Critical Studies in Media Communication

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcsm20

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Dana L. Cloud
Published online: 11 Feb 2014.

To cite this article: Dana L. Cloud (2014) Shock Therapy: Oprah Winfrey, Celebrity Philanthropy, and Disaster “Relief” in Haiti, Critical Studies in Media Communication, 31:1, 42-56, DOI: 10.1080/15295036.2013.864047

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2013.864047

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Shock Therapy: Oprah Winfrey, Celebrity Philanthropy, and Disaster “Relief” in Haiti

Dana L. Cloud

This article examines coverage of the 2010 Haiti earthquake on the Oprah Winfrey Show. I argue that the Oprah Winfrey Show attempted to deploy therapeutic discourse to warrant what Naomi Klein (2008) calls the “shock doctrine”: an argument for the demolition of “failed” societies and states so that they can be rebuilt in the neoliberal image of private capitalism. Thus, Winfrey’s discourse might be described as “shock therapy.” However, celebrities featured during these episodes worked as shock absorbers, engaging in an ideological tug-of-war with the therapeutic narrative, oscillating between personalistic and more broadly critical perspectives on crisis.

Keywords: Shock Doctrine; Haiti Earthquake; Oprah; Celebrity; Therapeutic Discourse

Being the object of charity is hardly to be compared with being the subject of freedom—Elizabeth Spellman (1997, p. 71)

An earthquake measuring 7.0 on the Richter scale struck the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince on January 12, 2010. Laying waste to the city, the earthquake toppled poorly constructed houses, hotels, hospitals, and even the presidential palace. An estimated 200,000 people died, and three million more were left in desperate need of aid. As of March 2012, 500,000 Haitians were still homeless, most Haitians had no plumbing or medical care, cholera was rampant, and Haitian unemployment stood at 70%. Only half of the pledged aid to Haiti had arrived; the U.S. had delivered on only 24% of its promised help (Phillips & Provost, 2012; see also Sedlar & Beeton, 2012).

This ongoing tragedy was a natural disaster, but it occurred in a social context of desperate poverty, shoddy infrastructure, and a government weakened by two...
centuries of U.S. military intervention. During the Cold War, the U.S. supported the Duvalier dictatorships (1957 to 1986) as a counterweight to Castro’s Cuba nearby. In the 1980s, masses of Haitians rose up to drive the Duvaliers from power, and in 1990 elected reformer Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Removed in 1991 by a U.S.-backed coup, Aristide resumed office in 1994 when Bill Clinton sent U.S. troops to the island—but on the condition that Aristide implement a restructuring plan that Haitians called the “plan of death” (Prashad, 2010). In 2004, Washington again collaborated with Haiti’s ruling elite to back death squads that toppled the government, then kidnapped and deported Aristide.

Each of these interventions required ideological warrants. Anne McClintock (1995) explains how, historically, images of colonial subjects of Western imperialism have depicted black populations in racialized, sexualized, and gendered terms that construct those subjugated as animalistic and sexually brutal (p. 51). These representations warrant U.S. and U.N. intervention in a society presumed to be incapable of self-governance. Today, U.S. and U.N. forces, along with the Organization of American States (O.A.S.), control the country. March 2011 elections made musician Michel Martelly the president. However, like the Clinton administration before them, both the George W. Bush and the Obama administrations have used crises to expand tourism, support textile sweatshops, and weaken state economic control through privatization and deregulation, all of which set the stage for a natural disaster to become a social catastrophe.

Here I investigate the meanings of this tragedy in U.S. celebrity culture. I argue that the combination of two critical concepts, that of therapeutic discourse as developed in the work of Dana Cloud (1997), and of shock doctrine, defined by Naomi Klein (2008) as the capitalization by business on natural and human-made disasters, capture the import of discourse in the earthquake’s aftermath. Put together, these words form the phrase “shock therapy,” a term used in other contexts to describe abrupt economic reform, typically by the sudden release of price and currency controls, withdrawal of state subsidies, immediate trade liberalization, and large-scale privatization. As therapeutic rhetoric puts a humanitarian face on profound exploitation, it privatizes the experience of and response to privatization. In the process, celebrities perform an important function as shock absorbers who cushion the shock, bridge the divide between personal and political frames for tragedy, and compete and collaborate with the host during the interpretive process.

In support of this argument, I examine the only two episodes of the Oprah Winfrey Show addressing the earthquake (Winfrey, 2010; Lady Gaga, 2010). They also are representative of Winfrey’s show generally in their embrace of the meritocratic, neoliberal, and therapeutic discourses identified by Dana Cloud (1996, 1997), Eva Illouz (2003), and Janice Peck (2008). Winfrey’s program, network, magazine, and other media products constitute an empire in which hers is the dominant voice; more than 45 million people in the U.S. watched her show weekly until the end of its run in 2011 (Jacobson, 2011). Moreover, as Peck (2008) explains, the Winfrey empire functions to capture the “hearts and minds” of U.S. women and articulate them to privatized solutions for social problems. This process is depoliticizing but not
apolitical, as her program and the talk show genre thus participate in broader ideological patterns warranting new forms of colonialism and empire.

As I will show below in a brief discussion of Winfrey’s response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the patterns I describe in the Haiti coverage are not exceptional but are rather part of an overall therapeutic approach to neoliberal shocks. In my main analysis, I describe how celebrities Wyclef Jean, Sanjay Gupta, Lady Gaga, and singers Rihanna and Maxwell mediated a tension between a therapeutic, emotional, naturalizing response and a political response that denaturalized the events and insisted upon historical contextualization and material, justice-oriented intervention. Ultimately, my analysis asks whether and to what extent hegemonic responses to political and economic crisis may be contested even in such a therapeutic forum.

I proceed by first examining how neoliberal economic and political intervention in Haiti is warranted by the language of self-help and personal responsibility in what Chouliaraki (2012) calls the “theater of pity,” defined as a “communicative structure … that, by circulating images and stories about suffering, proposes dispositions of emotion and action to the West” (p. 1). Winfrey’s program is unparalleled among non-news media space and particularly therapeutic talk programs, which are powerful sites for circulation of such meanings and images.

Second, I discuss therapeutic discourse in celebrity culture generally and Winfrey’s show in particular. Winfrey scholars have consistently criticized the therapeutic, gendered, and ultimately pro-capitalist narratives that dominate her enterprises. Winfrey’s massively influential texts participate in the ideological rationalization for unequal capitalist social relations. For this reason, Janice Peck (2008) calls Winfrey a “cultural icon for the neoliberal era.” For the millions of middle class women in her viewership, Winfrey’s programs work to craft personal selves in line with global economic imperatives. As Eva Illouz (2003) explains, the narratives (a) manufacture of a dysfunctional public self in need of a cure, (b) psychologize politics, and (c) deny the existence of social classes in the liberal doctrine of the enchanted self. Winfrey’s manufacture of a post-racial enterprising brand and promotion of a “mind cure” for social problems reduced to the “failed self” all contribute to her function as a one-woman campaign for neoliberal economic expansion. This formula has been especially compelling for white, middle class women because “it [takes] into account the ‘emotional and cultural tensions’ confronting them” (Peck, 2008, p. 30).

Third, I perform close analyses of selected Oprah episodes to show how celebrities destabilized Winfrey’s therapeutic responses to the devastation in Haiti. I conclude with observations about the role of celebrities as shock absorbers, figures whose performances oscillate between personal and political personae, interpreting disaster as more than personal, but as political in a way limited by the mode of humanitarian giving.

**Shock Therapy and Disaster Capitalism**

The work of such celebrity humanitarianism is closely tied to the neoliberal economic agenda described by Klein (2008):
The process deceptively called “reconstruction” began with finishing the job of the original disaster by erasing what was left of the public sphere and rooted communities, then quickly moving to replace them with a kind of corporate New Jerusalem—all before the victims of war or natural disaster were able to regroup and stake their claims to what was theirs. … Disaster capitalists have no interests in repairing what was. (p. 10)

We see this logic in an article from the investment site The Street called “An Opportunity to Heal Haiti.” “Here are some companies,” the authors write, “that could potentially benefit [from the earthquake]: General Electric, Caterpillar, Deere, Fluor, Jacobs Engineering” (Rothport, 2010). Signaling a therapeutic frame is the use of the word “heal” to mean economic appropriation of Haitian labor and resources. Similarly, New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof attempted to pass off the exploitation of cheap labor as a humanitarian initiative:

[The] best strategy for Haiti: building garment factories. The idea (sweatshops!) may sound horrific to Americans. But it’s a strategy that has worked for other countries, such as Bangladesh, and Haitians in the slums would tell you that their most fervent wish is for jobs. A few dozen major shirt factories could be transformational for Haiti. (Kristof, 2010; see also MacDonald, 2010)

Most Americans were rightly horrified at the devastation in Haiti, donating millions to relief efforts. However, political rhetoric, news media, and popular culture have not encouraged consumers to think about the disaster in social, political, and historical contexts. Given Winfrey’s prominence in the creation of what Chouliaraki (2012) calls the “theater of pity,” it comes as no surprise that just as her program encourages personal emotional and philanthropic responses to a structural crisis, it also participates in the privatizing logic of neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism, as Peck (2008) summarizes, is “an interlocking economic, political, ideological project to establish a new set of rules for governing the functioning of capitalism” (p. 7). Jodi Dean (2009) locates the emergence of this project in the late 1940s, when expanding global capital established exchange as a guide for all human action and the precondition of all human freedom. When crisis tears all security away and makes governments irrelevant, it is time for the bulldozers, financiers, and sweatshops to move in.

The rhetoric of privatization and individual responsibility has intensified with neoliberalism’s progress, justified in a fantasy of free trade that “captures our political interventions, formatting them as contributions to its circuits of affect and entertainment—we feel political, involved, like contributors who really matter” (Dean 2009, p. 49, emphasis in original). Eva Illouz (2008) likewise emphasizes the production in capitalism of a particular regime of feeling, namely therapeutic discourse, defined by Cloud (1997) as

a set of political and cultural discourses that have adopted psychotherapy’s lexicon—the conservative language of healing, coping, adaptation, and restoration of a previously existing order—but in contexts of sociopolitical conflict. The rhetorical
function of such therapeutic discourse is to encourage audiences to focus on themselves ... and their private lives rather than address and attempt reform systems of social power in which they are embedded. (p. xvi)

If privatization is the logic of neoliberalism, the therapeutic is its ideological corollary in privatizing the experience of privatization. As the “feeling regime” of neoliberalism, the therapeutic participates in a “communicative capitalism” (Dean, 2009) that attempts to solve political and economic crises through the “talking cure.”

Celebrities in the Theater of Pity

Commercial mass media circulate therapeutic responses to humanitarian crisis with the aid of celebrities who “embod[y] the false promise of individual power as a force of social change” (Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 4). Chouliaraki (2012) explains how “celebrity introduces into the theatrical dynamics of pity a crucial communicative figure, a figure who commands the necessary symbolic capital to articulate personal dispositions of acting and feeling as exemplary public dispositions at given historical moments” (p. 2, emphasis added). Such celebrities as Angelina Jolie and Audrey Hepburn have engaged in the “theater of humanitarianism” in performances that buttress “the global order of capitalism” by engaging consumers in “philanthropy without justice” (Chouliaraki, 2012, p. 13). Raka Shome (2011) identifies such discourse as “romantic internationalism,” in which consumers of media feel pity alongside gratitude to have escaped the fate of sufferers from a position of implicit superiority (p. 49). Spellman (1997) explains how objects of pity are condemned in the Western democratic popular imagination to tragedy, commodified as spectacles for distant audiences, or tasked with carrying meaning to collapse the distance between nonsufferer and sufferer (p. 85).

Thus, these discourses generate feelings of compassion that “may reinforce the very patterns of economic and political subordination responsible for suffering” (Spellman, 1997, p. 7; see also Berlant, 2004). Balaji describes how the homogenization of the victims of the Haiti quake as “a tragic and dysfunctional Other” (Balaji, 2011, p. 51) evokes pity rather than empathy; this pity galvanizes a politically vacuous “spectacle of giving.” The processes of personalization, racialization, and commodification occur through the personae of celebrities who absorb the shock of mass suffering by individualizing trauma and affording a commodified conduit for charitable giving.

As Littler (2008) has argued, celebrities “mediate distant suffering” while performing the traits of compassion and caring; their causes are about grinding poverty while the persona of the celebrity is the ironic embodiment of personal wealth (Littler, 2008). Across these moments, the celebrity generally functions to cushion the impact of geopolitical shocks through glamour and spectacle. Although several scholars have recognized signs of a critical humanitarianism in celebrity politics (Dyer, 2006; Street, 2006, 2012; Woodward, 2004; Yrjölä, 2012), Winfrey’s texts do not generally exhibit such complexity.
The Oprah Winfrey Show and the Struggle over the Meaning of Disaster

Unsurprisingly, Winfrey’s discourse is consistent across disasters. For example, regarding the devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans in 2005, Winfrey’s attention resulted in the raising of $10 million for survivors (Decker, 2006). However, her program heralded micro-level, pathetic responses, such as the rescue of one survivor’s dog—met with the abject gratitude of the dog’s owner—by Winfrey’s camera crew (Nate’s Hurricane, 2011). Winfrey’s Katrina coverage laid heavy emphasis on reporters’ (as stand-ins for audiences’) subjective emotional encounters with dead and decomposing bodies (Oprah on Hurricane Katrina, 2013). A third emphasis was on unfounded rumors of rape and other violence among survivors at the Superdome (Oprah on Hurricane Katrina, 2013; Stabile, 2007). Joyce King (2011) criticizes these rumors and their widespread circulation for tying together disaster and black depravity. As the following analysis will demonstrate, Oprah Winfrey’s program attempted to frame the 2010 Haiti earthquake in a similar spectacle of horror and pity.

Two main instances of this treatment are my foci: an interview with Haitian-American musician Wyclef Jean (Winfrey, 2010), and a segment featuring pop star Lady Gaga (Lady Gaga, 2010). Across the episodes, there is a struggle over the framing of the Haiti crisis between political and therapeutic frames. The tension between these frames is resolved by articulating social change through the personae of celebrities, as their emotionally reacting bodies and commodified opportunities for charitable giving cushion the shock of witnessing global catastrophe.

Wyclef Jean is a Haitian national who began his successful musical career in the progressive New Jersey hip-hop group The Fugees. Immediately after the earthquake, Jean traveled to Haiti and gave a number of interviews upon his return. A self-appointed ambassador for and to Haiti, Jean mounted an electoral bid in 2010–2011 for President of that country.

“Just Back from Haiti: Wyclef Jean’s Eyewitness Account” ran on January 20, 2010. The episode has four basic parts: (1) the interview with Wyclef Jean; (2) historical and geographic background montage with voice-over; (3) an interview with celebrity physician Sanjay Gupta; and (4) musical performances by the artists Rihanna and Maxwell. Via Winfrey’s voice, the episode tells a neoliberal story of a failed state whose people are “resilient” but not active shapers of the future. However, Jean and celebrity physician Sanjay Gupta challenge these frames.

The Neoliberal Narrative of the Failed State

During the segment overviewsing the history and geography of Haiti, Winfrey narrates the story of a people who won their independence from slavery in rebellion. This narration takes place over a photomontage of earthquake and post-earthquake footage, the image of a map of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, and historical images of the Haitian people and the Haitian revolution. Since that time, Winfrey says, centuries of civil war, violence, famine, political corruption, and natural disasters have “wrecked
havoc” on the nation’s nine million people, who had, until disaster struck, been on “a path to progress.” Her remarks signal a neoliberal frame that valorizes self-help and economic progress as the antidotes to havoc and disaster. The montage continues as Winfrey notes a statue of an unnamed escaped slave still standing in the rubble.

In a visual transition analogizing that heroic figure to photos of Wyclef Jean, Winfrey describes how the musically gifted Jean first came to the U.S. with his family at age nine. “Wyclef rose to the top. He had a dream of making it big in music.” And he did, enacting the generic, rags-to-riches story that has warranted faith in upward mobility in capitalism. This narrative that also describes Winfrey herself, whose popular biographies tell a single story implying the accessibility of the “American Dream” to black people regardless of structural barriers posed by racism and inequality (Cloud, 1996).

It is from this vantage point that Winfrey describes the unfolding horror in Haiti as a series of either natural disasters or the consequences of Haitians’ own choices: “The Haitian people, they have faced catastrophes, bad government, hurricanes, bad government …” (The statement trails off.) Importantly, featuring this narrative on Winfrey’s program situates the earthquake as a product of a failed state in much the same way that therapeutic discourse produces “failed selves” (Illouz, 2003) in need of repair. Neoliberalism thus finds its emotional and ideological expression in therapeutic form, as U.S. president Bill Clinton intones, “Haiti had the best chance to break the chains of the past and become a truly modern state.” As Clinton’s words invoke the imperative of neoliberalism and whiteness his own investment in modernizing Haiti, Winfrey’s narrative blames fate and irresponsibility rather than economic relations for the disaster, all while cultivating emotional expression in a healing frame. Winfrey engages in a second privatizing strategy in this episode: bringing the topic down to the brute level of bodies and feelings to the exclusion of historical context or political analysis.

Tell Me About the Smell

From the beginning of the episode, Winfrey attempts to bring viewers into the sensory experience of what Jean calls a “seventh hell.” Winfrey herself did not travel to Haiti in the aftermath of the earthquake, but in the interview with Jean, she obsessively imagines the smell of decomposing bodies and the horrific experience of trauma. First, audiences of the show see spontaneous footage from the perspective of Jean’s cousin’s phone camera. The scene is truly shocking, featuring, in Winfrey’s words, “bone-chilling screams, crying, and bleeding, and dead bodies.” After this footage, Winfrey extends a discussion of whether Wyclef wore a mask while he searched. Visually and aurally, Winfrey constructs a proxy witness, locating the viewer behind that mask. Although viewers cannot literally “smell” the scene, repetition helps to locate them in the private witnessing body.

Diegetic to the footage, Jean comments, “You can still smell the bodies decomposing,” as his wife reminds him to put on his filtering facemask. Winfrey insists several more times on the significance of the smell, saying over and over again:
“You can’t describe what the smell is like.” Then, in response to a political argument offered by Jean (described below), Winfrey changes the subject: “So what were your first thoughts, *though*, when you got there and took it all in? … Everybody else around, they are not wearing masks” (emphasis added). Jean reminds Winfrey that he had worn his mask, which would be a cue to leave the topic behind. But without recognition of his statement, Winfrey replies, “Because you can’t. You can’t really describe what the smell is like.”

The importance of her insistent focus on the smell and other bodily experience is twofold. First, the reduction of experience to the body is the paramount instance of privatization. It asks audience members to inhabit a subjective, visceral response, in this case olfactory disgust. Chouliaraki (2006) notes the aesthetics of “raw realism” to produce a “shock effect” in humanitarian celebrity discourse (p. 111), and this strategy is clearly at work here. Second, Winfrey’s repetition participates in a routine, dehumanizing cultural reduction of black subjects to the non-agentive body (Jackson, 2006).

In this context it is the role of the celebrity to *absorb* some of that shock by modeling the structural crisis as an emotional one amenable to therapeutic work. Jean resists this metonymic move, but when Winfrey responds to Jean’s political framing of the Haitian people with a personal prompt (“What were your first thoughts, *thought*?”) she acknowledges that she is changing the subject, diverting attention from Jean’s preceding remarks and redirecting attention to private experience. In other words, in response to shock, she compels confession and offers therapy. However, Jean’s political vantage and Gupta’s point of view as a doctor disrupt her effort.

**Politics and History: Rejoinders by Jean and Gupta**

**Call for Attention to Structure and System**

Despite the continual invocation of the body and feelings as the loci of appropriate responses to the earthquake, Winfrey’s guests are not completely cooperative with her depoliticizing frame. For example, during the same episode, she calls on celebrity physician Sanjay Gupta, reporting from Port-au-Prince. She praises his heroic actions, asking him, “Did you feel that aftershock this morning?” Gupta describes the shaking of the hotel, but then states,

> Oprah, *if I can just show you quickly*, since the earthquake, eight days now, behind me tents have been set up. People obviously have been displaced from their homes, but also to your point, people are just fearful to go back inside a structure because of these aftershocks….I heard Wyclef talking specifically about the roads and how difficult it was to coordinate relief. *Take a look behind me if you can,* Oprah, that’s what one of these roads look like. (emphasis added)

Gupta’s statement is hardly a political manifesto. However, he does not absorb the (after)shock personally as he literally redirects her and her audience’s attention away
from himself to the surrounding scene and the material needs of the survivors. In offering to “show” viewers a bigger picture, he figuratively points to the failure of engaging structure and system: “Take a look behind me if you can.” His intervention directly asks Winfrey to transcend the personal and look at the whole scene. Winfrey, however, immediately returns to the question of experiencing aftershocks.

Later in the segment, Gupta calls attention to the need for logistical help in moving food and medicine. He acknowledges Haiti’s duress, but in a different way from Winfrey’s “failed state” narrative:

Well, you’ve got to think about where Haiti started, Oprah, and you talked about this earlier. This is a country that, as you know, is one of the most impoverished in this part of the world, but as a reflection of that, the medical infrastructure was terrible … So you start there, and then all of a sudden you decrease the amount of hospitals, the amount of personnel available, and you exponentially increase the number of patients who need that infrastructure, and that’s what really worries me. (emphasis added)

Instead of implying that it is eternal and endemic to Haitian culture to live in desperation, Gupta identifies poverty and a lack of infrastructure, amenable to human intervention, as causes of ongoing suffering. Gupta argues for aid instead of soldiers, which is a critical response to mainstream media overemphasis (as during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina) on the violence and looting of people characterized as animalistic and dangerous. However, prompted by Winfrey, he states that disasters have “personalities,” saying that the present one is characterized by deep “emotional anxiety” that is “hard to describe.” As he reinstatistics a therapeutic tone, Winfrey’s response to his eventual focus on the psychological is emphatic and affirmative: “Yes, yes, yes.”

History, Agency, and Toussaint L’Ouverture

In ways more direct than the exchange with Gupta, the tug between politicized and emotional frames also characterizes Winfrey’s conversation with Jean. Immediately after Winfrey’s second intonation of “You can’t even describe what the smell is like,” Jean contextualizes the trauma:

But you know what I noticed, though, while I’m watching this footage is I remember every night, me and my wife, that the people were singing. I mean despite what they were going through they were still—we still heard “Amazing grace, how sweet thou art” [sic] because the Haitian people are the people of 1804, the first black republic. There’s nothing that they can’t withstand after taking out the Napoleon army. Like, we know what struggle is, you know? And just to see this fight, what they’re going through, you can hear them chanting and still singing the words of God is unexplainable. (emphasis added)

As during Winfrey’s remarks, Jean’s use of the word “though” after “what I noticed” signals an attempt to change the subject and priorities of the interview. Jean first frames
the situation politically and historically in terms of Haiti’s successful slave rebellion against colonial rule in 1804. He uses the language of political agency: “We know what struggle is.” This simple sentence achieves three rhetorical purposes: It identifies Jean with the Haitian people in a collective persona: We know what struggle is. Thus, he restores an agentive political frame encouraging struggle (a proactive, collective, self-determining transformation) rather than affirming the passive position into which Winfrey’s remarks have located survivors. He also states that he wants Winfrey’s viewers “to know the Haitian people are not animals.” In the context of historical representations of colonized others, Jean’s assertion is significant. Characterizing Haitians as animals—and Black men in terms of sexual excess and threat—has warranted colonialism, slavery, and ongoing relations of coloniality and exploitation. Rather than standing in for Haiti and absorbing the blow of the quake personally, Jean generalizes the suffering and therefore taps a source of collective strength.

This intervention is important as a response to the pathologization of black suffering bodies. Indeed, Jackson (2006) names Wyclef Jean among a very short list of black cultural producers who model a complex and progressive performance of black masculinity (p. 150), the criteria for which include the commitment to collective struggle, self-efficacy, and individual achievement in balance with community (p. 135). Jean’s desire to lead a task force signals his sense of agency, and he uses celebrity to advance his people’s cause.

A Single Tear: Celebrity Affect and Action

Just as Jean says the words “first black republic,” a single tear slowly runs down his right cheek. He does not wipe it away; its trail is visible throughout the duration of the interview. He visibly mourns the losses of his family and nation. (Perhaps he also mourns the frustrating limits of Winfrey’s framing.) The meaning of this emotional expression is complex in social context. While crying motivates witnesses to ameliorate the crier’s distress (Provine, Krosnowski, & Brocato, 2009), such a response is not hard-wired. Instead, responses to emotion occur within regimes of affect (Lutz, 2002, p. 188). Writing about film, Lutz describes the priming of emotional release that accompanies a narrative character’s achievement of their proper social role (p. 192). In this way, Jean’s controlled crying as he enters the heroic role of Toussaint L’Ouverture compels deep affective engagement on the part of the audience, or, in Lutz’s words, “the sympathetic tears of an aroused sense of social possibility” (p. 200). Likewise, Chouliaraki (2012) offers an apt comparison in her description of a crying Angelina Jolie, whose “personification of suffering appears to fuse factual description with the spontaneous expression of emotion that, in bearing witness to the horror of suffering, cannot be contained as a professional object of reflection” (p. 12).

The function of public emotional expression is complicated here by gender and race (Jackson, 2006; Jackson & Hopson, 2011). Shamir and Travis (2002) argue that the affective economy of neoliberalism constructs masculine affect as “scarce,” thus endowing “the slightest expression of masculine feeling with inflated value” (p. 209; see also Chapman & Hendler, 1999; Strand, 2008). Jean’s tear in its isolation draws
attention to both his personal experience and his political role. He absorbs some of the shock of witnessing, but does not break down so far as to require therapeutic repair. In this way, Jean complicates the theatrics of intimacy; he is neither a distant white observer nor pity’s helpless object.

However, Winfrey intervenes at this point in the interview to reinstall a neoliberal frame: “And the Haitian people have proven over the years, catastrophe after bad government, after hurricanes, after another catastrophe, that they’re so resilient” (emphasis added). Implicit in the affirmation of resilience is another suggestion: the Haitian people are endemically magnets for catastrophe. This invocation of resilience makes shock absorption and bouncing back the apparent limits of Haitians’ agency.

Yet, Jean parries in an attempt to widen viewers’ perspective and corrects Winfrey’s description of the Haitian people as merely resilient:

The thing about the Haitian people is, it’s will, it’s determination. And we, as the Haitians from Benin in West Africa, you know, the tribe of Toussaint L’Ouverture, it’s something about Haitians where the only thing we have that we could hold on to is our pride. (emphasis added)

Again invoking the leader of the 1804 slave rebellion in Haiti, Jean replaces “resilience” with “will,” “determination,” and “pride.” By noting Haitians’ origins in Africa, Jean also calls attention to the history of enslavement as backstory and analogy to the contemporary crisis. Such contextualized critique is an antidote to the intertwined logics of neoliberalism and the therapeutic; it politicizes the shock and resists the therapeutic.

**From Theater of Pity to “Charitainment”**

Jean’s persistent displacement of personalistic and neoliberal frames in favor of politicized ones is remarkable in so far as it challenges the theatrics of pity. In addition, interventions of other musicians as guests both supplement and undermine the program’s political repartee in a genre Nickel and Eikenberry (2009) name “charitainment.” In charitainment, bodies of the performers and their products become conduits through which financial aid must pass to reach its intended recipients.

The episode features singers Rihanna singing “Freedom Song” (Marley, 1999) and Maxwell singing “Fistful of Tears” (Maxwell, 2009), songs with political/resistance themes. Intriguingly, “Fistful of Tears” mediates the personal and political as Jean did: “We gon’ fight the war. We gon’ fight our fears. The only thing I want to throw, fistful of tears.” These lines contain the duality of the personal and the political: Maxwell will throw a fist, but it is a fist full of his emotions—outrage, frustration, courage, and grief. Rihanna’s version of “Redemption Song” also is a “song of freedom.” However, the re-inclusion of Rihanna at the end of the show is explicitly therapeutic, as Winfrey turns to Rihanna without transition, stating, “And I hear you go to bed thinking about the orphans.” Rihanna responds to this maternalistic non sequitur affirmatively, promoting her own foundation for Haitian orphans. Winfrey then calls upon everyone to donate to foundations. Jean again interrupts in a political
mode to say that the Haitians “don’t need no more photo ops. We need logistics, we need people to go to the airport to get this stuff out to the people.”

Jean’s statement can be read as a critique of the celebrity foundation politics represented by Rihanna and Maxwell and their plans to participate in a “Hope for Haiti Now” television event. Rihanna states, “We’re all performing from London, and, you know, everybody just needs to tune in. We need your help” (emphasis added). Rihanna’s emphasis on passive giving across geographical distance confirms the celebrity function of mediating distant suffering for Western consumers of entertainment. Although Jean and the other musicians all perform the function of shock absorption in a therapeutic narrative warranting neoliberal disaster politics, Jean resists a wholly commodified and detached response to shock.

A later show featuring Lady Gaga (2010) provides another example of the limits of celebrity humanitarianism. During the episode in question, Gaga (in a green, crowned costume evocative of the Statue of Liberty) incongruously compares the suffering of the Haitian people to the situation of New Yorkers after 9/11, referencing a shock closer to home. There is an element of the white woman’s burden in her pledge of concert funds for relief efforts, a maternalistic parallel to what Rudyard Kipling named “The White Man’s Burden”: to “help” desperate, savage Others in ways that benefit colonizers’ interests (Kipling, 1997/1899). Balaji’s (2011) offers a trenchant critique of the racialization of pity and the privileging of a white view of the dark world as dysfunctional, childlike, and dependent .... cultivated and affirmed by mediated representations of disasters and their aftermath, particularly through the development of a narrative that places the fate of the dark world in the hands of a benevolent white one. (p. 50)

Next, Winfrey awkwardly changes the subject, asking what Lady Gaga wants viewers to know about her (Gaga) personally. The answer is an inane discussion of food. We learn that Winfrey’s chef had made fried chicken after Winfrey had had a “trying week” (a thoughtless complaint in the present context), and Gaga enjoyed the leftovers. This surreal return to the sensation of “comfort” (as in “comfort food”) also functions to absorb the shock of traumatic images.

Winfrey then asks Lady Gaga for inspirational words: “The message of Gaga is …” Gaga’s answer is located squarely in the neoliberal paradigm and the narrative of the American Dream: “Work so hard and never give up.” In this way, the personal is tied to the political with the celebrity body mediating the gap. Winfrey affirms this function in the earlier episode: “And I was saying to Wyclef that, you know, for me it’s about—I want everybody to do what they can right now, and we will use our platform to follow what these foundations and NGOs are doing in the future.” Winfrey’s words echo the George W. Bush administration’s exhortation to Americans after 9/11 to remain in their regular routines of shopping and working, implying that the public should absorb the shock and carry on. Celebrities enact this preferred response as bombs and buildings fall around the world.
Conclusion: “Take a Look Behind Me, if You Can”

In this article, I have examined the episodes of the Oprah Winfrey Show devoted to coverage of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. That examination reveals how guests on the program, including Sanjay Gupta and Wyclef Jean, engaged in a struggle with Winfrey over the dominant frame for the story of the disaster. I have also suggested that the role of celebrity as mediator of distant suffering could bear some critical potential if viewers adjust their point of view along with Gupta, who asked us to “look behind me, Oprah, if you can.”

However, just over the shoulder of these celebrity icons looms a crisis that is more shock than therapy, one has not been solved in Haiti either by individual heroic celebrities or the donations they solicit. Chouliaraki (2006) cautions scholars that humanitarian discourse “offers both the tentative promise of new practices of altruism and the threat of cultural narcissism” (p. 13), and Jean’s expressed desire to take a task force to Haiti suggests his ambivalent role. Indeed, Jean (called by one reporter the “Ronald Reagan” of Haiti) supported the 2004 coup and celebrated former U.S. secretary of state Colin Powell as its hero (Hinton, 2010). More recent news coverage scrutinizing his foundering Yéle Haiti Foundation noted financial irregularities in its management and questioned Jean’s motives and gains (Sontag, 2012). As Farrell (2012) writes, “The biggest peril for the movie star on the famine stage comes from the lure of playing the hero … . [They] insist that they are protagonists … saviors, or at least the instigators of salvation” (p. 44).

In the project of “shock therapy”—a humanitarian discourse of helping, coping, recovering, rebuilding, and developing through individual heroism and corporate invasion—celebrities mediate the personal and political. They expose, document, and perform reaction to trauma (becoming subjects of the therapeutic) while simultaneously offering a site for individual action and passive charitable giving rather than critique or activism. Their efforts neither completely personalize nor fully politicize responses to disaster. Instead, their role is that of shock absorbers—recognizing the shock of neoliberal crisis but personalizing and cushioning its impact for audiences.

Even so, the push and pull of Jean’s and Gupta’s interventions suggest that inhabiting the celebrity role does not occur without fissures and contradictions. Jean waged a persistent effort to undermine Winfrey’s therapeutic consolation. And some among those listening to Gupta’s call for aid and infrastructure or Jean’s narrative of the Haitian slave rebellion might find those personal encounters opening up into broader political awareness, or at least curiosity, about the motives and effects of U.S. involvement.

Therefore, I maintain that we should attend to how popular responses to naturally occurring and socially amplified disasters like the Haiti earthquake circulate rhetorics of shock therapy as the kinder face of the neoliberal project. In sum, the therapeutic privatizes the shock of privatization. As Jean’s interview demonstrates, celebrities in this process provide emotional reaction to political events in varying balance between personal feeling and social contextualization. Intermediate to those poles is
the moment of human engagement and agency, when the personal might be productive of the political rather than absorbing it stillborn.

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