



Review of Trysh Travis, *The Language of the Heart: A Cultural History of the Recovery Movement from Alcoholics Anonymous to Oprah Winfrey* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010) xvi + 376 pp.

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Academics are professional skeptics. Among other things, we have learned to be wary of the book introduction, burned too many times from single-digit page numbers that over-promise and under-deliver. Trysh Travis's recent monograph, *The Language of the Heart: A Cultural History of the Recovery Movement from Alcoholics Anonymous to Oprah Winfrey*, is the rare book that more than lives up to its promises: the rich contents of this book far surpass the vague claim on the dust jacket, which tells us that Travis will argue that "what unites these varied cultures of recovery is their desire to offer spiritual solutions to problems of gender and power." Travis certainly takes gender seriously, but her cultural history is both more sweeping and more nuanced than a formulaic feminist Foucauldian analysis might allow. In Travis's introduction, she makes clear that the primary aim of her book is not to deconstruct facets of the recovery movement, but to lay the groundwork for establishing an "adequate sense" of what the term means (p. 3). Her second stated purpose is to "establish recovery—its history, its organizing principles, and its culture—as a legitimate subject for sustained scholarly analysis" (p. 8). She capably accomplishes both goals.

The first section of the book, "Addiction and Recovery," establishes a working definition of recovery culture(s) by making the crucial distinction between Alcoholics Anonymous and the professional treatment industry. Without ignoring the ways in which the theories put forth by associations were in concert (both in seeking public recognition and in developing a "distinctive rhetoric"), Travis begins with the implication that future studies of recovery would do well to make a primary distinction between voluntary associations like AA and the recovery industry based on 12-step principles or models. In this section, the "distinctive rhetoric" that would later become the "language of the heart" of the book's title, begins with a discussion of the "disease" concept of alcoholism. Rather than attempting to debunk this concept, Travis historicizes it, tracing its development as well as its uses, as it was alternately put forth by various actors throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. This genealogy of the disease concept of addiction is traced through: the language of Alcoholics Anonymous and its founders; the theories of the Yale School of Alcohol Studies and Marty Mann's National Committee for Education on Alcoholism; the policies of the federal government, beginning in 1963 with the Community Mental Health Centers Act; and the agendas of "process" addiction advocates, who expanded the "disease" concept to many aspects of modern life, including sex and food. After historicizing how "addictions" of various sorts came to

be understood as a “disease” on par with type one diabetes, Travis turns her attention to the “antidote” as offered by Alcoholics Anonymous: “surrender.”

The second chapter illustrates how AA’s concept of “surrender”—and AA itself—can be traced to AA’s theological roots in both New Thought mysticism and Protestant (Oxford Group) evangelism. It also traces its roots biographically, in the life stories of its founders, Bill Wilson, Bob Smith and the largely white, Protestant, middle-class men who formed the earliest AA groups. While much of the content of this section will be familiar to historians of addiction, Travis’s careful delineation between the various historical actors who contributed to the “diseasing” of America, and her introduction of a new conceptual framework from which to view the early AA paradigm of “surrender,” are worthy contributions to the available scholarship.

At the end of the first section, Travis coins the phrase “alcoholic equalitarianism,” situating it as a response to Victorian success ideology and an offshoot of Christian equalitarianism, a movement that held that salvation was available to “all who would seek it, irrespective of rank or station” (p. 92). This equalitarian “self-in-relation” cultivated by the AA group was supported by a gift economy, as articulated in one AA slogan: “You have to give it [sobriety] away in order to keep it” (p. 93).

In the second section of the book, Travis argues that AA developed its own print culture to support this ideology. Through the production of AA’s central text (the “Big Book”) and its approved literature, AA was able to protect and institutionalize the anti-capitalist ideology of alcoholic equalitarianism and the gift economy of AA. Those who have read Matthew J. Raphael or Susan Cheever’s accounts of how the Big Book came to be will not be surprised by Travis’s narrative, but her discussion of how books can both build and shield institutions will be of interest to historians of print culture and religious scholars, particularly those interested in the intersections between exegesis and power. The latter half of the section concentrates on the development of the book production of the nonprofit (but highly profitable) recovery center and publishing house, Hazelden. Hazelden’s expansion from a treatment center explicitly based on the AA model to a “multidisciplinary” center roughly coincided with its decision to begin publishing its own literature, beginning with the meditation book *Twenty Four Hours A Day*, which Alcoholics Anonymous previously refused to publish. When recovering academic Karen Casey crafted a companion meditation book for women in recovery, Hazelden found that marketing different versions of recovery to different demographics with different addictions was a highly profitable enterprise. While Travis argues for the centrality of the book market in recovery culture, one could also read her account of the explosion of the daily meditation book as a model case study for future scholars who wish to investigate how AA’s recovery culture began to evolve and proliferate in a variety of media and institutional settings.

The third section of the book, which brings us to the present day, finds it difficult to avoid addressing other forms of media. Travis divides the final section into two parts: the first deals with feminist and lesbian recovery movements, the second with the unavoidable recovery icon, Oprah Winfrey. Unlike critics of feminist recovery movements, who argue that the culture of recovery co-opted and deflated the politically profitable consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s and 70s, Travis concludes that post-12 step recovery is not “feminism’s evil other,” but its offspring:

“a hybrid discourse of spiritual seeking and self-love, and a key tool through which average American women pondered questions of gender, self, and power” (p. 228). The hybridity and ubiquity of market recovery culture begin to cause some problems for Travis’s print-centric analysis, and if there is one quibble with the book, it is that the final section is a bit too tidy in its discussion of today’s admittedly messy and multiplatform marketplace of recovery. Identity categories established in earlier chapters, as men in early AA groups of the 1940s and lesbians in grassroots San Francisco recovery groups of the 80s negotiated their gender and sexuality, seem more overtly complicated as the book approaches the turn of the twenty-first century. I wondered what Travis would make of the 1990s books by transgender activist Kate Bornstein (such as *My Gender Workbook: How to Become a Real Man, a Real Woman, the Real You, or Something Else Entirely*).

In conclusion, Travis is neither a booster nor a detractor of the cultures of recovery she describes, and her willingness to seriously engage with the lay scholarship produced *by* AA members and feminist recovery groups and the critical body of scholarship produced *about* them, is the book’s greatest strength. While other academics have admirably historicized various portions of the American recovery movement, Travis’s examination is the best introductory survey published to date.

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