnold-Ratliffe). The legacy of *Oprah* began on September 8, 1986 and ran until May 25, 2011, airing for 25 seasons (Rose, 2012). To this day, Oprah is the highest-rated daytime talk show host in American television history. To rhetorically analyze an episode of *The Oprah Show* opens a window to better understand how she reached so many viewers with her show and has since built a media empire — The OWN Network (OWN). It is important to uncover what Oprah and her producers did to obtain such a large-scale audience following, and how they made such an impact on the talk show industry and format. Due to the show’s vast and longitudinal popularity, examining it provides insight into how the show, culture, and society shaped one another over the years, and continues to impact present day. Using the method of rhetoric analysis allows for a deeper understanding of both Oprah as an entity and the structure and organization of the talk show as an American cultural artifact.

The text selected for this rhetorical analysis is the written transcript of the episode called “A Secret Sex World: Living on the Down Low.” The episode aired on Friday, April 16, 2004 and featured HIV activist, author and publisher, and *New York Times* best seller J.L. King. The transcript was obtained from the 501(c)(3) Florida-based agency funded by United Way, Big Bend Cares (bigbendcares.org). Their mission is to provide support and education to people affected and impacted by HIV and AIDS.

KRYSTEN STEIN (she/her/hers) is a first-generation, interdisciplinary Ph.D. student studying Communication and Media with concentrations in Gender and Women’s Studies and Black Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She researches TV and Digital Cultures, Media Industries, Entertainment Media Culture, Trash Culture, Popular Culture, Cultural Production and Representation, Pedagogy, and Intersectional Feminism — Gender, Sexuality, Race, and Class. She can be reached at kstein22@uic.edu.

Popular Culture Studies Journal
Vol. 9, No. 1, Copyright © 2021

I look at this specific episode of *Oprah* because of its historical and cultural relevance. According to Pepper, “The AIDS epidemic was largely understood through media representations such as film and television” (2). When the episode aired, conversations surrounding the down low (DL) and the media frenzy surrounding HIV and AIDS was booming. The media coverage of the DL opened a gateway for Oprah to be the first person to discuss it on a talk show. The show is a paramount cultural artifact as it was one of the first times millions of viewers were introduced to the phrase living on the DL. The episode was especially powerful because never before had a Black man who lived on the DL then converted given his first-hand personal experience and life story on national television. This show played a part in constructing larger conversations taking place about the HIV and AIDS epidemic. It helped shape how people viewed, defined, and thought about Black men living on the DL, HIV, and AIDS.

This paper investigates the historical context that impacted the creation and delivery of the episode, an applicable perspective/methodology of scapegoating, an exploration of the episode from the scapegoat perspective, and a summary of the implications. Through this analysis, I found that the episode acted as a drama where: 1) the scapegoat (the DL) was identified by 2) the repentant (King) and 3) the victims (women) spoke to 4) the community (whose values are made explicit by Oprah) about how 5) the scapegoat (the DL) had caused their problem (HIV and AIDS in the Black community), instead of identifying homophobia and deliberate blindness to HIV and AIDS in the community as the cause of the problem. This is especially important as utilizing the scapegoat frame allows people to turn a blind eye to the actual root of societal issues. Oprah utilized her position as the rhetor to place Black men living on the DL as the scapegoats, and the women as the victims. Additionally, this episode exemplified the integration of scapegoating with epideictic and therapeutic language discourse. This analysis is situated within the literature focusing on how television programs frame portrayals of Black sexuality, Black men, HIV, AIDS, and the DL.

The Historical Context of HIV and AIDS in the Media

The rhetorical purpose was brought to the attention of the media and then the public. The DL began trending around 2003, and by 2004, there was a media frenzy surrounding the DL, HIV, and AIDS. The term living on the DL expressed the behavior of men who slept with other men in secret while living a

heterosexual lifestyle. Many popular media outlets, like *The New York Times* (NYT), *The Washington Post*, *The Daily News*, *The Dallas Morning News* and *The Guardian* created content that described Black men living on the DL and blamed them for the transfer of HIV and AIDS to straight Black women. The circumstance that allowed Oprah to create and air this specific episode was timing and the environment constructed by the media. Popular messages created by the media about HIV and AIDS at the time classified them as “gay diseases” only having impact on the gay community. Due to these incorrect, inaccurate, and harmful messages, the media pushed the idea that straight people did not have to worry about the HIV and AIDS epidemic, because it would not affect them. This eventually shifted over time, but crafted an extremely negative media landscape for the gay community.

The NYT 2003 article, “Double Lives on the Down Low,” focused on the subculture of the DL. The article discussed a Flex bathhouse in Cleveland, OH where Black men on the DL went for sex. Another 2004 NYT cover story, “AIDS Fears Grow for Black Women,” focused on Black men living on the DL and presented statistics showing how HIV and AIDS were impacting the Black community, specifically Black women. The article explained, “In 2004, The Center for Disease Control and Prevention concluded that the 30% of all black bisexual men infected with HIV may serve as a ‘bridge’ of HIV transmission.” During this time, HIV and AIDS gained national awareness as diseases that could infect those of various sexual orientations, not just openly gay individuals. The focus was especially on men who had sex with both men and women, how their “lifestyle” spread HIV and AIDS, and how Black women were high risk for contracting HIV and AIDS from this lifestyle. This shift challenged the idea that HIV and AIDS were “gay-only” diseases. A 2004 *Washington Post* article, “The Overlooked Victims of AIDS” and a 2004 *Daily News* article, “Polls Ignore Crisis Among Black Women” highlighted the concept of living on the DL and how Black women were contracting HIV and AIDS from their boyfriends and husbands without knowing it. *The Dallas Morning News* ran an article on their website called, “Author Warns Women of Closet, HIV” in 2004. The article specifically highlighted King blaming the contraction of HIV and AIDS on the DL lifestyle, sending a warning to straight Black women. According to Younge, in 2001, The Kaiser Family Foundation found that 67% of black women with AIDS had contracted it through heterosexual sex — up 58% from 1997. *The Guardian’s* 2004 report confirmed the rise in AIDS virus contraction was 23

times more likely for Black women, touched on the cultural concept of living on the DL, and highlighted the impact of homophobia in the Black community.

Openly homosexual men in Black culture were frowned upon, leading to creation of the DL lifestyle, and downstream effects of systemic and cultural homophobia. This lifestyle created a path for individuals to secretly practice homosexuality while still appearing heterosexual in the public sphere. All the articles implied that the DL was the cause of increased HIV and AIDS rates in the Black community. Much of the media instilled fear in Black women who could potentially contract the virus from their Black boyfriends or husbands who were having sex with other men in secret. As shown, investigative journalism and media outlets at the time spotlighted the issue of HIV and AIDS as a dangerous epidemic. The media coverage framed the topic and set up the discussion perfectly for Oprah to be the first person to develop and share the topic(s) with millions who tuned into her show.

Cultural Rhetorics of Black Media

Cultural rhetorics seek to understand the practice of meaning making and producing knowledge, while understanding that all rhetorics are cultural and all cultures are rhetorical (Cultural Rhetorics Consortium). Black Media has been analyzed over time covering various mediums such as newspaper, radio, television, the Internet, and specifically, social media. Black identity and representation show up in these channels of communication, creating both culture and rhetorics. Omi and Winant argue that racial representation within social structures impacts and is required for racial formation. Brock builds upon their work, looking specifically at online personal contexts and Black identity. He explains that Black identity and representation take place on the Internet, in the public sphere, reflecting back on the Black community. Brock parallels the Internet to barber shops and beauty salons. Both spaces encourage interaction about identity between Black men and women. Additionally, the online, public space allows for non-Blacks to join and contribute to the shaping of online Black identity. Additionally, Florini, looks at racial identity online and the use of the Black American cultural tradition of “signifyin.” She found that cultural knowledge and competence were used by Black users to perform their Black cultural identity on Twitter. Focusing on the representation of Black men, Perry, Smith, and Brooms, conducted in-depth interviews with Black men who made

meaning of their experiences in romantic relationships and marriage with references to popular culture and media. They found that participants who consumed representations of Black men in the media, used those images to understand their own romantic relationships. The literature exemplifies how culture and rhetorics impact racialized representation, formation, and identity. If scapegoating is applied in these areas and within Black media, it can further marginalize and damage those already living in the margins.

Mishandling of the HIV and AIDS Epidemic

With any global epidemic, how it is managed is always a question for concern. This is especially timely as we are coping with and living through the COVID-19 pandemic. We see how the virus has impacted particular groups of people, especially those in the margins of society in more intense and negative ways than others. We also have seen how Asians have been positioned as scapegoats for the cause and spread of the virus, resulting in devastating, terrible hate crimes and harmful, racist rhetoric. This was also the case with the HIV and AIDS epidemic. The HIV and AIDS epidemic has been associated with the word's discrimination and homophobia. Pepper explains that media discourse about AIDS in the late 80s and early 1990s treated AIDS as a disease affecting homosexuals, hemophiliacs, heroin addicts, and Haitians ("the four H's") (4). According to Piot Russell, and Larson, the stigma associated with sexual intercourse and injection drugs, and the impact of economic and social inequality on the epidemic were two major focus areas. Both things led the crisis to become highly politicized, revealing weaknesses in societal systems and structures. Health officials were aware of HIV and AIDS in 1981, they were spreading rapidly by the end of 1984, but U.S. leaders were unresponsive and remained silent to the health emergency until 1985 (Bennington-Castro). Overall, when the viruses first began to spread rapidly, classifying them as homosexual diseases allowed those in power to turn a blind eye. The thought was that the crisis only impacted a culture the straight world did not want to see, and could easily avoid. Without proper management and mishandling of the viruses, they continued to spread rapidly, and still impact millions of people today. This is strikingly similar to our current cultural context of COVID-19, as we see those in the margins most impacted in negative ways and painted as the scapegoats.

Scapegoat Perspective

The use of scapegoating occurs and then is reinforced by the media through the goal of issue containment. Scapegoating has been and is still used to take the blame from the collective or larger societal systems and place it on a particular person or group of people. Scapegoating has been used widely in both historical and present-day rhetoric.

Oprah's episode creates the DL as the scapegoat for the HIV and AIDS crisis. Burke's popular piece, applied the concept of scapegoating to the rhetoric Hitler used in his battle against the Jews, and used the Jewish population as the scapegoat for Germany's problems. By utilizing anti-Semitism, he created the Jews as the scapegoat for the economic and social problems in Germany. Tonn, et al. also write in the lens of scapegoating, examining the case between Donald Rogerson and Karen Wood. Wood lived in the woods in Maine and was shot in her backyard by Rogerson during hunting season. Wood became the scapegoat of her own death because of her "outsiderness." Ott and Aoki also examine the concept of scapegoating in the news coverage of Matthew Shepard's horrific murder. The coverage portrayed Henderson and McKinney's homophobia as character flaws, rather than addressing nationwide prejudice and homophobia as the problem. Even though homophobia was and is a nationwide issue, the murderer's characters were crafted as the scapegoat. Butterworth looked at scapegoating and argues that Rafael Palmeiro used a scapegoat to produce the politics of fear and division that separated post 9/11 America. Signer utilized scapegoating to look at elite corruption and American greed, specifically focusing on news framing of the lease deal between Boeing and the Air Force, and how Burke's concept of the scapegoat was applied.

Black Men Living on the DL as a Scapegoat

The phenomenon of the DL dates back to the early 2000s, and exploded in both popular culture and news media, such as the *Oprah* episode discussed and R. Kelly's *Trapped in the Closet*. Snorton does extensive research on the DL, Blackness, and queerness. His book, *Nobody Is Supposed to Know*, explains how negative perceptions of Black sexuality are reproduced and propagated through the DL in popular culture and media, like television, movies, music, and news. Additionally, he argues that the DL polices and surveils Black sexuality through

narratives that represent DL Black men as promiscuous and dangerous. Looking at the digital, Brandon Robinson and Salvador Vidal-Ortiz focus on ads posted to Craigslist by people on the DL. From their analysis, they found most ads were seeking masculine men, and that “DL” in the ads was not only used by Black men. Focusing on television shows, Cerise Glenn and Andrew Spieldenner, utilized Black feminist thought and an intersectional frame to analyze portrayals of Black women in relationships with men on the DL in *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* and *Girlfriends*. Their analysis uncovered that hyper-sexual affluent Black folk with HIV and/or AIDS were associated with the DL. Additionally, they further developed the trope of Black women being in love and in trouble and the trope of Black men having to silence and disguise their sexuality for acceptance.

The literature on the DL and scapegoating can be applied to many situational acts and occurrences in our culture. When people need to explain a tragedy, crisis, crime, etc., like the HIV and AIDS epidemic, one tendency is to identify some person or group of people, like people on the DL, who can be symbolically the host/cause of the problem to cast them out and thus cast out the blame/responsibility for the problem.

Studying Oprah

Researchers study Oprah to determine what her show did and how it was so effective, focusing on her star persona, show organization, and her rags-to-riches narrative. A major aspect that plays into Oprah’s narrative includes her star persona. Oprah had her talk show, but has also been featured in films, on the radio, and in many different forms of popular culture. Kylo-Patrick Hart and Metasebia Woldemariam look at Oprah’s experience in acting and also how viewers relate to characters on screen. They argue that viewers experience a sensation with two different kinds of characters on one screen. They enjoy characters that have lives, experiences, and situations that are completely different from their own. When a character lives a completely different life than the viewer, it can transport the viewer to a new life or situation. On the other hand, viewers also like to relate and identify with characters that are similar to them. Viewers can experience a mix of these two worlds with Oprah. She is a mixture of the extraordinary along with the ordinary. In a sense, Oprah is just an ordinary Black woman who we, as everyday citizens, can relate and identify with. The authors’

look at Oprah's acting roles in *The Color Purple* and *Beloved*. Both movies portray Oprah as a Black woman overcoming trials and tribulations. Her mastery in acting in these heroic roles add to her credibility as a strong Black woman.

Dana Cloud explains the concepts of liberal hegemony, star discourse, tokenism, class politics, and cultural criticism in relation to Oprah as a talk show host and her show. She explains the idea that culture creates a script that maintains hegemony even when Black people build their own images. Cloud positions Oprah in a positive place, stating she was a token of a marginalized group, but she fulfilled the hero story. Even though Oprah came from a poor family, is Black, was sexually abused, and struggled throughout life, she rose above and is now very successful. Oprah plays into the token Black success story on television. Her position as a world-famous talk show host creates the message that the American Dream is attainable for all Black folk. The rags-to-riches story accurately reflects people's actions, but it also deflects attention from economic and social structures that stand in people's ways and implies that failure of people is their own fault for lacking the will to fight. All the concepts Cloud discusses in relation to Oprah play into the fact that Oprah's narrative and persona built her reputation and credibility. Sartwell explains Oprah's narrative and goes into detail outlining why her narrative impacts viewers so strongly. Her narrative is so powerful because it is opposite or contradicts people's typical lived experiences. Most Americans do not endure intense suffering and then become an internationally known talk show host. The narrative of redemption is prevalent in Oprah's story. She suffered, came from a childhood impacted by trauma, experienced redemption, and is now a multi-billion-dollar commodity. This leads to why audiences are so intrigued and infatuated with Oprah as a rhetor.

Christine Marshall and Kiran Pienaar observe how identities are crafted through language by looking at the discursive construction of the "suffering victim" identity of Oprah. They explain how suffering is utilized on the show by saying:

The Oprah Winfrey Show appears to derive from Winfrey's ability to constrain interpretations so that they reinforce the epideictic and therapeutic setting of the show. In addition, the "therapeutic" goals of the show transform it from a merely voyeuristic spectacle of pain and tragedy to a forum for generating catharsis and self-transformation. The show does this by reminding the suffering victim that (s)he is not alone and that with the help of others, can transform her/his identity from being a victim of

tragedy to an empowered, resilient survivor. By exploiting a belief in the universality of suffering, Winfrey is able to promote “therapy” for everyone, both “suffering victims” (the guests) and potential victims (the viewers). (535-6)

The literature shows that a key concept in Oprah’s shows, website, and materials is overcoming suffering and self-help mechanisms to live a happy and fulfilled lifestyle. The show created specific identities for guests and positioned them in places of suffering to allow for overcoming and triumph.

Analysis and Discussion

Scapegoating Black Men Living on the DL. Oprah utilized the scapegoat frame to identify, blame, and deem Black men living on the DL as the host and cause of the HIV and AIDS crisis. She presented the lifestyle of living on the DL as a very negative one, and instilled fear in Black women by communicating that men living on the DL were one of the reasons for the spread of HIV and AIDS. The DL was placed as the scapegoat instead of looking at homophobia and blindness to HIV and AIDS as a cause of the problem. Homophobia and women as victims were two downstream effects of the DL, and the lens of scapegoating and moral judgment in both American and Black culture took place in the episode.

We have seen damaging and dangerous examples of scapegoating throughout history and in our everyday lives. When blame is placed upon a person or group of people, the true source of the problem is not discovered or even ignored on purpose. Additionally, scapegoating techniques are harmful and create polarization in societies, traditionally outcasting, blaming, poorly treating, and even instilling violence on already marginalized folx, like Black men living on the DL. Since television, media, culture, and society all shape and mold one another, it is crucial that information communicated on popular past shows like *Oprah*, and present-day shows are factual and address all angles of an issue or topic. Since scapegoating can occur when society is in a state of struggle and panic, like during the HIV and AIDS epidemic, it is essential to understand where blame and responsibility is placed, as this uncovers societal power and hierarchical dynamics. Popular talk shows like *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, have the power to positively or negatively impact entire groups of people. Due to Oprah’s long airtime and massive viewership, how topics and marginalized groups were framed is crucial to understand as these conversations impacted and continue to socially

construct and cultivate the world around us. The power of these in demand talk shows should not be taken lightly as they can cause harm if tactics like scapegoating are used on them when discussing challenging topics.

Therapeutic and Epideictic Language. Oprah presented the DL in a negative and dangerous lens, by utilizing therapeutic and epideictic language when discussing this subculture. In this specific episode, the therapeutic rhetoric leads to the perspective of scapegoating. The DL was crafted as the scapegoat and the guilty party who must be blamed and should confess. The therapeutic rhetoric creates a “confessional” — a place where people admit evil or terrible things they did, or things others did to them. Therapeutic language was also utilized in the episode to overcome the suffering identity. Oprah, as the rhetor, encouraged guests to narrate their personal stories of suffering. She guided the conversation by prompting guests to explain their lived experiences and deep feelings. In addition, she inspired guests to use oral narration to explain their stories, which in turn, created sympathy for the guest by the viewer. The epideictic created discourses of praise and blame and constructed a stage to portray the character as a particular person. Oprah then praised victims who confessed their suffering and blamed those who committed DL sexual acts.

The placement of psychologists and psychiatrists were also in the episode to incorporate therapy techniques during interviews. The therapists and Oprah offered correct ways to act and think based upon good and moral behavior. This language was used to create an interpersonal connection between Oprah and her guests. Oprah’s therapeutic rhetoric epideictic (either praise or blame) functioned as scapegoating by creating a guilty party to blame and in turn, should confess. The persona of the converted/repentant played into the men who had confessed and had been forgiven. The scapegoat was aided and perfected by those who had repented or converted from the DL lifestyle, including King.

Drama = Scapegoat, Repentant, Victims, Community, and Problem. The episode acted as a drama where: 1) the scapegoat (the DL) was identified by 2) the repentant (King) and 3) the victims (women) spoke to 4) the community (whose values are made explicit by Oprah) about how 5) the scapegoat (the DL) had caused their problem (AIDS in the Black community). Oprah utilized her rhetor position to place the Black men living on the DL as the scapegoats, and the women as the victim personas. Many rhetorical components were used in the text to emphasize the main goal of scapegoating like purpose, persona, tone, and narratives as support material.

The Purpose. Some questions to ask in search for the episode's purpose would be — why did Oprah take an entire show to cover this topic? Why was this topic important, and why was it discussed? This specific episode held the rhetorical purpose of scapegoating Black men living on the DL and exposing the lifestyle of living on the DL through the personal experiences of Black men and women. It was crafted by the rhetor (Oprah), the situation (HIV and AIDS epidemic), and the audience (*Oprah Show* audience/viewers). She said in her opening paragraph, “Today, you’re gonna hear many reasons why AIDS is on the rise again. Here’s a shocker! It’s one of the big reasons why so many women are getting AIDS. Their husbands and their boyfriends are having secret sex with other men.” “Okay, so this lifestyle even has a name. It’s called ‘Living on the Down Low.’” (para 1) This section of the transcript and introduction of the episode specifically explained what was going to be discussed.

Personas. The personas of each guest on the show played into and constructed the scapegoat lens.

King. King took on the persona of the repent or the person who converted from the DL lifestyle. Sharing his personal narrative transported the audience and created strong emotional appeal. King said,

Deep down on the inside, I had a desire to be with men [...] and the desire was so strong, that it just overrode everything I knew. It created this whole secret life and made me make up stories and try to cover up my tracks [...] a life that destroyed my family. The day that I got caught was a sad, sad day. (para 9)

Having first-hand experience of living on the DL served to build his credibility. Additionally, him speaking about living in such conditions exemplified why he took on the persona of a repent DL man in this transcript. King fulfilled the persona to aid and perfect the scapegoating of the DL lifestyle.

Oprah. Oprah took on the persona of orator/narrator which also played into the scapegoating perspective. The media frenzy surrounding HIV and AIDS at the time, placed Oprah in a perfect position to air this episode, and her as a rhetor was very powerful and impactful. From analyzing the two roles she played in *The Color Purple* and *Beloved*, we can see she played independent women who thought for themselves and had great strength. In parallel, she is also considered an independent superwoman in real life. The fact that she played two roles that built into the persona she exemplified on her talk show is very powerful. She

exudes the same heroic qualities of the characters she plays in her everyday life. In her performances, she works to expose issues that are difficult to discuss like abuse, sexism, classism, etc. Her personas both in television and film exemplify empathy to others, intimate connections with topics and people's lived experiences, and honesty on issues and challenging topics. She always challenged and discussed racial and social issues on her television show, and now does the same on the OWN Network.

Oprah's audience, both immediate and mediated, relate to her and even at times view her as a close friend, creating a parasocial relationship that enhances her success. The relationship between the viewer and Oprah is built through Oprah's willingness to self-disclose about her own life. She shares many intimate things about her life like being abused as a young girl, her relationship with Gayle and Stedman, and her struggles with weight and general life issues. When Oprah self-discloses it makes her seem like a real and ordinary person — just like everyone else. She lives an extraordinary, wealthy life while remaining down to earth and relatable to her audiences through her self-disclosure, personal life story, and rags to-riches narrative. Playing into the constructed narrative of the American Dream, she represents the idea that Black folk can fulfill their dreams if they just work hard enough. Oprah's star persona is crafted by her power to discuss and stand against issues like sexism and abuse and by her life experiences. Both things hold a cultural significance of their own, impacting her success as a rhetor/narrator.

In this episode, Oprah had an edge due to her race and reputation. She had the advantage of being a Black woman speaking to her "brothers" and "sisters." She utilized her talk show host skills to convey and communicate the message of being on the DL as an awful thing, and to elicit fear in Black women. She had to determine what stance to take, who to interview/include on the show, and how to present the information to her audience. Her and her team had to determine how to frame the topic and episode, what language to use, and how to present the episode to viewers in a way to educate and insight fear and danger. Oprah's reputation, public image, and race aided her in being a suitable rhetor for scapegoating DL men, while raising awareness and knowledge of the HIV and AIDS epidemic, especially to Black women.

Women as Victims: Cheryl, Marcea, and Jane. Women being framed as victims of the DL is an important one. Oprah used straight Black women and their narratives to perfect the scapegoat lens, create the identity of the victim, and craft

self-help and overcoming suffering techniques. She shared the community perspective on this topic by naming victims. She presented female victims and narration of the victims to appeal to emotions, and even pushed show participants into the persona of the victim if they were not taking that stance. She also identified them by blaming the HIV and AIDS crisis on DL men. An example of her interacting with a victim occurred as follows,

CHERYL: Well, it just seemed that there were always gay men around. Gay men would be visiting him in his apartment, we would go out together and there would be gay men to pass us and speak to him in the street and there just seemed to be an awful lot of gay men in his life. (para 105)

OPRAH: That ain't a red flag, that's the Indy 500!

CHERYL: Well, but this was back in 1986, Oprah, and no one was talking about Down Low. People was still fixated on this being a gay, White, male disease. The only thing I was worried about was a Black, gay male friend of mine who liked to date Caucasian men and I kept telling him, "Be careful; be cautious because you know you can catch this thing." I never thought it would impact me. Never. (para 107)

OPRAH: J.L., so I'm thinking if gay men are surrounding your boyfriend all the time, then that's a clue? (para 108)

A major persona that was crafted in this episode was victim. The straight, Black women who had been infected by their significant other living on the DL took on this persona. Examples of this include Cheryl, Marcea, and Jane. Cheryl shared her personal experience of being infected by a man she was dating on and off for ten years. Emotional appeal was incorporated when she said, "I never thought it would impact me. Never." (para 107) Marcea also took on the persona of victim. She explained:

Yes, I very seldom did not use a condom. I was in college. I was studying to be a Psychologist. I had plans to have my PhD in Clinical Psychology and I was dating a gentleman and I found out after I left him and broke up with him that I was pregnant. I had cancer and I was HIV positive. I went back and told all my previous...anybody I'd even kissed that I had HIV and it later came back to me that he was also HIV positive and not JUST HIV positive, but had AIDS. (para 125)

Both Cheryl and Marcea can be classified into the victim persona because they are two women who were impacted in negative ways by the DL lifestyle. They

were victimized and could not do anything to stop contracting HIV and AIDS because they did not know about their partner's secret lifestyles. Jane, like Cheryl and Marcea also took on the victim persona. Jane brought the perspective of an older woman who was infected. She explained:

The death of the man who infected me was a wakeup call. And I felt I could make a difference if I stand up and say, "Look at this face — this old, wrinkled, jowly face. This is another face of HIV. (para 181)

[...]

I was 50 years old when I was infected. I was 55 when I found out; and I am 68 today. (para 186)

She, along with the other women did not know they had been infected and their lives had been forever altered. All the personas in the episode play into the perspective of scapegoating the DL. The concept of gender was incorporated by victimizing all the women in these situations. The straight Black women were made the victim by the DL lifestyle, and Oprah placed the blame on the DL instead of looking at other societal factors like homophobia. Using the repented and converted persona of King allowed for the scapegoat to be perfected.

Tone. The tone of the episode also impacted the scapegoat perspective by suggesting the rhetor's (Oprah's) attitude towards the DL and showing the meaning she was trying to communicate. It framed living on the DL as a personal threat to Black women and was confrontative in a way that it addressed difficult issues, focusing on people negatively impacted by the DL lifestyle. Some ways to describe the tone would be: dangerous, personal, tragic, negative, dark, fearful, harsh, negative, moralistic, condemning, terrifying, and threatening. This was influential as it was emphasized throughout the entire transcript, as evidenced by King saying: "I know that...and that's why I did it. That's why I did it! I get the death threats." (para 48). In paragraph 98, descriptive tones like hurting, deceiving, lying to her, cheating, crying and screaming were all used. Oprah responded with "Coming up you've met with men who lead secret sexual lives. Next, we're going to hear from the other side, women who were deceived and infected with HIV speak out" (para 99). She also stated, "Listen to this: a sudden spike in HIV infection rates among African American male college students is being declared a public health emergency. Not an increase, but an emergency" (para 131). These are a few examples of how tone was used throughout the entire episode. The tone emphasized that the DL was the reason for the HIV and AIDS

crisis in the Black community, specifically impacting Black women in negative and harmful ways.

Supporting Materials. The final rhetorical component used often in this specific *Oprah* transcript is supporting materials such as statistics and testimonies/narratives from people both living on and impacted by the DL lifestyle. These supporting materials made the concept of living on the DL more memorable and vivid to the viewer. With the emotional aspect of this topic, the narratives/testimonies tap into the audience's emotions. The statistics provide quantitative and shocking insight into the sheer amount of Black folk affected by HIV and AIDS. Using these supporting materials play into emotional appeal and connect the act of living on the DL to real-life. These rhetorical components all play into the perspective of the DL as the scapegoat.

Conclusion

This analysis uncovers the rhetorical tactics utilized in *The Oprah Show episode, "A Secret Sex World: Living on the Down Low,"* expanding the literature on Black sexuality, Black men, HIV, AIDS, and the DL. Moreover, it further explains the implications of utilizing scapegoating techniques and dives deeper into the cultural and rhetorical understandings of *Oprah*. To recap, it presents how Oprah utilized language strategies such as therapeutic and epideictic rhetoric to create a confessional for the guests in this episode to admit to evil or terrible things, creating a discourse of praise or blame. Oprah's persona and rags-to-riches story impacted how her audience related to her. She lived an extraordinary lifestyle, while still being relatable, down to earth, and ordinary. Oprah as the rhetor and host had a huge impact on the episode and the act of scapegoating. The discourse used in this episode, like language strategies and tone all worked as evidence to the claim that Black men living on the DL are evil and the problem for HIV and AIDS. Homophobia and women as the victims are two aspects that downstream from this text. The community perspective (Oprah) named victims (Women) and identified with them while blaming the crisis (HIV and AIDS) on the scapegoat (Black downlow men, the excluded audience) instead of identifying homophobia and deliberate blindness to HIV and AIDS in the community as the cause of the problem. This scapegoating is aided/perfected by those who repent or converted from the downlow lifestyle (King). The various rhetorical tools created and utilized in this episode of *Oprah* played into her specific purpose of exposing

the DL and placing Black men on the DL as the scapegoat and cause for the HIV and AIDS epidemic.

Works Cited

- Arnold-Ratliff, Katie. "Adding It All Up: *The Oprah Winfrey Show* by the Numbers." *Oprah.com*, June 2011, www.oprah.com/entertainment/the-oprah-winfrey-show-by-the-numbers-oprah-show-statistics/all.
- Auerbach, Judith. "The Overlooked Victims of AIDS." *The Journal Times*, 18 Oct. 2004, journaltimes.com/news/opinion/editorial/the-overlooked-victims-of-the-aids-epidemic/article_9031ea3d-8145-5321-b940-4ff0858ad5a5.html.
- Bennington-Castro, Joseph. "How AIDS Remained an Unspoken — But Deadly — Epidemic for Years." *History*, 1 June 2020, www.history.com/news/aids-epidemic-ronald-reagan.
- Burghardt, Carl R., and Hillary A. Jones. *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*. Strata Publishing, Inc., 2017.
- Butterworth, Michael L. "Purifying the Body Politic: Steroids, Rafael Palmeiro, and the Rhetorical Cleansing of Major League Baseball." *Western Journal of Communication*, vol. 72, no. 2, 2008, pp. 145-61.
- Brock, André. "'Who Do You Think You Are?': Race, Representation, and Cultural Rhetorics in Online Spaces." *Poroi*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2009, pp. 15-35.
- Cloud, Dana L. "Hegemony or Concordance? The Rhetoric of Tokenism in 'Oprah' Oprah Rags-to-Riches Biography." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, vol. 13, no. 2, 1996, pp 115-37.
- Cultural Rhetorics Consortium. "Home." 2021, cultrhetconsortium.org.
- Denizet-Lewis, Benoit. "Double Lives On The Down Low." *The New York Times Magazine*, 3 Aug. 2003, www.nytimes.com/2003/08/03/magazine/double-lives-on-the-down-low.html.
- Florini, Sarah. "Tweets, Tweeps, and Signifyin'." *Television and New Media*, vol. 15, no.3, 2013, pp. 223-37.
- Glenn, Cerise L., and Andrew R. Spieldenner. "An Intersectional Analysis of Television Narratives of African American Women with African American Men on 'the Down Low.'" *Sexuality and Culture*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2013, pp. 401-16.

- Hart, Kylo-Patrick R., and Metasebia Woldemariam. "Oprah Winfrey as Melodramatic Actress: Contributions of Winfreys Feature-Film Performances to the Authenticity of Her Star Persona." *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2008, pp. 183-95.
- Maddux, Kristy. "Finding Comedy in Theology: A Hopeful Supplement to Kenneth Burke's Logology." *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, vol. 39, no. 3, 2006, pp. 208-32.
- Marshall, Christine, and Kiran Pienaar. "You Are Not Alone: The Discursive Construction of the Suffering Victim Identity on The Oprah Winfrey Show." *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2008, pp. 525-46.
- Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States*. Routledge, 2014.
- Ott, Brian L., and Eric Aoki. "The Politics of Negotiating Public Tragedy: Media Framing of the Matthew Shepard Murder." *Rhetoric and Public Affairs*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2002, pp. 483-505.
- Pepper, Shayne, "HBO and the Story of HIV/AIDS." *Communication, Media and Theatre Faculty Publications*. vol. 4. 2014. neiudc.neiu.edu/cmt-pub/4.
- Perry, Armon R., et al. "'You Ain't No Denzel': African American Men's Use of Popular Culture to Narrate and Understand Marriage and Romantic Relationships." *Journal of African American Studies*, vol. 18, no. 4, 2014, pp. 485-97.
- Piot, Peter, et al. "Good Politics, Bad Politics: The Experience of AIDS." *American Journal of Public Health*, vol. 97, no. 11, 2007, pp. 1934-6.
- Price, Lori. "Author Warns Women of Closet, HIV." *The Dallas Morning News*, 2004.
- Robinson, Brandon A., and Salvador Vidal-Ortiz. "Displacing the Dominant 'Down Low' Discourse: Deviance, Same-Sex Desire, and Craigslist.org." *Deviant Behavior*, vol.34, no. 3, 2012, pp. 224-41.
- Rose, Lacey. "America's Top-Earning Black Stars." *Forbes Magazine*, 29 Jan. 2009, www.forbes.com/2009/01/29/oprah-will-smith-business-media-0129_black_stars.html?sh=2d356c54b241.
- Singer, Ross. "Framing of Elite Corruption and Rhetorical Containment of Reform in the Boeing-Air Force Tanker Controversy." *Southern Communication Journal*, vol. 76, no. 2, 2011, pp. 97-119.

- Skenazy, Lenore. "Polls Ignore Crisis Among Black Women." *The Daily News*, 2004.
- Snorton, C. R. *Nobody Is Supposed to Know: Black Sexuality on the Down Low*. U of Minnesota P, 2014.
- Tonn, Mari Boor, et al. "Hunting and Heritage on Trial: A Dramatistic Debate over Tragedy, Tradition, and Territory." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol. 79, no. 2, 1993, pp.165-81.
- Villarosa, Linda. "AIDS Fears Grow for Black Women." *The New York Times Magazine*, 5 Apr. 2004, www.nytimes.com/2004/04/05/us/aids-fears-grow-for-black-women.html.
- Younge, Gary. "Black Women in US 23 Times as Likely to Get Aids Virus." *The Guardian*, 5 Apr. 2004, www.theguardian.com/world/2004/apr/06/aids.usa.