

**THE AMERICAN PARADOX:
BOOK CLUBS AND READING AS SELF-HELP**

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

JACQUELINE WHITE

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Dr. Marian Eide

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ABSTRACT

The American Paradox: Book Clubs and Reading as Self-Help

Jacqueline White
Department of English
Texas A&M University

Research Faculty Advisor: Dr. Marian Eide
Department of English
Texas A&M University

At the same time that our country is witnessing a decline in interest in the humanities, American readers are becoming increasingly involved in serious reading practices. Such reading practices have proliferated from online forums provided by celebrities like Oprah Winfrey and Reese Witherspoon, to in-person book clubs. This thesis aims to understand the phenomenon through a cultural theory I have named “The American Paradox.” Using scholarly sources, interviews with readers of all ages, and book club observations, I explain the American Dream’s influence on reading practices in the United States to argue that book clubs have emerged as a communal form of self-help. How is reading as self-help inherently American?

Today, upward mobility in regards to the American Dream has become less about monetary gain and more about individual growth. My main theory, the American Paradox, argues that the inner motivation of the American Dream compels individuals to gain a certain capital—cultural capital. American individuals view their lives aspirationally and often use reading— both serious and recreational — as a means to enhance their bourgeois status and improve their quality of life.

DEDICATION

To Oprah, for starting everything.

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I personally attended and reviewed the book clubs analyzed for *The American Paradox: Book Clubs and Reading as Self Help*. The analyses depicted were conducted by me, Jacqueline White. All relevant publications are cited in the thesis.

All other work conducted for the thesis was completed by the student independently.

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INTRODUCTION

Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. The United States of America was founded on the idea that happiness in life is something that, in a free capitalist society, Americans have the liberty and obligation to obtain. We each have the birthright and patriotic duty to stand out and pursue happiness in whatever way we see fit. Upward mobility is a quintessential American ideal that is ingrained in the heads of all young patriots, as teachers and parents nationwide quote founding fathers like Benjamin Franklin who said, “you can do anything you put your mind to.” These ideals were only further exacerbated by the Industrial Revolution and, shortly after, innovations brought on by both WWI and WWII.

Americans are not only taught to “pursue happiness” as individuals but to, like our forefathers, be trailblazers and pioneers. We are taught to dislike big government; in the words of Thomas Jefferson, “law is often but the tyrant’s will, and always so when it violates the right of an individual.” This is why the original American colonies separated from England: to become an individual entity with a new name and new values. Individualism and “making a name for yourself” are, quite literally, foundational to America. However, a subtler American value is hidden among these accomplishments—communal support. Despite our desire to stand out and be rugged individualists, none of these individualistic goals would have been seen through if it were not for the efforts of many. The camaraderie and desire to feel a part of something bigger than yourself became especially prevalent after the World Wars of the 20th century. With increased access to educational resources and job opportunities, the American dream became even more valued by aspirational Americans.

In the 20th and 21st century, a combination of new resources and old values has come to fruition through an increased interest in self-help literature or using literature as self-help. Although self-help is a seemingly new concept that has only received both attention and scrutiny in recent years, such literature is just another illustration of the American Dream. One of the most quintessential “Great American Novels” is F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, which illustrated the idea that, with grit and hard work, any average American can move to the big city and earn “new money.” This well-known story is set during the economic boom of the “roaring twenties” which was a time period characterized by a flourishing economy and high hopes. In that same time period, rhetoric that revolved around American prosperity became, once again, all the more prevalent. The middle-class grew, not only in size, but in exposure to a wider range of literature, media, and educational resources. Although American-dream ideals were present before this time, they were intensified by a now greater opportunity to move upward in society—for middle-class Americans, to “enhance cultural capital.” The desire for the individual mobilization that characterizes the American Dream has always articulated the notion of success in the United States. However, in an ironic juxtaposition to the self-interested values of the American Dream, the United States’ rise of consumerism has only further enhanced many Americans’ desire to fit in with their neighbors or “Keep up with the Joneses.” It became clear that the American Dream was also about community. According to Donna Packer-Kinlaw, beginning as early as the 18th century, “success was inextricably tied to religion and morality; thus, success was measured, not only by the accumulation of material wealth, but also by one’s moral code, one’s standing in the community, and the contributions that an individual made to the community” (Kinlaw 3). In the case of cultural capital, much like the subtle American value of communal support hidden among individualism, a similar paradox began to take place. The

desire to move or mobilize upward was both fueled and counteracted with the desire to fit in. My thesis aims to understand this phenomenon through a cultural theory I have named “The American Paradox.”

My research on the irony of the American Dream began after observing a different paradox happening in the United States: while our country is witnessing a decline in interest in the humanities, American readers are becoming increasingly involved in serious reading practices. Such practices have proliferated from online forums provided by celebrities like Oprah Winfrey and Reese Witherspoon, to traditional in-person book clubs. Using scholarly sources and book club observations, I explain the American Dream’s (and, by default, the American Paradox’s) influence on reading practices in the United States to argue that book clubs have emerged as a powerful communal form of self-help or “mobilization.” These readers embody the beauty of this paradox: that one must be individually responsible for growth, but that community is vital.

In researching the American Dream, I became wary of the ways these promises prove to be unfruitful— how American children grow up being taught that they can do anything, only to find out that obstacles such as the poverty cycle and marginalization were never taken into consideration. I began to believe that much of these American values are a scam. However, in researching and observing how American Dream ideals are ingrained in literature and reading practices, I began to notice that such ideals could possibly be used to ignite good and meaningful change. There seemed to be a trend: the American Dream was and is often utilized to fight against the very values it stands for. That being said, I also plan to rebut the idea that the American Dream can only birth toxicity. That, despite its questionable roots, the ideals that encompassed our upbringing could perhaps encourage us to rewrite the future.

As previously stated, the American Dream and, by default, the American Paradox has been historically infamous for being unfruitful. Thus, this becomes a more complex facet of the paradoxical American dream—that it is so often seen with a pessimistic lens. I also plan to explore how people use the ideals of the American dream to help both themselves and the country they live in. More specifically, I researched book clubs to articulate the American Paradox. I found that the American Dream of mobility works in unexpected ways within reading communities. In *The Self-Help Hermeneutic: Its Global History and Literary Future* Beth Blum writes that, “Economists outline the way that class mobility generated new anxieties over self-presentation regarding social status. From a literary perspective, it is impossible to separate self-help’s popularity from its defense of a mode of reading being expelled from elite cultural spheres: reading for agency, use, and self-change” (Blum 1109). Just as individuals began to view their lives as a means to move upward in life, using reading—both academic and recreational—as a means to enhance their individual capital became that much more prevalent. In the past 25 years, the number of readers engaging communally in serious reading practices has become exponentially more visible. From “Oprah’s Book Club” founded in 1996 to actress Reese Witherspoon’s Instagram-born Book Club founded in 2017, reading books has become, not just widespread, but considerably trendy. Similar to the literary boom upon the development of the printing press, the Middle Class has once again created their own forms of reading practices. Simply, Literature has once again become an outlet for mobilization. Also similar to the exposure to literature brought by the printing-press, once again, the elite scholars of the 21st century often scoff at the literary choices of “amateur” readers. In this thesis, I plan to explore several hypotheses that revolve primarily around the centrality of cultural capital attributed to literature, literature’s role in modern bourgeois life, and the positive and negative effect of the

American Dream in these newfound serious reading practices. I also intend to find how the American Paradox in regards to reading as self-help is not amateur or naive, but profoundly intellectual and wise.

My research approach revolves primarily around individual observations and analyses. In April of 2020 I began observing book groups, the first one being a community of all female students who created a virtual book club after the COVID-19 pandemic began. In my observations, I began to notice how most of the readers' desires were to attempt to both relate to the characters and to grow as individuals. The inclination to apply the book to oneself was especially interesting to me and, in a time where self-reflection had become exacerbated by social isolation, I was presented with a perfect opportunity to learn more about this impulse. Beginning in the fall of 2020, I decided to observe a book club of aspirational college students who gathered together bi-weekly to study *So You want To Talk About Race* by Ijeoma Oluo. In this setting, I aimed to investigate the role of "self-help" in this American social-justice oriented context and learn more about the motivations of using literature to mobilize. Also in the Fall, I was able to interview a founding member of an urban book club composed of middle-aged women and analyze their reading habits. Throughout my studies, I have had the opportunity to speak with voracious readers, aspiring readers, and burnt-out readers. I have gotten to study the phenomenon of celebrity book clubs such as "Oprah's Book Club" and even conduct an unofficial survey through my Instagram profile. Through my observations and analyses of many scholarly articles and sources, I continuously aimed to define Self-Help as something different than what many critics believe it to be. Self-help is not just about reading explicitly growth-oriented books like *The 7 Habits Of Highly Effective People* by Stephen R. Covey, listening to motivational podcasts, or making futile New Year's Resolutions. It is the American desire and

effort to obtain intellectual and cultural capital. This action is motivated by the, arguably, American desire to make oneself and the community they live in “better.” Many define self-help as exactly what it seems to be: an individual effort to improve the self. However, the term is ironically often used in the phrase/contexts of self-help groups. While it emphasizes self-reliance, its methods may be communal. Self-help requires individual motivation but also communal support.

According to Timothy Aubry in his 2011 book *Reading as Therapy: What Contemporary Fiction Does for Middle-Class Americans*, “the growth of industrial capitalism throughout the twentieth century and the emergence of massive corporations and bureaucracies after World War II alongside cold war anxieties provoked a sense of uncertainty and individual powerlessness, which led people to prioritize the private and the psychological as the only sites of shelter, safety, and agency within an increasingly confusing social and political world” (Aubry 19). Aubry then notes that the years that followed World War II allowed for more Americans to obtain jobs and money, thus leading to a large and continuously growing middle class. The fear of sending soldiers off to foreign lands and the financial anxieties of the Great Depression were now ancient concerns that were all but faded. However, Aubry notes that many scholars believed that, “Without such hardships, many Americans [had] the luxury to dwell obsessively upon their psychological health — a fixation that advertising campaigns have, by associating their products with the attainment of happiness, cleverly exploited” (20). However, despite this questionable exploitation, I do not believe that the desire to obtain happiness is an inherently bad thing. I believe this examination of “psychological health” through literature, whether categorized as “self-help” or not, is a necessary aspect of both coping and understanding how to create a better

country than the one these soldiers left behind. This is where the idea of using literature to further mobilize culturally, and even sometimes politically, comes in.

In his book, Aubry cites established critics like Dwight Macdonald and Leslie Fiedler who believe that reading as self-help takes away the art and complexity of literature. Dwight Macdonald was an influential literary critic who, in the 1950's and 1960's, articulated the initial critique of the modern styles of reading as self-help. He described this movement in his book *Masscult and Midcult: Essays Against the American Grain* which, according to Jennifer Salzi in her 2011 *The Nation* article "Mac the Knife: On Dwight Macdonald," "It wasn't the 'Masscult' but the 'Midcult' that so offended Macdonald. Midcult was what he called 'the tepid ooze' of middlebrow culture—neither high nor low, without any depth to redeem it" (Salzi). It is evident that self-help has often been framed in an extremely negative light with the argument that the shallow perception that a book's sole purpose is to please or help you is demeaning to classic literature. However, based on my observations, I am inclined to disagree. Despite the fact that reading as self-help could be, in my opinion, rooted in the questionable values of the American Dream, I have found that this "luxury" of self-examination has the powerful capacity to ignite change on a grander level. While critics like MacDonald suggested that amateur readers wished to increase their cultural capital, I found these readers sought a better understanding of the world (or country) around them. Similarly, considering the toxic nature of many American values, I found that the American Paradox emerges in useful ways in common reading practices. Do these values guide the decisions we make, all the way down to the books we choose to read? These are questions I plan to both explore and answer from the lens of an American with inherent American values.

1. EXAMINING MOTIVE: COMMUNAL

One flaw with asking questions about the American character of certain reading practices is that it inclines us to examine motive as the sole means to determine whether or not an outcome is productive. I argue that book-club participants using books to understand themselves better and understand the world around them is both productive and rooted in the American Dream. Allow me to elaborate. I am in a Sci-Fi senior seminar class and we have been examining the motives of the space race. I had come to view it in a rather cynical lens, upon learning that the motives of the United States did not seem to actually be about advancing science to benefit the human race. Rather, the space race was motivated by the classic American ideals of “competition” and mobilization in a time of war. However, when I researched all of the good advancements that came out of the science of the space race— better medicine, penicillin, better agriculture, and more— I finally felt appreciation of the extraordinary feats that came out of the space race. So many scientific advances — agriculture, media, and even radars during WWII — have not only saved lives, but increased quality of life.

Vannevar Bush, an American engineer in the 1930’s, believed that scientific progress was the gateway to prosperity and improved quality of life. The first chapter of his 1945 report to the President on behalf of the Office of Scientific Research and Development is entitled “Scientific Progress is Essential.” He writes about the, “new drug,” penicillin, reminding the President of the, “countless lives it...[saved]” during WWII and how, “science and the great practical genius of this nation made this achievement possible.” Amidst the tragedies and loss of WWII, penicillin emerged as a life-saving silver lining. It emerged as a result of the scientific progress of war-time. As heartbreaking as this truth is, the development of penicillin could not have

happened without war. Personally, I strongly dislike war and the multiple questionable motives of it. However, I examined motive without considering that, despite motive, great results still occurred. When we dislike motive, it is hard to appreciate the byproduct, no matter if it is good.

Similarly, I have had a cynical opinion about the American Dream for so long—that it is toxic and deceptively cyclical. However, despite the toxic roots of the American Dream, it has at least allowed for Americans to aspire to be better on a grander level. Although the motive of the American Dream is arguably selfish, it has created generations of dreamers—people who believe in their own ability to change the toxic systems that we were born into. Americans have always been known to be bold and, often, arrogant. However, I believe that such confidence has created a generation of people that believe in their ability to change the world (or at least the country they live in). Such dreamers have been able to use their innate and American desire for mobility to make meaningful and necessary changes in their homeland. Ironically, the American desire for mobility often inspires and encourages citizens to challenge the constructs of their country, even in spaces as seemingly insignificant as reading groups.

Directly after the COVID-19 pandemic began, book clubs were either formed to help quell boredom or mitigate isolation; many existing groups moved promptly online. Widely known book clubs such as the “2020 Quarantine Book Club,” were created in easily accessible online forums. However, even in small towns, schools, and nursing homes, reading groups were established by people craving community. At a university in Texas, a group of female undergraduate students decided to create a zoom book club that would meet once a week to discuss *The Nightingale* by Kristin Hannah. During discussions, readers were often inclined to place themselves in the novel, asking one another which character they would rather be in the book and why. However, the topic of conversation soon shifted from placing themselves amidst

World War II, to deliberating about a relevant global issue of today— coronavirus. “Our kids and grandkids will remember it and ask us about it,” one member said. What started as, “would you rather have been an adult or child during WWII?” turned into “do you think it is easier to handle coronavirus as a child or adult?” One member offered this response: “I’d rather be an adult because you have a better idea about a hope for the future.” There are evidently good reasons to look inward with a group of like-minded people. Critics like Dwight Macdonald and Leslie Fiedler may argue that, in doing this, the participants of this book club took away from the art and poignancy of the actual text. Macdonald might say that they used this novel to “appeal to and foster what is common, predictable, and formulaic in its consumers, thereby disseminating an insidious form of mass consciousness and creating the condition for widespread conformity” (Aubry 3). Perhaps Macdonald is right. However, I began to feel a sense of hope from the outlook of these women in a time of global and national despair. In this space, they encouraged one another and offered insight into their friends’ lives. They motivated one another to look within and not become swallowed up by the tension of the world they lived in.

2020 was not only a year swallowed by pandemic anxiety, but also a period characterized by American civil unrest. With frustrations with racial inequality growing fiercer, a communal desire to fight the system emerged. Summer 2020 was also a period characterized by sharper political lines drawn between the right and the left. There are those who disagree with the claims of Black Lives Matter protests, those who agree, those who participate in protests, and those who support the freedom to protest but dislike these specific aims and methods of the BLM movement. Many of those who quarrel with BLM believe protesting American institutions, like the police, is inherently...un-American. However, isn’t it inherently American to fight to be “better?” If the American Dream advocates for this ideal on an individual level, then surely the

American Dream can encompass desire for greatness on a national level too, right? Were these protesters not aiming to do the same?

In response to these divisions, in a small town in rural Texas, a group of college students meets together bi-weekly to discuss a book on how to improve discourse around race relations—*So You Want To Talk About Race* by Ijeoma Oluo. The book club was formed in the fall of 2020 after witnessing the tensions of their country that summer. At the first meeting, each member agreed that they wanted to “be better” and help others “be better” as well. Although this goal is vague, it was coupled with a unanimous frustration with America, one member even joking that, after 2020, she wanted to move to Canada. However frustrated as they were, they still joined together to discuss the broken systems of the country they were raised in. They also each shared a similar motive in discussing this book—to begin conversations that lead to the breaking down of the harmful cultural systems of their country, even if only on an individual level. Members vowed to now discuss race relations with their friends, coworkers, acquaintances, and even misinformed family members. As a group, they had a communal frustration with the unspoken rules of their country. As a group they also had a unanimous desire to break those rules down. Dare I call them American “dreamers”?

Despite their frustration with biased cultural norms, when discussing their favorite parts of the book, almost unanimously, every member’s favorite section was “the rules” on how to have better conversations about race. Even within book clubs, the American Paradox remains a prevalent social structure. A group of rugged individualist dreamers was ironically desiring guidelines—rules to follow to help them break the rules of cultural-norms. I cannot help but ask myself “how could this be bad?” I am aware that in some ways this group was “Keeping-up-with-the-Joneses” in a manner that is both inherently American and notably controversial.

Emphasizing independence, we have looked to our peers to decide what to do and what decisions to make. Ironically, however, Americans also are taught to be individualists—to make a difference and to stand out. Could these two seemingly different values, that have often been toxic, form together to create good? This book club makes me believe this: although paradoxical, the rules they follow are going to ignite good change, not stagnation.

The founder of the *So You Want To Talk About Race* book club told me that she actually created this group to provide a productive outlet for her escalated frustrations regarding race relations in the United States. For privacy, we will call Interviewee 1, Tiffany Jones. Jones is an African-American recent alumna from Texas A&M University and, after brainstorming how to use her place of work for meaningful change, decided to form a book club. This is especially significant to Jones because she works at a local Christian student ministry who looked to her for guidance on how to address the racial tensions of the country. Alongside her boss and co-workers, they landed on *So You Want To Talk About Race* by Ijeoma Oluo to study in a book club that they would open to the public. “One reason I started this book club was because, over the summer, we saw a mass unveiling of all the fractures in American society,” Jones said. “With COVID, we saw that the American healthcare system is not the best and greatest and brightest in the world” and, after the death of George Floyd at the hands of American police, Jones noted that Americans began to “realize that America is not as together as it should be.” Jones emphasized that, although it was encouraging to see people allying alongside the black community, a part of her wondered “how long is this going to last?” When these social media posts advocating for the black community lessened, Jones became angry and frustrated. Wanting to use her desire for justice and passion for equality to make meaningful change, Jones asked herself “what should I

do with this frustration and anger?” and “where are the places I have influence in?” Thus, the book club was established.

In this space, the members are able to both learn about and discuss certain broken and discriminatory systems of America in a communal attempt to understand them and, perhaps, break them down. The book club meets every other Sunday at the Christian ministry in which Jones works. In most discussions, members talk about clear cultural differences within America, most participants agreeing that there exists a lack of cultural sensitivity with black and brown students in America. Jones organizes the dialogue by segmenting each discussion by chapter. In doing this, the group is able to focus on not only Oluo’s personal experiences, but her statistical articulations of education systems in America. Throughout the semester, the members also discussed racial discipline disparities, the school to prison pipeline, institutionalized racism, cultural appropriation, and more. The student participants, most of whom are white, often express how much Oluo’s insight has helped them learn and sympathize with the black community. Jones, however, tells the group that *So You Want To Talk About Race* helped her articulate her individual feelings about the United States in a way that both validated her frustration and equipped her to ignite meaningful change. “The reason why I started this book club is because all of my anger and frustration made me realize I had a position and space that is pretty white and I can do something with that,” Jones said. “I may not be able to storm Congress and demand change, but I can use the sphere that I have to do something about it.”

In a somewhat typical American dreamer aspiration for continuous improvement, each individual agreed that they desired to ignite change in their country in whatever way they can. Whether it was the white student who wanted to have productive conversations with her parents about race or the Hispanic student who desired to encourage the Latinx community to stand with

their black neighbors, each member wanted to make a difference. Jones commented on this when she told me that, “Movie theatres are cool because the only thing you for sure have in common with everyone in the room is what you are watching. In airplanes, the only thing you have in common with everyone is where you are going, even though they are strangers. Book clubs and bible studies are really cool because the one guarantee you have in being similar to each other is that you are reading this thing and trying to dissect it together. I think that’s really cool because even if you are different in every other possible way, that is one thing you guys can talk about.” It was clear that Jones was passionate about bringing together those of different backgrounds and beliefs. More than that, though, Jones explained that she wanted them to all help one another further develop into productive members of society and help be a part of creating a better America.

Jones felt that gathering as a group allowed the members to learn from one another and get perspectives outside of their own— something that every member of the book club believed America was sorely lacking. Book club is “also a good space to ask questions and ask what the author meant,” said Jones. “Doing that by yourself is a little harder and takes a little longer.” In the group discussion about microaggressions, Jones guided the members to focus on two aspects of the chapter: the rules that Oluo laid out on how to address microaggressions and also to share if we can think of an experience that we have encountered that was a microaggression. Each member shared a story in which they encountered either a friend, family member, or acquaintance said a microaggression or acted in a microaggressive way. Together, each member was able to articulate why microaggressions are hostile and how exactly a subtle comment can have its roots in racism. They were able to validate each other in their frustrations and personal encounters with racism in America. While critics like MacDonald notice the solipsism of this

“middlebrow” reading approach, I find it difficult to believe that humans (and, specifically, American humans) insert themselves into this narrative exclusively in a self-centered way. Perhaps, in the setting of Americans who desire to ignite mobilization for the greater good, this recognition of individualism can be productive.

In the conversation that revolved around the chapter, “Why are our students so angry” the members of Jones’ book club agreed that they were attempting to rewrite the constructs they grew up believing to be true. In this chapter, Oluo describes how adults have frowned upon much of the activism of the youths’ frustration with America and their desire to change the status quo. In reading this book, the members of the book club agreed that they were reminded that we cannot always blindly follow and believe what we were taught was true and good. Perhaps, the same apprehension should be applied to how we view “good” and “bad” literary practices.

At their final meeting of the Fall semester, Jones asked her group what the main takeaway they believe this book has given them. One member said, “I feel like after reading this book I can carry conversations about race better” and “I know my research should not end here.” “There were a lot of holes in my knowledge that this book filled,” said another member. It is evident that this book was deemed as good and productive by the members, despite that none of them are professional literary analysts and have often even called themselves. In the same way that scholars believe a “scholarly” way of reading is good, perhaps the academic version of the “good” way to read is a type of status quo that needs to be changed as well. This book club is just one of many examples on how Americans were encouraged to use their existing desire for mobility to make an impact, no matter how small. Oluo’s rules allowed them to both question and attempt to break the rules they grew up accepting. Oluo’s rules gave them inspiration on how to create new rules in both the country and city they live in. Together, they were able to form a

critical lens of their country's societal constructs and pioneer the beginning of new truths. Not only that, but they were empowered to do this by their rules. What possibly could be more powerfully and paradoxically American?

2. EXAMINING MOTIVE: INDIVIDUAL SCALE

What exactly does self-help entail? Does it have to be books as targeted and specific as *So You Want To Talk About Race*? In this section, I will explore the concept of how self-help is not just limited to the specificities of non-fiction, but also that fiction has the powerful ability to ignite change. Not only that, but both fiction and non-fiction have the ability to create meaningful “mobility” on an inward, individual level. To critics like Macdonald and Fiedler, using fiction in this way may be perceived as a childish luxury of the 21st century. However, the members of Jones’ book club agreed that, in order for the country to change, one must change inwardly. That being said, I argue that using books to examine yourself cannot be useless.

Self-improvement or, “self-help,” motivates the creation of book groups, regardless of their book choices and preferred genres. In a neighborhood book club in Houston, Texas, a small community of middle-aged women meet to discuss a fiction book every other month. The book club began about six years ago after a group of friends who went vacationing together once a year decided they should, instead, gather every other month to discuss their favorite reads. Interviewee two who, for privacy, we will call Mary Smith, was initially intimidated by book clubs, saying, “I was not a very good reader, so I would get jealous when everyone would talk about these books.” She also noted that, in her opinion, she needed to read more. She felt that the book club would be beneficial for her individual betterment, emphasizing that, “It was good for me because I need to read more. That is how I got into it—because I am not a good reader but I wanted to be. I wanted to... **do better.**” This comment is strikingly similar to the comments made by the members of Jones’ college book club at their first meeting, when they each vowed to “be better” in regards to talking about race productively.

As previously stated, I believe that this phenomenon is quintessentially American. “Doing better,” coincides with the American Dream idea of continuous upward mobility. This is what Americans have been taught to do in this country, not just on a broad scale like Jones’ book club’s group promise to be better, but also an individual scale. In this instance, the justification for reading more is because it would, somehow, mobilize Smith to be a “better” person. To Aubry, this desire may be to “enhance cultural capital.” Or perhaps this mobilization is to become a more emotionally and intellectually aware human. Although Smith noted that *Roses* by Leila Meacham was the most popular in her book club and her personal favorite, it was not the book that she believes warranted the most fruitful discussion. Smith was very clear about the fact that the best discussion the book club had was over *The Light Between Two Oceans* by M.L. Stedman. This is because it was about a married couple, their journey as parents, and the profoundly intense love of a mother— something each woman in this book club, she believed, could relate to on a deeply profound level.

Although *The Light Between Two Oceans* was not necessarily their favorite book, it seems as though the relatability of the novel led to cultivating a beautifully fulfilling conversation. *The Light Between Two Oceans* is the story of a lighthouse keeper off the coast of Australia named Tom Sherbourne. Having become an isolationist after his years serving in WWI, Tom marries the bold and dynamic Isabel Graysmark who wants nothing more than to be a mother. However, the couple keeps having miscarriages and, in a last resort of heartbreak, Isabel cries out to God to miraculously gift her a baby. Soon after her prayerful lament, a dead man washes up on the shore of their rarely visited island in a shipwrecked dinghy. With him, is a very much alive baby girl. Tom immediately wants to report the presumed father and daughter but, convinced this is a clear answer to prayer, Isabel persuades Tom to allow her to keep the

child. He begrudgingly complies. Years later, they realize that their choice had devastating effects on a mother equally as heartbroken as Isabel once was. As previously stated, although *The Light Between Two Oceans* was not the book club fan favorite, Smith is positive that the whole group would agree that their discussion of this book was by far their most powerful. They could see themselves in the maternal protectiveness of Isabel and felt compelled to ask each other, “if you truly believed God gave you this baby, would you give her up?” Despite Isabel’s experience being fictional, *The Light Between Two Oceans* allowed the group to cultivate a sincere communal sense of sympathy for Isabel. Not only that, but the novel offered a poignantly accurate articulation of these mothers’ fierce love for their own children.

The women were able to use the book to support and understand the experiences of parents and, specifically, mothers. This phenomenon is most accurately described by Timothy Aubry:

How does fiction help people? What forms of emotional support do books provide? Do they stave off loneliness? Do they offer useful examples of how to lead or how not to lead one’s life? Why is the tingle of self- recognition that accompanies identification with a fictional character so satisfying? To ask these questions is to recognize that many readers in the US today treat novels less as a source of aesthetic satisfaction than as a practical dispenser of advice or a form of therapy. They choose books that will offer strategies for confronting, understanding, and managing their personal problems. They want to encounter characters who remind them of themselves, their family members, or their friends. In search of comfort and companionship, they also expect novels to validate their grievances, insecurities, and anxieties while confirming their sense of themselves as deep, complicated, emotionally responsive human beings. (Aubry 1)

Perhaps this desire, as Mary Smith says, to “do better” more accurately translates into this: it helps to “stave off loneliness” or gives “useful examples of how to lead or how not to lead [her] life.” Perhaps it is neither of those ideas but rather the comfort in the companionship of a character like Isabel that reminds Smith, and the other members of this book club, of themselves.

Reading books like this one was powerful for book club because it allowed them to understand someone else’s experience, articulate their own and, thus, cultivate empathy. These women will most likely never be in a position like Isabel’s and, as Aubry notes many high-society academics and intellectuals, “view the urge to identify with fictional characters as a naïve surrender of critical distance based on an embarrassing inability to recognize the distinction between literature and life...[and] the psychological emphasis of middlebrow fiction, scholars on the left have argued, fosters the self-indulgent impulses of its readers, introduction promoting liberal individualism and the evacuation of the public sphere” (Aubry 2). However, I argue that these women do understand and are able to distinguish between the books they read and the lives they live. Although many scholars prioritize explication or close reading and frown upon the kind of private and psychological engagements of many book clubs, based on my observations, I am inclined to disagree. These women are far from naive.

Beth Blum, in her book *The Self-Help Hermeneutic: Its Global History and Literary Future*, offers a concept that may suggest that what these readers are doing is similar to an even older and more intellectual style of serious reading practices: “Wisdom Literature:” Wisdom Literature is the ancient genre of sacred texts that are often religious and philosophical in nature and were used to provide wisdom to readers. Blum writes that “Wisdom literature may sound a little archaic to some scholars, and that is part of the point. At a time when moral humanism has

fallen out of academic fashion, self- help readers and writers have become custodians of the canon of practical thought” (Blum 1099). I too would argue that reading literature as self-help harnesses the capacities of fiction for the purposes of wisdom. Yes, these women saw themselves in the novel but, as Blum notes, this experience is valuable, useful, and wise. Not only that, but reading in this way is radical. Blum goes on to prove that reading as self-help is profound:

Self-help’s emulative reading methodology has a surprising political history of inspiring the formation of radical readers in countries across the globe, from U Nu, the first prime minister of Burma, who translated Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People* into Burmese (Butwell 31), to the scores of young Iranian feminists reading pirated copies of John Gray’s *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* (Shahidian 102; Carnegie). Far from passively assimilating capitalist values and hierarchies, readers around the world have pivoted from encounters with classic self- help texts to agitate for political independence and contribute to nationalist cultural initiatives. By putting on hold the standard critique of the genre’s homogeneous influence, I recalibrate the scales by which we measure self- help’s literary and political relevance. (Blum 1099)

Contrary to the beliefs of scholars like Macdonald and Fiedler, perhaps reading as “self-help” is not naive and predictable, but is far more radical, powerful, and inspiring than many scholarly practices that academics find more cultured. These women, as Beth articulates later in this chapter, use “self- help and fiction [to] experiment with scenarios of life management” and that perhaps this experience that they have committed their time to “is valuable and worthy of communication, but it also presupposes that this experience can be converted into useful knowledge” (Blum 1114). Fictional experiences seem to, in fact, have the potential to be “converted” into very legitimate and “useful” wisdom (1114). Whether or not these women are

equivalent to ancient philosophers like Socrates and Plato is beside the point. However, I do believe that the American Dream has created individuals who desire to grow individually. This, my friends, is radical.

I interviewed some younger readers about why they love literature in an attempt to compare their answers to those of Smith and her middle-aged peers. One 21-year-old male stated that he reads because it is “probably better than watching TV.” He added that he believes he can learn more from reading because it helps with his personal growth and attention span. A 23-year-old woman said something similar when speaking about her book club: “Everyone reads differently so I like to see what perspectives and experiences other people have.” She added that she doesn’t believe there is such a thing as a “good” or “bad” book, but all books can “help” an individual in some way. Although their answers were different, both interviewees and Smith focused on personal growth and a desire for general betterment. No one focused on a tangible upward mobility, but individual growth.

Individual growth is what Samuel J. Abrams believes characterizes the American Dream. “The meaning of the Dream has evolved,” Abrams said. “It is not about material success, but about individual choice” (“Family and Individualism: A New View of the American Dream”). Perhaps this is just another reason why the women of Smith’s book club related to Isabel so much. Not only did they relate to her identity as a mother, but perhaps applauded her convictions to make an individual choice, even if controversial. Perhaps it would inspire them to do the same. In his article “Family and Individualism: A New View of The American Dream,” Abrams quotes both 21st century artist Maya Lin and early 20th century writer James Adams who felt similarly about the modern development of the American Dream. Lin, a famous American designer and daughter of immigrants, believed that the American Dream was about pursuing

individual passions and goals. Adams, the man who initially labeled the American Dream, said that the American Dream is, “being able to grow to fullest development as a man and woman” (“Family and Individualism: A New View of the American Dream”). These beliefs hold true in regards to the answers of all of the interviewees. Each of these Americans, no matter their age, talked of gaining a sort of individual capital from the books that they read. To them, each book was in fact “self-help.” According to a survey done by Abrams through the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), only 16% of Americans believe that tangible capital (i.e. money, wealth, material possessions, etc.) is what characterizes the American Dream for them. In the words of Abrams, “it is clear that the public conceptualization of the American Dream stresses individuality and community over material pursuits” (“Family and Individualism: A New View of the American Dream”).

Fascinated by this new conceptualization of the American Dream, I decided to conduct an unofficial poll on Instagram by asking my followers specific questions about American ideals as they intersect with their motivations for reading. Not only that, but I was curious about the general motivations of younger adults (the demographic that comprises most of my followers) and their motivations to read or to join a book group. What I found corroborated my own impressions. The participants were generally cynical about upward mobility, but themselves engaged in complex processes of self-improvement in their book clubs; processes I have associated with the American Dream ideology. The participants proved to have a desire for individual growth while simultaneously desiring a community of readers to help them pursue those aims.

Upon analyzing the responses, I realized that, generally, all of the responses mentioned some sort of aspiration or improvement: for example, a desire to understand other people’s

experiences. Although this is a quintessentially American desire (and every response was from an American), many responses had an air of skepticism with a subtly simultaneous hopeful slant. When I asked “What do you believe characterizes the American Dream?” one person responded, “In concept: equity. In reality: privilege and unmerited opportunity.” However, another participant emphasized a sort of hopeful “upward-mobility” mindset, saying that the American Dream is the “desire to change your life/improve it in some way & the freedom to do so.” This answer stuck out to me because the American Dream did not seem to be the *outcome* of aspiration, but rather aspiration itself. It is not success but, instead, a “desire” to change something that both Mary Smith and Tiffany Jones proved in their reading motivations. One Instagram user even said this explicitly, telling me that “[they] think it’s more about the *ability* to succeed, not success itself.” Perhaps my favorite response to this question was this: “individualism and perseverance (and *hopefully* empathy).” In this response, empathy does not seem to be a given but, rather, a *hope*. The American Dream may not be inherently empathetic (as it focuses on the self), but perhaps it has the potential and ability to cultivate empathy: something that both *So You Want To Talk About Race* and *The Light Between Two Oceans* was able to do for these readers, regardless of whether the books were designed for that purpose.

Of course, the American Dream was also described by many as exactly what I anticipated, one adult saying that it is “The ability to do whatever you want and be whomever you want.” A common factor between all the responses was an emphasis on individuality. However, amidst the emphasis on individualism and self-improvement, empathy—an adjective that describes compassion towards someone other than oneself—emerged in an ironic and paradoxical contrast to the individuality emphasized by all. Individual mobility is, for better or

for worse, a quality that does not have anything to do with those around you. However, whether people acknowledge it or not, it seems as though empathy towards others is the unspoken goal of individual mobility.

Empathy is a quality that is, unarguably, best cultivated by seeing another person's viewpoint or attempting to understand the experience of someone else. These individuals, with personal aspirational goals, desired to both live out and understand the experiences of others. In response to, "do you read for fun" one person said explicitly that it helps them "develop empathy." Some other responses were to read "stories to relate to and learn something new," "to learn and explore and make the world better," and that reading is "a reminder that my life is one of billions and to live is to learn and experience others."

While empathy and the desire to understand others is a common motivation, escape from oneself and one's circumstances is another. In the answers to my other two questions, "Do you read for fun? If so, why?" and "Do you belong to a book club?" the common supposition of people's reading habits is that they are, in many ways, escapists. In regards to belonging to a book club, the answers were simple: community and escape. Although the goals were "individualistic" and they regarded themselves as individual people, the ultimate goal was to become a more empathetic person and to understand others and the world around them better: the American Paradox.

3. AMERICAN DREAM IN FEMALE BOOK CLUBS

Literature being used by groups that have been historically oppressed has its roots in American individualism. For American women, using the values of the American Dream to mobilize in this way became prevalent in the 19th century as education became gradually more available for those who are not upper-class white men. Thus, the American female book club began. In her article *Literature as A Spur to Collective Action: The Diverse Perspective of 19th and 20th Century Reading Groups*, Elizabeth Long writes, that “the women who founded literary clubs were aflame with the then revolutionary desire for education and self-development, which they called ‘self-culture.’ This was an exhilarating challenge to the norms of altruistic service” (Long 337). The desire for change, mobilization and dreaming the impossible are all unarguable American values. Who was to say that women could not utilize those values as well, in a paradoxical rebellion to the America they lived in?

The Revolutionary War was a time where women often had an equally as revolutionary part to play in the war effort. Women followed men to the battlefield to be nurses, cooks, and more. Although they still played a domestic role, this was a big step towards inclusion. After all, it was Abigail Adams who used her inspiration from the revolution to utter the famous words “Remember the Ladies” warning that “If perticular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion.” Because of the foundations of revolution, American women began a lengthy but sustained journey of using their patriotic desire to change the status quo by continuing to seek out positions of importance. This then started a subtler revolution—one of females using their intellect and desire for knowledge to challenge the social structures of their new nation. However, the men in power instead granted these female patriots a more

domestic responsibility which they called, “Republican Motherhood.” This became the term used to describe a “good” American woman who uses her nationalistic love for her country to raise and nurture young patriots. Despite the obvious aversion that the men of that time had in the concept of women having a job outside of “mother,” a feminist desire was born within women that was founded on the belief that, with hard work and grit, any American— no matter their gender — can be and do anything.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, as women were slowly allowed to receive formal, advanced education, that foundational feminist spark was ignited even further by the formation of these serious reading practices. These spaces fostered their American sense of individualism while also allowing them to form a communal relatability with one another. Their shared understanding and practices led to both communal and individual feelings of growth and prosperity. Not only does this perfectly illustrate the beauty of the Paradoxical American dream, but also proves that books being used as “self-help” is not naive or selfish, but progressive and powerful. As Long writes, “The community of women in reading groups was bound together and inspired to action by “love and ritual” as well as the powers of textual analysis (Smith-Rosenburg 1985). Their literary clubs became sites for developing not only literary skills but also strong and nurturing ties with other women that fostered a genuine feeling of sisterhood and an exhilarating sense of the collective powers and possibilities of Women” (Long 341).

Much like the female mindset that was prevalent after the Revolutionary War, a similar attitude was further exacerbated by the effects of WWII and the culture of America during and after that time. The concept of women in the workplace was slowly becoming more socially acceptable through the influence of Rosie the Riveter and patriotic duty to assist the United States. In a country where most young men were fighting in foreign lands, women took over jobs

that were normally reserved for men. When their sons and husbands returned, the women did not want to stop. After all, wasn't it America who told them to serve in the first place? Once again, the American Paradox took place as women used the ideals of their country to rewrite their national norm and progress further than domesticity.

In the instance of American history, the “patriotic” values that oppressed women were now being used by women to write new rules. Not only that, but these women were using literature and serious reading practices to mobilize. The fact that “Male authorities perceived these activities as a threat to domestic order” was proof that their efforts were widespread enough to be considered groundbreaking and revolutionary (337). Not only that, but it is within these circles of influence that these women found both individual and communal identities. After all, all Americans are taught to have an identity. Now, American women were finding new spaces to inhabit—ones they were not allowed to occupy for so many years. These new opportunities were found through literature. Book groups, quite literally, were a part of the cultivation of the idea that women's intellect was of great value in this country too!

Now, in the 21st century, female book clubs remain a powerful method of, not just community, but explicit activism. In the summer of 2017, 33-year-old Renne Powers launched the “Feminist Book Club,” which quickly gained a considerable following. Their mission is to “read and resist” by infusing “social justice into their bookshelf” (“Feminist Book Club”). The money that goes towards a Feminist Book Club membership not only gives readers a new monthly read, but also 5% of the proceeds go towards different feminist organizations. Powers even hosts a podcast that discusses the “intersection of feminism and literature.” In her first episode she interviews feminist authors on both their writing processes and their motives in writing their books. One author shared that she wanted “anyone who picks up the book to flip

through and find themselves.” In this sentiment, it becomes clear that the purpose of the Feminist Book Club is not only to be a force in a larger social justice movement, but to empower and activate women on an individual level; to give women a book that highlights their femininity. Another example of feminism and activism within a book club is Well-Read Black Girl (WRBG): an online book club forum that strives to champion and support Black Female writers. On the cover page of their website, the “importance of reorganizing ourselves in literature” is emphasized and their goal to “address inequalities and improve communities through reading and reflecting on the works of Black women” is highlighted (“Well Read Black Girl”). Much like the Feminist Book Club, WRBG uses literature as a vehicle for activism.

Founded in 2015 in Brooklyn, New York, WRBG has gained an enormous following and has even been endorsed by important figures like President Barack Obama. Glory Edim, the founder of WRBG, started the book club to both highlight black authors through the cultivation of a passionate reading community. It is this community that has the cooperative power to advocate and honor black women on both an individual and communal level in the United States. Their book choices range all genres and authorship from Toni Morrison’s 1973 novel *Sula* to Brit Bennett’s 2020 historical fiction *The Vanishing Half*. It is through these stories, that a group that has been oppressed and overshadowed for so long, is simultaneously highlighted and empowered.

WRBG’s themes move between a focus on individual growth and community empowerment. The goal of these books is not just to advocate for a group of people but to advocate for the individual as well. Each month is given a different book correlated with a specific theme for activism. The theme of WRBG’s December 2020 book club picks was “How we show up” to encourage members to not “be afraid of the future” and “imagine a world

transformed” (“Well Read Black Girl”). This is not a simple statement or half-hearted charge. It is a powerful call to action. It is a beautiful example of Feminist American upward mobility on a macro level; on a communal level. However, it is not just a community that is called to mobilize, but the individual as well. Just one month later, in January of 2021, the theme hit enormously closer to home— Friendship. In introducing this more personal theme, Glory referenced two quotes from *Sula* by Toni Morrison. The first one highlighted one’s individual desire for friendship, saying “She had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her a while to discover that a lover was not a comrade and could never be - for a woman” (Morrison 108). The quote highlights the unique power and importance of female friendships: a discovery that can never be fulfilled by a man. The second quote focused more on individual mobility stating simply, “I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself” (Morrison 83). Both quotes highlight a sort of dream of the speakers— a desire to find a friend and a contrasting desire to also make something of themselves. I cannot help but see the beautiful irony of the American Paradox in the juxtaposition of these two quotes. Americans desire both community and individualism, and it is the power of both that has allowed for marginalized groups and individuals to mobilize upward.

Even the origins of WRBG began with, not only a spark of individual inspiration, but an ironically beautiful bandwagon effect. In an interview with WheelerCentre, Edim tells the audience that the term “Well Read Black Girl” actually came from a t-shirt that her boyfriend had made for her as a gift. Walking around New York City, passerbyers would ask Edim where she bought her unique and empowering shirt, wanting one of their own. This gave Edim an idea. She decided to actually create a community of “Well Read Black Girls” that could be a space for black women to encourage one another in their literary pursuits. From there, the initially

small group of about 10, decided to start an Instagram page to document their growth. Because of this outlet, people could observe the literary conversations of Edim and her friends and, soon, so many Instagram members desired to join the community that the once small book group blossomed into an enormous society of like-minded readers. Although passionate about her reading group, Edim admitted that she could have never guessed that WRBG would become the sensation that it is today.

For Edim, books have always played an important part of her life. As a child, young Glory was taught and encouraged to read by her mother who provided her with books that “opened up new worlds for [her]” (“Glory Edim: Well Read Black Girl” 4:09-4:11). At this point, she was not reading books for the purposes of activism and intersectionality, but simply imagination. It was not until Edim’s senior year of high school that the presence of powerful stories in her life became not just prevalent, but necessary. Just before leaving for her freshman year of college, Edim’s mother got diagnosed with such severe depression that she was no longer able to speak. With the lack of a tangible maternal voice in Edim’s life, books became a source of “refuge” and alternate fountain of wisdom in her life (“Glory Edim: Well Read Black Girl” 5:04). It was then that Edim no longer read solely for entertainment, but desired to find stories she saw herself in; stories that could be a comforting and nurturing guide in her life. Authors like Alice Walker, Bell Hooks and Naomi Jackson were able to offer Edim affirmations and encouragements in a time of life-change into young adulthood. Now, Edim desires to provide a source of wisdom to young women who may also need a guiding light or healthy mentor in their lives. Similarly to Mary Smith and Tiffany Jones, Glory Edim recognized the therapeutic importance of being able to insert yourself into a book and surround yourself with a community

of like-minded people. These books encouraged and advised Edim and continue to do the same for others.

An important aspect of this book club is not just one's ability to discuss literature well but, according to Edim, the ability to be “vulnerable” (“Glory Edim: Well Read Black Girl” 10:37). It was in her initial book club that Edim found a space to share about her experience with her mother’s mental illness through books that discussed depression. This then allowed others to feel safe enough to do the same. It allowed Edim to feel less lonely because she was able to see herself in the book. Similarly to Mary Smith’s book club, there is a certain type of comfort in seeing your own experience or sentiments illustrated through a character. Perhaps, in their ability to use such stories to find applicable insight into their own lives, these women are also creating “Wisdom Literature.” Not only that, but they are encouraging others to do the same. Because of the inspiration that comes from reading a story and the bravery of people like Edim to share their stories, readers felt equally as empowered to tell their own. “Beyond just reading, it becomes a very therapeutic experience where people can feel centered” said Edim (“Glory Edim: Well Read Black Girl” 10:50-10:56). The importance, however, is not only in sharing stories of mental illness but in the power of feeling important enough to have a story told about you— something that, Edim says, is especially important for black women who often “do not have the ability to feel like the focal point is only on them. With that, there is an openness that comes. You let your guard down a little. You don’t have to feel like you’re being judged or compared to. You can simply be” (“Glory Edim: Well Read Black Girl” 10:58-11:12). Edim’s description of her group indicates the extent to which Black women’s voices are still silenced and the value of solidarity. This is why, Edim believes, the community of WRBG has grown to the number it has today.

In typical American Paradox fashion, however, it is not just individual growth or “mobilization” that WRBG has spearheaded. A community of a historically oppressed group is coming together to advocate for their visibility and representation. Even Edim’s interviewer, Santilla Chingapie, said that WRBG operates as more than a book club. It is a community that looks to progress towards a better future. Edim has also stated that WRBG goes beyond the authors that they highlight. WRBG also aims to use the author’s works to challenge readers to question what the next era of readers and activists looks like and how they can be a part of supporting them.

It is this kind of empowerment that articulates an integral part of the American Feminism movement. In *Feminist and Empowerment Theory*, authors Sandra G. Turner and Tina M. Maschi describe how different feminist and empowerment techniques are used in order to articulate both the individual and social spectrums of female advocacy. Both spaces are important vehicles of change, but in both spheres, it is vital that “empowerment must be anchored within women’s own experiences” (Turner and Maschi 1). For Edim, the importance of being able to see yourself in the experience of a story is suggested to be equally as important as their solidarity of the experience of being a black woman in America. According to Feminist Theory, when a person is able to articulate their own reality or “understand how they are oppressed and dominated” it “often inspires them to engage in efforts to bring about broader social change” (Turner and Maschi 2). What better way to grasp these experiences than through the stories of one another? Using literature to understand oppression is not a naive or privileged indulgence of self-help. It is quite literally a proven pathway to advocate for justice for those who do not have the privileges of other Americans. Perhaps this could be categorized as “self-help” but it is not just used to help the individual. Edim and those in her book club are doing just

what Feminist scholars like Turner and Maschi describe to be an “essential part” of feminism:
“[increasing] the personal, interpersonal and political power of oppressed and marginalized
populations for individual and collective transformation” (Turner and Maschi 2(Lee, 2001)).

4. CELEBRITY BOOK CLUBS, VIRTUAL COMMUNITY

Celebrity book clubs are one more example of groups that were frowned upon initially but have also ignited meaningful change. Exactly 220 years after the birth of our nation, in 1996, Oprah Winfrey started her iconic virtual book club. As a world-renowned philanthropist, actress, and host of one of the most influential talk-show shows ever aired, it is clear that Winfrey has an enormous array of credentials. Why start a book club? “Because I love books and the community that’s created when people share them” said Oprah in 1996 (Winfrey). The book club received criticism at first but, soon after its creation, Americans flocked to the bookstore to buy any new read that the celebrity billionaire recommended.

Even in the 2020’s, Oprah remains a figure that is regarded as one of the most influential people of all time. However, as powerful and extraordinary Oprah Winfrey is, her beliefs on the purposes of literature are similar to that of Smith, Jones, and many other of my interviewees. In a 2019 article on her virtual “Oprah Magazine,” Winfrey writes that endorsing books was never about monetary gain, but “the reward has always been the way your mind is expanded when you’re exposed to new adventures and ideas. And what the writer Andre Dubus III calls ‘the sacred connection between readers and characters.’” (Winfrey). Much like her other fellow Americans, there seems to be something to gain out of reading. A pattern remains across all readers analyzed: the benefit of one’s mind being expanded is worth reading.

Not only is Oprah outspoken about her love for literature, but is known to be an activist and spokesperson for politicians in the United States. In 2018, Oprah was an outspoken supporter of Stacey Abrams— the democratic nominee in the Georgia gubernatorial election. Although Abrams, a well-known democratic politician and activist, lost to Brian Kemp for Governor that

year, she made history as the first African-American female gubernatorial nominee for a major party in the United States. As a woman who is also often regarded as a pioneer for African-American female advocacy in the US, Oprah's support of Abrams is not unsurprising. In a speech Winfrey made the night before the Election, she famously said these words: "I'm here today because of the men and because of the women who were lynched, who were humiliated, who were discriminated against, who were suppressed, who were repressed and oppressed...[and] I refuse to let their sacrifices be in vain" ("Oprah: Why I'm Here" 0:10-0:40)

As an African-American woman in the United States, Oprah Winfrey has undoubtedly shattered glass ceilings. However, her rise to fame and fortune was nothing short of remarkable. Although she is now one of the richest people to ever live, her beginnings were far from optimal. Until moving to Milwaukee at the age of 6, young Oprah was raised by her grandmother in impoverished rural Mississippi. Although acknowledging the fierce love of her grandmother and the important role she played in her childhood, Oprah's adolescence would only become more difficult. In the Wisconsin boarding house she lived in with her mother, young Oprah suffered years of physical and sexual abuse. "It happened to me at 9, and then 10, and then 11, and then 12, 13, 14. You don't have the language to begin to explain what's happening to you," Oprah told *People Magazine* in March of 2018 (Winfrey). It wasn't until Oprah moved to her Father's home in Nashville, that her future began to look brighter.

Winfrey attributes much of her initial success to her Father who instilled in her the discipline and structure to take school seriously and even required her to turn in book reports to him at the end of each week. In a 1992 episode of "The Oprah Winfrey show," Winfrey takes her audience on a tour of her Father's barbershop and the convenience store she worked at as a young teenager. As she shows the audience the home she lived in with her father she says,

“When I was 14 years old living in Milwaukee with my mother and on the verge of becoming a serious juvenile delinquent, I got sent to live with my Father so that my Father could straighten me out...and that he did” (“Oprah’s Hometown Trip to Visit Her Father” 3:50-4:01). She even explains that when she first moved to this new quaint Tennessee home, she felt that she lived in a mansion. Knowing more about Mr. Winfrey’s emphasis on education and how close teenage Oprah came to being a young derelict, the correlation between the two is hard to ignore. It is clear that Oprah Winfrey has one of the most remarkable “rags-to-riches” stories and is a textbook illustration of the American Dream. That being said, it is no wonder Winfrey has become an activist for pioneering politicians. It is no wonder she decided to create a book club to help create healthy and intellectual communities. It is no wonder people look up to her. Winfrey never references the genre of “self-help,” the American Dream, or a specific book that inspired her to work hard or become famous. However, her inspirational life story and belief in the power of reading is similar to what inspired Tiffany Jones’ *So You Want To Talk About Race* book club—the realization that communal support and book discussions can ignite change for those that America has historically oppressed. What possibly could illustrate the American Dream better?

Although Oprah does not ever mention self-help, her book choices are far from generic or ordinary. On the episode in September of 1996 that Oprah announced the launch of her book by recommending Jacquelyn Mitchard’s *The Deep End of the Ocean*, she said this: “I love books. When I was growing up, books were my friend. When I didn’t have friends, I had books. One of the greatest pleasures I have right now in life is to be reading a really good book and to know I have a really *really* good book after that book to read” (“Oprah’s Book Club (Do You Remember the First Book She Picked?)” 0:13-0:27). Similarly to Dwight MacDonald’s criticism of what he

called “Middlebrow” reading practices, many were skeptic of Oprah’s authority. A 2002 article from *The New York Times* by David D. Kirkpatrick even confessed that Winfrey’s new “project” was quick to receive “considerable skepticism in the literary world, where many associated daytime television with lowbrow entertainments like soap operas and game shows” (Kirkpatrick). Even with such criticism, no one could deny the show host’s influence on what new novel would become a best-seller. Perhaps Oprah was right when she, in announcing her book club launch, explained her hope that this could “get the whole country reading again” (“Oprah’s Book Club (Do You Remember the First Book She Picked?)” 1:20-22). Carolyn Reidy (as cited by Kirkpatrick) the longtime CEO of publishing company Simon & Schuster, when she said that Oprah, “raised the whole level of discourse about fiction in American life; she gave impetus to the idea that fiction was something to share and make part of your friendships and daily life.” This is a powerful statement considering that Oprah’s motivator in the creation of this book club was not only because she loves books but also because she loves how a community can be formed around books. In both the motive and outcome of Oprah’s book club, it is clear that the power is not only held in the book. The power is also born out of the friendship and camaraderie that book clubs are known to birth.

Even in 2020, the community of Oprah’s Book Club continues to thrive. On Facebook and Twitters online discussion groups remain prevalent. One Facebook group has 10.8 thousand members dedicated to conversing about each of Oprah’s book selections. Despite their clear commitment to Winfrey’s choices, they make clear on their “About” page that they also exist to “discuss all things reading” or even simply discuss any of your favorite books (Oprah’s Book Club). Ashley Riordan, author of *A Story of Debt*, is also a successful book blogger who has accumulated 42.7 thousand subscribers on her YouTube channel, “Climb the Stacks.” In a 2016

video, she admits that her “entrance into reading literary fiction was almost 100% guided by Oprah” (Riordan 0:08-0:13). Riordan explains that she had always been a voracious reader, but when she was a teenager, most of her inspiration to read fiction came from Oprah’s choices. Although she did not watch the Oprah Winfrey show or even consider herself an avid Oprah’s Book Club fan, the influence of Winfrey’s choices was unmistakable. “I don’t think my experience with the Oprah book club is unique. I think it encouraged a lot of people to start reading literary fiction. And I also think it encouraged a broad audience to start discussing what they were reading in a way that was critical and also personal” (Riordan 1:29-1:44).

Feeling understood and known, both personally and communally, is a quintessential aspect of the American mindset. Perhaps this is one of the primary reasons Americans have flocked to book groups as expansive as Winfrey’s. Perhaps they see Oprah’s fame and the role that literary scholarship played in her success and believe that, through the books she recommends, they could climb up the American social ladder too. After all, many of Oprah’s book choices revolve around America or the story of powerful Americans. She has been clear about her desire to share stories about the trials and tribulations of Americans, recommending recent publications such as *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead and even classics like Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*. In June of 2017, Oprah recommended Imbolo Mbue’s book *Behold The Dreamers*. In an interview with CBS that July, she revealed to the public that she chose this book because the title caught her attention. After she read it, she decided that the story was just as good as its eye-catching title and would become her next endorsement. In the Oprah Winfrey Network’s broadcast of the summer book announcement, she shares how well *Behold The Dreamers* articulates the reality of race and immigration in the United States. Not only that, but she tells her audience that the Washington Post had named

Behold The Dreamers one of the hippest books of the year, then encouraging watchers to buy it, insinuating that they will also be hip if they purchase a copy. What better way to appeal to American dreamers than a book about dreamers that, arguably, the most famous woman in America has called hip? It is clear that Oprah's Book Club appeals to Americans' desire to not only mobilize upward and, in the words of Mary Smith, "do better," but also to find community while doing so. Not only that, but in desiring to read books about inspirational Americans—ones that courageously escaped slavery or went from poor to prosperous—with a subconscious hope of also making a difference in the world as an individual, Oprah's tight-knit community of new and old readers alike represent the beauty of the American Paradox.

In 2018, Oprah chose former first lady Michelle Obama's memoir *Becoming*, explaining her confidence that the book will inspire its readers tremendously. In this memoir, Michelle describes the story of a girl from the South Side of Chicago who grew up to become one of the most influential women in history. Although she graduated from two of the most prestigious schools in the nation—Princeton and Harvard Law School—her roots are humble. In a 2018 interview with ABC about *Becoming*, she describes her experience as a first-generation college student and how foreign the affluence of her peers was to her. At the end of the interview, Michelle is surprised with videos from Princeton undergraduates who told ABC how inspired they are when they know that young Michelle walked those same halls. One female undergraduate even said that Michelle graduating from Princeton was a factor in her applying. The interview ends with Robin Roberts telling Michelle, "it is because of you that they are there" as tears well up in the former first lady's eyes ("From Michelle Obama's humble Chicago upbringing to the White House: Part 1" 8:46-8:48).

Much like Oprah herself, Michelle Obama is an unarguable illustration of the American Dream. When young Americans read *Becoming* and learn about Michelle's rise to success, they apply to schools like Princeton or simply stand in awe of her accomplishments. It is no wonder that Oprah, who is known to choose books about overcoming adversity and dreaming big, chose to feature the powerful stories within *Becoming*. Just as Michelle Obama's legacy has inspired so many Americans, many read this memoir with the desire to perhaps follow in Michelle's footsteps. One member of the Oprah Book Club Facebook community posted about how *Becoming* helped her further realize her white privilege, then asking her fellow members if they had more recommendations to help her be anti-racist. Amidst the many recommendations in the comment section, one member simply shared that she too is on a "journey to becoming anti-racist" and that the recommended books she had read assisted her in said journey (Oprah's Book Club). Another person noted that the mere existence of such dialogue is nothing short of motivational. I cannot help but agree. Could *Becoming* be another one of the many examples of a non-fiction turned self-help? Is it another story that was not explicitly created to help individuals grow, but did nonetheless? These Americans are mobilizing, but not in a selfish way. They are using the power of, not only inspiration that comes from American Dream stories, but of what a community with a shared desire to grow can do. I do not know if these members will ever become the next First Lady, a famous actress, or a trailblazing talk-show host. However, I do know that, because of the power of literature, these American readers are mobilizing individually and collectively to become more inclusive, open-minded, and culturally aware people.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of my research began with the desire to explore the American Dream's influence on reading practices in the United States and to prove that book clubs have emerged as a communal form of self-help. However, the lens in which all Americans view both the American Dream and their own motivations is complex. As an optimist, I came to find that the reason people (and, specifically, American people) join book clubs and read books is in order to understand themselves better and understand the spaces and places they inhabit better. The inclinations to be American Dreamers has cultivated communities of more empathetic people who desire to forge new and more inclusive paths in their nation.

I am now an adamant believer in the ironic redemption of American values; values that have been shifted by hopeful people whose inner desire (whether known or unknown) for mobilization is used to ignite change— good change. Aren't we the same America that elected a President under the promise to "Make America Great"? Is this American value why most American book club attendees desire self-help books or books that will help them improve life? Does this, like Dwight Macdonald believes, demoralize and diminish the art of a piece? I don't believe so or, rather, do not want to believe so. Because even widely read books like *To Kill A Mockingbird* and *The Great Gatsby* have brought Americans together in a unique communal understanding, for generations past and generations to come. Does it really matter if they are widely-read, or who recommended them? Could something being widely-read and understood actually make it more valuable, and not less? Perhaps self-help is inherently American. However, I do not believe that makes it inherently bad. Perhaps mobilization does not just help flame the

fires of consumerism but can actually provide improvement on an individual and communal level.

Even if the desire to grow and move upwards in life is rooted in American values of power and expansion, it is clear that those innate desires have created an America different than the one built in 1776. These self-help readers are shaping themselves and the country they live in, one book at a time.

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