

Anonymous in San Anto:

Chicano Identity and Alcoholism/Addiction Recovery in the Alamo City

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In 1966, Father Joseph O'Brien, then chaplain for the Texas Corrections Department, visited San Antonio to conduct a crime analysis of the city's west side. He was curious to find why only 1 in 50 of the state's 2400 ethnic Mexican inmates held a high school diploma. Citing broken families, a lack of formal education, alcoholism, and vice as the root causes of crime, the chaplain expressed the need for a Mexican American chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous in the city. Father O'Brien voiced an opinion held by many – that Mexican Americans would not attend a meeting that was predominantly white.<sup>1</sup>

This work explores the relationship between San Antonio ethnic Mexicans and the local institutions of recovery. As a piece of cultural studies, I work to uncover the immaterial processes of culture as produced within these particular material circumstances (Gray 2003, 12) – those of ethnic Mexican San Antonio, 1969 - 1984. The present condition of *raza*<sup>2</sup> recovery is built upon a historical precedence. These years are pertinent as they pertain to the development of a new class- and race-based consciousness not afforded by previous national-level political movements by ethnic Mexicans in the United States. I argue that this historical narrative is guided by both ethnic solidarity and spirituality, and as such, continues to this day. I speak to the networks and organizations constructed by San Antonio ethnic Mexicans in response to the material conditions of the *barrios*<sup>3</sup> and the social conditions of addiction. These are the stories of Chicano activists, *barrio* workers, AA 12<sup>th</sup>-steppers<sup>4</sup>, recovering addicts, and Christian ministers, as they are pulled “from out of the shadows” (Ruiz 2008) and brought to light to “recover,

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<sup>1</sup> “Roots of Crime,” *San Antonio Light* (San Antonio, TX), Feb. 11, 1966.

“Texas Prison Chaplain Makes Study,” *San Antonio*, ( San Antonio, TX), Feb. 8, 1966.

In 1966, there was one Spanish-language meeting held in the city, operating in the downtown area.

<sup>2</sup> Spanish for “the Mexican people.” Synonymous with ethnic Mexican

<sup>3</sup> Spanish for “neighborhoods.” In this case, refers to the ethnic Mexican neighborhoods of San Antonio

<sup>4</sup> Alcoholics Anonymous sponsor – the 12<sup>th</sup> step in AA is sponsorship

recapture, and recast the ethnic Mexica past” (Chavez 2013, 506) of *raza* recovery advocacy in San Antonio.

My questions arise from the date itself. What are the experiences of San Antonio ethnic Mexicans in recovery? What forces engendered the recovery advocacy of San Antonio *raza*? How do ethnic Mexicans in recovery navigate the intersections of recovery and race?

Scouring the archives, looking through old newspapers, speaking with participants, and reflecting on my own experiences as a Chicano in recovery revealed a through-line in this social historical narrative. The Chicano Movement’s ideals offered agents a guiding platform from which to build these networks of recovery. I argue the Chicano ideal of *carnalismo*,<sup>5</sup> whether expressed under the pretense of spirituality or through a politicized ethnic identity, guide this narrative of Raza recovery.

Auto-ethnography is used to relate my own experiences as a Chicano alcoholic in recovery. McGee and Warms argue that auto-ethnography challenges the positivist hegemonic Western nature of traditional social science (2013, 2). Auto-ethnography also provides a method for which to practice a critical and reflexive mode of engagement with my own experiences in the San Antonio recovery community (Maréchal 2012, 2). Given that the goal of this work is to uncover the stories of addicts, alcoholics, and those who worked in solidarity with them, and to situate these narratives within a larger historical narrative, I believe it is fitting to use this model to present this work. Thus, I offer my own experience to shed light on the cultural and experiential nature of recovery within a material, social, political, and historical context.

I explore these relationships as a Chicano in recovery and member of Alcoholics Anonymous myself. Born in 1993 in the border city of Laredo, my family settled into a working-

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<sup>5</sup> Sister/brotherhood

class suburb in the city's northwest side by 2007. Acknowledging these points is important, as my goal is to be clear and straightforward about my positionality within the research and in relation to my participants.

### *Alcoholics Anonymous*

Alcoholics Anonymous is one of many ways in which *barrio* residents approached the problem of addiction, both historically and today. Given that my participants and myself are all members of the recovery fellowship, who've practiced the program for at least 2 years each and have since moved on to sponsor incoming addicts and alcoholics through the programs 12-steps, I will give a background of the program as follows. Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is both a fellowship of members in recovery from alcoholism and addiction, as well as a program of recovery, as originally laid out in *Alcoholics Anonymous* by co-founder Bill Wilson (1939). The program itself relies on the 12- step model, where, guided by a sponsor, people seeking recovery confront their alcoholism and work through the spiritual, social, and psychological consequences of their addiction. Meetings are held in multiple formats. Speaker meetings have members with sustained periods of recovery give their stories in a 10, 30, and 45+ minute format. Discussion meetings are those most held in the public consciousness, where a topic is introduced by a member chairing the meeting, and members speak to that topic. The program itself relies on sponsorship, where members on their 12<sup>th</sup> step – “Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs” (60) guide their sponsees through the 12 steps of recovery. For participants, the program is a spiritually-situated philosophical model (Wilson) inseparable from daily life (Waters 2015, 770). It was the first mainstream movement in the United States to frame addiction within the disease model, preceding the medical community by 25 years (Jellinek 1960). The program

originated from the protestant-oriented Oxford group (Gross 2010, 2361), but continued forward with general spiritual concepts applicable to ideally any person of any faith in the transcendent (Sandoz 2014, 948). Thus, the program opened doors for subsequent recovery movements throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

AA is not only a program of recovery, but a fellowship of “men and women in recovery from alcoholism [and addiction]” (Wilson 1939). As a program of recovery, the 12-steps facilitate a reorientation of identity from individualistic to community-oriented and relational, wherein a recovering addict/alcoholic’s recovery is based on the strength and health of their relationships (Young 2010). AA fosters a community-oriented model of recovery among members of its fellowship. Among AA communities, there is commonality in the psychological, material, and social consequences of addiction, and subsequently a profound joy in the shared process of liberation from addiction.

The first pressing of *Alcoholics Anonymous* was released in 1939, drafted by Bill Wilson, a stock broker and recovering alcoholic, with the help of Dr. William D. Silkworth (VI). The first group started in New York and 1935, and by 1941 it had made its way down to San Antonio (Randall 16, 2006). The early meetings, according to a 1941 article in the *San Antonio Light*, were composed primarily of members “active in San Antonio’s civic and professional enterprises.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> “Drunkards Asked to Join Alcoholics Anonymous”, *San Antonio Light* (San Antonio, TX), Jun. 29, 1941.

Seventeen years after its arrival in the city, however, San Antonio saw the opening of its first Spanish-speakers' Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. The Wesley Group catered to the city's Mexican American population, working to carve out space for ethnic Mexican alcoholics throughout Jim Crow San Antonio. The meeting was one of about a dozen or so in the city, and the only one at the time conducted for and by the city's Spanish-speaking population, catering to both the established Mexican American population and newly arrived immigrants alike (Randall 2006, 60-61). Given the color- and class-blind (or transcendent) nature of AA's philosophy, it is refreshing to see local AA historian Randall recognized the need, as presumably many AA members did at the time, for raza meetings. Speaking to the first meeting, he writes:

The Wesley Group, a spin-off of the Downtown Group, was created to address several needs: First, the new group was designed specifically for Hispanic alcoholics who felt isolated and apart from the Anglo community. It would also be a beacon of hope for still-active Hispanic alcoholics who would hear of the group via word of mouth (60-61).

The issue of the racial disparity among AA's membership in the city, however would continue to come up in the following decades, in both popular discourse like newspapers and among the membership itself. A 1969 article in the *San Antonio Light* announcing the Southwest Texas Area Conference of Alcoholics Anonymous detailed the conference's invited speakers included a member of "Latin American descent," with the goal of appealing to Mexican Americans. A conference administrator got across "their culture seems to discourage this kind of help." "There are few Latins in Alcoholics Anonymous," he went on to say.<sup>7</sup> However progressive the recognition of racial disparity may have been, this theme of blaming Mexican American culture came up a handful of times from implicated Euroamericans, and

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<sup>7</sup> "AA Holding Gathering in SA," *San Antonio Light* (San Antonio, TX), Nov. 8, 1969.

unfortunately continues to this day<sup>8</sup>. As early as 1969, a handful of grassroots efforts rose to fill the void of recovery for ethnic Mexicans, who built networks and organizations of *barrio* recovery advocacy whose legacy continues to impact the San Antonio recovery community today.

### *The Origins of Barrio Recovery*

The Chicano Movement is pertinent within the historical foundations of the ethnic Mexican recovery community in San Antonio. Frustrated with the lack of political progress by previous generations of Mexican American activists, the Chicano Movement saw a generation of activists rise to political relevance under precedent of a new a community identity. This new identity built upon the ideals of *carnalismo* (communal brother/sisterhood) and ethnic and class solidarity (Quixote 2, Chase 3). Ethnic pride has, within academia, been recognized as a positive attribute with efficacy in both preventative and recovery efforts for racialized groups, especially given the family- and community-centered identities of Mexican Americans (Castro et al. 214, 1991). In turn, Young and colleagues describe the reconstitution of identity facilitated by Alcoholics Anonymous as one from an individually-oriented identity toward a relational identity, wherein the person-in-recovery's identity is rooted in the nature and health of their relationships (Young 9, 2010). San Antonio *barrio* organizations of the Chicano generation did work to provide services and outreach that was lacking in the ethnic Mexican neighborhoods, often times working to politicize addicts on behalf of their organizing.

Within San Antonio, these roots of change can be traced back and largely associated with the founding of the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO) in 1967 (Montejano 2010,

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<sup>8</sup> In my interview with Juan, he expressed a young woman from his recovery program not feeling comfortable going to the Youth Recovery Community Center, which serves a predominantly white, middle-class youth community.

59). The group started out as a coalition of first-generation college students from in and around San Antonio who “were to provide a stronger political voice for barrio residents and to help them receive a decent level of municipal services”<sup>9</sup> and “include[d] under one roof a comprehensive continuous approach to the problems of the [inner-city] residents,” which included “housing, employment, health, education, and business development”<sup>10</sup> in a new political immediacy that eschewed the Americanist politics of previous generations in favor of a political urgency new to San Antonio. MAYO “brought barrio residents, gang members, politicians, and college students together;” (Montejano 59) speaking both the language of the “business-suit types” and the language of the working-class *barrios* of the city (Cardenas 1969). In 1968, MAYO received a Ford grant and opened the Mexican American Unity Council, a non-profit through which they funneled their grant monies into various *barrio*-improvement programs, including La Universidad de los Barrios (LUB).<sup>11</sup>

As a Chicano liberation school, LUB was opened with the expressed intent of acting as a war council between the West Side gangs, but also worked to organize and politicize them. A 1969 article by Leo Cardenas discusses the gangs work with addicts:

Norman Guerrero, a Trinity student known as the "dean" of the Universidad, works with a staff of three and said in a press conference last week that his staff is out until 2 or 3 a.m. working with dope addicts. "Well," he explained. "We aren't dealing with angels out here." (Chicano 1969, 4).

The language used by Guerrero suggests the group’s earnestness in their work with addicts – despite not necessarily being addicts themselves, they cared for the less-than-angels they dealt

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<sup>9</sup> History of MAYO, 1973, 1, Albert Peña Papers, Special Collections at UTSA.

<sup>10</sup> 3, 1973.

<sup>11</sup> Cardenas, Leo, “The Young Activists Rely Heavily on Grants,” *Chicano 1969*, 1969, Albert Peña Papers, Special Collections at the University of Texas at San Antonio.



with. Alongside LUB was San Antonio's chapter of the Brown Berets, whose local chapter also formed out of MAYO members and included *batos locos*<sup>12</sup>, *barrio* youth, and, at times, reformed *tecatos*<sup>13</sup>. According to interviews conducted by Montejano, the San Antonio Brown Berets occasionally worked with addicts on the street, politicizing them on behalf of *la causa* (the cause for self-determination) and organizing them alongside the *barrio*-improvement efforts (Montejano 2010, 179).

Through the late 1950's up until his death in 1968, Reverend Paul Soupiset, operator of downtown's Little Church of La Villita, humbly ministered to the city's most vulnerable.<sup>14</sup> The torch of street ministry was then picked up again in 1970, when Victory Outreach opened its doors to the west of Little Church, continuing in the tradition of serving the marginalized. Victory Outreach operated as a *barrio* recovery program in the city's west side. Born out of Victory Temple in East Los Angeles, *Victory Outreach* began in 1970, in a way that was intimately in tune with the material and cultural conditions of San Antonio.<sup>15</sup> With an Evangelist message, the church claims the only path to recovery for addicts is through Jesus Christ. San Antonio branch founder Reverend Freddie Garcia was a recovering addict himself who was reformed after working with founder Sonny Arguinztoni. Four years into their opening, they claimed to run a 40% success rate – higher than any federal- or state-funded rehabilitation – while operating on a \$1500 monthly budget for their Victory Home at 1030 S.W. 39<sup>th</sup> St.<sup>16</sup> A graduate from the Latin American Bible Institute, Reverend Garcia was well known around the city, speaking at high schools and for criminology courses. He dedicated his time evangelizing

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<sup>12</sup> Gang-affiliated Chicano youth

<sup>13</sup> Addicts

<sup>14</sup> Minister to Skid Row Facing Eviction from La Villita Area, *San Antonio Express* (San Antonio, TX), Oct. 14, 1966.

<sup>15</sup> Victory Outreach Minister Garcia Dies, *San Antonio Express* (San Antonio, TX), Oct. 16, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Junkie Preacher Heads Spiritual Program for Addicts, *Chicano Times* (San Antonio, TX), Jul. 5, 1974.

San Antonio addicts and community members in the *barrios*. His wife and he eventually published *Outcry in the Barrio* (1988), which details his own story of reform, and prescribes a program of Evangelist recovery for the *batos locos* and *tecatos* of San Antonio.

Starting in the streets of Westside San Antonio in 1974, Reverend Garcia spoke to *barrio* residents in a way that resonated with them. He cowrote plays with his wife, Ninfa, in the vein of Chicano *teatro*<sup>17</sup> about the perils and cycle of addiction. He walked the streets with addicts and spoke to them on their level. He was entirely grassroots in the vein of the Chicano movement, having applied for grants, been turned down, and proceeded to raise funds from the community for the Victory House and other Victory Temple projects.<sup>18</sup> His work encompassed the ideal of improving the conditions of the *barrios* in a time when the ethnic Mexican neighborhoods of San Antonio did not have the same access to recovery resources as the more affluent northside areas.

Texas Corrections Department chaplain Rev. O'Brien recognized that Mexican Americans would not join a predominantly-Anglo Alcoholics Anonymous group<sup>19</sup>, an opinion confirmed by Rev. Garcia. Garcia, in a 1977 interview with *Chicano Times* over his trouble with getting into Bexar County Jail to preach. He was being requested by inmates eager to begin their own reform process, but stated that the corrections officers would not allow him in as the jail already had its own visiting ministers – all of whom were Anglo. He recognized that Latin Americans would not open up to an Anglo priest, who were the only chaplains allowed into the jail at the time.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Theatre – Chicano street theatre was by activists throughout the United States to convey their political messages

<sup>18</sup> Junkie Preacher Heads Spiritual Program for Addicts, 1974.

<sup>19</sup> Texas Prison Chaplain Makes Study, 1966.

<sup>20</sup> Testimony by Lee Garcia “El Borracho” Rehabilitated Alcoholic, *Chicano Times* (San Antonio, TX), Aug. 19, 1977.

Whether affiliated with efforts toward ethnic Mexican self-determination or not, the local chapters of Spanish-language AA meetings provided a necessary space for raza recovery efforts. As recognized by many, ethnic Mexicans needed their own space in San Antonio to work with each other. By 1972, Grupo Unidad had opened. The group was the city's second Spanish-speakers' meeting and the first in the West Side. Mirroring the city's youth-led Chicano Movement, Grupo Unidad was primarily composed of men in their late 20's. By 1974, the West Commerce home served an average of 300 individuals per week and held women's meetings and Al-Anon meetings (12-step program and fellowship for loved ones of alcoholics), as well as serving as a half-way house for persons working stay sober (Randall 87-88). Though AA's philosophy claims to be color- and class-blind, local AA historian Randall recognized the need, as presumably many other AA members did at the time, for meetings for and conducted by raza.

#### Discussion

A large portion of contemporary recovery programming can trace its roots back to AA. From its early conceptualization as a disease, about 25 years before the first medical framing of alcoholism as a disease, to its 12-step programming, followed by numerous self-help chemical and process addiction communities today, most notably Narctonics Anonymous, Gamblers Anonymous, and Overeaters Anonymous. Alcoholics Anonymous today has changed significantly over time. Today, autonomous meetings are held everywhere from rural Mexican villages (Sutro 1989) to Wall Street, New York.<sup>21</sup> Translated into sixty-nine languages by 2014, its original membership has also changed dramatically from its middle-class, Euroamerican beginnings (Wilson, xxiii). AA advises its members toward "attraction rather than promotion"

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<sup>21</sup> *In the Rooms*, meeting locator, <https://meetings.intherooms.com/aa/WALL-STREET/88966>.

(*Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* 183, 1989). It is up to the recovered<sup>22</sup> to relate the program back to the newcomer.<sup>23</sup> For folks belonging to a population outside the traditional membership of the program, the 12<sup>th</sup> stepper<sup>24</sup> takes on the role of cultural broker (Porta & Last 2018), communicating these ideas in a way that resonates with folks coming from similar material and cultural conditions.

My conversations with the participants, alongside my own experience in recovery, provide insight into how the program and principles of AA are related to fellow addicts and alcoholics, especially those outside of the program's original English-speaking, middle-class, Euroamerican membership. Each of the three of us are working-class ethnic Mexicans living in San Antonio; we all, however, have experience working recovery<sup>25</sup> with folks who don't share our ethnic and class background.

### *Autoethnography*

I got sober after my last arrest – a DWI in the early morning December 29<sup>th</sup>, 2014. I blacked out at the bar I spent my night at, and had no recollection of the events that took place after midnight for months until reading through the police report the day of my hearing the following February. With an open marijuana possession case at the time, I was sentenced to 16 months of probation, 48 hours of community service, and, because of my high blood-alcohol content, 8 months with a breathalyzer. I had wrecked my car, so I was issued an outlet-powered model which I was required to blow into three 3-hour windows a day. I took this with me almost everywhere for the next 8 months.

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<sup>22</sup> Though the program recognizes recovery as a life-long process, the term “recovered” is sometimes used to reference those who have personally amounted a sustained period of sobriety by “working” the 12 steps with a sponsor.

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<sup>24</sup> Person in recovery practicing recovery advocacy and sponsorship as part of their 12<sup>th</sup> step work.

<sup>25</sup> “working recovery” in this case refers to recovery advocacy in and out of the membership of AA.

I could not stop drinking on my own. Drinking between breathalyzer windows and late into the night, I had accumulated so many missed breathalyzer windows, or had blown above the breath-alcohol limit. My probation officer sentenced me to the Palmer Drug Abuse Program, where I was required to meet with a licensed chemical dependency counselor and attend support group meetings and drug offender courses.

The first meeting I had with a counselor seemed like a waste at the time. We related on the nature of our experiences through addiction, but I drew back as I was asked if I had a God personal to me. “You need something to believe in. You can’t do this on your own.”<sup>26</sup> I had my own conception of God. That was good enough for me. I rejected an anthropomorphized conception of God. I also wasn’t ready to commit. I left home and picked up some beers on the way home.

The next counselor I saw related to me her conception of a higher power – she called it the “spirit of the universe.” Right out of the big book.<sup>27</sup> I was sold. I was also fed up with the depression, suicidal ideation, and the consumption of personal agency by my addiction. She invited me to my first AA meeting, where I met my first sponsor, who guided me through the 12 steps until his own relapse nine months into my own recovery.

Two months into my sobriety, I transferred from Northwest Vista Community College to the University of Texas at San Antonio, where I eagerly enrolled in the university’s collegiate recovery program. This was the start of my recovery activism. Under the mentorship of the young program’s founder, I was persuaded into a leadership position with the city’s chapter of Young People in Recovery, a national organization leading the advocacy efforts behind the

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<sup>26</sup> Taken from memory.

<sup>27</sup> How insiders refer to *Alcoholics Anonymous*

nation's "opioid crisis." They were successful in bringing to the national stage the issue of opioid addiction, intensified by the spread of fentanyl-spiked heroin, and fueled by media depictions of white, middle-class heroin-addicted suburban residents. They were the face of the recovery movement.

I quickly noticed that just like the recovery community on campus, the majority of activists involved in the recovery movement were white, middle-class folks themselves. Where was the recovery movement during the 1980's crack epidemic? It took a white, middle-class population to humanize the condition of addiction.

The 2016 campaign season was in full swing during my early recovery. That brought plenty of outrage, which sparked my own Chicano activism. Through my anthropology and Mexican American studies classes, I became aware of the institutional nature of racism, and was able to contextualize my own racialized and working-class history within a greater historical narrative. I tried to work through these experiences with my sponsor at the time, whom I came to find out didn't believe in racism. After working through a fifth step<sup>28</sup> with him during campaign season, I left feeling distraught and depressed, and dissociated for a week after. During this time, I was working to consolidate my cultural and recovery identities. How does one make sense of their racialized and politicized identities while in recovery?

The day before, I had attended a Spanish-speakers meeting. I was eager to meet some more *raza* in recovery. I was warmly greeted and asked to offer up a topic. In my broken Spanglish, I spoke to anxiety over my upcoming fifth-step with my sponsor. The topic was resentments. The eldest man in the group spoke emphatically about "*el pinche Trumpitas*,"

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<sup>28</sup> A fearless and personal inventory is conducted by the person in recovery as part of their fourth step. The fifth step is relating the written inventory to a sponsor and the person's higher power. This is done as needed throughout the person's life.

whom he labeled as sick himself. He vented his frustration, and ended his share speaking about forgiveness.

I've shared my story in discussion meetings three times. The first was for a speaker meeting of Young People in Alcoholics Anonymous (YPAA), whose membership is also predominantly white and middle class. The second was for my eighteen-month chip<sup>29</sup> at the recovery collegiate recovery center of campus. The third was for Juan's<sup>30</sup> program. I finally was able to speak to a *raza* audience. By that time, I had shared my story with so many individually and given it in pieces in meetings throughout my sobriety. Relating it to an audience of brown youth was powerful, however, and was my first time shedding a tear speaking to my own story.

In AA, members seeking recovery, or sometimes seeking new sponsorship, will ask another member who has worked the first eleven steps for sponsorship. Despite a sense of cultural nationalism I had built by the time I was sponsoring people, I never turned anybody down. My first year and a half of recovery saw an eager me ready to help anybody with anything I could, especially recovery; if they were *raza*, that made me even happier. Recovery meant the ability to be of use to my fellows, and this gift included picking up mentorship roles in and out of AA and recovery.

### *Participants*

Juan is a 36 year old man with 5 years of recovery. In our interview, he got across that he had been sober since 2004, but didn't start working the program of AA until 2013. He worked at the time of the interview for a Mexican American youth recovery program housed in the Mexican American Unity Council in the city's west side. Though he had only been in the city for

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<sup>29</sup> Chips are given out in meetings as tokens in recognition of milestones of sobriety.

<sup>30</sup> One of my participants

around 6 years, he was deeply embedded in recovery outreach and advocacy work around the city and in the west side through his personal and professional work. In our conversations, we aired our frustration with the contemporary state of American politics, discussed our ethnic and cultural pride, and talked about our experiences in and out of recovery.

Roberto was a 69 year-old Vietnam veteran with 19 years of recovery at the time of our interview. He was born and raised in the city's west side and has lived in the area most of his life. Roberto was hard-pressed to speak about issues of race, speaking to them as "outside issues."<sup>31</sup> He related all of his experiences back to the tenets and principles of AA, having fully integrated the program into his life.

### *Advocacy*

Recovery advocacy is a foundation of the principles of AA. The 12<sup>th</sup> step states "Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs" (Wilson 60, 2001). Reaching out to the newcomer in AA meetings and sponsorship through the twelve steps are how individuals working a program of recovery as suggested by Alcoholics Anonymous maintain their sobriety over their lifetime.

For some, this recovery advocacy extends outside of the rooms and spaces of AA in the form of activism. For Juan, this meant going back to the prison system and spreading the word of recovery to inmates.

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<sup>31</sup> Within the AA community, "outside issues" is commonly used to refer to issues of a controversial nature or that could derail AA meetings from their primary purpose of helping alcoholics to recover. Depending on group consensus set forth in group conscious meetings, this could include speaking to drug use, as some AA members view drug and alcohol addiction as separate circumstances.



“I love doing shit like that bro. Go[ing] back to the prison system and speaking to the inmates. You see me out there, you know, going back into the system. I love that. I don’t feel God’s presence more than when I go back into the prison.”<sup>32</sup>

Juan’s daily routine included a morning gig at a methadone clinic before going into his full-time position at the youth recovery center.

“I work at a methadone clinic in the mornings, so you already know the stigma behind that. But I serve a purpose there. And it’s just everybody’s recovery is different. You know. Are some people subsidizing one drug with another with methadone? You know, possibly. I’ve seen it. They’re steady getting high on that shit. And then there’s some that, actually, it helps. And one thing I’ve done at this methadone clinic is I actually help people get into treatment. I had one of my patients that actually went to treatment last Friday. You know, so I don’t know how my bosses feel about that.”<sup>33</sup>

As a dedicated activist, he positions himself as a personal recovery advocate for his clients, at the dismay of his supervisor.

“My boss doesn’t directly tell me, ‘well you’re giving away all our clients and sending them to treatment.’ But she knows that I am. She knows that I’m in recovery, and she knows that if someone wants to go into treatment, I’m not gonna tell them not to go. I’m gonna tell them to go and, you know, ‘If you can get off the methadone and you can get off everything, fuck yeah, go.’”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Juan (pseudonym), interview with author, June 11.

<sup>33</sup> Juan, 2018

<sup>34</sup> Juan, 2018.

On top of his advocacy with the youth, whom he earnestly tries to push into recovery, while recognizing that “[they’re] not all going to make it,” he pushes himself to be a “walking, living example of [the book of *Alcoholics Anonymous*]”.

Roberto’s advocacy is more reserved.

“One day I kept hearing that he was on the verge of getting fired because of tardiness and all that kind of stuff and I approached him and I tried to carry the message and I told him, ‘look there’s this place that I go to that has helped me a lot,’ and he picked up on it right away and said, ‘no I don’t need that,’ and he walked away. After that he avoided me and didn’t want anything to do with me. I told my sponsor about that and he said, ‘you were trying to carry a message. Maybe it’s the way you said it, but AA is not for everybody. You did the best you could, now go find somebody else.’

“I told myself the only way I’d do that is if I went to another AA meeting. Let’s say it’s a bunch of newcomers – I’m under the umbrella of the meeting. Again, one of the traditions – It’s a program of attraction not promotion.”<sup>35</sup>

After a negative experience of trying to “spread the message” to a co-worker he understood to have a drinking problem, Roberto now keeps his advocacy within the program.

Both participants relayed their experience in recovery advocacy. Juan expressed his eagerness to help both folks in active addiction as well in recovery, while Roberto expressed keeping his advocacy within the context and spaces of AA. As an ethnic Mexican man coming from the *barrios* of Austin himself, working for *barrio* youth and their families in San Antonio today, Juan was able to provide them an intimate, approachable, and vulnerable model of recovery. As a recovery advocate in the various spaces he practices his advocacy – the prison

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<sup>35</sup> Roberto (pseudonym), interview with author, June 21, 2018.

system, the recovery center, home visits with youth and their families, in AA meetings, at the methadone clinic – he is a cultural broker for recovery.

### *Race*

The 2016 presidential campaign brought new sets of challenges for ethnic Mexicans in the United States. Donald Trump started his presidential campaign in 2015 by demonizing Mexican immigrants as rapists, drug mules, and criminals, a theme that has carried on through his presidency, now in the form of legislation.<sup>36</sup> With politicized racial identities, my ethnic Mexican participants and I have all felt the effects of interpersonal, structural, and rhetorical racism as stressors in our recovery.

In our conversations, Roberto naturally displayed a race-consciousness, but was hard-pressed to speak about it. He expressed dealing with what he sees as the inherent racism of American life through the 12 steps.

“[Mexicans] get stopped [by cops] more often than the whites. That’s just the way it is. That’s just the way it’s been for years and years and years. With more of this training, more enmeshing myself in the program, that really becomes a non-issue.”

Juan, on the other hand, displayed a militant stance toward his ethnic pride, admitting it had gotten him in trouble before.

“I never say I’m Mexican American. I say I’m fucking Mexican. That’s one thing I’ve always been proud of man. My fucking brother in law called me a wetback 4 years ago, I fucking knocked his bitch ass out. I almost went back to prison for it. But that’s one thing I continue to work on is my anger.”

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<sup>36</sup> Ye Hee Lee, Michelle, “Donald Trump’s False Comments Connecting Mexican Immigrants and Crime,” *The Washington Post*, Jul. 8, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2015/07/08/donald-trumps-false-comments-connecting-mexican-immigrants-and-crime/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.881af7462897](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2015/07/08/donald-trumps-false-comments-connecting-mexican-immigrants-and-crime/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.881af7462897), accessed Jul. 22, 2018.

Juan and Roberto also expressed dealing with the frustration of the current anti-Mexican and anti-immigrant sentiment in varying capacities, both referring to the program for support and guidance through these issues.

Roberto tended to avoid focusing on race, which he viewed could be a detriment to one's personal recovery.

“My life could change for the better as a result of working the steps, not because I started going to Hispanic-only meetings. Or you know, only white meetings. That's why, initially, I thought I might not be helpful to you with your research because the program of AA is colorblind, or it should be.”

While Roberto focused on the color-blind nature of AA, Juan saw the inherent advocacy possible through Spanish-language meetings, despite not attending them regularly himself.

“I would love to go to more Spanish speaking meetings, 'cause part of my job now is – I have a lot of Spanish-speaking parents. I'm glad we're talking about this 'cause that's what I need to do is get my ass into more Spanish speaking meetings.”

Thus, recovery advocacy to Juan was not confined to the meetings or spaces of AA, but rather extended outward into surrounding world. He expressed working to the point of exhaustion and still not feeling like he does enough for the various communities he is a part of. That said, as models for recovery, both men provide examples, in and out of their interactions with the institution of AA, of what positive change can look like, on the individual level and for a community. Both men expressed the importance of family and the gift recovery has brought in their personal and familial relationships.

Whether confined to meeting spaces or throughout their daily lives, Juan and Roberto seek to be a positive influence in the world. Both participants offered to forgo using

pseudonyms, to which I insisted, and were happy to have their stories shared. As per the principles of AA, every recovering alcoholic and addict involved in the program works to embed the compassion, honesty, and vulnerability of the program into their lives. In this is an inherent humanistic advocacy. For ethnic Mexicans, the liberation recovery provides is not only individual, but communal, providing a model for positive change in communities and families.

### *Conclusion*

Contemporary Western recovery can trace its lineage back to the 12-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous. Its alcoholic-to-alcoholic approach set the groundwork for modern and contemporary self-help groups and recovery fellowships, organizations, and institutions. With the lack of recovery programming for *barrio* residents in segregated San Antonio, local Chicano-centric programs and culturally-competent organizing filled the void of recovery for ethnic Mexicans. Bent on self-determination and improvement of the conditions of the *barrios* and *barrio* life, the Chicano generation worked hand-in-hand with *tecatos* and *borrachos*.<sup>37</sup>

Situating these experiences within the greater historical narrative of Chicano recovery contextualizes our efforts and the implications of our recovery. For Juan and myself, our ethnic and recovery identities were at the forefront of our consciousness. They guide how we make sense of ourselves and the world. For Roberto, however, this wasn't necessarily the case. He was just happy to be sober, practicing his program and spreading the message when necessary. Living as racialized persons, however, has affected all of our recoveries. Each of us has an awareness of the social-political status of ethnic Mexicans in the United States. We have all felt the blows of interpersonal, institutional, and rhetorical racism. Making sense of and dealing with these stressors starts, for us three, with the spiritual step-work laid out in the program of Alcoholics

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<sup>37</sup> Drunkards

Anonymous. As people in recovery, Juan and myself practice recovery and humanitarian activism to improve the conditions of our society, while Roberto offers the wisdom of his years to persons in and seeking recovery through AA.

It is my honor to present this work and to relay the stories of these activists, advocates, *barrio* workers, and 12<sup>th</sup> steppers. As ethnic Mexicans, our work simply recovering is an act of decolonization. As we free ourselves from the colonial shackles of addiction, we build a better world for ourselves and our relations.

#### *Limitations and Future Directions*

The participants chosen were all male as, at the time of starting this, I did not feel comfortable in relating the experiences of women, as a man, in recovery through my research. The gender disparity in the San Antonio Alcoholics Anonymous community is greater than the racial disparity. The trauma of addiction can also be heavily gendered, and as a male, I would rather do my part to support a research project in conjunction with or led by a woman than to offer up their experiences for analysis by myself.

This historiography is also, unfortunately, entirely gendered. More work needs to be done to build a comprehensive history that would shed light on the incredible work done by these *barrio* activists.

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