Sloganeering Our Way to Serenity:
AA and the Language(s) of America

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In the preface to his 2000 ethnography, Storytelling in Alcoholics Anonymous, George Jensen remarks that early in his research process he “was struck by how extensively AA has entered the consciousness of popular culture . . . while relatively few people have any knowledge of what actually goes on in a meeting.” “[V]irtually everyone,” Jensen observes, “has heard of AA and the Twelve Steps,” and “[m]any people even repeat AA slogans, phrases from the Twelve Steps, or passages from AA literature, without any apparent contact with AA meetings,” and thus without any real understanding of “the culture and rituals of the program” (viii). Jensen’s main concern here is with the second part of his equation—with the larger culture’s lack of understanding of AA meeting praxis, despite its saturation by AA terminology—and so the goal of his study is to illumine what “actually goes on” in AA meetings in order “to move the reader . . . closer to the position of an insider” to the program (viii). Yet, I am struck more by, and my own study proceeds from, the first part of Jensen’s equation, by the point he makes in passing, and for very good reason takes for granted, as he establishes his ethnographic agenda: “virtually everyone” can indeed quote from AA, or “speak fluent recovery,” as Wendy Kaminer has put it (36), citing slogans, phrases, and passages from support group texts that would seem to serve only a limited population with a highly specific problem—alcoholics who need help staying sober.

While this cultural dynamic is a strange and striking one, I say that Jensen justifiably takes it for granted because, in another sense, there is nothing surprising about our fluency with recovery discourse at all.
Robin Room has documented, Alcoholics Anonymous has been a “visible presence” in U.S. film since the mid 1940s, propagating what he calls “the AA worldview” of addiction’s “downward slide” and recovery’s restorative power (“Alcoholism” 370–71). Confessional memoirs of drinking/drugging and recovery, ever increasing in popularity, have for almost as long been “staples of the American literary scene” (Furedi 40–41), and since at least the 1980s, with the explosion of the TV talk show genre, the confessional scene of addiction has been a fixture on pop culture’s center stage. The talk show “[brought] the language of recovery out of the church basement and into American living rooms” once and for all, historian Eva Moskowitz has written, crediting The Oprah Winfrey Show specifically, not only more than any other talk show, nor even any other form of media, but “[m]ore than any other single force in America,” with “making stories of addiction, denial, and recovery the story of America” (259, 262; see also Kaminer; Rapping). Moving quickly to the present, reality TV shows have now entered American living rooms to tell the same, apparently endlessly compelling stories in a new format (episodes of the A&E documentary series Intervention are airing multiple times weekly at the time of this writing), and it has become impossible to turn on the television at all without learning of someone else going off to “rehab.” AA’s long “visible presence” is by now, and has been for some time, more accurately described as a vigorous cultural ubiquity. As Klaus Mäkelä et al. observed over ten years ago in their international study of Alcoholics Anonymous groups, “Even a superficial reading of American newspapers and magazines shows that AA wisdom has definitely moved from the margins to the center of prevailing culture. Comic strips now assume knowledge of 12-Step language and thinking” (216–17).

Yet, if Jensen is right to take AA’s extensive entry into pop cultural consciousness for granted, he is also right to suggest that extensive entry does not always translate to extensive reflexivity or substantive knowledge about “what is actually going on” in the workings of the discourse we are citing. The case, of course, is often quite the opposite: the more extensive the entry of a discourse into cultural “consciousness,” the more unconscious our rehearsal of it is likely to be, and thus the more urgent our scrutiny of that discourse. Mariana Valverde makes this point with clarity in Diseases of the Will: Alcohol and the Dilemmas of Freedom,
when she writes, “In the same way that people who do not know or believe in Freud’s work still use the notion of the unconscious on occasion” (and she might have mentioned a plethora of other Freudian “notions”), “so too have AA terms—for example, ‘being in denial’—come to form part of the general stock of contemporary language, and therefore deserve more serious analysis than they have thus far commanded” (19–20).

Of particular interest to Valverde, and to my forthcoming arguments, are AA’s slogans, and while her book has other primary agendas, Valverde does offer some commentary on what AA (in its slogans about its slogans) calls its “nuggets of wisdom written in shorthand”: 1 Characterizing the inspirational phrases posted around AA meeting rooms, and passed on both orally and through recovery literature (and now on the web), as “admittedly inane, even vacuous,” Valverde states that the slogans of AA “may appear to be beneath the notice of the . . . social theorist; they are the very opposite of the serious texts favoured [sic] by academics.” Yet, Valverde asserts that these phrases—she mentions “Easy does it,” “Keep it simple,” and, of course, “One day at a time”—“are not so vacuous” after all; they are “crystallizations of AA’s homegrown collective wisdom,” and “precisely because they have so little inherent content,” derive all of their power from how they function pragmatically, mnemonically, in that collective context (136, 141). The slogans “play a very important role in the practical management of people’s lives,” Valverde elaborates. “This power is not due to any feature of the text itself: their power . . . has been shaped in and by the ongoing practical work of an organization, for without the practical work of AA, the slogan ‘one day at a time’ would have little effect” (136). Of interest to rhetoricians, Valverde concludes that AA slogans have revived the Greco-Roman huponnemata genre: they are “collections of practical wisdom put together from fragments” meant ultimately to serve as “guides for conduct,” and, following Foucault’s work on the huponnemata in “Writing the Self,” she makes the important point that though the slogans do facilitate work on the self, they are “precisely not constitutive of individual identity” (137). That is, they are “borrowed” and, again, “collective,” “reflecting the . . . work and wisdom of the past rather than one’s personal relation of self to self” (136–37). Mäkelä et al. offer a more abbreviated, but nearly identical rhetorical analysis of AA’s slogans, also
characterizing them as “empty looking” but “infus[ed] . . . with great wisdom,” and writing: “On the surface, they seem almost devoid of content. The point is, however, that they are deictic, that their semantic content is completely determined by their situation of utterance.” Like Valverde, Mäkelä et al. emphasize that the slogans are context-dependent “pointers for conduct,” “instructions for action,” likening them not to hupomnemata, but, more pragmatically still, to “manuals on how to operate stereo equipment”: the import of the slogans lies not in what is said, but in how their instructions are carried out, and those instructions will often be “utterly incomprehensible if there is no button B to push” (123–24).

These are valuable preliminary analyses, and they point to two definitive features of the slogans, and thus of AA praxis, that will be much discussed below. First, the slogans are drawn from the collective and help to establish a distinct, collective identity. Second, the slogans are meant to be accepted as wisdom, and, as such, acted upon, more so than they are to be questioned or contemplated. As Valverde says of this feature, “[w]hen an AA member thinks of a particular phrase [or] slogan . . . he/ she is meant to think not of intrinsic meaning,” but, yet again, of “conduct” in context, of “effectivity and practical effects” (141). However, these analyses elide and distract us from a central, if simpler point, which both authors have themselves actually made in other places in their texts: the slogans are not without effect in the absence of AA’s “button B.” Quite the contrary, many of AA’s slogans (both authors have noted) have reverberated well beyond their situations of utterance to form part of the larger, collective stock of contemporary language at the very center of prevailing culture, and they have done so precisely because of the resonance of their content, because this content crystallizes much more than AA’s unique form of “wisdom” (though some slogans do this far more obviously than others, to be sure). When we attend to their semantic content closely, we find that the slogans of AA are indeed not vacuous; they are as chock full of American truisms as the maxims from Poor Richard’s Almanack, suffused with and reproductive of some of our most deeply felt, deeply conflicted, and sometimes our most deeply pernicious cultural values. Prioritizing personal “serenity” and satisfaction over civic life and political engagement, justifying self-serving individualism
with contradictory appeals to the language of community and commonality, and then mobilizing the language of the community to suppress differences, isolate group members, and inhibit both emotion and critical thought, the slogans of AA reflect a broader "AA worldview" that is sobering in its servitude to dominant U.S. ideologies. In what follows, I will flesh out these claims by fleshing out the slogans themselves, tracing them back to and reading closely the more elaborated (but no less platitudinous) AA literature they serve to distill, and then outward to the larger cultural values with which they resonate.

The purpose of this bi-directional tracing, as I have begun to suggest but would like to belabor for a moment before commencing, is essentially twofold. First, in part, I seek to do via textual and rhetorical analysis what Jensen seeks to do through ethnographic observation: illumine "what is actually going on" within AA discourse, in order to move the reader closer to the position of "insider" to the specific (textual/rhetorical) workings of the AA program. I believe Jensen is again correct in his indictment that though critiques of AA, both popular and scholarly, are rampant (and often rabid), many of these proceed without the benefit of full immersion in, sometimes with nary a reference to, primary AA literature (136), and thus might only perpetuate the lack of reflexivity attending our re/citation of the distilled phrases and slogans that have worked their way into dominant cultural parlance. AA "speaks" all the time in our culture; recovery is, as I have already begun and will continue to establish, a discourse of hegemonic currency. Yet, as Sharon Crowley reminds us in Toward a Civil Discourse, the very nature and purpose of hegemonic discourse is to speak itself into a sort of inarticulateness which becomes a primary "source of its power": "Hegemonic discourses," Crowley writes (and this is a theoretical truism worth reiterating here), "construct and inform [our] experience to such an extent that their assumptions seem natural, 'just the way things are'" (12). My forthcoming discussion, then, strives (in part) to render AA articulate in its more elaborated specificity; to expose and explore the textual roots of the recovery commonplaces "virtually everyone" can rehearse. However—and this brings me to the second, related, but larger purpose of my tracing project—in this close attention to and elaboration of primary AA literature, I seek also to articulate, in the sense of connect, AA discourse to the ideologics that
have so thoroughly naturalized its/our assumptions, and which make us all, in a sense, "insiders to the program." That is, I seek to expose and explore the very non-specificity of AA's language, the deeper, knottier roots of its cultural authority, ultimately in order to denaturalize that authority and place under continued scrutiny some of the quintessentially American values forecasted above. I begin (at long last, then) with AA's treatment of that preeminent American value: selfishness.

"This is a selfish program"

AA proudly proclaims its "selfishness" in the slogan above because of what is understood to be its essential role in maintaining sobriety. In AA's view, primary manifestations of the alcoholic personality are "grandiosity" coupled with an extremely low tolerance for frustration, a combination with disastrous consequences (Twelve 123; Pittman 190; Denzin 92): The alcoholic likes to, and believes he can, "run the whole show," arranging all "of the players in his own way," and then "becomes angry, indignant, self pitying" when "the show doesn't come off very well" (Alcoholics Anonymous 61). Thus, though the first step of recovery is admitting powerlessness over alcohol ("We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable"), successful recovery also very much depends on relinquishing these desires to control other people, or external circumstances more generally. The alcoholic, as the AA "Big Book" (and the slogan) says, needs to "quit playing God," and focus only on what he can reasonably expect to control—himself (Alcoholics 62).3

In a certain sense, then, or at least in certain places in its literature, AA seems to view its mandate for "selfishness" as more of a demand for "humility" (one of AA's most esteemed terms and personal qualities), but the result is the same nonetheless: the recovering alcoholic's sphere of influence extends only so far as his individual thoughts and actions, and attempts to affect any external change at all are considered either futile, unnecessary, or, most importantly, destructive to a necessarily unremitting focus on self (and sobriety). "The lesson I must learn today is that my control is limited to my own behavior, my own attitudes," says one
slogan. "If it is peace you want, seek to change yourself, not other people," says another. Alcoholics are instructed that "The farthest we can go outside ourselves is caring and sharing with others"; that they "need to concentrate not so much on what needs to be changed in the world" as, again, on what needs to be changed within (Pittman 9, 1). AA believes that, largely because of "self-delusion" and "self-pity," "our troubles . . . are basically of our own making" (AA 62), and so "to change reality" we need only "change [our] perception of reality" (Pittman 22). Should reality resist this perceptual alteration, one's line of vision is just redirected again back to the self. A particularly illustrative example of this process comes to us from an anonymous entry in Bill Pittman's collection of AA writings, Stepping Stones to Recovery, entitled "The Things I Can't Control":

Such issues as world hunger and peace sometimes seem so far beyond our individual control we are tempted to throw in the towel. In such times I must remind myself—God is calling me to be faithful, not to save the world.... As I think about it, there are many things within my immediate grasp to control—my attitude, dieting, exercise, and how I will act and react to others' behavior. (82)

This solipsistic worldview has already garnered much criticism from the political and intellectual left. Elayne Rapping, for example, one of the foremost feminist critics of recovery, has characterized it as recovery ideology's "ultimate danger," writing that, "in its focus on changing ourselves as a means of defusing our problems, recovery leads us farther and farther away from the social root causes of those problems [,] . . . so far away that we are in danger of lapsing into chronic political myopia" (13). But AA goes farther, even, than a myopic focus on self-change. As several of the quotes above begin to suggest, AA actively discourages political, "worldly" involvements, or even concerns, a stance that, the AA text Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions explains, has its roots in the failures of earlier fellowships for sobriety, most notably that of the Washingtonians in the mid-nineteenth century. Believing that the Washingtonians "completely lost their effectiveness in helping alcoholics" when they became involved with temperance and abolitionism, founding AA members resolved to keep AA apolitical and made that resolution
explicit in the organization’s tenth tradition (the traditions complement
the steps by setting policy for AA as a whole): “Alcoholics Anonymous
has no opinion on outside issues; hence the AA name ought never be
drawn into public controversy” (178–79). AA authors do clarify, in their
discussion of tradition ten, that this stance applies to the group, and does
not “mean that the members of Alcoholics Anonymous, now restored as
citizens of the world, are going to back away from their individual
responsibilities to act as they see the right upon issues of our time” (177).
But Richmond Walker, one of the most prolific authors of early AA
materials other than “Bill W” (Bill Wilson) and his collaborators on the
Big Book and Twelve and Twelve, suggests that even this allowance for
individual civic participation is risky—that is, sobriety jeopardizing.
Writing about factors that cause longtime AA members to “slip,” Walker
states, “One of them is the doctrine that AA should enable a man or
woman to ‘live a normal life,’ as the saying goes; to spread out his
activities in society, in community programs, in business, in hobbies, and
in many other ways.” For most recovering alcoholics, this is just too
dangerous, Walker concludes. “Other activities can so easily assume an
importance that overshadows our one great need—to keep our con­
cious minds full of the AA program at all times as long as we live”
(Pittman 217–18).

AA has no social obligation to have a social obligation, it is true. AA
is an apolitical enterprise “acting as it sees the right” for the legitimate,
and legitimately prioritized, purpose of helping people survive and
combat addiction. But, as Kaminer reminds us in her critique of recovery,
“an apolitical movement that helps shape the identities of a few million
people will have political consequences” (152), especially when those
few million people are repeatedly enjoined to concentrate only on
shaping their own identities, and to conceive of civic participation, or
concern over issues like “world hunger and peace,” only as threats to
peace of mind. “[W]e have stopped fighting anybody or anything. We
have to!,” the Big Book declares (103, italics in original). “We absolutely
insist on enjoying life. We try not to indulge in cynicism over the state of
the nations, nor do we carry the world’s troubles on our shoulders” (132).
Such statements of determined detachment do not merely reflect the
“selfish” stance of an organization resolutely (and reasonably) commit-
ted to political disengagement; they reflect what is understood to be the right and necessary attitude of each AA member if he or she wishes to achieve lasting sobriety. AA literature alternates between the view that everything “is exactly the way it is supposed to be at this moment” (because “absolutely nothing happens in God’s world by mistake”), and the view that, even if all is not right in the world, we “can find no serenity” until we accept things as they are, for they are, ultimately, beyond one’s power to change (Pittman 1). Better to refract one’s gaze and focus closer to home: on the self that is at once responsible for all that is wrong and responsible to little else but staying serene enough to stay sober. “I am responsible for myself alone,” the slogan says. “My sobriety, my well being, my happiness—all of these are, ultimately, my own responsibilities.”

AA is not, to state the obvious once more, unique among American social forms for this privileging of the self. The idea that the self has become increasingly prioritized, increasingly disarticulated from external frames of reference, that popular culture in general has taken a perilous “inward turn,” has been a perennial concern of social critics since Christopher Lasch lambasted us with The Culture of Narcissism in 1979, and perhaps since Philip Rieff declared “the triumph of the therapeutic” in 1965 (see Furedi 50, 145–47). The leading contention offered by critics of our self-obsessed “therapy culture” has been the obvious one and shares much with the recurrent criticisms of recovery representatively voiced by Rapping above: that in its intensive focus on a self considered “private” and split off from any material or social influences (other than the immediate family), the therapeutic sensibility effectively blinds us to systemic problems and breeds public/political apathy, which in turn helps maintain the status quo (see Moskowitz; Furedi; Room, “Healing”). In many ways, AA shares much with, participates in, and is a product of the larger therapeutic culture that surrounds it. Problems are understood to be “of one’s own making” and thus strictly personal, the change that is valued occurs at the level of the self; and that change is wrought by confessing problems (Steps 1, 4, 5, 10), and then working to ameliorate “dysfunctional behaviors,” or what AA originally would have called “defects of character” (Step 6). It is often for these reasons that critics of therapy culture, and/or of the related self-help/self-
esteem movements, take up recovery in their analyses—as yet another incarnation of the depoliticizing, individualistic, self-centered ethos of our day. This is the criticism I myself have just leveled at AA. Yet, in other respects, AA doctrine seems to stand diametrically opposed to the self-centered sensibility of therapy culture, and becomes an all the more intriguing site of cultural-discursive analysis for these apparent differences and for its own internal inconsistencies. Most generally, as Mäkelä et al. point out, AA is more accurately described as a “mutual help movement” than a “self-help movement”: it eschews the intervention of experts/professionals usually integral to therapeutics or self-help, stressing egalitarian group interaction instead, and goes beyond a focus on self-realization to place an equally strong—and AA would say primary—emphasis on helping others in their recovery (13). In fact, despite its widely criticized—and self-proclaimed—“selfishness,” AA actually understands its central mission to be the eradication of group members’ self-absorption, a fact of AA praxis interesting not only for the way in which it seems to dislocate AA from the other therapeutic enterprises with which it is so often lumped, nor even for its internal inconsistency, but for the ways in which this inconsistency locates AA at the very “heart of America.” Indeed, it is when we begin to explore AA’s contradictory commitments—to self and service, individualism and mutuality—that we find that, long before Oprah “made” addiction, denial, and recovery the story of America, AA had much to tell us about the state of this nation (whether AA would like to think about that or not).

“The price for serenity and sanity is self-sacrifice”

“Selfishness—self centeredness! That, we think, is the root of our troubles. . . . Above everything, we alcoholics must be rid of this selfishness” (AA 62). So says the Big Book, while multiple slogans, like the above, extol the virtues of service and sacrifice: “True happiness will come to the person who seeks and finds how to serve others”; “the only thing we take from this world when we leave is what we gave away.” AA also expressly prioritizes the “common welfare” of the group over “individual welfare” of members in the first of its twelve traditions
(Twelve 189), and the twelfth step requires that members make a lifelong commitment to "turn outward toward our fellow alcoholics who are still in distress"—a "kind of giving that asks no rewards" (Twelve 106), and that would seem to have very few: Recovering Alcoholics are warned that in their service-work they should expect interruptions to job, sleep, and pleasure, to make "innumerable trips to police courts, sanitariums, hospitals, jails, and asylums," and to meet with violence, as "[a] drunk may smash the furniture in your home, or burn a mattress" (AA 97). AA members are even instructed in how to daily think and pray with others at the forefront of their minds; they are encouraged to "constructively review" each day by posing such questions as, "Were we thinking of ourselves most of the time? Or were we thinking of what we could do for others," and to greet the next day with a resolution to do better, "ask[ing] especially for freedom from self-will," and being "careful to make no request for ourselves only" (AA 86-87).

How do we reconcile the overt directives for other-orientation and unremitting sacrifice offered here with the equally explicit directives for self-preservation and privileging offered above? How do we reconcile "this is a selfish program" with "above everything, we must be rid of selfishness?" This is a contradiction that has apparently vexed AA insiders over the years as well; the matter has been a recurrent topic of conversation in AA's monthly journal AA Grapevine, and there are many recovery websites devoted solely to its clarification. On one such site, a group calling itself The Big Book Bunch of Alcoholics Anonymous has quantified the number of times the word "selfish," or any synonym, appears in the Big Book to illustrate that it always has a negative connotation, thereby "proving" that though the slogan "This is a selfish program" is regularly heard at meetings, AA is, simply, not: selfishness remains one of the grossest defects of character, the slogan is misleading, and/or reflects a misconstrual of the idea that one must put his own sobriety first—before he can, and so that he can, be of use to others. Yet, if we join The Big Book Bunch in similar acts of Big Book exegesis, we may come to a different interpretation.

There can be little doubt that, in many crucial respects, AA seeks to diminish the self. The alcoholic, as we have seen, is in AA's view "an extreme example of self-will run riot" (AA 62). He is so ego-driven, in
fact, that he is "really a self-seeker even when trying to be kind," attempting only to "wrest satisfaction and happiness out of this world" by managing others (61). There can be little doubt that AA endeavors to reorient the recovering alcoholic away from these manipulative behaviors and toward more beneficent acts of caring. However, as we will now see, even in these new, sober acts of outreach to those still suffering, the recovering alcoholic remains self-seeking, and self-serving, and though his is now "the kind of giving that asks no rewards," the rewards AA promises are many.

"Helping others is the foundation stone of your recovery," AA says just before it explains all of those sacrifices one must expect to make in his new life of service (AA 97). I place the emphasis on "your" in this passage because that is where it belongs. "In AA's conception," Mäkelä et al. conclude, "the primary reason for helping other alcoholics is to maintain one's own sobriety" (119; emphasis added), a fact about which AA is fairly clear (but which does make the recovering alcoholic, still and again, a self-seeker even when being kind): "Practical experience shows that nothing will so much insure immunity from drinking as intensive work with other alcoholics," is the opening sentence of the Big Book's chapter, "Working with Others" (89), and is "the simple yet profound insight" that the authors of The Twelve Steps Revisited call "Bill Wilson's greatest contribution to the birth of AA": the "realization that if one alcoholic devoted time and energy to helping another stay sober, then the 'helper' would be successful even if the 'helpee' got drunk—since he himself had been able to make it through another day without alcohol" (79). Working with others works this way, the authors continue, in part because the sober alcoholic is forced to recall how painful active alcoholism is (79), but, as we have already learned that AA members absolutely insist on enjoying life, that they "aren't a glum lot" (AA 132), it should come as little surprise that working with others promises much more than an endless mirroring back of past miseries. In fact, it promises quite a nice high. "Life will take on new meaning," AA swears of the joys of twelfth step work. "To watch people recover, to see them help others, to watch loneliness vanish, to see a fellowship grow up about you, to have a host of friends—this is an experience you must not miss. We know you will not want to miss it" (AA 89). According to AA, "Practically every AA
member declares that no satisfaction has been deeper, and no joy greater than in a Twelfth Step job well done" (Twelve 110). I am not arguing here that recovering alcoholics should be deprived of such deep satisfaction and great joy. But I am pointing out that when we read AA literature closely, those aforementioned sacrifices to sleep, work, pleasure, and property seem ultimately to have been sacrifices of the self made primarily for the self; and that pleasure, happiness, satisfaction—the personal rewards not asked for—are yet not only received in full measure, but are, still and again, the primary focus of one’s efforts and one’s life. “Let it begin with me,” says the slogan. It seems that in AA, however, it always ends with “me” too.

So, where does this beginning end? With the conclusion, contra the Big Book Bunch, that AA “really is” a selfish program, only perhaps a more disingenuous one than other self-help enterprises for its pretenses to putting the “common welfare” first? Sort of. But, while I do believe that conclusion reconciles the conflict I set out to address, it is admittedly rather facile, and thus invites immediate (and necessary) rejoinders. One might argue, for example, and many have, that all acts of benevolence and altruism are to a certain extent “really” self-interested. One might press on that the “true” self-interest undergirding our efforts to help others does nothing to diminish the effects or effectivity of that help. Or, one might take a slightly different tack and argue that even if unbridled altruism does exist, there are nonetheless times and places when it cannot—exigencies such as achieving and maintaining sobriety, for example, which call for the privileging of self-concern and even for hyper-vigilant self-interest (which comes closest to being AA’s expressly stated argument when it is not contradicting itself on this vexed matter). In short, the conclusion that AA “really is” a selfish program, while valid and, I think, accurate, does open up into a potentially infinite regress of questions and qualifications. This conclusion, however, is not only problematic with respect to the (ages old) questions it opens up, but with respect to those it closes down. That is, the conclusion that AA “truly is” selfish is perhaps somewhat less illuminative than letting AA’s contradictory commitments—to self and service, individualism and fellowship—coexist, and not peaceably, for that is precisely how they coexist in American culture writ large. In Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life,
Robert Bellah and his coauthors famously posited (following Tocqueville) that America is a “house divided,” torn between its two legacies, and two languages, of individualism and commitment, and while we place the greater value on individualism, with its ideals of personal responsibility and high regard for personal satisfaction, we remain dedicated still to the competing ideals of community and common welfare. If individualism is “the first language in which Americans tend to think about their lives,” Bellah et al. made clear, the languages of “social obligation and group formation” are a close second (viii, 276, 154). AA literature, as we have seen, espouses some of the most basic tenets of American individualism as Bellah et al., and most anyone else, would define that tradition: “success or misfortune is the individual’s responsibility, and his or hers alone,” one is primarily responsible to that self alone (even as he is serving others), and success is measured by personal fulfillment, which, in turn, becomes “the very meaning of our lives” (viii, 47, 150). Moreover, as we have also seen, despite AA’s insistence that the common welfare of the group comes before that of the individual, the group itself exists to help individuals get and remain sober (and to find new meaning in life by doing so). That is, the individual is prior to this society, which is formed voluntarily so that individuals may enhance their own well-being and maximize personal gain—all primary features of group formation and purpose within an individualistic culture (Bellah et al. 143, 47). As Mäkelä et al. write of the “special type of social network” we see exemplified by the AA fellowship, “individuation” (which they identify as a definitive “aspect of modernity” more generally, rather than of American culture) is the very precondition of its formation: alcoholics “enter AA as individual atoms cut off from their social matrix,” and then cultivate mutuality based on “individual existential experience” (71, 53). But the fact remains that AA, like the larger culture that surrounds and gave rise to it, is itself a “house divided,” a microcosmic testament to and embodiment of America’s own central conflict, and so expressions of commitment circulate widely and vie for primacy in its texts and slogans, and in the AA way of life. While it is the commitment to individualism that eventually prevails, AA is fluent in both languages of America. Perhaps we are so fluent in recovery because it allows us to pay lip service to them both.
“Death, Insanity, or Recovery”; “You either is—or you ain’t”

In the preceding sections I have argued that AA promotes self-centered living at the cost of civic participation and political engagement, and that, though well versed in the languages of community and commitment, it is America’s first language and ideology of individualism that wins out over, and in many cases actually inspires, AA’s appeals to—and its actual work on behalf of—the “common welfare.” However, if we continue to examine AA’s conception of community and the place of the individual therein, we find that AA’s appeals to a common welfare often slip into something more sinister than “selfishness.” AA quite purposefully suppresses differences by advancing the idea that all addicts have the same life-trajectory, and by constructing a wholly subsuming addict-identity around that trajectory. As Bellah et al. declared of the culture at large, the “triumph” of individualism within AA is “far from complete” (276), and while Habits of the Heart offered this as a positive assessment of U.S. society, AA’s (many) anti-individualistic tendencies are not necessarily cause for celebration.

Though not always fully attuned to the individualistic imperatives that, I have argued, motivate AA’s (ostensibly primary) commitment to working with others, AA is in other respects and moments highly aware of its place within a culture of individualism and of its need to contend with that culture’s prevailing ideology. While elaborating Tradition One—“Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends on AA unity”—for example, the authors of Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions anticipate and address the objection, “Does this mean . . . that in AA the individual doesn’t count for much? Is he to be dominated by his group and swallowed up in it?” “No!” the authors respond, assuring readers/potential group members that “there isn’t a fellowship on earth which lavishes more devoted care upon its individual members,” nor one “which more jealously guards the individual’s right to think, talk, and act as he wishes.” Newcomers to AA will observe “liberty verging on license,” on “sheer anarchy,” the authors maintain, though, yes, they will also “recognize at once that AA has an irresistible strength of purpose and action” (129–30). As this imaginary dialectic continues, the authors eventually reveal “the key to this strange paradox”: AA’s “crowd of
anarchists" holds together so readily and well not because of group coercion or the threat of censure, but because each individual member knows he "has to conform to the principles of recovery"—if he doesn't, "the penalty is sure and swift; he sickens and dies" (130).

This (literal) death threat—that is, AA’s notion (and slogan) that alcoholism is a disease which is "incurable, progressive, and fatal"—plays an essential role in ensuring lockstep following of the 12 steps, and in essentializing "the" alcoholic. In AA, there is only one story, the story "found on everyone’s lips" (Jensen 112), and it goes like this: one becomes (or, more likely, is born) an alcoholic; one moves progressively and inevitably through alcoholism’s four stages, and, in the final stage, ends up in a mental institution, prison, or dead, unless he "hits bottom," sees the light, and enters recovery. Jensen points to the positive effects of this narrative’s "erasure of difference" (his phrase), writing that in "com[ing] to see that every alcoholic's story is essentially the same," newcomers to AA can recognize regrettable past actions as effects of a shared disease, and so "move past guilt and shame" (81, 125; see also Denzin 329, 349). However, as might be predicted, it is precisely this narrative’s "erasure of difference" that most concerns AA’s critics. Philosopher Hebert Fingarette, for example, who has played a key role in efforts to dismantle the disease-theory of alcoholism, contends that newcomers who want to continue in AA have little choice but to "learn to believe in an autobiography that exemplifies A.A. teaching" lest they be "confronted and charged with denial" (88). Less pragmatically, but to similar effect, Helen Keane writes that the addict with any story but that of "disease and loss of control" becomes a "subject excluded from the truth," her words, like the speech of Foucault’s madman, "worthless as evidence," "null and void, 'mere noise'" (81). But it is perhaps more accurate and, again, illuminative to point out that AA has not merely dismissed as "noise" alternative stories of alcohol ab/use; instead, as hegemonic discourses do, it has extended its narrative and cultural reach by assimilating "noise," blending and smoothing it into the sound of the same. In the first edition of Alcoholics Anonymous (1939), for example, stark differences were drawn between "the real alcoholic" and other types of "hard drinkers." While the hard drinker might find it difficult to quit, suffer ill health and other adverse effects, even "die a few years before his
time" from alcohol use, the "the real alcoholic" "does absurd, incredible, tragic things while drinking. . . . He is seldom mildly intoxicated. He is always more or less insanely drunk," and "he frequently becomes disgustedly, and even dangerously anti-social." Soon, his nerves and health shot, career, finances, and family life in ruins, "he begins to appear at hospitals and sanitariums" (21–22). This "picture of the true alcoholic" (22), AA came to find, had its problems; too much, it seems, could escape its frame, and so while the first portion of *Alcoholics Anonymous* (the portion that details the program itself) has never been altered, indeed is considered inalterable, the "Personal Stories" section of the text has been changed with each new edition "to represent the current membership of Alcoholics Anonymous more accurately, and thereby to reach more alcoholics" (*AA* xii). While the more recent changes, in the third (1976) and now fourth (2001) editions, seem geared toward addressing cultural diversity (more on this issue to come), the sole impetus for the first revision to the stories section, in 1955, was to make room for what in AA parlance are called "high bottom drunks"—that is, for "alcoholics" who bear little resemblance to the grisly picture drawn above, but who are "true" nonetheless. A new grouping of stories was therefore added to the 1955 Big Book under the heading, "They Stopped in Time," which was separated from "They Lost Nearly All" (and from a third grouping, "Pioneers of A.A."). As AA explains of this revision, since the first edition "dealt with low bottom cases only," the organization was finding it difficult to help those alcoholics "who still had their health, their families, their jobs, and even two cars in the garage," or "young people who were scarcely more than potential alcoholics." Such folks were trying the program, AA claims, but were getting stuck on the very first step—they could not admit, because they were not experiencing, "hopelessness." "Since Step One requires an admission that our lives have become unmanageable, how could people such as these take this step?" AA asked of itself. Ever ready with its own answers: "It was obviously necessary to raise the bottom the rest of us had hit to the point that it would hit them" (Twelve 23).

It would seem, then, that in AA the individual does not have anarchical license to think, talk, and act as he wishes. Hard drinkers are consigned to the disease of alcoholism, active alcoholics are consigned
to "death, insanity, or recovery," and recovering alcoholics are consigned to repeat the story of how they escaped those first two options. AA's commitment to a "common welfare" is in this case quite insidiously in earnest; the triumph of individualism is not complete. Yet, there is more at stake here than AA's abdication of its/our first language of individualism and its supreme ideals of personal autonomy and choice. The disease narrative is totalizing not only in that it precludes other possible interpretations of individual drinking behaviors, but in that it subsumes all other aspects of the alcoholic's identity. That is, it is not just that now hard drinkers are "really" alcoholics who have this disease; it is that all alcoholics are their disease, and little else. AA has "succeeded in turning a disease into a full-fledged, lifelong social identity," as Valverde puts it (122), and it is an identity, as we will see, to which AA demands full-fledged allegiance, an identity that must eclipse all other facets of the social self.9

"Look for similarities rather than differences";
"Don't compare—identify"

"Alcoholism is an equal opportunity destroyer," says the slogan. Because alcoholics have all been "wrecked in the same vessel" (and "restored and united under one God"), social distinctions are "laughed out of countenance" in AA (AA 161). AA considers itself the classic classless society, its groups, and the fellowship at large, havens of harmony in an otherwise divisive culture, a veritable microcosmic triumph of democracy. "We are people who normally would not mix," the Big Book proclaims, yet "camaraderie, joyousness and democracy pervade the vessel from steerage to Captain's table." Having discovered "a common peril" and "a common solution," AA members—who represent "all sections of this country"—"can join in brotherly and harmonious action" (17). As is always the case with harmony, however, and if I may extend AA's shipwreck metaphor, something has to be drowned out. That something becomes most readily apparent when we turn to AA's more contemporary documents, where issues of cultural identity are taken up directly and in detail.
"AA has certainly felt the pressures of identity politics," Valverde wrote in 1998, explaining that the organization had begun to "[make] some limited room" for women-only groups and gay/lesbian groups despite its belief that the alcoholic identity is, and must remain, primary (131; also Mäkelä 101). Valverde certainly seems to be correct, as, in addition to allowing for the formation of such groups, AA produced a spate of pamphlet publications in the mid-late 1980s for "the woman alcoholic," "the gay/lesbian alcoholic," and, particularly interesting, for "the Native North American." (AA now also has pamphlets for the teenage alcoholic, the older alcoholic, and for alcoholics in the armed services. There are no pamphlets either for African American or Latino/a alcoholics.) These pamphlets are composed largely of personal narratives, which tell the story "found on everyone's lips" but with a multi-cultural twist, primarily to assure prospective group members that AA is indeed the equalizing bastion of brotherly (and now sisterly, too) love it has always claimed to be, and that it is also a great respecter (or, in the case of gays and lesbians, tolerator) of diversity, though alcoholism is itself, of course, "no respecter of persons" or their differences (AA xx). What is evidenced by these documents instead, however, is a continued and particularly non-humorous form of "laughing social distinctions out of countenance," and, less humorous still, the wholesale usurpation of cultural identity, affiliation, and tradition by the AA group and the "disease."

The stories and testimonials in *AA and the Gay/Lesbian Alcoholic* contain predictable guarantees that gays and lesbians will be accepted in AA, either because alcoholics "cannot afford to be judgmental," or because no one in the group will be curious about their "private life" (9). Since alcoholism is the tie that binds (the ship that wrecks), gays and lesbians should be able to "feel very much at home in any AA group," the pamphlet promises, but offers the extra reassurance that there are gay/lesbian groups for those who would feel more comfortable therein (9). These groups, however, are presented as secondary options, and as transitory. They are also, and crucially, presented—truly this time—not as serving individuals in their efforts to get sober and thereby maximize personal gain, but as serving the overarching mission of AA, and ultimately as in service to the development of the fully fledged alcoholic
identity. Gay/lesbian groups "[act] as an inlet" to the larger AA community; they are places "where for a time we find it easier to identify as an alcoholic," and the groups never "lose sight of the fact that [their] primary purpose is to carry the message of recovery from alcoholism," that they are "[i]n most respects . . . no different from other AA groups" (9–10; emphasis added). One testimonial from an "inlet"-group member concludes with the celebratory comment, "We no longer have to feel unique simply because we are gay," and then with a faithful rendering of the slogan that frames this section: "We can now concentrate on the similarities between us and other alcoholics rather than the differences" (10). Beyond flattening differences then, this document proffers AA as the place where gays/lesbians will at last find relief from difference: "A.A. people understood me—something I'd been looking for all my life. That terrible apartness from the human race . . . began to disappear" (10). But beyond this move, the pamphlet presents AA as the place where gays/lesbians will find relief from gay/lesbian identity itself, which is portrayed as a kind of bad-faith self to be discarded for the authentic whole of the alcoholic self, as well as freedom from formerly constraining, even injurious, communal attachments:

I have learned that being a lesbian has nothing to do with my alcoholism. Alcoholism is a disease which ignores sexual orientation. I have also learned that I am capable of standing alone, and am therefore free to choose the people with whom I wish to share my life. . . . Today I am free of my dependency upon alcohol and my need for other people to supply my identity. Thanks to AA, I am free to be who and what I am . . . (10–11)

The treatment of difference in the pamphlet for the Native North American—subtitled "Trails to Freedom"—is somewhat more complex, largely because the eradication of culture is less complete. While the personal stories here do contain the usual flattening of difference—affirmations that "AA is truly colorblind," that "[t]here is no difference between an AA meeting in a plains teepee or in a church basement" because "[t]he words spoken and feelings shared are the same," and this, again, because "[o]ur common bond is alcoholism" (19–20)—there is no suggestion that the Native American must relinquish a bad-faith identity or misplaced
communal/cultural affiliation for her new self/group. In fact, the message is quite the opposite; writers speak of being able to “retain all of my people’s Native traditions, customs, and ceremonies,” of being “in AA and proud of our rich Native heritage at the same time” (6). There is even some allowance that Native Americans might, at times, or at first, feel alienated and unable to identify with white speakers at meetings, and that issues might arise during their recovery that only other Natives can understand (21, 27, 35). Most stunning of all, in some stories there is actually a hint that racist oppression and poverty, and not just “the disease” or “problems of one’s own making,” might have contributed to one’s drinking (27, 31, 35), though this is counterbalanced by assertions such as “I don’t want to suggest that I am an alcoholic because I was born on a reservation, or because my father was a drunk, or because I couldn’t read or write” (21). Overall though, one is tempted to conclude that AA is making great, progressive strides. But, we have not yet finished our walk down the trail to freedom. AA, it turns out, not only allows Native North Americans to be Native North Americans; it not only allows them to retain their cultural traditions; it brings them more thoroughly in line with those traditions. In fact, AA allows them to be “truly” Native American for the very first time. One testimonial by a Sioux writer, for example, concludes by saying that since in AA people choose their own “higher power,” participating in the group “made [her] beliefs [in the Great Spirit] stronger” (6); another concludes with, “Today, I am living my life according to how my Creator meant it to be lived” (29), and another with the statement that, thanks to AA and a victorious battle with alcoholism, “I am finally becoming a warrior” (11). Though Native identity is not wholly effaced by the alcoholic identity, the alcoholic identity—specifically, the recovering alcoholic identity—remains totalizing in that it is what has restored the Native North American to fullness and authenticity of self. And though Native cultures are not unauthenticated, as in the case of gay/lesbian cultures, they are usurped nonetheless in that AA is the vehicle of deliverance (back) into that culture, which active alcoholism (the only bad faith attachment here) prevented the Native American from appropriately honoring: “Through the practice of the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous,” a man named Al writes at the end of his story, entitled, “Today I am Proud to be a Cherokee,” “I
addressed my own spirituality, as a human being and as a Native. Alcohol had been a false idol. I have learned that dependence on alcohol is not a Cherokee tradition” (35). Perhaps AA’s ability to reunite Native Americans with abdicated cultural traditions should come as no surprise, because, as it also turns out—as this pamphlet confirms in its introduction—AA and Native traditions already have very much in common: “The greatest spiritual law of Native People upholds community over individual effort. A spirit of community is at the heart of Alcoholics Anonymous too” (7).

I hope it is evident why I spend so much time with these two short documents. Here we have AA, in more contemporary cultural moments, engaging issues of identity and difference that the founding authors could not have had at their disposal the proper idiom to address. That is, it would be easy to read the Big Book and Twelve and Twelve as simply “dated,” and so, if not to laugh out of countenance, then at least to excuse as warranted naiveté, their lofty liberalisms about essential(izing) unity. But AA is nothing if not committed to “preserv[ing] the integrity of the AA message” in the midst of “sweeping changes in society as a whole,” as the foreword to the 2001 edition of the Big Book, and my analysis above, makes clear (xxiv). While the pamphlets above, as well as the personal stories added to the latest edition of Alcoholics Anonymous, now represent a more legitimate cross section of American(s) than when the statement “we are people who normally would not mix” referred to approximately 100 middle class white men in 1939 (AA says that the fourth Big Book finally represents “virtually everyone the first 100 members could have hoped to reach” [xxiii-xxiv]),¹² AA’s vision of its membership, and its conception of difference, remains fundamentally unaltered: these are the people who do “mix.” “Mix,” after all, means to combine unlike elements into an undifferentiated mass.

Fingarette notes that the type of “passionate and complete reorientation” to sameness that we see in AA texts and practice “is not a unique phenomenon,” likening it, as the harshest critics of AA often do, to the process of “ideological reeducation” that occurs within religious sects (88). I am not always opposed to such critiques, though I do think AA’s form of ideological reeducation is far less unique than they allow, and that to liken AA to a sect (or cult) is actually to vastly diminish, rather than
paranoically overestimate (the usual counter-accusation) its cultural significance. “Look for similarities rather than differences”; “don’t compare—identify”—these slogans are not the ideological idiosyncrasies of a sect (nor are they incomprehensible out of context); they are the commonplaces of an American liberal pluralism that has always given short shrift to that pesky “pluralism” part. Alcoholics are wrecked in the same vessel, restored and united under one God, and melted into the same pot, with liberty (“verging on license”?) for all. As Kaminer writes, echoing the sentiments that launched this essay, it is clear that a counterculture has arrived, is no longer “counter,” when “its language enters the vernacular” (24). AA did not have far to go to arrive, and none of us need take many re-educative “steps” to become fluent in its pieties.

In sum, AA provides reeducation and reorientation not (only) in the sense that Fingarette fears—toward some worldview worrisome and new—but in the sense of entrenchment back, again, into an ideologic wholly familiar, which is no less worrisome for being so. If I may reappropriate the term, the “denial” of difference, all the while paying lip service to pluralism and diversity, is another habit of the American heart, another language of America—a habit, Bellah et al. remind us, that is not inconsonant with individualism but a product of it. Unable to account for factors “outside” the self which construct and constrain that self, individualistic ideologies are unable to account for the vast social, economic, material, embodied differences that do divide us (206, 203). As a result, our conceptions and practices of “community” degenerate, precisely as they do in AA, into celebrations of consensus, of sameness across differences that were elided from the start. Genuine community, Bellah et al. make clear, entails the recognition of difference, the integration of a “public” and a “private” self, and an attunement to the self-constitutive nature of larger social networks (72, 135). Community is “not a collection of self-seeking individuals” who believe themselves essentially similar, not a voluntary arrangement for the fulfillment of needs (134–35, 154). When we think of it as such, when we practice it as such, we are more accurately in the exclusionary realm of what Bellah et al have called “lifestyle enclaves”: groups that rejoice in “the narcissism of similarity,” “involve only a segment of each individual” (though AA does its best to make this segment the whole), and then further segment both self and
group by withdrawing from the “public world” and endeavoring to “make of [their] particular segment of life a small world of its own” (72, 112, 50). To borrow vocabulary from an entirely different tradition, which nonetheless makes much the same point, “there is no community in these ‘communities’” (Davis 180): As D. Diane Davis writes, drawing on the work of Jean-Luc Nancy and Jean-François Lyotard, we don’t “make community happen, produce it, and/or build it”; community is an “originary sharing” that “always already is,” something to be “experienced” or “exposed” as constituting us, not something constituted by our own (inevitably exclusionary) efforts (180, 195–96).13 “[I]t is precisely in our intended establishment and/or protection of ‘community,’” Davis warns, “that we are bound to forget it” (193). Though it may seem incongruous to “mix” the insights of Robert Bellah, a communitarian, humanist, person of faith, and self-professed “child of the Enlightenment” (Bergman), with those of anti-humanist postmodernists such as Davis, Nancy, and Lyotard, and though these theorists are critiquing “community” toward different ends—Davis toward an “infinity of loose ends” (185), and Bellah in the hopes of a more “inclusive whole” (72)—the “being in common,” as Davis might have it (193), across these divergent traditions bespeaks an undeniable urgency. “Community,” there seems to be some consensus, must be based in dissensus if we are to manage to “be in common” at all.14

AA’s “habit of the heart” where community is concerned, I have been arguing, is our own; and it is a bad one we all need to kick. But habits are hard to break when they are manifestations of a larger, systemic, in this case profoundly social, disease. The attenuation of community, both in terms of how we (mis)conceive of it and how we (fail to) participate in it, can be linked to the erosion of more organic networks of relation and support, which our attenuated practices of community then help perpetuate (Furedi; Bellah). That is, “enclave” group formations such as those we see in AA are an inevitable, perhaps even necessary, outgrowth of a “radically individualizing society” (Bellah 73), but in these groups’ tendencies toward privatism and antipathy to difference, they reproduce the atomization that led to (that Mäkelä et al. say is the precondition for) their formation in the first place. This language of inevitability, however, should not suggest innocence. As Davis has advised us, there is usually
a most determined "forgetting" going on in such acts of "community building," and, once again, AA's efforts prove no exception. Much as it strenuously works to suppress and subsume differences, so does AA labor to ensure that its members are then isolated in their exclusive similarity. We have already witnessed a good deal of this isolative process in action—in AA's insistence that one can change nothing but the self, in its related discouragement of political/civic participation, and in its attempts to dislodge (gay/lesbian) group members from preexisting communal attachments, and/or to present the "disease" of alcoholism as the only significant bond. But AA further dissolves connections to the "community that always already is" by actively militating against informal relations of dependence, and by diminishing both the connective and potentially disruptive effects of emotion.

"Anger is but one letter away from danger"

In Therapy Culture: Cultivating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age, Frank Furedi explains that the therapeutic ethos involves, and sustains itself through, two central and related contradictions. First, though the "therapeutic imperative," like the lifestyle enclave, is a response to a fragmented, individuating, and thus alienating culture, it further disintegrates the weakening informal bonds that contributed to its creation by positing those bonds as sites of trauma, and by installing in their place formal dependency on the expert/therapist. Second, though the therapeutic ethos ostensibly embraces feeling—is all about feeling—it is actually by turns suspicious, condemnatory, and suppressive of feelings, precisely to the extent that they bind us to others and/or threaten to become disruptive to the status quo, which the therapeutic sensibility, in its myopia, helps to maintain (103, 30–33). AA distinguishes itself from therapy culture in key ways, as we have seen. When it comes to AA's treatment of bonds of dependence, and of feeling more generally, however, it becomes more productive to look for similarities rather than differences.

Though the Big Book has told us in no uncertain terms that alcoholics' problems are of their own making, AA is not beyond casting at least
a little blame outward at one of therapy culture's favored targets—“relationships”: “[I]t is from our twisted relations with family, friends, and society at large that many of us have suffered the most,” the authors of *Twelve and Twelve* write (53), forgetting at one point, even, the fundamental truism that alcoholism is a “disease that strikes at random,” and stating, “defective relations with other human beings have nearly always been the cause of our woes, including our alcoholism” (“Do You” 80). Like therapeutics, AA seeks to help the individual differentiate “twisted,” “defective” relational patterns from “healthy” ones, so that ultimately she may replace the former with the latter. “Like our professional friends”—that is, psychiatrists—AA says, again in *Twelve and Twelve*, “we...are aware that there are wrong forms of dependence. ...No adult man or woman, for example, should be in too much emotional dependence upon a parent” (38). But there are other “wrong forms” of emotional dependence for AA as well; among these, “overdependence upon people,” a condition which AA is hard pressed to define but which seems to involve having any expectations that personal relationships will provide “security” or “stability” (115–16). Humans, it seems, “are fallible,” will “let us down”; “they create confusion and turmoil” (*Twelve* 115; Pittman 90). The only appropriate forms of dependence, then, are upon God and the AA group. Reliance on God tempers “the urge to wholly rely on human protection and care,” and the group—though composed of humans—helps members make the distinction noted above and “begin to learn right relations with people who understand us” (*Twelve* 116–17).

In the foregoing, we begin to see in AA words and praxis what Furedi has described as therapy culture’s proclivity for “stigmatising [sic] informal relations of dependence”; its tendency, in fact, “to view the human condition and personal relations as inherently destructive” (21, 104). We also see what we have seen before: AA’s never subtle attempts to reorient individuals away from preexisting attachments and into a consummate bond with the group. Particularly telling in this respect is AA’s treatment of marriage, for while AA is not so bold as to stigmatize *this* bond—for which “God fashioned us” and which “nearly every sound human being” desires (*Twelve* 117)—and while it counts among the organization’s greatest successes all the families reunited by recovery (*AA* xx), it still manages, when it can, to subordinate marriage to AA
membership. In the Big Book’s chapters “To Wives” and “The Family Afterward,” for example, AA warns that the newly recovering husband/father will likely be so taken with the demands of sobriety and outreach work that he will be “really neglectful,” spending most of his time with other alcoholics (119, 131). As it is only this work that will ensure he remain sober, AA makes clear that “it is well to let him go as far as he likes” (129). “If you cooperate, rather than complain,” AA assures its “women folk,” “you will find that his excess enthusiasm will tone down” (119). And what of AA members who are not married? AA poses, and answers, this very question in Twelve and Twelve, promising non-marrieds that the fellowship can “offer them satisfactions of similar worth and durability,” and, what’s more, that both these members and AA will reap greater benefits from their lack of family ties: “Free of marital responsibilities, [single members] can participate in enterprises which would be denied to family men and women. We daily see such members render prodigies of service, and receive great joys in return” (120).

It is not my intention here to defend the primacy or “sanctity” of marriage from AA’s encroachment, but only to demonstrate that the mere fact of AA’s encroachment onto even this sacred ground (in the 1930s–50s, no less)—its willingness to construct the group as a suitable substitute for domestic coupledom/family, and/or to construct coupledom/family life as obstacles to recovery—speaks volumes about its attitudes toward relationships. Personal bonds are destructive because they are distracting from focus on self and sobriety, and not only, as might be wrongly conveyed by the above, because of the “duties” or time commitments such bonds entail, but because of the emotions they entail. In fact, perhaps even more telling here than AA’s attitude toward the extant bond of marriage is the program’s renowned recommendation that AA members not already in couples commit to “relationship abstinence” for the first year of sobriety (Linder). “No intimate relationships during the first year of sobriety” is a “sound bit of wisdom” that “[r]ecovering addicts hear . . . all the time in 12-step programs,” according to psychotherapist and “relationship trainer,” Daniel Linder, and is a pointer for conduct meant to forestall the “emotional over-involvement” triggered by new relationships and, particularly, by (new) sex. “The problem,” as Linder explains, is that “sex, exciting enough as it is, often leads to an infusion
of romantic feelings, which can further heighten the excitement, which then awakens the ‘sleeping giant.’” The “giant” would be the addict’s “backlog of unmet emotional needs,” and it is during the crucial first year of recovery that she must be learning to manage these needs on her own, learning to “look internally” for sources of “emotional nourishment,” rather than (“addictively”) turning outward to others “to make up for what is missing.” This is exactly the suspicion of feeling that Furedi says constitutes one of therapy culture’s chief paradoxes, a suspicion made all the more paradoxical when we see that “[e]ven happiness can become problematic if its realisation [sic] depends on others” (31). That is, within the therapeutic sensibility’s (and AA’s) “intensely individualised” view of emotion, “feelings that bind the individual to others”—even in “positive” ways—are often understood to “distract individuals from their own needs,” and so are (re)defined negatively (31–32). Emotions must “assist the project of self-fulfilment” (31), which, for AA of course, means only one thing: they must assist the individual in maintaining sobriety. While bonds with the group are necessary to this project, any other bond is likely to bring with it feelings which—to hark way back to Richmond Walker—might well overshadow group members’ one great need: to keep their conscious minds full of the AA program at all times as long as they live.

As Furedi’s insights begin to suggest, and as he goes on to confirm, what makes an emotion “negative” within therapy culture, then, often has less “to do with any of its intrinsic quality” than it does with that emotion’s capacity to tie the individual to others and so derail the quest for a self-sufficient self (32). But AA reserves a special suspiciousness, and a stockpile of slogans, for those emotions conventionally considered “negative”: “Sorrow is looking back; worry is looking around”; “fear is the darkroom where negatives are developed”; “anger is but one letter away from danger.” AA likens “excesses of negative emotion—anger, fear, jealousy and the like”—to the hangovers of one’s drinking years, for, like the aftermath of excess drink, such feelings make it impossible to “live well today” (Twelve 88). “If we would live serenely today and tomorrow, we certainly need to eliminate these hangovers,” AA states, a process that requires “unsparing self-survey,” and then “correction of errors now” (88–89). Negative emotions may be unavoidable, they may even need to be indulged in order for the recovering alcoholic to honestly
assess and then “settle with the past” (89), but in that last phrase lies the key point: negative emotions are to be indulged only to be gotten rid of (“eliminated”), so that one may move on into what we already know is an “insistently joyful” recovery.

Some negative emotions, however, are better left altogether alone—too disruptive to be indulged even in the quest for serenity. Anger, for example, AA deems the “occasional luxury of more balanced people,” and says if the alcoholic is to recover, if he is to live, he must be permanently free of its “poison” (Twelve 90; AA 66). Savvy as always in preemptively addressing objections, AA acknowledges the possibility of “justifiable anger,” and asks in its dialectical fashion, “are there no exceptions” to the “spiritual axiom” that “every time we are disturbed, no matter what the cause, there is something wrong with us”? Can’t we at times be “properly angry” if, say, “somebody cheats us,” or if someone is being “self-righteous?” “For us of A.A.,” comes the conclusion, “these are dangerous exceptions. We have found that justified anger ought to be left to those better qualified to handle it.” Having been “led straight to the bottle” by anger before, recovering alcoholics need to focus on “quieting stormy emotions” (Twelve 90). As the slogan might put it, “serenity is not freedom from the storm, but peace amid the storm,” and this peace is achieved via the buoyant apathy we have seen before—by a simple refusal to be disquieted, a determination to detach. One might even say it is achieved by “denial.”

The problem with such detachment, in case it is not obvious, is that there just might be more to be “justifiably angry” about than personal slights or others’ “self righteousness.” As Furedi argues, the “diseasing of so-called negative emotions,” particularly of anger, “distracts attention from the fact that maybe it is the conditions that gave rise to them that need to be cured” (198). What Furedi terms the cultural “crusade against anger and hatred” may be motivated in part, he says, “by a genuine desire to minimise conflict and promote harmony,” but it may also “represent the demand for acquiescence and conformism” to what are often “appalling acts of injustice and oppression” (198). The suspicion and suppression of strong, and particularly of “negative” feelings, are thus indicative not only of therapy culture’s deep ambivalence about emotion, but also of the ways in which dominant ideology works on and through emotion,
so that we might "go quietly, silently into the good night that ideology has already prepared for us" (Worsham, "Terms" 105). Lynn Worsham has made this point repeatedly in her work on emotion, arguing in "Coming to Terms," for example, that "the primary work of ideology is more fundamental than the imposition of a dominant framework of meaning. Its primary work is to organize an emotional world, to inculcate patterns of feeling that support the legitimacy of dominant interests" (106). One of the primary ways that ideology performs this primary work, Worsham reminds us, is that it "provides a limited vocabulary of emotion and thereby seeks to ensure an inability to adequately apprehend, name, and interpret the social dimensions of our affective lives" (106): (Mis)Regonizing emotion in general as "personal" and "private," (mis)recognizing "negative" emotions such as anger, rage, or bitterness as personal, "unjustified," and/or pathological, ideology makes certain that we do not appropriately name, and thereby cannot clearly see—see, for example, that anger, rage, bitterness, grief are not only at times "justified" responses to injurious social conditions, but that they are, indeed, "moral achievement[s]," "ethical imperatives" ( "Postal" 225; "Terms" 106–07, 111; emphasis added). No timid participant in ideology's dominant work of semantic deprivation, AA can tell us only what we have heard so many times before in our personalizing, individuating culture: "It isn't the load that weighs us down—it's the way we carry it," and that we should therefore "have a good day, unless [we've] made other plans." Limited semantic content to be sure, but hardly void out of context. Hardly vacuous.

Worsham has said that she is "not overly sanguine about our prospects for reeducating emotion," given the various forces that conspire to keep invidious distinctions such as those between "private" and "public" firmly in place ("Postal" 219–20). I would agree with this assessment, and would add to it that I am not overly sanguine about our prospects for reeducating emotion given the forces that conspire to keep sanguinity itself in place. As Terry Eagleton observes, "what distinguishes [U.S.] culture is its buoyancy, its robust exuberance"; we are a "nation of eager yea-sayers and zealous can-doers," continuously spouting "voluntaristic clichés," quite precisely like those we see above, which remind us that "the sky's the limit" if we would only just cast off that load (185, 187).
These languages of America, these particularly ingrained habits of the American heart—or, more pointedly, our habituation by ideology to a necessary because obfuscating optimism—make the "rehabilitation" of "negative" emotion seem unlikely indeed. "In this remorselessly up-beat climate," as Eagleton says, "feeling negative becomes a thought crime" (188). AA is but one insistently joyful American enterprise among others, taking its place within a broader ideologic determined to blot from view that "the load" is for too many, too often, too heavy. Discernment of this weighty matter seems more unlikely still, however, when the act of discernment is itself derided. In AA, as we will see in this final section of my analysis, it is not only "feeling negative" that is a thought crime; thought is a thought crime. The crime it commits is against faith: faith in belief itself, faith in the AA program, and, specifically, faith that the program's prepackaged acts of "reasoning" are the only thoughts that count. This language, too, might sound familiar.

"The three most dangerous words for an alcoholic: I've been thinking"

Critiques of AA's and the larger recovery movement's anti-intellectualism abound. Among just the scholars whose work I have drawn on in this essay, for example, Rapping has stated that (another) "[o]ne of the most disturbing aspects of recovery" is its "implicit anti-intellectualism" (181). Kaminer has written that recovery "so discredits reason" it has turned it into a(nother) pathologized form of "dependence" (161). Mäkelä et al. repeatedly, if dispassionately, note AA's "suspicion" of critical analysis (131, 229, 248), and even Jensen, whose interpretations of AA praxis are by his own admission almost singularly positive (136), concedes that "[b]eing intellectually sophisticated can be more of a detriment than an advantage" within AA. The program's "new way of thinking," Jensen writes, which he finds to be "best embodied . . . in its official slogans," may strike certain newcomers as "a little trite." "It is the well-educated intellectual," he says, "who tends to stumble" upon first encountering "the simple way of living" the slogans express (84–85). But, as the slogans express so well, there is nothing "implicit" about AA's anti-
intellectualism: "Keep it simple, stupid," "Practice the answers known," "Don't intellectualize—utilize," "Analysis is paralysis," "There are none too dumb for AA, but many are too smart." I could go on. We might surmise at this point that there is something about critical thinking, then, that AA perceives as destructive to sobriety, and that would be correct. As another slogan clarifies, it is alcoholics' "best thinking" that got them into trouble ("my best thinking got me here," or "my best thinking got me drunk"), because they have had to employ all forms of rationalization, justification, and excuse-making in order to continue drinking despite strong evidence that their alcohol consumption, and lives, were out of control (AA 23; Twelve 46-47). In short, analytical thinking has been the alcoholic's chief mechanism of denial, and so "lapses" into analysis are seen as a warning sign that relapse may be imminent. Especially dangerous among "defensive"-thinking strategies is "intellectualizing," an unfortunate habit of mind that "keeps so many otherwise intelligent alcoholics soused for a lifetime." Here we have drinkers who "use lengthy philosophical arguments or picayune disputes to distract from the larger issue. An intellectualizer will acknowledge a 'drinking problem,'" for example, "but wants to argue about whether or not alcoholism is really a disease" (Rogers, McMillin, and Hill 36).

If intellectual(izer)s can just "resign from the debating society" long enough to admit that, disease or no (but it is not "no"), they are powerless over alcohol, they will be well on their way to taking the first step toward recovery (Twelve 26). But there are other points, also early in recovery, at which the "intellectually self-sufficient man or woman" becomes what AA openly calls a "problem" (Twelve 29), and that is in their likely resistance to steps two and three, which require the admission that only "a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity," and then the turning of one's life and will "over to the care of God as we understood Him," respectively. "Surrender" and/or spiritual belief are aspects of AA praxis also not debatable, and I mean that in two senses. First, while much is made of the fact that AA members choose their own "higher power," one can not choose not to have one. As even the most sympathetic accounts of AA note, AA maintains that "surrender" (admission of a higher power) "is required if recovery is to occur," surrender is facilitated by a "conversion" to a new way of life, and the "conversion that occurs
must be spiritual” (Denzin 61, 55; emphasis added; see also Wilcox 66). As Norman Denzin elaborates of this principle in *The Alcoholic Society*, since AA believes that the alcoholic has proven time and again he has no self-or human-recourse against drink, it thereby believes it is “[o]nly by being humbled before a power greater than himself” that he can “hope to be relieved of the compulsion to drink” (115; *AA* 39, 43). Second, while debates rage on as to whether AA is a “religious organization,” a “spiritual program,” or a “quasi-religion” (Wilcox; Mäkelä); whether its worldview and practice are wholly dominated by its roots in Protestant Christianity, or are amenable to and perhaps reflective of “mystical” and Eastern traditions as well (Valverde; Wilcox; Jensen); whether it has sect and/or cult-like tendencies (Kaminer; Fingarette), for my purposes here, these are “picayune disputes.” AA is a faith-based program, period, and belief is, again, required. As anthropologist Danny Wilcox observes plainly in his ethnography of AA, “newcomers to AA are told that even atheists and agnostics have to live by faith” (63). And indeed, AA texts make perfectly clear that “intellectually self-sufficient” members, “too smart for [their] own good,” praying to the “god of intellect,” and/or believing they can function on “brainpower alone,” will remain “problems,” and will find themselves unable to recover, until they too have “received the gift of faith” (*Twelve* 29–30).

I am not arguing here that intellectualism and faith exist in an inherently binary relation. I am arguing that in AA they do, and that they do so because what does exist in a necessarily binary relation is intellectualism and the type of total, unquestioning acceptance that AA demands. Recovering alcoholics need to “resign from the debating society,” “quit bothering [themselves] with such deep questions,” “[stop] arguing [so they can] begin to see and feel” AA’s “prodigious results,” “stop fighting and practice the rest of A.A.’s program” (*Twelve* 26–27). (We see other familiar oppositions in lively circulation here as well.) While AA wants to “quickly assure” prospective group members that recovering alcoholics “tread innumerable paths in their quest for faith” (27), it seems that actually questing, questioning, seeking is not one of them. Rather, all that is required is “acceptance” (34)—plus a wholesale relinquishment of intellectual and rhetorical agency—and AA members will “[cross] the threshold” into a “faith that work[s] under all conditions” (27, 31). But
now I draw a false binary perhaps, for as AA readily admits, such acceptance and renunciations are hardly exercises in passivity (nor are they required only by steps two and three): “All of the Twelve Steps require sustained and personal exertion to conform to their principles and so, we trust, to God’s will” (40; emphasis added). AA’s “religiosity”—debated, derided, celebrated, denied—is thus almost incidental to my argument. Whether the principles of recovery are presented as “God’s will” or not, they are presented as authoritative and nonnegotiable. The “text of the twelve-steps is treated as fixed for all time,” Valverde writes. The steps are not to be questioned; they cannot be practiced selectively based on (dis)comfort or (dis)agreement; they are a holistic “design for living” that AA considers “an absolute necessity for those who are alcoholics” (126–27). Should newcomers find the “total psychic change” demanded by recovery overwhelming (Wilcox 63), they will likely be reminded to just “keep it simple”: “Don’t think, don’t drink, and go to meetings.” Soon, “more will be revealed.”

Despite AA’s banishment of argument above, AA itself, as we have seen many times over, is not averse to—is actually quite skilled at—rational argumentation, and so it is not surprising that its authors spend no small amount of time marshalling “evidence” for the necessity of a surrender to God (as well as evidence for the existence of God), and, in general, appealing to the reasonableness of both recovery’s principles and of belief itself. Again in Twelve and Twelve, for example, AA authors, identifying as former nonbelievers, write that they had to cede “the fallacy of [their] defiance” upon witnessing the incontrovertible “fruits of belief” within AA: “men and women spared from alcohol’s final catastrophe,” and able now to “transcend their other pains and trials” (31). The Big Book goes further still in its appeals to reason (and in its use of identification), its authors declaring in the chapter, “We Agnostics,” “Logic is great stuff. We liked it. We still like it,” and that, given this affinity, they are “at pains to tell why we think our present faith is reasonable, why we think it more sane and logical to believe than not to believe” (53). As above, the “sane” and “logical” conclusion advanced is: “When we saw others solve their problems by a simple reliance upon the Spirit of the Universe, we had to stop doubting the power of God” (52). That AA’s reasoning here is more tautological than logical, that it is based
on an inductive fallacy, to be precise, is to be expected and is not my
central point (I would not expect AA to prove the existence of God). My
point now is that AA is appropriating the hegemonically endorsed
vocabulary of reason that would exclude their fundamental(ist) claim that
faith in belief is the "avenue to truth" (Crowley 170), and that they are
doing so, moreover, in order to then exclude as unreasonable any other
truth claims: "Faced with alcoholic destruction," Big Book authors write,
after having repeatedly characterized both their drinking behavior and
former "alcoholic thinking" as "insane," "absurd," "incomprehensible,"
"foolish," and "crazy," "we soon became as open minded on spiritual
matters as we had tried to be on other questions." In this respect, alcohol
was a great persuader. It finally beat us into a state of reasonableness.

... [W]e hope that no one else will be prejudiced for as long as some of
us were" (48). AA has clearly "hijacked the magic words" here, as Stanley
Fish might put it (309). Appealing to Reason, summoning rational
argumentation's chief criteria of persuasiveness and "open-mindedness,
AA performs the dual move of arguing the faith-based principles of
recovery into cultural legitimacy and of delegitimizing as irrational (at
best irrationally intolerant, at most "insane") the very rationality that
might preclude faith. The terms "reason" and "rational," Sharon Crowley
reminds us in Toward a Civil Discourse, have long served as "words of
power, used to legitimate points of view that typically get a hearing while
others do not" (168). AA ensures it gets its hearing, and then it ensures
that there is no more to be said.

Conclusion: "This, too, shall pass"?

Keeping the unsayable unsaid (and thus the unthinkable unthought), and
saying the sayable into the commonest of sense is, of course, the primary
purpose of slogans—AA's or any others. Slogans galvanize and rally,
propel toward a predetermined action. They are, as Valverde and Mäkelä
noted at the outset, "pointers for conduct," not points of contemplation;
their "intrinsic meaning" is not to be sought.22 In this sense then, AA's
plethora of slogans, which demand unreflective action, are redundant,
though the existence of so very many of them confirms what is at stake:
It would be dangerous indeed to forget to “practice the answers known,” dangerous to forget that “when all else fails, the directions are in the Big Book.” In his Postscript to 2003's After Theory, Eagleton draws our attention to what he calls the “anti-theoretical terms” that were coming into vogue in the United States just after September 11, terms like “evil,” “freedom-loving,” “bad men,” “patriot”—a list to which, from our cultural vantage point of several years later, we could now add a host of other terms, phrases, and slogans. “These terms,” Eagleton writes, “are invitations to shut down thought. Or indeed, in some cases, imperious commands to do so. They are well-thumbed tokens which serve in place of thought, automated reactions which make do for the labour of analysis”; they circulate to guarantee that discussion will “remain on the level of the ready-tag, the moralistic outcry, the pious rejoinder, the shopworn phrase” (223). The aptness of this description to the workings of AA slogans offers a final testament to what has been this essay’s central claim: that AA speaks the languages of America with force and with power, and in the service of a host of dominating interests that far exceed keeping alcoholics sober. The “philosophy and teachings” of AA, Rapping wrote in The Culture of Recovery, “have come to be instinctively invoked and adhered to as ‘common sense,’” as the “obvious, only, way to handle addictive problems.” In this process, she continues, AA’s philosophy has “take[n] on a hegemonic authority which is hard to resist,” its “ideas and rules of conduct” for recovery from addiction becoming “a kind of universal set of guidelines for proper living” (79). Rapping clarifies that she is not “suggesting that AA is a planned out conspiracy of control and indoctrination,” but she does worry, and contend, that recovery has evolved into “a loose, uncodified, but nonetheless effective means of social control” (79). I have been arguing here that we might attribute this state of affairs to forces more powerful, even, than Oprah. I have been arguing that AA terminology and ideology are so often invoked as “common sense” because they are common sense.

Kaminer concludes her critique of recovery with the (hopeful) observation that “the recovery movement . . . may be too confused ideologically to ever pose a serious threat” (163). Yet, I would suggest that AA poses—and/or, more importantly, reflects and embodies—two distinctive kinds of threat to both our “being in common” and to the
possibility of ideological/emotional) reeducation. First, AA is a "community" of belief (an enclave of belief) marked by what Crowley calls "single-mindedness and the privilege of isolation" (191). "Single-mindedness," Crowley explains, "is available to those who are situated in the *habitus* in such a way that they seldom hear or read arguments that carry sufficient force to change their beliefs. That is, single-mindedness is available to people who are either privileged and/or isolated from dissonance" (193). Crowley's "and/or" is crucial here because I am not insinuating that recovering alcoholics constitute a privileged class. Nevertheless, AA's isolationist attitudes, strategies, achievements, and "advantages" should be amply clear at this point: Withdrawn from the larger public world, severed from preexisting cultural/communal/personal ties, serene in the face of potentially disquieting emotions, and with all the "known" answers—and the *only valid arguments*—available at their fingertips in "The Book," AA members (if the program works as well as it promises, at least) would be as sheltered from "dissonance" as it is perhaps possible to be. The "single-mindedness that accrues to isolation," Crowley (under)states, "can mitigate the possibility of change" within and to the *habitus*, and so she urges "those of us who want change" to "challenge privilege and isolation in whatever ways we can find or invent" (194), and, I would add, wherever we can find it. Yet, with respect to AA, this seems an especially challenging challenge, for while AA does "make of its particular segment of life a small world of its own," to reinvoke Bellah, it is also and at once (as has been my central argument) supremely of this world: fully interpellated by, acting and discoursing in concert with, and thus reproducing what I have characterized as some of our most deeply felt, deeply conflicted, and pernicious American values. It is for this reason that AA poses, embodies, and reflects a second, almost opposing threat to our "being in common" and to the potential for ideological reeducation, a threat which Crowley's work once again best helps me convey: "the more densely beliefs are articulated with one another in a given belief system or across belief systems," Crowley hypothesizes, "the more impervious they are to rhetorical intervention" (78). I would hypothesize that Crowley's hypothesis will prove correct, and that thought leaves me, well, "not overly sanguine" when we consider AA's place within the *habitus*, when we consider the deep and knotty
articulations of the habits of its heart with our own. As Kaminer eventually concludes, reconsidering her assessment of recovery’s “ideological confusion” and status as “threat,” the conflicts we see within recovery praxis are nothing less than “the contradictions in American democracy itself”: pietism mixed with pragmatism; a valorization of emotion offset by a focus on techniques for managing/subduing emotion, the “drive for individual fulfillment . . . rivaled, and maybe surpassed, by the desire to conform” (163). (We could add other tensions and contradictions to her list.) It is the density of these articulations, I would imagine, that leads Kaminer to title the final chapter of her book “The Political Problem of Self-Help, Which the Author Has No Idea How to Solve.” This author, too, finds herself at a similar loss to “solve” the sociopolitical, cultural problems posed and mirrored by AA. But I hope I have made the case that the slogans and terms of AA, that what is “actually going on” in the workings of its discourse, are indeed worthy of more (and more) analysis than they have thus far commanded; that interventions and disarticulations are in order, for while AA would like us to “expect miracles” as we calmly wait out the storm, I am not at all certain that “this, too, shall pass.”

Notes

1. As slogans, AA’s “nuggets of wisdom” are in the public domain. Nonetheless, for the particularly scrupulous or curious, I have amassed the slogans used in this essay from the following three sources: Bill Pittman’s *Stepping Stones to Recovery*, pages 221–36; “252 AA Slogans” at <http://www.soberrecovery.com/forums/archive/index.php/t-1546.htm>; and “Over 400 AA Slogans” at <http://webpages.charter.net/jlbond/slogans.htm>.

2. I borrow the apt term “ideologic” from Crowley. As she explains: *ideologic* “name[s] the connections [articulations] that can be forged among beliefs within a given ideology and/or across belief systems.” The morpheme *logic* conveys both this sense connectivity and the “regularities that can be traced” as beliefs align, realign, or rupture with one another (75–76).

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edition)—hereafter abbreviated as AA in parenthetical citations. (AA’s other main text is Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, often referred to as Twelve and Twelve, published in 1952.) Also, a note on pronoun usage: Throughout this essay, I will over-rely on the masculine pronoun. I do this in part for consistency, as the vast majority of AA literature uses only the masculine pronoun, and in part (as that fact suggests) because “the alcoholic” was originally constructed as a masculine subject and bears all the traces of this construction: AA was in its inception a men-only organization, denying women admission to the group from 1935–39. A title considered for what would become the Big Book was “One Hundred Men” (Berenson 67), and though that title was rejected, women show up in the text primarily as “our women folk,” and in the chapter specifically addressed “To Wives.”

4. AA has estimated its U.S. membership at around the one-million mark since the mid 1980s (Denzin 7), though its worldwide membership estimate, currently at two-million, has doubled since 1976 (AA xxiii). As neither of these figures includes people who have attended any of the 12-step/recovery groups modeled on AA, Kaminer’s claim that recovery (directly) shapes the identities of “a few million people” is hardly hyperbolic.

5. See http://www.sober.org/Selfish.html. This seems to be the standard resolution to the “selfish/not-selfish” dilemma, and is one which The Big Book Bunch and others arrive at by citing a letter written by Bill W. in 1966, and reprinted in As Bill Sees It: The AA Way of Life: “I can see why you are disturbed to hear some AA speakers say, ‘AA is a selfish program,’” Bill W. wrote to a group member. “The word ‘selfish’ ordinarily implies that one is acquisitive, demanding, and thoughtless of the welfare of others. Of course, the AA way of life does not at all imply such undesirable traits.” Bill W. goes on to clarify, then, that what “these speakers mean” is that personal salvation “is the highest vocation that a man can have,” and that for those in AA “there is even more urgency”: “If we cannot . . . achieve sobriety, then we become truly lost . . . We are of no value to anyone, including ourselves, until we find salvation from alcohol. Therefore, our own recovery and spiritual growth have to come first—a right and necessary kind of self-concern” (81).

6. Bellah et al. actually define American individualism as comprising four strands, or sub-traditions: utilitarian, expressive, biblical, and civic (142). The tenets of individualism I set forth here reside primarily within the most thoroughly individualistic (and culturally dominant) strands—utilitarian and expressive.

7. These three groupings have been retained as master-categories for the stories section in all subsequent editions.

8. The disease narrative’s erasure of difference—more precisely characterized as a usurpation of difference—has a host of pragmatic (and painful) consequences for those who seek help for issues of substance abuse. Though AA
sees its "raising of the bottom" as sparing those "less desperate" or "potential" alcoholics "that last ten or fifteen years of literal hell" (Twelve 23), it is possible that their narrative's extension has consigned more people to a place of suffering. This is Fingarette's concern when he argues that "an appreciation of individual [and social] differences is fundamental to any efforts designed to help alcohol abusers"; that we need not one continually expanding program (and discourse)—for one "ailment so powerful that it overwhelms individual differences"—but multiple forms of treatment for what he believes are "so many different patterns of chronic alcohol abuse" (114, 6). (The continual expansion of the AA/12-step monopoly is made most visible, perhaps, by the largely invisible existence of the other forms of treatment and alternative recovery programs Fingarette calls for—among these, Rational Recovery, SMART Recovery, Women for Sobriety [WFS], and Secular Organizations for Sobriety [SOS].) Questions of what happens to the very real "subjects" who find themselves "excluded from AA's truth," who are unable to locate their life's narrative within AA's "one-story," and who then may be literally unable to locate other forms of help and support, are pressing and urgent ones, and I do not mean to diminish their import by pursuing this essay's admittedly less pragmatic concerns and lines of critique. At the same time, however, I would like to give voice to an interesting point Rapping makes when she suggests that AA has achieved its ascendancy and maintained its monopoly precisely by ensuring (with much assistance from the media sources discussed during my introduction) that we "focus all our attention on individual suffering"; by ensuring, that is, that we conceive of addiction as a matter of personal illness and pain, and of recovery as "a voluntary self-help movement" for "hurting, desperate souls" (82). Potentially going unnoticed when we focus our attention thus is what Rapping's analysis attempts to unearth: that we all live, as her title makes clear, in a "culture of recovery." Questions of why, and how, and to what political and ideological effects this is so are, I believe, equally pressing and urgent ones, and are some of the questions that Rapping's analysis and my own attempt to address.

9. This process of turning the "disease" of alcoholism into an identity began prior to AA's emergence, of course. It began, according to Valverde, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and others, with the consolidation, during the late nineteenth century, of the acts of drugging/drinking into the personage of "the addict"—a medico-juridical accomplishment much like (and occurring coevally with) that which produced the figure of the homosexual (Valverde 140; Sedgwick 130). However, as Sedgwick writes, this "assignment of a newly pathologized addict identity to the users of [drugs]" was only the beginning of a story to which has been appended a "startling coda" of later developments (131). In the quote from Valverde, she is pointing to AA's central place within that "coda"—to its pivotal role in the full realization and widespread propagation of the disease-as-identity model, as well as to the ways in which AA has been the prototype not only
for other identity-based 12-Step groups, but also for more politicized groups such as those for cancer survivors, and "people living with HIV/AIDS" (137).

10. The pamphlet for the woman alcoholic appeared in its earliest form in 1951, and then again in 1968, before it was revised for a final time in 1986. All pamphlets are available at <http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org/en_is_aa_for_you.cfm>.

11. The idea that recovery restores an authentic self "lost to alcoholism" is not unique to AA's treatment of Native Americans, but is a central idea—a central goal—of recovery more generally (Denzin 355, 357). In many ways, recovery is recovery of the self, and the development of a "master identity" of "recovering alcoholic" is always the key to this process (329). However, while not unique within the pamphlets, this central tenet of recovery does become uniquely problematic when it involves the erasure or usurpation of cultural specificity.

12. Without exception, the personal stories from minorities in the 2001 Big Book retain the thematics displayed in the pamphlets. For example, a story by a Native American woman (one of two, of 42 total stories) ends with a discussion of sweat lodges and an homage to AA for having "returned [her] to the spirituality of [her] ancestors" (469). A story by a lesbian (also one of two by [identified] gays/lesbians) ends with the statements, "it is the areas where we are the same that impress me. The differences are but delightful flourishes on the surface" (347). And a story by an African American woman (again, one of two) ends with the acknowledgment that, while she wishes there were more African Americans in AA, "if I didn't look in the mirror, I wouldn't know that I was black, because these people treat me as one of them, which I am. We all have the same sickness..." (534).

13. In The Inoperative Community, and "A l'insu (Unbeknownst)," respectively.

14. Obviously, there is much middle (other? third?) ground that one could stand on between Bellah and Davis/Nancy/Lyotard. Coming immediately to mind, for example, are Chantal Mouffe's repeated calls for a "type of pluralism that . . . gives positive status to differences" and their expression, rather than "striving toward harmony and consensus"; a type of pluralism that "questions the objective of unanimity and homogeneity, which is always revealed as fictitious and based on acts of exclusion" (Paradox 19, 77). While Mouffe objects to certain aspects of the communitarian revival of civic republicanism as advanced by Bellah (see Return 23–40), as well as to what she might view as the "extreme pluralism" of irreducible "heterogeneity" and "incommensurability" advanced by Davis et al (Paradox 20), we can nonetheless add her voice to the many calls for a rejuvenated understanding of community that resists the "illusion of consensus and unanimity" (Return 5). Again, I seek not to make these diverse
theoretical traditions commensurate, but to join them in coalition toward this important aim.

15. See <http://www.relationshipvision.com/read.php?ID=11>. Recovery’s first year ban on intimacy has evolved over time as sexual/romantic conventions have diversified. However, Twelve and Twelve lays the foundation for the ban, stating that unmarried alcoholics should be “solid AA’s” before they begin dating: “They need to be as sure as possible that no deep-lying emotional handicap” will “rise up under later pressures to cripple them” (119).

16. Alternatively in the Big Book 13 years earlier, “the dubious luxury of normal men” (66).

17. AA has a few “pro-thinking” slogans—among these, “Think, think, think,” “Take the time to think it through” (“the seven T’s”), and “If I think, I won’t drink, and if I drink, I can’t think.” However, as is probably already clear, these slogans are advocating an instrumental, rather than expansive or abstract form of thinking: this is thinking that is in service to (sobriety), and, perhaps more interesting, it is thinking that is meant to preempt, outmaneuver, “outsmart” the “rationalizations” of analytical thinking that are understood to precede and condone relapses.

18. Many supporters of AA claim that this power-greater-than-the-self can truly be anything—that despite the third step’s assertion that members must turn their lives and will over to “God as we understood Him,” the “higher power” surrendered to does not really have to be “divine.” As ethnographer Danny Wilcox writes, expressing this view, one’s higher power can be a concept, like grace, love, or acceptance; it can be “a telephone pole on a city street, or a fence post in the desert,” as long as members believe in something beyond their own personal power (63). It is also especially common to hear said (perhaps because AA says so) that the AA group itself can serve as one’s higher power. However, AA is fairly clear in Twelve and Twelve that one’s conception of “higher” power needs eventually evolve beyond telephone poles, and that even faith in the (human) AA group is finally insufficient, calling it a “method of substitution” by which many members have “begun to solve the problem” of believing in something more conventionally divine: “You can, if you wish, make A.A. itself your ‘higher power,’” the authors write. “Here’s a very large group of people who have solved their alcohol problem. In this respect they are certainly a power greater than you. . . .” Yet, much like the gay/lesbian “inlet” groups, this arrangement is presented as transitory and inferior; faith in the group is a means by which AA members “have crossed the threshold” into a “broadened,” “deepened” faith that includes “talk of God” (27–28; emphasis added). The authors will reiterate this precept with more force later in the text where, instead of “talk of God,” they say that the “doubter” who considers “his well-loved AA group the higher power” will come to “love God and call him by name” (109).
19. Addressing AA’s spiritual roots, Pittman reprints an article from the AA monthly newsletter Hello Central, which states, “we need not argue with the historical fact that AA was initially an outgrowth of Protestant Christianity.” Bill W. derived the first three steps from the Epistle of James, the article explains, and early members of what would become AA considered “call[ing] themselves the ‘Jamesians’ since many of their ideas for living sober were based on the New Testament writings of James.” Soon, however, a more truly “Divine wisdom prevailed,” and AA “renounced all religious sectarianism” in favor of becoming “strictly a spiritual program” (29–30).

20. Because faith is required, the “intellectually self-sufficient” are not the only “problem” members for AA, but one of many challenging “cases.” Among the others:—the case of the one who says he won’t believe—the belligerent one” (who “is in a state of mind which can be described only as savage”); the one who had faith but lost it and is now “prejudiced against religion”; and the one who thinks he already is faithful but does not possess the proper “humility” (Twelve 25, 28, 32). Twelve and Twelve seems to be the most strident and traditional of AA texts on the faith issue, but even where AA is more yielding and ambiguous, it can not yield to non-belief: At minimum, members must “be willing to believe,” and they must be willing to “live by spiritual principles” (AA 93).

21. See the chapter preceding “We Agnostics” ("More About Alcoholism"), especially pages 37–38.

22. Coming full circle to Valverde’s likening of the slogans to the hupomnemata, and visiting briefly Foucault’s own commentary on that genre in “Writing the Self,” proves interesting here, post-analysis: Emphasizing, as Valverde does, that hupomnemata served to capture and recirculate the “already said,” and that “they constituted the material and framework” for use and immediate action, Foucault ultimately describes the hupomnemata as “a supply of helpful discourses capable—as Plutarch put it—of raising their voices themselves to quiet the passions as a master may, with one word, calm the growling of dogs” (237).

23. I would like to thank the two anonymous JAC reviewers who have been through two rounds of this essay with me. Their challenging comments and suggestions have altered this essay’s focus, sharpened its insights, complicated and clarified its arguments immeasurably. Any dullness or simplicity or entanglements that remain will have been entirely my own (un)doing.

Works Cited


