Spring 1-1-2015

Only God can judge me: The politics of social change at Victory Outreach church

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Only God can judge me: The politics of social change at Victory Outreach church

by

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B.A. Anthropology University of California Riverside, 2011

A thesis submitted to the

Faculty of the Graduate School of the

University of Colorado in partial fulfillment

of the requirement for the degree of

Master of Communication

Department of Communication

2015
This thesis entitled:

Only God can judge me: The politics of social change at Victory Outreach church

written by Wayne Freeman

has been approved for the Department of Communication, University of Colorado Boulder

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards
of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

IRB protocol # 14-0558
Victory Outreach is a mostly Chican@ Protestant Church, with substantial African American membership in some congregations, which has grown rapidly in past few decades. Targeting mostly gang members and those battling drug or alcohol addiction for potential membership, “VO” espouses mostly mainstream American values, specifically oriented towards the urban poor and especially men, and drawing on cultural elements including hip hop culture, low rider car culture, gang and prison culture, and *cholo* culture. Using mostly interviews and participant observation focusing particularly on men at a Victory Outreach congregation in Denver, CO, this project describes the ways that men at Victory Outreach revise their conceptions of masculinity and create cultural bridges between African Americans and Chicanos through the development of a hybrid masculinity and a reliance on shared black-brown cultural exchange. However, the rhetoric at “VO” often leaves the roots of class relations, structural racism and gender hierarchy mostly unchallenged, limiting the churches resistant potential in the areas of race, class, and gender.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

I see them approaching out of the corner of my eye. Two cholos, pretty hardcore looking. I’m holding my paper plate with carne asada in my left hand and a tortilla in my right, and I’m by myself now, because I walked to the trash can to throw away my plate. They are walking straight towards me from the other side of the park. I’m not from this area; I’m from a neighboring community. I’m just here celebrating the birthday of a friend of the family. Just trying to eat some tacos is all. I stop chewing as they come near: here it comes. I know what they are gonna ask me, “Where you from holmes?” “What are you doing here ese?” I’m about to get “hit up”, questioned about my gang affiliation. I gotta swallow this last piece of carne so I can squeak out “uhhh nowhere,” “nothing.” They walk right up to me. They are cholos, badass vatos, bald heads, tattoos, the khakis with a crease, nike cortez, true cholo style. “Hey ese” one of them says. Gulp. “Do you believe in God, eh?”

At first I felt relieved. They’re Christians! But then I wasn’t sure what was better, getting jumped or evangelized. Although I was raised as a Christian and spent a lot of time in Protestant churches growing up, I wasn’t much for faith. So I wasn’t sure if I really wanted to answer that question and go down that path with them, but I took their flyers and they told me “God Bless.” By then, I knew who they were. They were from Victory Outreach Church. You could catch these guys all over the barrios of Southern California. Former hardcore gangbangers turned hardcore Christians. My mother used to talk about them when I was a kid; she would always speak really highly of them. They were reformed. They were cholos for Jesus. Vatos locos for Christ. Orale.

So Victory Outreach has always had a certain curiosity for me. Who were these guys, who dressed and carried themselves like cholos, who would knock on doors, talk to gang
members in the parks, and be waiting at the gates to hand us flyers when the bell rang in high school? What I seek to do in this project is too analyze Victory Outreach, which began in the Chican@\(^1\) barrios of Los Angeles and now spreading well beyond them. “VO” is an evangelical church ministry made of mostly Chican@ membership (and sometimes African American) that explicitly targets gang members and drug addicts for potential membership, even running homes for recovering drug abusers and former gang members. VO generally sees social ills as the result of “sin” or the “devil,” and encourages “recovery,” whether from gang life, drug addiction, or any other issue, through individual and spiritual means. These include the acceptance of God, acceptance of responsibility, and incorporation into a number of hegemonic values.

As a mostly Chican@ Protestant Church with substantial African American membership in some congregations, espousing mostly mainstream American values, specifically oriented towards the urban poor and especially men, and drawing on cultural elements including lowrider car culture, hip hop culture, prison culture, and cholo culture, this organization contains fascinating intersections of social, cultural, political, racial, religious, ideological, and economic tensions. What might we learn about race, masculinity, resistance and hegemony by looking closely at Victory Outreach, there practices, their discourses, and their role in our communities? To better think about this, I next provide an overview on Victory Outreach and the academic literature that has been written on the church.

**Setting the Scene: Victory Outreach**

Victory Outreach was founded in Los Angeles in 1967 by Cruz “Sonny” Arguinzoni, a former gang member and heroin addict who gave up drugs and the gang lifestyle after

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\(^1\) I use Chican@ as a gender neutral term that refers to Chicana and Chicano. At other points, I use Chicana or Chicano to be more gender specific. The term Mexican American will also be used interchangeably, especially when referring to U.S. Americans of Mexican descent in the era prior to the Chicano movement.
experiencing a Christian religious conversion (Sanchez Walsh, 2003). The ministry has continued to grow over the next few decades, expanding to *barrios* all across Southern California, then into Northern California as well. Today, Victory Outreach has spread all over the country and even to other parts of world (Sanchez-Walsh, 2003). “VO” however, is still most closely associated with American inner cities, and especially Chicano *barrios* in the US Southwest, though a cursory look at videos of church services and outreach materials suggests that many congregations have significant African American membership. The church explicitly targets gang members and drug addicts for potential membership, even running homes for recovering drug abusers and former gang members. Church pastors and leadership are also generally former gang members and/or drug abusers themselves. As Vince Moreno, head of Victory Outreach homes in Orange County put it in a 1989 Los Angeles Times Article, "Gang members can reach out to gang members. Drug addicts can reach out to drug addicts. That's why we're effective” (Lichtblau, 1989).

Victory Outreach, then, relies extensively on vernacular discourses from barrio and *cholo* subcultures, infusing Christianity with Chicano slang, style, aesthetic. Examples include *cholo* styles of dress, Rap music, advertisement using airbrushing and lowriders, and use of *barrio* slang (Flores, 2008, 2012, 2013). They also participate in outreach in the community, and organize various events, notably “dramas,” which are plays that identify community problems and propose solutions. For example, some prominent dramas, among many, include a Chicano gang drama titled “Blood in Blood out” after the famous gang-themed movie, and “Straight from the hood” dealing with interethnic violence between Chicano and African American males.

These dramas, as well as many others, seem to be particularly invested in masculinity, focusing on intervening in the lives of young men in the community involved in gangbanging,
drug dealing and/or using. Though the church also runs women’s homes, women are not allowed to take up leadership roles within the church. Reformed men, then, are given the task of reaching out to men in the community involved in gangs and drugs, and therefore discourses within the church tend to focus on masculinity. This allows men space to articulate alternative forms of masculinity that reject gang violence. While this is helpful for men, the continued denial of leadership positions to women reproduces problematic gender hierarchies and patriarchal structures.

In addition to problematic gender hierarchies, VO also tends to take a largely apolitical stance on the various issues that they seek to address. As mentioned, Victory Outreach seeks to offer its parishioners a way out of the gang and drug lifestyle, viewing their practices as harmful to the various communities that they serve. However, they take a view of these various social ills that tends to focus very little on the underlying social, political, or systemic circumstances. For example, sermons, dramas, or outreach events provide solutions to various issues including gang violence, drugs, crime, and poverty that exclusively involve personal change and religious conversion. The struggle against these social ills is repeatedly referred to as a “spiritual warfare.” Victory Outreach, then, attempts to “save” gang members and drug addicts, through individual change, as they generally views social ills as supernatural in origin, rather than systemic (Sanchez-Walsh, 2003). As Sanchez-Walsh (2003) puts it, “If they once believed that their circumstances were caused by institutional sexism, racism, or economic injustice, conversion has reoriented their worldview to look at a supernatural agent as the root of their troubles” (p. 125).

If only in its size and growth, there is something curious about Victory Outreach. According to Sanchez-Walsh (2003) there were 250 VO congregations at the time of publication of her book. Today, 11 years later, VO’s official website places the number at over 700. They
have also been somewhat successful in bridging the gap between African Americans and Chicanos, incorporating significant African American membership into many of their congregations. This is something that political organizers have been quite unable to do. However, while Victory Outreach congregations regularly take to the streets in marches, rallies, and other community events, there is a definite lack of any explicit politics. Nevertheless, Victory Outreach continues to grow, facilitate gang exit and drug rehabilitation, actively reconceptualize masculinity, bridge black-brown divides, reach out to those they refer to as the “outcasted,” incorporate various elements of Chican@ and African American culture (and shared culture) all while continuing to uphold traditional gender hierarchies and taking a very apolitical stance on significant issues facing Chican@s, as well as African Americans, generally spiritualizing and individualizing social ills rather than politicizing them.

At present, there exists a small body of academic literature focusing particularly on Victory Outreach, mostly focused on Victory Outreaches in Los Angeles where the ministry first began, and generally couched within a narrative of Chican@ resistance, empowerment, and politics of style. For example, focusing mostly on male members, Flores (2008, 2012, 2013) notes the ways in which Victory Outreach attempts to reach gang members in the barrio through the use of barrio styles, language, and traditions infused with Protestantism. Examples include cholo styles of dress, rap music, advertisement using airbrushing and lowriders, and use of barrio slang (2008, 2012, 2013). He also notes the ways that traditions from African American churches, such as call and response techniques, have been incorporated (2012). Sanchez-Walsh (2003) also touches briefly on this topic of style pointing again to music and fashion, including oldies and hip hop. She states that. that oldies style “music that conjures up images of the veterano is used to reach the veterano, and that same music also reaches today’s Gen-X gang
member, except that hip-hop, a different kind of slang, and other fashions have become appropriated to preach to a new generation (143).” She states that, “Hip Hop culture, fashion, and music signal to youth that the church does not reject them, and, in fact, seeks to validate their life experiences” (146).

But these forms of vernacular expression including “oldies” music, hip hop music and style, lowrider car culture, and much more, are certainly not exclusive to Chican@'s. They are all part of a long history of cultural exchange between Chican@'s and African Americans in Los Angeles and throughout the Southwest. Sanchez-Walsh only briefly suggests that rap music, in particular, is “the common language that allows Latino youth to worship with African American youth” (141). In fact, many Victory Outreach congregations have a substantial level of African American membership (especially those in neighborhoods with high levels of African American residents) to some extent integrating what Martin Luther King Jr. once called, “the most segregated hour in America.” This is all the more notable given the often high tensions between the black and Chican@ communities.

Despite these well documented tensions, the cross cultural exchange between African Americans and Chican@'s deserves at least as much attention, and scholars have been increasingly interested in Black-Brown interethnic relations in recent years, especially focused on the Los Angeles region, where VO began. Areas of recent scholarship on black-brown cultural exchange have included the phenomenoms of zoot suit culture, lowrider car culture, rap and hip hop, and more (Delgado, 1998; Macias, 2004; Alvarez, 2007; Ogbar, 2007; McFarland, 2013; Kun, 2014; Sandoval, 2014; Johnson, 2014). The black-brown relationships fostered at VO are an area that is in need of expansion, particularly in the role that various forms of popular culture play. This could be yet another area where VO may be resistant and empowering.
Though black-brown relations have been largely ignored, most of the current literature does take a view of Victory Outreach as empowering and resistant in various ways. For example, Flores (2008, 2012, 2013) argues that for urban Chicanos, Victory Outreach, and organizations like it, has facilitated acculturation, increased socio-economic mobility for the children of Mexican immigrants, countered some of the effects of racism, and lead to a movement towards healthier and less self-destructive conceptions of masculinity among Chicano men by relying on hegemonic conceptions of masculinity, which he terms “reformed barrio masculinity” (2008, 2012, 2013).

However, the idea that VO could be hegemonic is one that has only been very briefly explored. For example, in a separate article Flores and coauthor Hondagneu-Sotelo (2013), after constructing another empowerment narrative, concede only in the final paragraph that gang recovery programs can both empower and rearticulate hegemony, as they often focus only on the individual as the agent of change. They go on to recommend that due to the crisis of joblessness, gang recovery programs should also provide access to “education, skills training, and well paying, stable work” (Flores & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2013). This discussion is short, however, as it is limited only to a final paragraph in what is otherwise a narrative of empowerment. And while it does attend to larger structural forces, the onus is placed upon the particular program to supply “education, skills training, and well paying, stable work,” rather than a larger society that has denied those rights to Chican@s since the incorporation of the Southwest into U.S. territory. In that way, this solution, while not entirely individualized, tends to rely on the same neoliberal, privatizing logic of these social issues.

There is a similar, very small, section in his book *God’s Gangs: Barrio Ministry, Masculinity, and Gang Recovery* (2013). In this also very empowerment oriented piece, Flores
does link the emergence of Victory Outreach and similar organizations to structural racism, especially the rise of neoliberalism and mass incarceration. However, he only very briefly concedes that the “gang recovery movement’s resistance and activism do not yet target the institutional apparatus (Flores, p. 193).” Instead, Flores prefers to view Victory Outreach as a Gramscian “war of maneuver” in which Chican@s are forced inward upon themselves. Following Gramsci and Omi and Winant, this “war of maneuver” can then allow for a “war of position,” which can involve political struggle (Flores, 2013). In this way, Flores does not view the philosophies of Victory Outreach as inherently hegemonic, but as resistance in progress. In other words, though they aren’t there “yet,” the development of an explicit politics of resistance in Victory Outreach is only a matter of time.

Arlene Sanchez Walsh (2003) describes how Victory Outreach leans heavily towards a conservative politics, in line with what is most common in the larger Evangelical political ethos, which generally views social ills as supernatural in origin, rather than systemic (Sanchez-Walsh, 2003), but stops short of problematizing these politics. As Sanchez-Walsh (2013) puts it, “If they once believed that their circumstances were caused by institutional sexism, racism, or economic injustice, conversion has reoriented their worldview to look at a supernatural agent as the root of their troubles” (p. 125). She even notes the enthusiastic support that Victory Outreach has received from state prison officials and several Los Angeles area police departments, a situation that only changed somewhat when a handful of former Mexican Mafia members became members of the church (p. 98). Though illuminating in describing the political conversion that goes along with the religious conversion and gang recovery in Victory Outreach, her account is mostly descriptive, avoiding any explicit critical evaluation or problematization of these politics.
Luis Leon (1996), on the other hand, is one scholar that has attempted to delve more deeply into the hegemonic aspects of Victory Outreach, in an ethnographic account of *Alcance Victoria* in East Los Angeles, which is Victory Outreach’s much smaller Spanish language congregation. He begins by briefly describing the rise of Latin@ Evangelical/Pentecostal Protestantism, and the lack of scholarship focusing on Latin@s in the United States. He divides the existing scholarship on Latin American Pentecostalism/Evangelism into two groups, which he named “Marxist Social-determinism,” and “rational choice humanism (Leon, p. 162).” Leon characterizes the Marxist group as those that view Pentecostalism as a movement channeling peoples energies and social dissatisfaction into spirituality and hope, preventing revolutionary potential and creating dupes for the capitalist order (Leon, 1996). Conversely, his “rational choice humanism” group of scholars describes those that conceive of Latin@s as rational decision makers that may use reason to choose one religion over another and fashion that religion towards one’s own needs, emphasizing agency and empowerment in religious choice or conversion. Through his participant observation of *Alcance Victoria* in East Los Angeles, Leon argues that that the truth lies somewhere between these two ends of the spectrum, because while *Alcance Victoria* can help members deal immediately with overwhelming circumstances, their choices for dealing with issues are still constrained by their marginal position in U.S. society (as low income, often undocumented and racialized immigrants).

However, in the relatively short piece, he does not delve very deeply into exactly how this occurs, and the existence of hegemony in the discourse of *Alcance Victoria* is reduced only to the reality of an individual’s constrained choice. By focusing only on this aspect of hegemony, Leon does not explore the possibility that there may also be action contained within the rhetoric itself that both resists and perpetuates larger social or economic structures, for example, those
that produce and reproduce these very constraints in the first place. Also, in contrast to the
project that I will propose below, Leons experience in the Spanish language ministry may differ
from mine, not only linguistically and culturally, but also politically. For example, Leon
mentions political issues of immigration. In *Alcance Victoria*, immigration issues may be those
that are most salient, while in the much larger Chican@ English speaking ministry, Victory
Outreach, issues of gangs and drugs seem to be the most salient.

Overall, the ethnographic work that has been produced by these scholars focusing on
Victory Outreach has been illuminating and contributed greatly to furthering the understanding
of Victory Outreach as a grass roots religious organization that reaches out to the most
marginalized in society. However, by focusing mostly on description and empowerment, critical
rhetorical interpretations have been ignored or left to single concluding paragraphs. In contrast, I
would seek to make that discussion central to the way that Victory Outreach is conceptualized.

The goal of this project, then, is not only to extend this existing research on the resistive
and empowering possibilities at VO, but also to take very seriously the various hegemonic and
disempowering possibilities that also may be at work at VO. VO’s largely Chican@
membership, particular focus on masculinity, their focus on the spiritual rather than the political,
their explicit reach to those on the margins, their stylistic and linguistic choices (from cholo
styles of dress, to hip hop, to vernacular rhetoric), their frequent appeal to, and acceptance of,
African Americans, their traditional gender hierarchy, and more all have a role to play in this
tangle of hegemony and subversion. By taking an ethnographic rhetorical approach, utilizing
both participant observation at church services and events as well as qualitative interviews with
members, I can better understand these choices and attempt to critique the sorts of political
implications these choices, whether political, stylistic, or otherwise, may have for the very
marginalized folks that VO explicitly targets for membership. To do so, I propose a qualitative rhetorical project at a particular Victory Outreach congregation, Victory Outreach Denver.

**Victory Outreach Denver**

It was many years after I nearly choked on my *carne asada* that I moved out of Southern California for the first time in my life, headed for graduate school in Boulder, Colorado. It was strange to me here. And also really cold compared to my hometown of Chino, CA, even indoors. But the first time that I walked into Sunday service at Victory Outreach Denver, nervous and armed only with my pen and pad of paper, they must have had the heat on, because it felt warm.

The church itself is an old theater fronting Federal Boulevard in Denver, Colorado, in a historically Chicano neighborhood that has recently begun gentrifying. On the side of the building is a large graffiti mural that reads “Stop the Violence.” Most members are Chican@. Though there are many female members at Victory Outreach Denver, all of the leadership roles are given to men, and sermons tend to focus on the ways in which men are leaders in the ministry, family, and community. In many cases, this involves a rearticulation of masculine conceptions of toughness, fighting, or courage. For instance, in one sermon that I attended, the pastor exclaimed “God is looking in the neighborhood for tough guys who can handle their business. We are fighters. We fought in the neighborhood, we fought in jail, we even fight with our wives. Fight for God! You are a man!!! We are warriors!” The crowd burst into applause.

Though Victory Outreach is most well known for reaching Chicano gang members and drug addicts, Victory Outreach attempts to address the full range of “sadness” experienced disproportionately by the Chicano community. Carlos Velez- Ibanez (1996) argues that, for Mexican Americans, the unequal distribution of social, political, and economic power and resources translates to its inverse, what he calls an unequal “distribution of sadness.” “Sad”
categories include mental illness, physical illness, drug abuse, over participation in U.S. wars, and of course, gangs and crime (Velez-Ibanez, 1996). Victory Outreach Denver attempts to address this sadness not only through events and church services but also through the “recovery” homes that they run in a nearby neighborhood. When I asked Victory Outreach Denver worship leader, Jimmy, himself a former 18th Street gang member about the recovery homes, he told me that they can include gang members, people struggling with drug and alcohol addiction, prostitutes, homeless people, people, ex veterans who need help, and people with marriage and relationship issues. In this way, Victory Outreach Denver attempts to address the full range of “sadness” in the community.

Chicanos, Gangs, and Sadness

As noted, Victory Outreach has an explicit gang focus. With this in mind, the origins of the organization in Los Angeles is far from random, rather, it is reflective of a long history of Mexican Americans and Chican@s in Los Angeles that includes violence, gangs, and drugs. Most scholars trace the origins of modern Chican@ gang culture to Los Angeles in the 1940’s (Vigil, 2002; Sanchez-Walsh, 2003), a time when Mexican Americans in the region were experiencing severe physical and psychological violence and distress.

Los Angeles in the 1940’s was marked by explicit segregation of Mexican Americans in schools and public places, and wartime anxieties that were often displaced onto the Mexican origin population. Mexican American youth were, ever increasingly, being viewed by mainstream society as serious threats to the social order, and biologically predisposed to violence and criminal behavior. The aftermath of the Zoot Suit riots in Los Angeles in 1943, where Zoot Suit donning Pachucos were attacked by servicemen, civilians, and the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) for ten straight days, saw the rise of gang related activity and the use of
hard drugs among barrio youth gangs (Moore, 1978; Escobar, 1999; Vigil, 2002; Sanchez-Walsh, 2003). This is also the time when the region saw the formation of its most violent gangs still in existence today, such as White Fence in Boyle Heights and El Hoyo Maravilla in East Los Angeles (Sanchez-Walsh, 2003) (In 1967 these same neighborhoods were also where Victory Outreach was first formed, and has since spread much further). Today’s Chicano gang, or “cholo” subculture, is the descendant of the pachuco zoot suiter. It thrives in the same environment of inequality, lack of dignity, and marginalization (but also cultural resistance and creativity).

Chicano studies scholars generally conclude that Chicano gang, or “cholo,” subculture grew out of the complex intersections of race and poverty. For instance, Vigil (1983) points to what he calls the “multiple marginalities” of Mexican Americans, including “the effects of barrio life, low socioeconomic status, culture conflict, and impaired development of self-esteem which arise in a complex of ecological, socioeconomic, cultural, and psychological factors” (Vigil, 1983). Vigil has elsewhere argued that, “The central reason for the rise of street gangs worldwide is poverty… and the repercussions and ramifications associated with it” (Vigil, 2007). He also states that most gang members come from families that are especially impoverished, often even in comparison to other families in the neighborhood (Vigil, 2002). Vigil (2007) points to recent variations of “strain theory,” which refer to the mismatch between status goals established by dominant society, and the ability of people to meet them. Either in an effort to achieve these goals (i.e. selling drugs or stealing to make money), or in responding emotionally to the inability to achieve them (i.e. anger, frustration, or depression leading to violence or drug use), individuals maybe be more likely to engage in illegal, criminal, or antisocial behaviors. Recently, this theory has been applied to help explain differences in crime
rates and drug use among different communities and between males and females (Agnew, 1992; Agnew & Broidy, 1997; Agnew, 1999; Jang, 2007). In the case of Chicanos, these “strains” have included poverty, low social status, lack of quality education, inadequate living conditions, and segregation, among a host of other social, political, and economic inequalities (Mirande, 1985; Navarro, 2009; Velez-Ibanez, 1996; Vigil, 2007).

Gender, however, becomes a factor in the ways that these “strains” are experienced and expressed. For example, according to Erlanger (1979), for Chicano males, the lack of status and political power may lead to a situation of “estrangement,” in which some Chicano males resort to interpersonal violence and gang territoriality as expressions of traditional masculine values of power, control, courage, and dignity denied to them. Flores and Hondagneu-Sotelo (2013) note that for Chicano males, when “old world” forms of masculinity do not suffice as a source of dignity or protection on the streets, some may turn to gangs and drug dealing as masculine badges of honor, income, status, and protection. This form of masculinity manifests itself in a code of honor and dishonor, often leading to aggressive, hyper masculine stances and interpersonal violence (Cintron, 1997; Flores & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2013). While providing a sense of masculine dignity denied by the greater society, this form of masculinity can also lead to a certain level of self-destruction, both because “interpersonal violence provokes police harassment and funnels these men into the criminal justice pipeline” (Flores & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2013, p. 478), and because men in the community are pitted against each other, impeding possibilities for collective identification and political struggle. In its most extreme forms, serious injury or death can be the result.

Ironically, however, this violence may serve a communal (even life giving?) purpose. For example, Cintron (1997), in his multiyear rhetorical ethnography on gang life in a Latino/a
neighborhood in Illinois, views this cycle of pain, vengeance and violence that emerges as also
serving a deep rhetorical purpose, in which,

A wounded someone wants to open a wound in someone else and in opening that wound,
there is a kind of ravishment, even a freedom. To release the blood of another is to
release oneself-all this is primal, and strangely communal, for those who speak the
discourse of pain desire pained others to accompany them. Call it, then, a need to make
others hurt as one hurts, a need to make pain communal (p. 150).

In this way, freedom and community seems to be achieved through a form of self and communal
destruction.

However, this interpersonal violence is not the only form of ironic practices that achieve
both freedom and destruction. For example, Chicano gang members have also been known to
participate in other practices that both free the self from pain and are potentially self- destructive,
as heavy drug and alcohol use is also part of Chicano gang life (Sanchez-Walsh, 2003; Vigil
2007; Flores & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2013).

This potentially self-destructive behavior has its roots, however, in very real structural
inequalities unequally impacting Chicanos. As mentioned, Carlos Velez- Ibanez argues that, for
Mexican Americans, the unequal distribution of social, political, and economic power and
resources translates to its inverse, what he calls an unequal “distribution of sadness.” According
to Velez-Ibanez, as a result of their underrepresentation in these various social categories,
Mexicans in the US Southwest are overrepresented in almost every “sad” category in proportion
to their percentage in the total population. “Sad” categories include gangs, crime, mental illness,
physical illness, and over participation in U.S. wars (Velez-Ibanez, 1996). (In fact, Victory
Outreach has also had substantial membership that consists of returning veterans from various
US wars, many who have fallen into substance addiction (Sanchez-Walsh, 2003). In these ways, Chicano gangs, as well as the violence and substance abuse that is often associated with them, can be seen as arising out of this disproportionate experiences of pain, strain, marginality, poverty, and humiliation experienced by the Mexican American population. In fact, gang culture, communicative practices, and organizational structures have been designed to provide a sense of shelter, familialism, and pride for members (Conquergood, 1994; Cintron, 1996; Flores & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2013). In addition to these emotional factors, gangs have also offered opportunities for prestige and profit (through participation in the underground economies) for those who have slim chances of finding meaningful and well-paying employment in the mainstream economy (Vigil, 1983). This issue of jobs is even more salient today. In the mid twentieth century, “maturing out” of gangs was a viable option, as youth gang members would often grow older, perhaps get married, and find relatively stable and well-paying jobs in the then vibrant manufacturing economy, even with a lack of formal education or experience. However, the decline of stable working class jobs in today’s economy has made that option of gang exit improbable (Flores & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2013).

For accuracy’s sake, relatively few barrio youth join gangs. Vigil (2002) estimates between 4 and 14 percent, Velez-Ibanez (1996) puts the figure somewhere between 3 and 10 percent. As Vigil (2002) puts it, “given the stresses of barrio life, it is remarkable, not that there are gangs, but that only a small minority of barrio youths join them (p.48).” In this way, Latino (especially male) criminality is often quite exaggerated in popular or media representations of Latinos. Though these images have changed over time, the violent or criminal image remains unchanged. Mirande (1985), for example, describes the evolution of these images from the nineteenth century “bloodthirsty, greasy, mustachiod bandido,” to the 1940’s “pachuco killer” to
todays image of the “cholo or vato loco” (p.89). This image of the Mexican American has been vastly overstated in order to portray Chicanos as inherently pathological, “mobilizing bias” against the Chicano community and reinforcing the racial hierarchy (Mirande, 1985). Mirande (1985) also states that, “The greatest danger in the mobilization of bias is that Chicanos, surrounded as they are by these negative images….are pressured to accept these as accurate images…. (p.89).” For example, Dwight Conquergood (1994), in his ethnographic account of communication practices among Latin Kings gang members in Chicago argues that “official discourse of the media, legal, system, and public policy solutions”, stigmatizes urban Latino/a youth long before they become gang members (p.53).

Despite misrepresentations and exaggerations in these official discourses, gangs have nevertheless been identified as an issue in the Chican@ community. As mentioned, Chicano gang members are frequently addicted to drugs and/or alcohol (Vigil 2007; Sanchez-Walsh, 2003; Flores & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2013). Because of this, some religious-based, anti-gang programs have adopted drug and alcohol addiction recovery models for gang intervention (Flores & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2013). Vigil himself noted as early as 1982 that Victory Outreach was one of the organizations that had done just that (Vigil, 1982). As Sanchez- Walsh (2003) notes, “Chicano gangs had no prohibitions against certain drugs, especially heroin, as other gangs had, and therefore the use and sale of drugs became part of the staple of barrio gangs” (p. 95). She goes on to say that, “drug use devastated families, and its trafficking created a market economy among gangs. It is within this realm that Victory Outreach carved its niche” (p. 95). By adopting a drug and alcohol addiction model, the rhetoric at VO often takes on fragments of therapeutic discourse, which tends towards an individual rather than structural emphasis.
As a mostly Chican@ organization, incorporating various vernacular discourses, reaching out to the marginalized, explicitly tackling various forms of “sadness,” including gangs and drugs, and doing this all while also utilizing various normative, hegemonic ideologies that may obscure structures of power, Victory Outreach is a complex of subversion and hegemony. In order to analyze this complexity, I look towards literature on hegemony, rhetoric, Latin@ vernacular discourses, and rhetorics of therapy.

**Hegemony, rhetoric, and (Latin@) vernacular discourse**

Moving away from more traditional views of rhetoric (speech acts, etc) and towards a concept of rhetoric as holistic and the mechanism by which power is both reproduced and challenged, many rhetoricians have taken to controversies and debates over the nature of hegemony and ideology as important areas of theoretical development in the field rhetoric (Wander, 1984; McGee, 1994; Cloud, 1994; Greene, 1998; Aune, 2003). For example, McGee (1994) describes the study of rhetoric as one that should view rhetoric as a material phenomenon fundamental to human existence (far more than simple tricks of language), that itself is a “species of coercion” (40). Likewise, Mckerrow (1989) pushes for a “critical rhetoric,” that seeks to “unmask or demystify the discourse of power.” To take this view of rhetoric in which the role of hegemony becomes central allows for a wider definition that can both critique discourses of power as well as identify and theorize resistance, leading to a potential for a less normative, more liberatory rhetoric.

However, various debates persist in rhetorical studies over the nature of the theory of hegemony, a concept originally introduced by Antonio Gramsci (1971). Some versions of hegemony take more traditional Marxist notions of the concept as a form of ideological domination. For example, Cloud (1994; 1996) takes a view of hegemonic rhetoric as one that...
can “obscure” relations of inequality in capitalist economy stratified by class and racial inequality. By obscuring these relations of domination through various discourses, hegemony seeks to produce consent for the parameters of subordination. Condit (1994, 1997) on the other hand, critiques this viewpoint, attempting to get out of the domination/subordination dichotomy by proposing an alternative view of hegemony which she terms “concordance.” Rather than what she sees as a simplistic dominant/subordinate binary, hegemony as concordance involves the negotiation of various groups, both elite and non-elite, to produce a sort of multivocal “accommodation,” that is agreed upon as the best that can be managed under whatever the particular circumstances may be. Others have taken more post-structural approaches that see power as much more dispersed and rhetoric as open to various interpretations, normative, resistant or otherwise. (Fiske, 1986, 1989, 1994; Greene, 1998).

Mumby (1997), writing from an Organizational Communication point of view, takes issue with all of these interpretations. He argues that the traditional Marxist conception of hegemony exemplified by Cloud is “crude,” “reductive,” and “functionalist,” as it continues to support a simplistic view of domination and subordination. However, he also takes issue with Condit’s concordance model, describing it as accommodationist and as a viewpoint that undermines the possibility for critique. Finally, he critiques the postmodern/poststructural approaches to hegemony in which all messages are open to alternative or oppositional meanings. He argues that though these viewpoints have emerged as a response to the traditional Marxist viewpoint and its totalizing view of domination, the postmodern approaches only do the opposite, providing a totalizing theory of resistance which romanticizes micro resistance and subversion without taking into account the larger relations in which these events occur (i.e. capitalism). Instead, Mumby argues that to effectively theorize hegemony, we must take into
account its “dialectical” character, which means that hegemony in and of itself embodies both domination and resistance. In this viewpoint, hegemony is an ongoing process of articulation and rearticulation, therefore it is always contested. The theory advanced by Mumby allows space for critique without essentializing the domination/subordination dichotomy. If this approach is taken, the role of the rhetorician is to critique hegemonic rhetoric in a way that brings out when and where both resistance and consent take place, often simultaneously.

These complexities of resistance and consent are particularly crucial for various social groups that have been historically and contemporarily marginalized. Ono and Sloop (1995) coin the term “vernacular discourses” to describe those forms of discourse that are unique to specific communities and often come from historically oppressed groups, moving away from the powerful discourses (public address, etc) that have traditionally been critiqued in the field of rhetoric. But they make clear that rhetoricians should not just describe vernacular discourses, but must engage with them critically in the same way one might critique mainstream discourse.

Ono and Sloop draw two main elements of vernacular discourse: cultural syncretism and pastiche. Cultural syncretism refers to the fact that even though vernacular discourses emanate from “oppressed communities” they are not necessarily always reactive, resistant, and counter hegemonic. Instead they tend to both resist and affirm dominant ideologies (which Mumby would argue is a feature of hegemony anyway). Pastiche is related to this point, as it involves borrowing various cultural “fragments” to construct unique subjectivities. Because pastiche involves borrowing from mainstream cultures (i.e. hegemonic), it will always contain certain hegemonic aspects, though they can be reconstituted for new uses and combined with elements of marginal discourses.
Perhaps, for Latin@s and Chican@s, this “cultural syncretism” described by Ono and Sloop is especially salient. For example, Anzaldúa (1987), describes a history of colonialism and resulting meztisaje that has created a cultura Chicana in a perpetual “borderlands,” straddling multiple cultures and multiple value systems. This has implications for the ways that cultural syncretism is itself a key feature of Chican@ culture. As Marez (1996) puts it, 

Because Chicanos are themselves collages-an amalgam of Indian, Spanish, Mexican, and Anglo elements-their cultural products are also mixtures of fragments from diverse traditions. Collage is thus the stylistic corollary of mestizaje, the "impure" status of racial and national mixture. Essentially without clear-cut racial or national essence, working-class brown people become mixmasters (122).

But this creativity and “mixmastering” also has important ramifications for the role that hegemony and resistance place for Chican@s. Referring to the clash of various frames of reference (colonial, oppressive, resistant, decolonial, indigenous, alternative, etc), that characterize the borderlands existence, Anzaldúa goes on to write that, “we get multiple, often opposing messages. The coming together of two self consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes un choque, a cultural collision (100).” In this way, colonial ideologies and discourses are embedded within the very fabric of Chican@ culture and psychology. So for Latin@s, and particularly Chican@s, the discussion of vernacular discourses that circulate within our communities is deeply influenced by the effects of colonization and the struggle for decolonial discourses. In this environment, the analysis of hegemony and ideology is also one of coloniality, as the development of counter hegemonic discourses becomes simultaneously a process of decolonization (Holling and Calafell, 2011). In addition to all of this, Latin@s, occupying a marginal position in U.S. culture, have often had to rely on particular
dominant logics in order to make political or rhetorical interventions in the first place. These complex circumstances lead to a uniqueness of vernacular discourses in Latin@ communities.

Scholars in communication have recently begun taking a close look at the specifics of Latin@ vernacular discourse. Holling and Calafell (2011) make the case that Latin@ discourse really exemplifies vernacular rhetoric because Latin@s must constantly negotiate their identities in relation to hegemonic ideologies and oppressive systems of power. With this as a starting point, a myriad of diverse Latin@ vernacular discourses have been analyzed in equally diverse ways. For example, Calafell and Delgado (2004) analyze the published collection of Latin@ images, *Americanos*, as a vernacular discourse that uses various cultural fragments, both dominant and resistant, to construct a Latin@ image and identity, “illustrating the complex nature of vernacular discourse as a space of identities in process” (p.11). Delgado (2000) focuses on the music and style of Chicano rapper Kid Frost, arguing that even as Kid Frost seems to reinforce dominant discourses of Chicano masculine criminality, he also challenges dominant constructions of Chicanismo and attempts to claim an empowered Chicano identity. These examples demonstrate the various ways that Latin@s appropriate dominant logics in order to make rhetorical interventions and carve out discursive spaces.

However, Latin@s also often must enter into hegemonic terrain when attempting to meet more explicitly political goals, such as claiming rights and equal protection under the law. For example, Anguiano and Chavez (2011) describe how undocumented Latin@ bloggers on the Dream Act portal embrace and reinforce the dominant, hegemonic logics of “the American dream” and “meritocracy” in order to resist their status as undocumented. By constructing themselves as model citizens (educated, success oriented, etc), DREAMERS make their cases for full citizenship. This exemplifies the syncretic nature of vernacular discourse, because though
they challenge their citizenship status (hence, a resistant, counterhegemonic stance), their heavy reliance on dominant ideologies ignores structural and institutional barriers and leaves other “typical” immigrants out of the claim for citizenship. This phenomenon of relying on certain dominant logics in order to claim rights is nothing new for Latin@s in the United States. For example, Flores and Villarreal (2012) describe how Texas Mexicans, in the Delgado vs Bastrop Independent School court case in 1948, were able to argue for desegregation by making rhetorical moves toward whiteness.

In the various ways demonstrated, the complexities of hegemony and resistance are far from simple. The concepts themselves are highly contested in the fields of Communication and Rhetoric, and become even more complex when attempting to analyze, critique, and untangle the concepts as they are expressed through the cultural syncretism and pastiche of vernacular discourses. Furthermore, the role of (de)colonization, mestizaje, and borderlands nature of Latin@ identity, culture, and experience further complicates the role that hegemony plays in Latin@ vernaculars, as well as the often necessary utilization of particular dominant and normative frameworks in order to push for both discursive and explicitly political interventions. Nevertheless, scholars focusing on hegemony in Latin@ vernacular discourses have made incredible contributions drawing from an extremely wide range of discourses that circulate within (and sometime emanate out from) various Latin@ communities.

**Therapeutic Discourse, Gangs, and Victory Outreach**

Victory Outreach, as an example of Latin@ vernacular discourse, draws heavily from alternative, and even resistant, discourses, including various forms of Chican@ and African American popular culture. However, true to the nature of the pastiche and cultural syncretism of vernacular discourses, there are also a number of hegemonic normative discourses that are
simultaneously at play in the rhetoric of Victory Outreach. For example, VO generally does not interrogate the social, political, or structural dimensions of the “sadness” described by Velez-Ibanez, instead focusing mostly on individual, spiritual, and therapeutic goals. According to Cloud (1998), therapeutic rhetoric is a hegemonic discursive pattern that translates social and political problems into the language of individual responsibility and healing, often couched in medical terminology. She argues that this form of discourse is a rhetorical strategy of contemporary capitalism that involves channeling anger, dissent, discontent, or social unrest into individualistic or private sphere concerns, isolating all issues from structural critique and collective action. It offers self-care, consolation, coping techniques, and other individual benefits as a substitute for material or structural change, and is often deployed as a response to social conflict along the lines of race, class, and gender. This sort of rhetoric is also common in popular rhetoric surrounding issues such as gangs, drugs, and crime.

As mentioned earlier, gangs are often constructed as the result of individual or familial pathology and disorder, rather than the result of complex structures of inequality. Conquergood (1994) asserts, “Gangs are constructed in public discourse as the cause, effect, and aberrant response to social disorder and urban decay” (p. 53). He goes on to say that, “This blame the victim approach resonates ideologically with bourgeois individualism. Moreover, it diverts attention away from the political and economic macro patterns of exclusion and displacement, which shape the micro textures and struggle of everyday struggle for poor and marginalized peoples (p. 54).” This logic also manifests itself in suppressive public policy and law enforcement tactics such as “zero tolerance” and “tough on crime” laws, leading to increased police harassment and stricter penalties for gang members. These strategies seek to eliminate people rather than problems, or perhaps more accurately, people and problems are viewed as
synonymous. As Cintron (1996) puts it, these approaches are generally unsuccessful, as they involve, “the unremitting enforcement of powerlessness upon those whose actions speak of a need for power (p.195).”

However, the individualizing of the social problem of gangs is not only a tool used in public discourse by the powerful, because this sort of rhetoric is a hegemonic discourse that persuades members of the working class, the poor, and the socially marginalized that they are responsible for their plight (Cloud, 1998). Conquergood (1994) notes that gang intervention programs often utilize communication strategies that direct messages exclusively to gang members, reinforcing that idea that the responsibility for the so called “gang problem” lies with poor youth of color, rather than larger structures. Even active gang members often place the blame exclusively on themselves for choosing the lifestyle (Chapel, Peterson, Joseph, 1999). Scholarship, especially communication research on gang intervention has also often focused on gang members themselves, rather than social forces that lead to gangs (Chapel et. al, 1999, Breen and Matusitz, 2009).

These individualistic and therapeutic approaches to inherently social issues such as gangs, drugs, crime, poverty, or any other form of “sadness,” to borrow Velez-Ibanez’s term, abound, obscuring the multiple structures impacting individual’s lives. In focusing on the individual as the exclusive agent of change, Victory Outreach may also participate in this neoliberal privatization of social ills, and they also often employ the rhetoric of therapy through the discourse of healing and recovery. As Cloud (1998) describes, since therapy is originally a medical concept, therapeutic rhetoric often employs the language of physical or mental health. For example, Victory Outreach members often speak of “healing” (Sanchez Walsh, 2003). One of the most prominent terms in the existing Victory Outreach literature is that of “gang recovery”
(Flores, 2013). The very idea that leaving a gang is termed as “recovery,” in the way that one may experience recovery from a mental or physical illness, may demonstrate an implicit reliance on therapeutic themes and discourses of pathology to explain issues ranging from crime, drug use, depression, poverty, and other social ills experienced disproportionately by certain populations. Chicanos in particular have historically been labeled as pathological (Mirande, 1985; Lopez, 1992; Velez Ibanez, 1996). In this way, analyzing the ways that Victory Outreach may draw on these therapeutic discourses can be fruitful in teasing out the hegemonic aspects of the organization.

Moreover, groups that promote an individualist, therapeutic rhetoric, such as Victory Outreach, can often be even more persuasive due to the simple fact that they are groups, giving them an aspect of collectivity. For example, Alcoholics Anonymous recovery program has been found to be quite successful, in part due to its ability to communicate individualist, therapeutic ideology while simultaneously providing individuals with a sense of community, support, interaction, and a shared ideological system. (Thatcher, 2007; Wright, 2010). However, there is a slight twist, in that VO does not only locate the causes of these various social ills in the individual, but often in the spiritual or cosmic realm (Sanchez-Walsh, 2003). While perhaps taking the burden off of individuals and families, and providing an alternative to the pathological view, this rhetoric of “spiritual warfare” rather than “political warfare” perhaps is still hegemonic to the extent that it successfully deflects attention away from the structural and institutional apparatus that lies at the root of various social ills.

**The Project**

In light of these complex intersections of Chicano Masculinity, hegemony and resistant rhetoric, spirituality, and interethnic shared culture, I will seek to arrive at a nuanced criticism of the sort
of everyday, vernacular rhetoric at Victory Outreach, as well as a nuanced understanding of the complex social and cultural elements that constitute the organization. The discussion of VO as both empowering and hegemonic, particularly combined with its emphasis on culturally specific forms of communication, (such as rap, lowrider car culture, etc), raise critical questions for communication (or rhetorical) scholars interested in the intersections of race, discourse, and resistance. Informed by previous work on Victory Outreach and scholarship on rhetoric and hegemony, I will seek to examine what rhetorical power, whether hegemonic or resistive, VO has. In this thesis, I will examine the forms of masculinity and cultural resistance at VO, the complexities of Black-Brown relations and cultural exchange at VO as a case study on African American-Chica@o relations, and analyze and assess the often apolitical, hegemonic rhetoric that involves therapy, an illusion of politics, and a spiritualization of social ills, alongside a gender hierarchy that generally goes unchallenged by the male centered rhetoric and leadership, at Victory Outreach.

Methods

To help me grapple with these questions, I used a variety of methods, including participant observation, interviews, and internet data/ church literature as a supplement. Some of my data is based on field notes collected while attending church services sporadically over a year and a half span (for a total of 15 church services) held on Fridays and Sundays, as a participant observer at a Victory Outreach congregation in Denver, CO. I also attended rallies, community events, and dramas (live plays organized by the church), when they occurred. I also visited the boxing club (located in the church basement), and the men’s home. At both church services and these other events, I took jottings on a pad of paper and typed them into field notes to be stored on my computer. I began by jotting down all sorts of details about the congregation, from
observed behaviors to the physical environment. Eventually, I narrowed my focus, paying closer attention to references, whether explicit or metaphorical, to gender, race, and the use of popular culture in church services and events. Finally, I conducted extensive, semi-structured qualitative interviews with five male members at the congregation, asking questions ranging from their personal histories and what led them to the church, to Black-Brown relations, to their ideas on issues regarding masculinity, gangs, drugs, crime, etc (interview guide at the bottom). These interviews lasted anywhere between 30 minutes and 3 hours. I recorded and fully transcribe each of these interviews, searching for general themes across them (such as attitudes about masculinity, causes and solutions to gang violence, personal histories, etc), analyzing responses from a critical rhetorical viewpoint that sought to tease out the implications for hegemony and resistance in the sorts of discourses that members most commonly draw upon. Finally, I supplemented with internet data that includes video footage of events and dramas, and documents distributed by the ministry. I believe that these methods provided me with both a broad and close perspective on the rhetoric and politics of Victory Outreach.

Throughout, I use qualitative data to make mostly rhetorical and humanistic arguments, rather than focusing on description and interpretation as is common in traditional social science research. For example, in Chapter 2, I use mostly interview and participant observation data to analyze the resistant potential of the alternative masculinities being proposed at Victory Outreach. In Chapter 3, I first detail the long history of shared cultural politics between African Americans and Chican@/s, using various forms of qualitative data to demonstrate my argument that Victory Outreach utilizes these forms of cultural exchange, both historical and contemporary, in order to promote black and brown unity. In Chapter 4, I use interviews and participant observation to make rhetorical arguments that problematize aspects of Victory
Outreach’s rhetoric that I frame as overwhelmingly hegemonic, namely, the deflection from social structures and lack of gender equity.

I chose this methodology because I believed that working at the intersections of qualitative work and rhetoric would allow me greater access to these everyday versions of rhetoric, in all of its forms. Middleton, Senda-Cook, & Endres (2011) argue that this more ethnographic approach to rhetoric, what they term “rhetorical field methods” allows access to “everyday rhetorical experience,” in a “processual form of rhetorical action that is accessible only through participatory methods” (387). This is especially important at a site such as an evangelical church, in which rhetoric often has an affective dimension, moving people through not only oratory, but through music, dance, art, emotion, and even the “holy spirit.” In this case, traditional text based rhetorical methods would present some limitations. For example, on site at Victory Outreach Denver, I was able to observe not only the sort of rhetoric in the sermons, but the affective energies generated through music and worship, the audience reactions to particular parts of church services or sermons, members styles of dress, communication, and behavior, and develop interpersonal relationships with members that provided me more insight into the cultural, rhetorical, and political practices of the organization. However, continuing to be critical while also developing relationships and being impacted by this affective dimension was also a challenge, and undoubtedly change my outlook. Throughout, I strived to maintain reflexivity and conduct research and criticism in an ethical and fair manner.

**Conclusion**

I believe that this project is necessary and urgent. As Chican@ communities, as well as African American communities, continue to experience disproportionate levels of poverty, police brutality, sickness, incarceration, pain, sadness, addiction, and violence, we must find the
complex connections between these various ills and organize to meet these challenges. However, we must also critically analyze those organizations that already exist, utilizing what may be useful and rejecting what may be harmful for the ultimate goal of mobilizing for justice and equality. I will conclude with a quote from former Chicano gang member and drug addict turned writer and activist, Luis J. Rodriguez. In his memoir (2005), he states:

But the solid and necessary work that will actually delve into the social, political, psychological, economic and spiritual basis for gangs, drug addictions, as well as domestic and street violence is not being done. To paraphrase Henry David Thoreau, thousands are hacking at the branches of the problem; few are working at the root. (xvi).
Chapter 2: Sadness, Masculinity, and the search for dignity

I’d rather die like a man, then live like a coward,
Theres a ghetto up in heaven and its ours, Black Power!
-Tupac Shakur, Only God Can Judge Me

Despite the frequent tensions between Black and Brown, Tupac Shakur has become somewhat of a martyr to urban Chican@s. In Southern California, it is not uncommon to see the title of this project, “Only God Can Judge Me” (which is also the name of a Tupac Shakur hit) decorating the forearms of cholos, or scrawled across the rear window of a tricked out Chevy Impala in the slow lane on the 60 freeway. In many ways, he has become an honorary Chicano. LA based Chicano rapper King Lil G, in his track “Who shot Tupac?” repeatedly refers to Pac as the “realest motherfucker ever born.” Perhaps this is because the diminutive Pac, more than any other rapper before or since, articulated the pain, sadness, and despair of urban Black and Brown males, combined with an unrelenting will to survive and assert his manhood and dignity, even in the face of insurmountable odds. His dedication to what he termed “thug life,” his tattoos and male bravado, and his intense love for Los Angeles urban culture (In “California Love,” Pac raps, “It wouldn’t be LA without Mexicans”) made him a revered figure among Chican@s, perhaps especially Chicano men. Like many other African American “gangsta” rap artists on the West Coast, he also drew heavily from Chican@ culture and even Chican@ gang cultures, wearing bandanas and creased khakis, rapping about lowriders, and even sampling from the famous Chican@ gang film “American Me” in his track, “Death Around the corner.” He often cried out to God, but like countless other Black and Brown males, death was around the corner. Tupac left the world the victim of violence. But he died with dignity, “like a man” as they say. Tupac Shakur had much to say about masculinity, sadness, and gang cultures in not only African American communities, but Chican@ communities as well.
As mentioned, modern Chican@ gang culture in Los Angeles emerged in the 1940’s, especially in the aftermath of the humiliation experienced by Mexican American youth following the 1943 Zoot Suit riots, after servicemen, civilians, and the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) attacked Pachuc@ youth for ten straight days. In many ways, the segregated, poor, and racialized Mexican American community of Los Angeles was scapegoated and regarded as the enemy other by whites in wartime Los Angeles (Mazon, 1984). This led to a rise in violent gang activity and the use of hard drugs among Chican@ gangs (Moore, 1978; Escobar, 1999; Vigil, 2002; Sanchez-Walsh, 2003). Of course Chican@ gang culture does not only exist in Los Angeles, but also in several major and mid-sized cities and metropolitan areas with large urban Chican@ populations.

Denver, Colorado is one of those cities, and one that shares a Chican@ gang history that is remarkably similar to that of Los Angeles. Duran (2011) points to the rise in Chican@ gangs in Denver as the direct result of not only the patterns of segregation and poverty among Denver’s Mexican American population, but also an increase in fears and criminalization of Denver’s Mexican American youth, after Denver’s white community, police, and newspapers got wind of the Zoot Suit riots occurring in Los Angeles. Recall that Chicano males, especially, have sometimes used gang membership and physical violence as an expression of dignity, manhood, and pride denied to them by the larger society (Erlanger, 1979; Cintron, 1997; Flores & Hondagneu- Sotelo, 2013).

Though these practices of violence and gang territoriality may provide a sense of dignity, they can also be destructive, not only for individuals, but also for the greater Chican@ community. Octavio Paz refers to this masculine code of conduct that pits men against each other, often violently, as the “ethic of chingar” in which men compete over the title of “mas
“chingon” (Paz, 1950). Scholars writing about so-called “machismo” among Chicano/Latino men differ on what they perceive to be its origins, nature, or if it even exists (Pena, 1991; Mirande, 1997; Falicov, 2010). Others have pointed to its simplicity and the various ways that Chicano men perform masculinity (Delgado, 2002; 2005; Holling, 2006). Leon (2014) points to the figure of Cesar Chavez as an example of an articulation of an alternative manliness, in which his version of machismo combined courage and social justice with an explicit dedication to non-violence. Victory Outreach has emerged partly in response to Chican@ gang culture, but with an explicitly non-violent philosophy offering hope and allowing men a space to explore alternative Chicano masculinities.

At Victory Outreach Denver, I observed men attempting to deal with their gang backgrounds and formulate alternative masculinities that allow for dignity without violence. Victory Outreach Denver provides male members a space to “do” masculinity in alternative ways. At VO Denver, men are encouraged to explicitly deal with their “sadness,” are provided a way to feel dignity without resorting to violence, and are given a space to actively claim or reclaim love in their lives, all while being included in a community that respects and welcomes those who are most “outcasted” in society. Interestingly, this reformulation of masculinity at VO Denver is often couched in Chicano urban slang and street life metaphors, and draws from “cholo,” and gang cultures and discourses. These somewhat traditional Chicano masculine performances allow men at VO to maintain distinct identities even as they challenge particular aspects of their masculine identities. For example, in one sermon, the head pastor at VO Denver, Pastor Ruben, told the congregation, “God says to love all people all the time. That means you should love them even when they ‘dog’ you, because if you can’t love somebody even when they are mad dogging you then you are just weak, fake, a punk.”
The goal of this chapter is to look at the ways that VO articulates an alternative masculinity for working class Chicano males, many of them former gang members. These men indicated to me that they had been socialized into a gender identity often based on physical aggression or violence, risky behavior such as drug and alcohol abuse, and the suppression of emotions, perhaps representing an attempt for marginalized men to approximate an ideal of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity, based on power and dominance, can include practices such as violence and aggression, competitiveness, stoic behavior (restraining emotions), success, and achievement, being “tough,” drinking and other risky behaviors, and the subordination of femininity and alternative forms of masculinity, among other practices (Connel, 2005; Donaldson, 1993; Engstrom, 2012). The way that these practices are expressed, and which of them is emphasized, however, differs based on one’s access to social and cultural capital, resources, and ability to wield abstract forms of power (Oliver, 1984; Katz, 2003; Connel, 2005; Mutua, 2006; Engstrom, 2012).

Because of this, some of the most physically violent, aggressive, or risky practices can emanate from men that find themselves at the bottom of the class or racial hierarchy (such as the working class Chicano men at VO), as they lack the necessary means to perform aspects of hegemonic masculinity such as economic success and achievement, workplace authority, or abstract forms of social and cultural power and dominance based on race or ethnicity. Nevertheless, these masculinities remain subordinated or marginalized in relation to the forms of masculinity that can be expressed by the few men with the most social, cultural, and economic power (i.e. wealthy, white, heterosexual men), even as they maintain (perhaps even more crucially, then) their hegemonic hold over undervalued femininity or queer masculinities (Oliver, 1984; Katz, 2003; Mutua, 2006).
Though Flores (2014) argues that the “reformed barrio” masculinity at Victory Outreach involves incorporation into a dominant, hegemonic masculinity revolving around being a family breadwinner (though he also notes that elements of *cholo* performance are integrated as well), I argue that, in my experience at least, the sort of masculinity proposed at Victory Outreach may be understood as quite resistant. Though this form of masculinity contains hegemonic aspects, as well as aspects of *cholo* masculinity, they intersect with ideals of love and non-violence in such a way that an alternative Chicano manhood with counter-hegemonic potential is produced. This chapter situates the seemingly traditional performances of masculinity at Victory Outreach within the less common site of love, non-violence, and faith to argue that the intersection of religion, love, non-violence, and traditional (Chicano) masculinities produces an alternative masculinity with counter-hegemonic potential. To make this argument, I first look at Chicano Masculinity and its specificity in terms of dealing with sadness and violence, then outline both the traditional and non-traditional cultural elements (i.e. pastiche and cultural syncretism) that intersect in the particular kind of masculinity proposed at Victory Outreach.

**Chicano Masculinity**

There has been much research, both past and present on Mexicano/Chicano/Latino heterosexual masculinities, particularly revolving around the idea of a certain hyper masculine *machismo* among Latino males. Various explanations have arisen for the supposed existence of “macho” behavior, or whether there is a reason for the concept of “macho” to even exist at all (Pena, 1991; Guttmann, 1996; Mirande, 1997; Falicov, 2010). For example, Pena (1991) argues that *machismo* stems from the need for economically and socially disempowered Latino men to enact power by other means. Mirande (1997) argues that macho behavior may be inherited among Latinos in response to the trauma of Spanish colonization, and that the traditional
negative “macho” characteristics (arrogance, lustfulness, violence, etc) actually characterized the Spanish conquerors and where projected onto Mexican men. Falicov (2010) dismisses the idea of machismo altogether, characterizing it as a reductive myth that fails to comprehend the complexity of Chicano/Latino heterosexual masculinity and the various ways that it may be performed. However, she admits that the strength of the myth as a hegemonic “grand narrative” in media and popular discourse may still pressure Chicano/Latino men to conform to its predetermined scripts.

Though the idea of machismo has generally been seen as entirely negative in mainstream discourses, some Chicano men have attempted to use the term in more positive ways. Mirande (1997) notes that Mexican and Chicano men themselves often view a “macho” as a label that need not be entirely negative, as positive ideals of courage, pride, honor, respect, and loyalty can also be attributes of a “macho.” This was also the way that machismo was often conceptualized during the Chicano movement. For example, the lyrics to the famous Chicano Movement corrido, “Yo soy Chicano” proclaim, “Tengo mi orgullo y machismo, Mi cultura y corazón. Tengo mi fe y diferencia, Y lacho con gran razón,” which translates roughly to, “I have my pride and my machismo, My culture and my heart. I have my faith and differences, And I fight with great conviction.” Importantly, however, Chicana organizers and activists from the Chicano movement era have often stated that they viewed many of the men in the movement as patriarchal, sexist, and homophobic, and felt marginalized within the movement (Martinez, 1998).

Though there has been a wealth of research on Chicano masculinity, it has for the most part been understudied in Communication rhetoric. Delgado (2002; 2005) and Holling (2006) have made crucial contributions, however. Holling (2006) incorporates a range of
interdisciplinary research, including the work of Delgado (2002; 2005) to understand the various ways that Chicano masculinity has been performed, revealing the complexity of Chicano masculinity in the TV show *Ressurection Boulevard*. These various performances go well beyond hegemonic masculinity or stereotypical portrayals of “macho” Latinos. Holling describes four types of Chicano masculinity present in the media and popular culture: the “tough macho,” the “tender macho,” “brown masculinity,” and “golden masculinity.”

Perhaps the most common and recognizable depiction of Chicano men is what Holling refers to as the “tough macho,” the hypermasculine, ultra-violent, and “scary” Latino male so often imagined in film and popular discourse. But Holling also points to another strand of Chicano/Latino “machismo” that resonates, that of the “tender macho” who, supposedly unlike white men, is better able to express love and affection. However, she also draws from Delgado as she points out two alternative ways that Chicano men have performed masculinity, what Delgado (2002;2005) calls “brown masculinity” and “golden masculinity.” Delgado (2002) describes “brown masculinity,” as exemplified by Chicano rapper Kid Frost, as a strand of Chicano masculinity that may incorporate elements of the “tough macho,” except with a more political orientation, often couched in a rearticulation of Chicano nationalism, that espouses Chicano pride and a community ethos (perhaps similar to “Yo Soy Chicano”). Another alternative is what Delgado (2005) refers to as “Golden masculinity,” best exemplified through the figure of Chicano boxer Oscar De La Hoya. This strand of Chicano masculinity blends various markers of “Latinoness” and hegemonic (i.e. U.S. American, white, middle class) masculinity. However, this form of masculinity has placed De la Hoya in a luminal space, viewed as not quite manly enough, not quite Latino enough, and not quite American enough, either.
Victory Outreach, then, provides yet another alternative, further adding to the complexity of Chicano masculinity often ignored in mediated representations and popular discourses about Chicano males. By encouraging a loving and affectionate masculinity couched in metaphors of “toughness” and “fighting” and punctuated by “cholo” performance, emphasizing responsibility to family and community, and adopting certain hegemonic values, Victory Outreach Denver blends and mixes all of the various masculine performances outlined, and more. This is what Victory Outreach scholar Edward Flores (2014) refers to as “reformed barrio masculinity.” This strategy may be seen as an attempt by men at Victory Outreach to remain “manly” enough, “Chicano” enough, but also “barrio” enough and perhaps even “American” enough as they deal quite explicitly with pain and sadness in their personal lives as well as within the larger community.

Sadness and Chicano men at Victory Outreach

Though Victory Outreach is most well known for reaching Chicano gang members and drug addicts, Victory Outreach attempts to address the full range of “sadness,” to borrow Velez-Ibanez’s term, experienced disproportionately by the Chican@ community. Recall that for Velez Ibanez, the “distribution of sadness” refers to various “sad” categories, including mental illness, physical illness, drug abuse, over participation in U.S. wars, and gangs and crime, all categories in which Chican@s are over represented. For Velez-Ibanez, this is a result of the equally disproportionate distribution of social, political, and economic, power and resources, of which Chican@s are severely lacking, or underrepresented. When I asked Luis, who helps out at the men’s home, why men enter the home, he said,” Drug addiction, we also get guys that are homeless, out there struggling, can’t find jobs so they come here. I mean they don’t have to be alcoholics, drug addicts, they just come here they wanna be closer to God. Closer to God.”
When I asked Victory Outreach Denver worship leader, Jimmy, himself a former 18th Street gang member and drug dealer (and later user) who also went through the men’s home years prior, if most people in the home are struggling with drug addiction, he told me that,

Although right now we are still reaching the drug addict, the prostitute, the gang members, in all reality not everyone in the home is strung out on dope. In all reality there’s some people that are just homeless, some people that are just hurting and they need help. There’s men and women that their marriages are struggling and they need help, so they’ll go into the home. There’s people in the church that they’re struggling and they just want more of Jesus so they’ll go into the home. Just to get away from everything and focus on the Lord. So there’s a whole variety of different people. There’s ex veterans, people that came from the gulf war, from Afghanistan, from Libya in the military force and they put themselves in the home. So there’s a whole range of different testimonies for why people choose the home. And like I said it’s supernatural, its God ordained. So it’s a choice that they make but Gods already known from the beginning where they were gonna go……But the men and women that are in the home nowadays, plus the teenagers, cuz we have youth homes, they are coming in with different problems than just drug addiction, amen?

As demonstrated, Victory Outreach, and perhaps the men’s and women’s homes in particular, confronts a wide range of “sadness” that disproportionally impacts the Chican@ community.

But gendered expectations often shape our experiences of sadness. In part due to the ways that traditional masculinity has been understood, whether it be hegemonic masculinities, various forms of Chicano masculinity, or gang masculinity, dealing with issues of violence or sadness (when one is expected to be physically powerful and stoic) becomes a gendered (and
raced) experience. So for the Chicano males at Victory Outreach Denver, many former gang members, who have often been socialized to maintain stoic attitudes, suppress so-called “weak” emotions, and not speak explicitly about things like sadness and pain (much like Hollings “tough macho”), they must reformulate their definitions of manhood in order to effectively deal with sadness. To provide space for these redefinitions, Victory Outreach intersects both traditional and non-traditional conceptions of manhood, opening up space for men to revise their views of masculinity while still affirming their identities.

**Relying on traditional masculinities to affirm, accept, and create space**

To push for a masculinity that allows room for a non-violent philosophy, an emphasis on love, and a way to openly and productively deal with pain and sadness, VO’s form of cultural syncretism incorporates various elements that are familiar to traditional masculinities and Chicano, gang, and barrio cultures. These include traditional Chicano gang structure, “cholo” masculine performance, and a reinterpretation of metaphors of “fighting” and “toughness.” I begin by discussion the way that Victory Outreach incorporates traditional gang hierarchies and structures into their organizational culture.

**Gang structures at Victory Outreach**

Traditional gang organizations tend to be male dominated and quite hierarchical and structured, with a leader as a key decision maker for gang activities who relies on a handful of “lieutenants” to carry out actions (Klein, 2014; Vargas, 2014). These large, well established gangs usually subdivide into chapters, with each branch having its own set of officers. Many of these traditional gangs are quite old, and elder gang members form powerful mentoring relationships with younger members. These relationships provide a level of status and respect for older members, as well as guidance for younger members (Conquergood, 1994). In recent times,
however, some gangs have begun to take on a more fluid, less rigid organizational structure, especially in neighborhoods that have begun to establish gangs fairly recently (Bolden, 2014).

In many ways, Victory Outreach seems to mimic the organizational structure and hierarchy of a (traditional) gang. Leadership positions are exclusively male, even at the level of the congregation, and there is a strict hierarchical structure. For example, the “mother church” (located in my hometown of Chino, CA) oversees all other congregations. Churches are subdivided into regions, and then individual congregations. The founder, Sonny Arguinzoni, is the final decision maker, but he is supported by other men who are referred to as “elders,” essentially lieutenants who are next in command. This hierarchy is repeated at the regional level and at the level of the individual congregation. For example, at Victory Outreach Denver, the leadership consists of a male lead pastor and four male assistant pastors. This hierarchy mirrors the sort of structured leadership described earlier, where large traditional gangs have one key decision maker, lieutenants, and are subdivided into chapters, each with their own sets of officers. In my experiences at Victory Outreach Denver, these leaders are generally older members (literally, “elders”), who are almost all former gang members themselves. And just as elder gang members are highly respected and provide guidance
for younger gang members, this practice is continued at Victory Outreach. “Elders” are granted very high status, and are viewed with reverence and respect. As elder ex-gang members, they provide direction and serve as mentors to young men who have either just recently left the gang lifestyle or are in the process of doing so.

Victory Outreach also continues to utilize gang communicative practices as well. Gang cultures and communicative practices have been designed to provide a sense of shelter, familialism, and pride for members, who are often marginalized in mainstream society (Conquergood, 1994; Cintron, 1996; Flores & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2013). Examples of these communicative practices can include the use of insider group language, handshakes, very close and familial identification with the in-group, styles of dress that signify gang membership, and claiming physical, group space through public graffiti (Conquergood, 1994). These communicative practices provide shelter for gang members within the group, usually young men who are vulnerable and marginalized, “be it via race, ethnicity, nationality, or poverty” (Klein, 2014). According to Klein (2014), this shared sense of social marginality becomes a gang unifier in and of itself, increasing the cohesiveness and collective identification of the gang. The focus on the marginalized (gang members, drug addicts, the homeless, etc) at Victory Outreach continues this tradition. Also, gang communicative practices are often maintained at Victory Outreach Denver that include linguistic styles, styles of dress, and even public graffiti (the side of the church is decorated with a large graffiti mural that reads “Stop the Violence”). In this way, Victory Outreach continues particular gang traditions in the emphasis on social marginality and collective communicative practices, while simultaneously denouncing gang violence, which itself is another “gang unifier” identified by Klein. As demonstrated, organizational structures and communicative practices at Victory Outreach often mimic gang cultures even as they
denounce gang violence. This provides a structure and culture in which men at Victory Outreach, many of them former gang members, can collectively renegotiate masculinity, emphasizing love over violence, while still taking advantage of the familialism, sense of shelter, pride and dignity, and familiar hierarchy afforded by gang organizational cultures and structures.

Perhaps not surprisingly, then, Victory Outreach also often finds themselves competing with local gangs, as well as drug dealers, for the hearts and minds of local youth. VO members in general see themselves as mentors for youth in the community, and attempt to “recruit” new members from neighborhood youth, much like gangs. For example, Luis told me, “Yea just we…I mean…Victory Outreach is gonna continue going after the gangs. And the drug addicts. I mean they (gangs and drug dealers) are not gonna stop were not gonna stop.” Similarly, Bobby told me, “It’s always gonna start with the younger people. That’s like us older people gotta start reaching out the kids so we could start…steer em² in the right direction.” Michael told me that, “older gang members, 30 and 40 years old, like to recruit younger people,” he went on to say that Victory Outreach has great programs for youth such as the boxing program, saying that its “best to grab em while they young.” In the summertime, Victory Outreach members head to local parks to “recruit.” As Assistant Pastor Paul told me “….we make like a circle, so we start here and then we go to another one and another one and then we end up coming back. And we do that in the summer so we hit that park maybe 4 or 5 times a few times out of the summer. So people see us and know us.” Through this sort of evangelizing, Victory Outreach maintains a presence in the neighborhood that offers church membership as an alternative to gang membership. No

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² Words like “gonna” “cuz” or “gotta” (as alternatives to “going to” “because” or “have to”) will be used throughout when interview data is used. Rather than convert these terms in to “standard” English, I chose to transcribe interviews as they were. Though terms such as those are not “standard,” they are generally used and understood in day to day life.
doubt, the fact that VO members continue to perform their masculinities in line with barrio styles of clothing, speech, and adornment helps in these efforts.

**Gender performance**

*Dressed in locs and khaki suits and ride is what we do.* -Tupac, *California Love*

Though male members at Victory Outreach Denver are actively revising their conceptions of masculinity, many members also continue to perform their masculinity (through dress, speech, adornment, etc.) in ways still generally associated with Chicano “*cholo*” masculinity. For example, oversized khakis or jeans with a crease, short cropped hair, “loc” sunglasses, and visible tattoos were common among men at VO, including those I interviewed. Also, Victory Outreach preaches love and non-violence while using traditional masculine ideals like toughness and fighting as metaphors, as well as utilizing Chicano masculine street slang, as terms like “homeboy” or “mad doggin,” as well as Spanglish/ caló terminology such as “*clika,*” “*pinta,*” or “*ese,*” are common, both in sermons and interpersonal communication. VO, then, frames an ideal masculinity at the intersections of traditional masculine ideals (*cholo* performance/adornment, and ideas of toughness, fighting, and dignity) and non-traditional ideals (love, non-violence) and couched in familiar Chican@ slang and street/gang terminology. This “cultural syncretism,” and “pastiche” which is a feature of all vernacular discourses, provides a potential space for Chicano men at Victory Outreach to perform an alternative “toughness” and find an alternative “dignity” while simultaneously rejecting physical violence.

**Being “tough,” being a “fighter”**

*Even in the darkest nights, I got the heart to fight*  
-*Tupac, Hellraiser*

At VO Denver, there is a rearticulation of the meaning of masculine ideals like toughness, fighting, and strength, as well as a focus on love. For example, Pastor Ruben, who
went to prison for murder at the age of 18, often uses fighting metaphors for love, Christianity, and serving God. During one sermon, he says, “God says to love all people all the time. That means you should love them even when they ‘dog’ you, because if you can’t love somebody even when they are mad dogging you then you are just weak, fake, a punk.” The men applauded and shouted their approval. In this way, Pastor Ruben attempts to change ideas of what it means to be a “true man” from having the courage to fight, to having the courage not to fight, and to love instead. In fact, succumbing to the urges of the “flesh,” in this case a physical confrontation with another man, actually makes one *unmanly*, as in “weak,” “fake” and a “punk.”

However, Christianity itself is often framed as a metaphor for fighting. For example, in another sermon, Pastor Ruben talks about “the enemy,” which is the devil. He characterizes Christianity as “a fight with the enemy” who wants to “use you like a chump.” He goes on to warn the congregation not to “get punked” by the devil, challenging their toughness, and hence, masculinity, by challenging their Christian faith. In yet another sermon, Pastor Ruben asserts that, “God is looking in the neighborhood for tough guys who can handle their business. We are fighters. We fought in the neighborhood, we fought in jail, we even fight with our wives. Fight for God! You are a man!!! We are warriors!” Once again, the meaning of being “tough” or “fighting,” is articulated to mean serving God, essentially using violent metaphors to preach non-violence. In this way, Chicano males can still be “warriors,” but rather than warring with other men (or women), we can fight a spiritual battle with evil. Also, in this reconceptualization, a man’s “toughness” becomes a valued trait that God can use, and is “looking for,” rather than something to be stamped out. These values of toughness, fighting, and “having heart” are seen as vital to Christianity. In another sermon, Pastor Ruben demonstrates this point further, saying, “You can’t be a boxer running away from his opponent, scared to get hit. Well being a Christian
is the same, you gotta have heart. You gotta be willing to take a hit!” Assistant Pastor Dave also used a boxing metaphor in yet another sermon to challenge members masculinity, beginning by saying “sometimes you stand up for God and get beat up”….. “but like Rocky, you gotta stay hungry.” He went on to say, “you gotta be sharp. Stay on your toes.” To demonstrate, he jumped into a fighting stance in front of the congregation, put his chin up, and said “What up ese?!?!?”

Fighting and boxing run very deep at Victory Outreach Denver, not only metaphorically but also literally. Victory Outreach Denver runs a free boxing program for local youth in the basement of the church, complete with a makeshift ring, punching bags, speed bags, and all of the other essential equipment. Perhaps this is not surprising, as the sport of boxing has often been seen as a crucial site in which race, class, and gender intersect. It is generally males from the lowest ranks of society (at any particular historical time period) that participate most heavily in the sport, providing these males with a refuge from hopelessness, indignity, poverty and racism, as well as an alternative to street violence (Wacquant, 1992; 1995; 2004). The boxing trainers are all men from the congregation, and on the day that I was there, the participants were all male youth from the neighborhood. On the wall of the gym was a large Bible quote from 2 Timothy 4:7 that read, “I fought a good fight. I finished the race. I kept my faith.” In an interview with Bobby, a trainer at the Victory Outreach Denver boxing program, he compared reading the Bible to a defensive stance in boxing, saying, “when you let your guard down, like you’re in a fight you let your hands down your gonna get hit. Ya know the devil always workin’, he’s probably clockin’ in doin’ overtime tryin’ to make a lot of people die. That’s his main objective, to destroy us, and if you’re not in that word, you’re weak, you’re vulnerable.”

Dignity, purpose, and status
God help me, 'cause I'm starvin' can't get a job, so I resort to violent robberies my life is hard/
Can't sleep 'cause all the dirt make my heart hurt, put in work and shed tears for my dead peers/
Mislead from childhood where I went astray, till this day I still pray for a better way/
-Tupac, My Block

As mentioned, one explanation for violent, hypermasculine stances among working class men of color has been the inability for some men, who lack forms of abstract status or power, to enact hegemonic masculinity in ways other than physical dominance. Additionally, indignities faced by Chican@s have led to the rise of gangs in the Chican@ community, and most gang members, unsurprisingly, are male. Rather than challenging the ideals of hegemonic masculinity (status, success, power) VO attempts to give Chicano men an alternative avenue to achieving some semblance of those ideals. Victory Outreach then, attempts to provide a way for members to find dignity, status, success, and power that do not rely on violence and gang membership. They do this through the men’s home, and by granting purpose and responsibility to male residents, both in the church and in the community.

All of the pastors and assistant pastors are former graduates of the Victory Outreach men’s homes, and roles in the church such as ushers and tech crew are fulfilled by men currently in the home, which is attached to the church itself. Pastor Ruben says in a sermon that, “The men in the home freak out when we give them the keys to the church and give them a role. They are honored. You are not just a menace. There is a hero in there.” He goes on to say that, “These are powerful men that could wreak havoc on the community. Instead they bow down before God and help the community.” When I asked Assistant Pastor Paul about the men’s home, he said “Nobody wants em, not even their own families. And so it instills a sense of purpose and meaning and that you’re not worthless, and in Gods eyes you are worth something, and they
could use you.” In these ways, Victory Outreach Denver provides Chicano men with a sense of purpose, value, and responsibility by giving them a role in the church.

Also, the difficult, low wage, and sometimes humiliating labor often performed by Chican@s is granted dignity and is used as a metaphor for Christianity by Pastor Ruben. For example, in one sermon he says, “Christianity ain’t easy. But everything we do is hard. Building buildings, fixing cars and changing tires, washing dishes, standing behind a cash register for 8 hours on your feet. And you think Christianity is gonna be easy?” He goes on to say that, “You’ll do anything for your boss. Put this funny costume on! Yes sir! But not for God?” These speak to the sort of labor that Chican@s must do on a daily basis. Included is the humiliation in some of the work (wearing a funny costume) but also the value in hard work, and the value to our nation (Where would we be without people who build buildings?). Once again this rendering provides a sense of dignity, purpose, and value to those who perform difficult labor for low pay, or are humiliated on the job by more powerful bosses or supervisors. Moreover, the hard work and humiliation associated with this sort of labor is seen as vital to Christianity, as serving God requires the ability to work hard and swallow one’s pride. For those who cannot find work, Pastor Ruben asks, “Looking for a job?” He then states that, “God has a job for you, and it’s not working for the man. It’s working for God!” Similarly, Assistant Pastor Dave, in another sermon, tells the congregation, “Ya know, when you are looking for a job, you ask if they have an open position. But they always say no. Well God has a position open for you.” This approach sends the message that members are somebody worthy of a job in the eyes of God, even if the world does not agree. Perhaps this is especially important for men, as traditional gender roles have historically positioned men as “breadwinners,” expected to provide materially and economically for their families through finding and keeping jobs in the mainstream
economy. It also attempts to shift the focus from elements of everyday life that may overwhelm people, by locating real purpose in the spiritual realm rather than the worldly realm. And unlike the mainstream economy, God is accessible to all.

Much like gangs, Victory Outreach provides an avenue for Chicano males to pursue traditional masculine ideals of dignity, “toughness,” courage, status, and responsibility. Unlike gangs, however, VO simultaneously counters forms of masculinity that are based on physical violence and physical power. By providing dignity to male members, both discursively (you are somebody!) and materially (giving men responsibility and a role in the church), combined with an explicitly anti-violence conception of masculinity (i.e. you are a “punk” for fighting, rather than the opposite), Victory Outreach Denver provides a way out of the cycle of indignity and violence so common among Chicano males and especially Chicano gang members. All this however, remains couched in familiar cholo performance, gang structures, Chicano barrio slang, and traditional masculine metaphors around “toughness” and “fighting.” These intersections allow men the freedom to deal with pain and sadness, as well as renounce violence, without relinquishing a particular kind of Chicano barrio masculine identity.

Victory Outreach, then, draws from Chicano gangs and masculinities in their focus on the marginalized, their organizational structure, their linguistic choices, communicative practices, and race/gender performances that value “cholo” masculinities. They also uphold hegemonic masculine ideals especially important to urban Chicano males, such as “toughness” or “dignity,” even as they rearticulate their meanings and/or provide alternative, non-violent, avenues to achieving those ideals. This affirmation of Chicano barrio masculinity not only allows men the freedom to deal with sadness without relinquishing their identity, it also provides a space where members identities feel valued and accepted, rather than feared, rejected, and repudiated. Many
men expressed to me a feeling of marginalization at other churches, but a sense of acceptance at Victory Outreach. The focus on the marginalized and “outcasted” (also a key part of gang cultures) is a key factor in this as well.

A chance

_Supreme ideology you claim to hold,
Claiming that we all drug dealers with empty souls._
-Tupac, _Everything You Owe_

_Can't help but feel hopeless and heart broke,
From the start I felt the racism ’cause I’m dark._
—Tupac, _My Block_

_Give us a chance_
-Tupac, _They Don’t Give a Fuck About Us_

A visiting pastor from California, Pastor Lalo, came to preach to the congregation one Sunday. A man in his seventies, he was around in the incipient days of Victory Outreach in East Los Angeles. People treat him with a lot of respect, sort of like a _veterano_ in the neighborhood. He begins his sermon by playing some oldies on his guitar, with the lyrics changed to Christian themes (Hey there lonely world, don’t you know that Jesus loves you too….). He then moves into his sermon, beginning with his “testimony” of how he came to Victory Outreach. He says that he was first “saved” in 1969, when the Holy Spirit “jumped him,” speaking to him through a _pachuco_ who brought the word of God to him. That’s right; the Holy Spirit jumped him, as a gang would. And rather than speaking through a White preacher, the Holy Spirit was communicated to him through a Chicano male, and what’s more, a _pachuco_, a member of a Chicano sub culture that was once so out casted and scapegoated by mainstream American society. In the same way that God spoke to Juan Diego through a brown woman, _La Virgen de Guadalupe_, God spoke to Lalo through a _pachuco_.

But folks at VO Denver realize that not everybody agrees with the audacity that God can take the form of a *pachuco*, even other Christians. Speaking of Victory Outreach, Pastor Lalo says, “If God didn’t give us this ministry, who would put up with us?” He says that “the average Christian wouldn’t come get us.” This was a common theme in sermons and interviews, as interviewees repeatedly talked about being welcome and accepted at Victory Outreach in ways that they would not be in other churches. For example, Assistant Pastor Paul said in an interview, “If I went to another church I wouldn’t fit in. Especially back when I first came in. Cuz they wouldn’t know what to do with me. They would see me and they would be probably hiding their purses and…..well…they probably were right, right? (laughs) But see in our ministry we already know all that and we just have a special anointing for reaching the people that most people don’t want. And it just shows me that God could…. it’s just a unique ministry that reaches out to people that most people wouldn’t even give a chance to.”

This feeling of being accepted and given a chance was important for newer members. For example, when I asked Bobby, a newer, younger member, to describe Victory Outreach, he told me this:

> It’s a cool place I mean, the people are not judgmental. Not only that its there’s a lot of drug addicts, gang members, dope dealers, you name it there here. Prostitutes. And its facts bro that Gods real if he could change people like that he could change anybody it’s just the matter of somebody willing to give him the chance and take him on.

What he also suggests is that Victory Outreach gave him a chance, when other churches would not. When I asked him if he has had any experiences in other churches he told me this:
Well the other churches that I have been to….like when you walk in every, all eyes are on you. You know like you’re a sore thumb sticking out and at Victory Outreach you walk in to the sanctuary right away there’s someone greeting you like hey God bless you. You go, everyone’s always happy to see you like hey! Even if they don’t know you they give you a big welcome and everybody makes you feel welcome. And that’s a big part of it. Not feeling like you’re a misfit kinda ya know? You just feel right at home no matter what. No matter what color anything we are all here we’re all people ya know?

The newest member that I interviewed was Michael. Michael had only come to the church a handful of times, and he was also the only African American man that I interviewed (all the rest were Chicano). I encountered him in the church restroom, where he was taking pills. He explained to me that they were pain medication. About 10 minutes later, we sat down in the sanctuary to conduct the interview. Though some of what he said was intelligible to me, much of it was not. In response to my questions about Victory Outreach, he often jumped from topic to topic, reciting Bible quotes, mentioning Shakespeare’s alleged role in translating the King James Version, discussing the Bering Strait that connected Asia and North America during the Ice Age, and referencing the pioneering work of paleoanthropologist Louis Leakey, among other things. I could not follow or understand most of what he was trying to say, nor make any sense of it. However, before we finished the interview, he mentioned again that this church was new to him. With my final question, I asked, “What brought you here, to Victory Outreach?” He responded only by saying, “I go where God’s spirit takes me.” I still do not know if those pills were actually pain medication. But what this interview demonstrated to me is that Victory Outreach absolutely accepts people at various stages of their recovery, whether it be so-called “gang recovery,” transitioning towards less destructive forms of masculinity, or recovering from
alcohol or drug addiction. Perhaps “God’s spirit” took Michael to the only church that would accept him with open arms.

As demonstrated, by affirming barrio identities and performances and explicitly focusing on, and reaching out to, the poor, the out casted, the “hurting”, and the marginalized, VO Denver asserts that in the eyes of God, all souls, and by extension all humans, are equal. In fact, many in the congregation believe that God has specifically included Victory Outreach for the responsibility of reaching these neglected souls. Pastor Lalo continues his sermon that day by saying that, “God has given us a special responsibility at VO, put a divine call on us (to reach those that others neglect), and that “God has included us in the body of Christ.” For the men of Victory Outreach Denver, this message of inclusion, equality, and humanity is a powerful one, as Chicano (and African American) men have historically been labeled in US media and public discourse as inherently violent and criminal. To end his sermon, Pastor Lalo points to his brown face and says, “Look at this face. It looks like a felony. We look scary, but inside there is something else.” Just maybe, it’s a soul.

**Incorporating non-traditional masculinities to revise and transform**

With this heavy incorporation of traditional forms of masculinity (whether hegemonic, Chicano, “cholo,” gang, or otherwise), affirmation of barrio cultures, and explicit reach to the marginalized or “outcasted” VO provides a space where men can feel comfortable, valued, proud, and have their identities affirmed. And by couching ideas of non-violence and love in more traditionally masculine language and performances (i.e. “toughness” and “fighting” metaphors for example) men can search for alternative masculinities without completely rejecting traditional Chicano barrio masculinity values and identity. But this also becomes especially important in providing male members (many of the former gang members) a space to
address sadness in their lives, often collectively with other men that may have suppressed very
human emotions in their pursuit of a form of masculinity that views emotion, compassion, or
love as weakness. In my interviews and observations at Victory Outreach Denver, men are
engaged in learning (or re-learning) how to cry and love.

**When Thugs Cry**

*Somebody help me, tell me where to go from here,*
*Cuz even Thugs Cry, but do the Lord Care?*
-*Tupac, Only God Can Judge Me*

*I’ve shed tattoo tears for years.* –*Tupac, When Thugs Cry*

*Lord, I suffered through the years, and shed so many tears.*
-*Tupac, So Many Tears*

*My tear drop’s getting bigger but can’t figure what I’m cryin for.*
-*Tupac, Who Do you Believe In?*

*What is the meaning, when Thugs Cry?*
-*Tupac, When Thugs Cry*

I sat down on Jimmy’s couch as he began telling me his “testimony,” as a drug dealer for
18th street gang in Los Angeles. He told me about the time when they offered him more money
if he would assume the role of “picking up the finances” for the gang.

I was going into actual neighborhoods, picking up money for them, bring it back to
them. So that’s about the time that I started to realize that I was gonna have to do some
things in my work that was gonna be violent. Some things that would be life and death
cuz not everybody is gonna pay up ya know. People were being ripped off, being jacked.
I guess I am being vague cuz I don’t wanna say, I don’t wanna admit to the things that
happened. So I guess that’s why….. Yea, I don’t know if, yea I don’t know if I’m in a
place to say exactly what happened. But it’s umm ya know now, I look back and I can’t
believe the things that I did, the things I was part of, the things that I seen. Now that I’m
saved, now that I’m serving the Lord. Yea I just have a lot of….ya know it tears me up to go back and see how many people were hurt, how many people suffer the consequence of that life.

He tried to continue but he couldn’t. He just stared at the wall, and I saw tears welling up in his eyes. He looked at me and I felt tears welling up in my eyes too. I told him he didn’t have to continue, and he didn’t. We talked for about 3 hours after that, and before I left, we hugged each other. Not those macho hugs where you pound your fist on the other mans back. A real hug. Cintron (1997) makes the case that interpersonal violence is, “strangely communal, for those who speak the discourse of pain desire pained others to accompany them. Call it, then, a need to make others hurt as one hurts, a need to make pain communal” (p. 150). The “distribution of sadness” is an interesting thing, because, like Cintron’s discourse of pain, it is communal too. Sometimes we fight against each other, sometimes we fight for each other. But sometimes we cry for each other, and sometimes we cry together.

Dealing with pain through crying together was a common theme at church service as well. At the end of every church service, they perform the “altar call” at Victory Outreach Denver. As the music plays, members make their way to the front of the sanctuary, generally men on one side and women on the other. At this point, members often dance, pray alone, put hands on other members (of the same gender, generally) to pray for them, lift their hands towards God, pace back and forth as if in a trance, speak in tongues, and often, cry. I have witnessed the same men, every Sunday, standing at the altar in tears, as other men console them. Pastor Ruben, in a sermon, once said that, “You know God is present when you see a thug cry.” I never felt comfortable making the altar call. I would stay in my seat, along with a handful of others
who decided not to make the trek to the front of the room. One time, Assistant Pastor Paul noticed me in the back, and walked back, put his hand on my shoulder, and prayed for me.

In this way, Victory Outreach provides a space where Chicano men can transgress racialized and gendered norms that often preclude them from expressing pain and sadness in ways other than aggression and violence. The ability to cry allows men at VO an opportunity to deal with sadness in very human ways without completely relinquishing their gender identity. But rather than doing this alone, Victory Outreach provides a space for men to deal with sadness alongside other men.

**Collectivity, Love, and Affect**

*Show me the meaning of forever and together we rise. –Tupac, Happy home*

*Unconditional love, talking about the stuff that don’t wear off, it don’t fade, it'll last through all these crazy days. –Tupac, Unconditional Love*

*Where would I be without my dogs? –Tupac, Unconditional Love*

In order to help members deal with sadness and attempt to claim or reclaim love in their lives, Victory Outreach Denver provides a space for members to deal collectively with grief. They do this in part through affective strategies, using music and worship, and practices that call for members to ritually cry, dance, and participate in touch. In this way, men learn to do things like loving and crying by doing them together in affective, intimate, environments. Though this may seem like something entirely foreign for Chicano males, especially those coming from gang cultures, closer inspection reveals that it may be a follow through, as much as a break from, Chicano gang cultures. In many ways, Chicano gangs are about collectivity and love as well. However the focus at VO on collectivity and love that goes beyond the insider group of the gang or neighborhood, extending to strangers, and the explicit non-violent philosophy, make for an opportunity for former Chicano gang members to revise their previous conceptions of masculinity and ponder their repercussions.
One day, after service, I follow a group of church members to a rundown motel on the East Side of Denver. They have organized an outreach event that will occur in the motel parking lot. I am told by a member that this is a common place to find drug addicts, prostitutes, pimps, and people who are homeless. The motel is a courtyard shape, with a bar in the middle. We set up chairs, band equipment, and the women prepare food to give to anyone who wants it. The band starts to play and people begin to peek out of their motel rooms to figure out what is going on. A few walk out to see what all the commotion is about. As the band plays, the women begin serving food. More and more people head out of their motel rooms, though many simply take food and go back inside. As people eat and listen to the music, Brother Richard begins telling his testimony about being addicted to crack cocaine in these same streets, and his transformation through God. There in the parking lot, I meet various people, including an undocumented Mexican immigrant who recently got busted by immigration and had to pay a fine, which left him no money to afford a down payment to rent a place. This has left his family stuck here at this motel. I also get in a conversation with another man, a Black man who works as a security guard at a strip mall, but doesn’t have enough to move out of the motel. The men’s home came to help, and though I wanted to take field notes, I ended up spending most of the time talking and laughing with men from the men’s home and other male church members. There was an excitement in the air, the feeling of community.

Some of the locals stuck around to listen, but many people simply grabbed some free food and left. One young Black man walked by me, and as Brother Richard said “let’s talk about God” he mumbled loud enough for me to hear, “let’s not,” then he grabbed some food and as he passed me to leave, said “gotta go” as he laughed and disappeared with his plate of food. I was surprised when I genuinely felt offended. Two men and a woman stayed to listen to the message,
and before we left, they all got up as the church prayed for them. We began to clean up to get ready to leave when a Black man that I had noticed hanging around earlier approached me and a few of the guys. He wanted to talk to some of the guys and get some help with drug addiction. He stayed until we left. Before we left, all the church members, and the four local people who had stayed until the end, joined in a circle. Up until this point, I had mostly sat in the back of church, not much for faith. But this time, I stepped into the circle instinctually, grabbed the hands of the two men on either side of me, and bowed my head as we prayed.

In service, though I never did head down for the altar call, I was often filled with a sense of identification and collective struggle with other members. Every church service begins with worship. As the band plays, and a slideshow of tranquil nature scenes rolls on a projector screen behind the stage, church members lift their hands in praise. As my time at the site went on, I found myself increasingly drawn in by the environment, sometimes even swaying my body back in forth, though ever so slightly, with the rest of the congregation. This process is repeated at the end of every church service as well. Usually, as the pastor’s sermon comes to a close, he begins to speak in a softer voice, calling on members to “follow Jesus.” Simultaneously, the band will play softly. As the sermon comes to a close the music will build to a crescendo, the tranquil nature scenes will start rolling on the projector, and members will get deep into worship. This culminates in the altar call, which, as I mentioned previously, is the most intense form of worship during the service, when members head to the stage and worship through touch (praying and consoling each other by placing hands on one another), and bodily movement (dance) as the music plays. Also as mentioned, crying, and speaking in tongues is not uncommon at this juncture. When I asked Jimmy, what is the most important part of the service, he said, “the worship.” When I asked Assistant Pastor Paul the same question, he said, “The altar call.”
Bobby also said the altar call, adding that “when you let go, that’s when he (God) really starts dealing with you and he touches you and ya know you feel it.” I asked Jimmy, who is the lead singer in the band, what his role is as worship leader. He told me that it is to help church members, “align themselves with that communication with the creator. It is a way. Definitely is a way to get you into his presence, into a place of meditation, into a place where you can let stuff not distract you.” In this way, the whole environment at VO Denver is rhetorical and affective, engaging the full range of the senses, including the emotional and spiritual.

Also, importantly, touch, bodies in motion, and just the very experience of being a group adds a sense of collectivity, shared struggle and community. Simply being a group matters. For example, according to Thatcher (2007), and Wright (2010), Alcoholics Anonymous recovery program has been found to be quite successful, in part due to its ability to provide individuals with a sense of community, support, interaction, and a shared ideological system. Perhaps for men, this is especially important as they can negotiate their own masculinity alongside other men doing the same, itself a challenge to the sort of “rugged individualism” often implied in conceptions of hegemonic masculinity. In this way, men at Victory Outreach Denver attempt to (re) learn how to love and cry by loving one another and crying together.

But perhaps Chican@ gang cultures, cholo subcultures, as well as Chican@ popular culture more broadly, also offers a template of sorts for the loving masculinity that men at VO strive for. I have already demonstrated the very collective, familial, impulses among Chican@ gangs and their communicative practices. But in many ways, Chicano masculine gang and cholo cultures are love as well. Chican@ culture in general, and cholo subcultures in particular often articulate love in ways that can be quite masculine, including romantic (though strictly heterosexual) love, love for community, family, and even love for other men. For example, the
love song “oldies” considered Chican@ lowrider classics are by no means feminized, the
tradition among cholos to tattoo the name of their female companions, neighborhoods, gangs, or
family name (overtly and unabashedly proclaiming their love for a woman, a community, or their
family), and the tradition of “carnalismo” among male Chicano gang members that allows men
to form deep bonds with other men, could all be analyzed much further in order understand the
role that love plays for men in cholo subcultures.

Perhaps this tradition, in and of itself, represents an example of the decolonial yearning
for “ero-ideologies” described by Perez (2015), even in the midst of so much “sadness.” This
also indicates that though Victory Outreach may have unique strategies, the desire to reclaim
love is not a desire unique to the “reformed” Chicanos at VO, but represents a longing shared
with others. In these various ways, then, even the move at VO towards new kinds of
masculinities emphasizing love are by no means a complete denouncement of traditional
Chicano, cholo, or even gang masculinities and cultures. In some ways, they may even be
extensions of such cultures. In very complex ways then, the sort of masculinity proposed at
Victory Outreach Denver is not something totally different, nor does it necessarily have different
goals than more traditional Chicano, Chicano gang, and cholo masculinities. Instead, this style of
masculinity differs only in that it views love as something that extends beyond an insider group
and is combined with a philosophy of non-violence, offering an opportunity for male members to
revise and rethink (but not completely reject) their practices of masculinity and their
repercussions, both for themselves, for others, and for the larger community. This has led many
men at Victory Outreach to revise or even transform what they believe it means to be “a man.”

Changes

It's gonna take the man in me to conquer this insanity. –Tupac, Keep Ya Head Up
Since my life is based on sinning, I'm hell bound. –Tupac, The Realest Killaz

How many caskets can we witness?
Before we see it’s hard to live this life without God so we must ask forgiveness.
-Tupac, Unconditional Love

If I upset you don’t stress, never forget
That God is finished with me yet.
-Tupac, Ghetto gospel

This ain’t the life for me, I wanna change. –Tupac, So Many Tears

The rhetoric surrounding masculinity, non-violence, love, and Christianity encourages men at Victory Outreach Denver to, through God, revise their conceptions of masculinity, denouncing violence and hate, and reclaiming love. All of the men that I interviewed, many at different stages of this change, indicated that they had either changed, or were in the process of changing, their conceptions of what it meant to be a man. For example, Assistant Pastor Paul, himself a former drug abuser from Denver, told me this:

I used to think that a man was someone that had to show how tough he was. Yea I used to think how tough he was, how many women he had, how much money he had, how much respect he has, and that’s what I used to think. But I don’t think like that no more. Those things don’t matter really. It never got me too far in life.

When I asked Luis, a former gang member from Los Angeles, what it meant to be a man he told me, “…to be a man you gotta be respectful, loving, caring, and be there for people and helpful. And just everything I wasn’t before.” When I asked him how he would have answered that question prior to coming to Victory Outreach, he laughed and said,

I wouldn’t even answer you. I probably would have answered in some way you wouldn’t have liked. You know, like the way I’m talking to you right now, I wouldn’t be talking to you like that. Every other word used to come out of my mouth used to be a cuss word….
Cuz I was out there doing my dirt. Selling drugs and I didn’t have a care in my life. So I don’t know how to really say it. Didn’t really care much about myself at the time.

Bobby also told me, “I would have never sat down like this but, hey, God changes people.”

Jimmy’s responses to my questions about manhood are also similar, and worth quoting at length:

Jimmy: (I used to think that) a man gonna be full of pride and there’s no filter man. A man like that can’t filter anything. If you look at him wrong you’re gonna pay for it, if you talk to him wrong you’re gonna feel it.

Me: And you don’t feel that way anymore, so how did that change?

Jimmy: I don’t know how that changed. I mean the word of God changed me, the word of God. So I believe that I lived an illusion for a long long time. Because the man that I am today is weak. The man that I am today is like prey to the man I just described.

Me: Explain that?

Jimmy: Like a sissy la la.

Me: So you’re saying that the guy back then would look at the guy now and say he’s a sissy?

Jimmy: Yes. Yeeessss. Yes!

Me: And what does the man today think about the man back then?

Jimmy: Stupid! Yea he was stupid. Nah really the man today would look at that man like he’s sick. Not mentally stable. Having no self control. Filled with anger and hate.

In this way, all of the interviewees describe gaining a new outlook on their own masculinity after becoming a member of Victory Outreach. They describe a past where they relied on hegemonic ideals, which they now view as problematic (being tough, “having” women, “doing dirt,” “having no filter,” etc) and moving towards a masculinity that, in Luis’ words, is
“respectful, loving, and caring.” Jimmy goes as far as to say that the man he was back then, relying exclusively on hegemonic notions of masculinity, would consider then man he is today a “sissy la la,” a feminized, and hence, undervalued man. But he states that after changing his view of manhood, he realizes that the man back then was simply “full of anger and hate.”

This theme of being “filled with anger and hate” was a common narrative when men described their disposition before coming to Victory Outreach. Bobby, a Denver native who just recently joined Victory Outreach told me this:

I mean, just a lot of stuff happened in my life was negative but when I came to church I let it go. Before all the stuff bad happened to me I kept it inside and I would feed it through the bottle and feed it through the pipe because I was so mad I didn’t know how to cope with it. It wasn’t so much not knowing how I didn’t want to. It was easier for me to get high and be numb that way I don’t even deal with that or feel that way. And my wife like I said my wife had the biggest impact in my life. I mean I love my mom I love my dad but on that companionship level that’s what really broke it down for me. And then. I beat my wife a lot of times, I’d wind up in jail for beating my wife ya know. And I’d feel stupid you know why am I hitting her she’s a woman! It was all that anger. And it seems like when you have all that anger you channel it and you…the closest person to you is who you’re gonna take it out on. And that’s what I did and I feel bad but that day when I woke up and I said I gotta change. I have to change. If I’m not gonna change I’m gonna land up back in jail or dead. If not I’m gonna end up hurting my wife bad and doing something I regret.

Bobby seems to suggest that with no outlet for his pain and sadness (perhaps due to the association of emotions other than anger with feminity) he was able only to express himself
through anger and aggression. He even told me, as well as Jimmy and Luis, that he would not have even spoken to me about this at one time in his life. He says that before, when all “the stuff bad happened” to him, he “kept it inside” and dealt with it only through the “bottle,” the “pipe,” and through violence against his wife. In this way, the sadness that often infects Chicano communities, when combined with traditional forms of masculinity, that are based on power and maintaining a gender hierarchy, and that preclude men from acknowledging and sharing emotions other than anger, can create a lethal combination for both men and women. As bell hooks (2005) puts it, “The first act of violence that patriarchy demands of males is not violence toward women. Instead patriarchy demands of all males that they engage in acts of psychic self-mutilation, that they kill off the emotional parts of themselves” (66). It was clear to me that Bobby, who has only very recently joined Victory Outreach, was searching for a way to bring those emotional parts of himself back to life, as way out of, as he puts it, “all that anger.”

Being overcome with anger hate was often combined with what interviewees described as an inability to love. Many interviewees told me that they felt unable to love others, as well as themselves. For example, Luis told me this:

Like I said I had a lot of hatred in me, a lot of hate. And that’s how, well I wasn’t brought up like that. I mean my mom, my mom or dad, they loved me but it’s just the street life. I used people, I used people to get what I wanted. And just to say that word “oh I love you” just to get what I wanted. I used to tell women that, tell girls that, to get what I wanted, but I didn’t care. I didn’t even care about myself if I lived or died. And being shot 3 times and everything people telling me you goin to heaven! Ahh! I’m going to hell! I used to tell people that I ain’t goin’ to heaven man I’m going to hell.

Jimmy also described his disposition before coming to Victory Outreach. He told me,
Its heavy bro, cuz I didn’t know how to be affectionate, how to be loving, how to show love. Even in Christianity, even in the men’s home, learning about the things of God. I was still hard hard hard. My wife couldn’t touch me. You know we were laying down, and if I was on my back towards her, she couldn’t touch me on the back. I would feel violated. I would feel like, don’t touch me. Or she would have to be real selective on when she touched me. Cuz I wasn’t there yet. It took me years. I was real hard man.

However, after joining Victory Outreach, the interviewees told me that they gained (or re-gained) the ability to love. This conception of love went far beyond romantic or sexual love, though, and included love of community, family, and between (heterosexual) men. Luis told me this about his transition in Victory Outreach:

God is saying if I can’t love a man, how can I love him? I was like damn that’s where my heart really opened up, I need to start loving again man. And it’s like I need to, it was hard for me to say I love a man, to say I love you but now it’s easy for me to say because, hey, we are there to help each other we need to be there for each other.

Bobby summed it up well when he said, “I think my perspective on being a man changed. Because I used to think being a man just meant having money in your pocket and not being afraid of anybody and holding your own and fighting whoever you wanted to fight.” But he went on to say that now he believes that, “…really, the man is the inside of your heart. Are you caring? Are you loving? If you love and you care and you can be honest and truthful and faithful then you’re a man in my book. And you can look someone in the eye and talk to them you’re a man.”

Bobby also told me about the relationship that he and the other trainers have with the young male participants in the boxing program, saying,” it’s a family ya know. Sometimes
whenever me or my dad or somebody goes into 7-11 or something we take the kids. Get a Gatorade a pop a candy you know? Show em love. That’s what it’s about basically. It’s all about love.” When I asked Jimmy what the role of Victory Outreach is in the community, he said, “…to tell them that God loves them and in turn they can love eachother…..and to draw them into a place where they can love themselves. Cuz if they can love themselves they can do anything” These interviews demonstrate the process of transformation that men involved with Victory Outreach go through, adopting a more loving, less physically confrontational ideal of manhood. As Perez (2015) notes, love, as a concept, has often been feminized, and hence dismissed as not politically salient. But men at Victory Outreach are actively attempting to reclaim love as something that can also be masculine, and can be personal self-love, familial love, romantic love, or love of one’s community. This wide conception of love is important, as it paves the way for a potential politics love and equality in all areas of life.

Nevertheless, both Jimmy and Bobby hinted that this transformation of masculinity is not necessarily a complete process for them. Bobby told me that though he used to be a “hothead” with a “chip on his shoulder,” but he no longer wants to be that way. He went on to say that “now I gave my life to God, I’m struggling a little bit but I ain’t giving up on him….it seems like everyone wants problems with me now.” He said that though he “doesn’t want no problems” physical challenges from other men test his faith, admitting, “I’m man enough to say that I failed many times, because men are prideful. And ya know, sometimes it’s hard to swallow.” Similarly, Jimmy told me that he works two jobs. He told me about the problems he has had with coworkers, especially superiors, who he feels have disrespected him or mistreated him. He talked about the struggle he has to bite his tongue, saying that although he is a changed man he still has to control himself and his pride. He says that he sometimes thinks “man they have no idea who
they are dealing with, back then I would have......ahhh!” This suggests that, despite going to
great lengths to rearticulate Chicano masculinity, denounce violence, and reclaim love, one can
still end up feeling quite “emasculated,” and the urge to express dignity and power through the
only means available, our bodies, can be suppressed but not easily eliminated.

Conclusion

Though many men at Victory Outreach Denver have left or are leaving the gang lifestyle,
and almost all have either revised/transformed or are revising/transforming their conceptions of
masculinity, many members
also continue to perform
their masculinity (through
dress, speech, adornment,
rhetoric of “toughness,” etc.)
in ways still generally
associated with Chicano
“cholo” masculinity. Rios
and Lopez-Aguado (2012) conducted interviews with multiple male Chicanos in California,
some gang members and some not, who perform this “cholo” style of masculinity. They argue
that though this gender performance may mimic and reinforce stereotypes of Chicano male
criminality, it also serves as a form of resistance, as Chicano males can defy expectations to be
good, docile, workers that caters to a white middle and upper class, experience a sense of power
based on the fear that they can provoke, and contest social invisibility by dramatizing their
difference instead of performing masculinity in ways deemed more acceptable by the white
mainstream.
So if we view cholo masculine performance as not entirely normative, but at least in some ways resistant, we understand that by continuing to perform cholo masculinity, men at VO are able to push the boundaries of narrow definitions of masculinity without discarding their distinct identities and the resistant powers that those identities and associated performances may hold. In various ways then, men at VO deviate both from the stoic behaviors associated with cholo masculinity while continuing to adhere to its politics of style, which remain deviant from mainstream society in and of themselves.

Nevertheless, some may argue that the racialized and gendered performance of cholo masculinity is really normative and hegemonic, much like the stereotypical “tough macho” described earlier. But even if one takes this viewpoint, when coupled with the explicit rearticulation of masculinity going on at VO, this performance needs to be understood as transgressive and counterhegemonic. Because though terms like “violent” or “thug” are generally attached to cholo performance in the dominant imagination, men at VO continue to perform the expectation even as they explicitly espouse a rhetoric of non-violence and love. This effectively detaches the body from the politics, disrupting hegemonic conceptions of a “good” or “bad” Chicano male subject. In addition to that, performing cholo masculinity also provides men at VO, once again, a space to challenge dominant conceptions of what it means to be a man while still performing gender in ways that feel comfortable, and are still intelligible in the barrio as masculine and Chicano. No doubt, this is a delicate balance, and members constantly run the risk of over or under compensating for these transgressions with their performances. However, it is a risk that members seem to embrace. During one church service, the man sitting directly in front of me spread his arms across the chairs at either side in order to embrace a woman and a
man on either side, making the underside of his forearms visible to me. Tattooed on both forearms in script letters was the title of this project, “Only God can judge me.”

I began this chapter by quoting a couple of bars from a song by the same name, “Only God Can Judge Me,” by Tupac Shakur: “I’d rather die like a man then live like a coward, there’s a ghetto up in heaven and its ours, Black Power!” What I did not include were the next two bars that follow that line: “Is what we scream as we dream in a paranoid state, And our fate is a lifetime of hate.” This is evidence of the hopelessness often articulated by Pac, who vacillated between an occasional fleeting hopefulness and a frequent deep despair throughout his work, before he met a violent death. In “Never B Peace,” he begins the track by stating, “Now of course I want peace on the streets, but realistically, painting perfect pictures ain’t never worked.” And though he often cried to God, dreamed of a better life in heaven, and pointed to faith as the only thing to rely on much of his music, he at times even abandoned that, questioning whether God cares or even exists. In “Starin’ at the world through my rearview,” he repeats, “Go on baby scream to God, he can’t hear you.” In some of his work, death was the only possible escape. However, unlike Pac, Victory Outreach sees a way out, one that they want to spread to all the communities they are involved in. The message is that even in the midst of so much sadness, our fate is not “a lifetime of hate” because love can be reclaimed, God does exist, does “hear you,” and through Him, peace is achievable, providing hope rather than despair to its congregation as well as the entire community. Hope that we do not have to live a “life of torment,” as one interviewee put it.

For the men at Victory Outreach Denver, their membership, and presence in the neighborhood, also provides an alternative to the gang and drug lifestyle. In the various ways described in this chapter, men at Victory Outreach Denver attempt to leave the gang or drug
lifestyle and develop alternative masculinities without relinquishing all aspects of their race and gender identity and performance. This allows member to feel comfortable, and aids them in being persuasive in the community. But in the process, they also transgress and disrupt the way that Chicano masculinity has been constructed in the dominant imagination, complicating what it means to be a man, a Chicano, and a Chicano man. This adds another layer to the sort of complexity of Chicano masculinity that Communication scholars such as Holling and Delgado are pointing to.

Also, though members promote love and denounce violence, men at VO Denver do not completely discard Chicano gang organizational cultures and structures either, instead they build on some aspects and challenge others. In many ways then, gang organizational cultures that provide a sense of familialism, dignity, and shelter for the marginalized are maintained and expanded upon, and new, creative ways, to pursue and re-claim love are developed, building upon the desire for love already present in “cholo” subcultures.

So though vernacular discourses, by definition, incorporate hegemonic, counter hegemonic, and alternative cultural fragments in messy ways, this is perhaps necessary in order to be persuasive, intelligible, and effective when attempting to make social and cultural change. In this chapter, I have sought to show how Victory Outreach, by redefining masculinity at the intersections of the traditional and non-traditional, has provided a safe space for men to challenge and subvert dominant, often destructive, notions of masculinity, as well as stereotypical, damaging, images of Chicano men. This resistance occurs, however, not through an outright rejection of dominant paradigms, but through a cultural syncretism that allows space for resistance to occur.
And regardless of how we may theorize the sort of cultural politics at VO Denver, we must remember that Victory Outreach, on a very basic level, is an organization that provides real help for real people that need it, both individually and collectively. By focusing on the marginalized, providing men a sense of dignity and purpose, facilitating gang exit and recovery from addiction, encouraging less destructive forms of masculinity, fostering community, and allowing for a space where Chicano male identities, practices, and cultures are respected, valued, and even encouraged, Victory Outreach attempts to address a wide range of “sadness” that plagues both individuals and the community, all while providing a sense of hopefulness and inclusiveness.

When I asked Luis, who became involved in gangs at the age of 11, entered prison by 18, became a drug and alcohol abuser, and nearly died of heart failure before joining Victory Outreach, what he says to people when he “witnesses” to them, he said,

I give em my testimony. What I went through in life you know. Then I tell em what God is doing in my life, gave me a new heart. Gave me a better look at life now. And hes keeping me alive. Cuz I could have died two years ago and he brought me back to life and I’m thankful for that, thankful for what God is doing in my life. And I tell them I’m going on 4 and half years sober now and it feels good to wake up every morning and know that I have something to live for now.

When I asked Jimmy want kind of impact Victory Outreach Denver makes in the local community and how they address the various social ills, he said,

The way that we are doing it is we are establishing a location, going to the streets, sharing the good news to individuals to let them know that they don’t have to live a life of torment. We are on the streets, we are witnessing to them, we are having rallies, we are
bringing people together from all race and cultures for one purpose: to tell them that God
loves them and in turn that they can love one another. And that’s in the gang atmosphere,
drug addicted atmosphere, it doesn’t matter. That’s what we bring. And that they can go
somewhere to be loved. To go somewhere to be appreciated. They don’t have to feel like
they’re not loved. So that’s what we are doing we are offering a location and to draw
them into a place where they can love themselves. Cuz if they know how to love
themselves, they can do anything.
Chapter 3: Westside Connection: Victory Outreach, Hip hop, and the Chican@ tradition of black-brown cultural exchange

If you don’t use the tools that are part of your generation that speak to each other, those tools will be used against us, right? -Bay Area activist Tara Espinoza, speaking about the role of Hip Hop in black-brown organizing

I played basketball all through high school. Point guard. Those were my glory days, when I thought maybe I would go pro and play for the Lakers. My high school was mostly Chican@, but for some reason, not a whole lot of Chicano kids were into playing ball. So though my high school did not have that many black students, most of my teammates were black. So was my coach. There were a few non black guys on the squad: a few other Latino guys, a Philipino guy, and an East Indian guy. My teammates often teased me, in good fun, for being a “white boy,” because of my light complexion and because I am the son of a Mexican American mother and a White father. We were like a family, my teammates and I. In a lot of ways, we were like a gang, really. We protected each other, both on the court and off the court, we found dignity and pride in our success, and we found expression for our budding manhood not so much in physical violence with other groups of young men, but in physical competition with other groups of young men. Of course, if it ever got violent, we were usually down for that too. I cried in my coach’s arms when we lost our last game in the playoffs my senior year because it was over for me. It wasn’t so much that I loved the game, though I did, but without my teammates and the status I gained from being on the team, I was lost. Suddenly I went from team captain to just another unemployed 18 year old with poor grades and no future. For a while there I felt like a nobody on the brink of adulthood. But for those years, in my difficult transition from “boyhood” to “manhood”, those guys meant everything to me.

The relationships between Mexican Americans and African Americans did not seem like a huge leap for me, culturally anyway. We often dressed a lot alike, we talked similar, and we listened to a lot of the same music (and if they were born in the United States, so did our parents,
by the way). Despite the many cultural similarities, many of the other Chicanos in the area did not share the same affinity for my African American teammates that I did, and since blacks were a relatively small minority in the community, the violence was often unidirectional. One of my African American teammates lived right down the street from the school and rode his bike everyday to practice. One day he was uncharacteristically late. When he finally arrived, he walked through the gym door carrying his bike, which had been completely bent out of shape. His face was bruised and cut, with swelling and welts already forming on his forehead. His clothes were ripped and full of blood. He said that he was jumped by a group of Chicanos on his way to practice. There were other similar occurrences at that time, so we used to walk in big groups when we had to walk around the neighborhood, making sure not to leave one or two black teammates alone. Other schools in my area with higher African American populations erupted in full fledged campus riots between black and brown students. Some areas were much worse. Around the same time, another teammate and very close friend of mine (who himself was half black and half Chicano) went to visit his grandmother one weekend in nearby Duarte, CA. He and his brother watched a Chicano teenage boy riddled with bullets in a drive-by shooting by a group of African American males, collapsing on their grandmothers front lawn. The kid died in their arms as they waited for the ambulance. I couldn’t quite understand why two groups that shared so much culturally and often found themselves in a similar position socially and economically as well, would have such animosity towards each other.

Our experiences growing up in Southern California in the early 2000’s were not an anomaly, but rather part of a long history of cultural exchange amidst tension between black and brown. Luis J. Rodriguez (2005), in his memoir of Chicano gang life in Southern California during the 1970’s, describes a similar experience, saying this:
For the most part, the Mexicans in and around Los Angeles were economically and socially closest to blacks. As soon as we understood English, it was usually the Black English we first tried to master. Later in the youth authority camps and prisons, blacks used Mexican slang and the *cholo* style; Mexicans imitated the Southside swagger and style- although this didn’t mean at times we didn’t war with one another, such being the state of affairs at the bottom. For Chicanos this influence lay particularly deep in music: Mexican rhythms syncopated with blues and ghetto beats (84).

So though relations between Chican@s and African Americans in Los Angeles and the greater US Southwest have historically been marked by conflict, there has also substantial cultural exchange. In addition to black-brown violence that shuts down the prison or even the local high school for days, we have Chicano rap and African American low rider clubs. It’s a strange relationship indeed. Tapping into these cultural affinities in order to pursue black-brown unity for interethnic peace and/or political coalition has had mixed results.

Because though my experiences of cross cultural affinity and fertilization between black and brown in Southern California were not uncommon, neither were my experiences of tension, and even violence. Tension between African Americans and Chican@s in the greater Los Angeles region also has a long history. This has been true in the various attempts at political coalitions, past and present, between the two communities (Pulido, 2008), in the politics surrounding issues of immigration (Kaplan, 2014), in perceptions of economic competition between the two groups (Pastor, 2014), and in conflicts in prisons, struggle over ethnic enclaves, and gang warfare (Quinones, 2014).

Focusing mainly on post WWII Los Angeles and the greater US Southwest, the goal of this chapter will be to analyze the often tenuous relationship between Chican@s and African
Americans, focusing especially on the ways that Chican@ culture has historically engaged with African American cultural expression, while often remaining much more reserved in its political affinity towards blacks. Furthermore, I will seek to analyze the ways that Victory Outreach church, an originally Los Angeles based, mostly Chican@ Evangelical church with substantial African American membership, occasionally bridges this black-brown divide. To do this, I will rely on academic literature and internet data, as well as ethnographic and interview methods conducted at Victory Outreach Denver. Ultimately, I will argue that Hip Hop culture is a vital ingredient in fostering positive black-brown relationships at Victory Outreach. Through their unique fusion of Chican@, African American, and Hip Hop cultures, VO may provide a model which can work towards the promotion of a more explicitly political, unified black-brown struggle for social, economic, and political change.

This emphasis on black-brown unity is especially important because the “sadness” described in Chapter 2 is by no means unique to the Chican@ community, but is something that African Americans are also all too well acquainted with. As a result of a wide array of historical and contemporary violence, segregation, exclusion, poverty, racism, and general adversity faced disproportionately by African Americans (like Chican@s), black people in the United States, also like Chican@s, are at a higher risk than white Americans for depression, psychological distress, being the victim of violence, suicide, post traumatic stress disorder, and general feelings of worthlessness, sadness, and hopelessness (Agguire-Molina et. al, 2001; African American communities, n.d.) Even as this “sadness” often courses through various forms of black and brown popular culture (think for example, the “blues”), these cultural similarities still must be mobilized in order to deal with the root causes (i.e. institutionalized racism and inequity) of this pain that has infected both communities.
Setting the stage

Despite the well documented tensions between African Americans and Chican@es, the cross cultural exchange between African Americans and Chican@es deserves at least as much attention. In fact, scholars have been increasingly interested in black-brown interethnic relations in recent years, especially focused on the Los Angeles region. For example, Gaye Theresa Johnson (2014) describes the ways that Chican@es and African Americans in L.A. have created solidarity spatially (through claiming spaces such as swap meets, etc), and sonically (through popular music, language, and style). Similarly, historians Anthony Macias (2004) and Luis Alvarez (2007) respectively trace the history of black and brown Los Angeles by focusing on popular music and the “politics of style” including zoot suit culture, R&B, Motown, soul music, lowrider car culture, and west coast Hip Hop culture among the many ways that black and brown communities have historically influenced each other and expressed cultural affinity. Denise Sandoval (2014) pays particular attention to the ways that African American and Chican@ lowrider car clubs have intermingled, and large amounts of research has been produced on the topic of Chican@es in rap music and Hip Hop culture (Delgado, 1998; Ogbar, 2007; McFarland, 2013; Kun, 2014). But what has been clear throughout is that this cultural exchange does not automatically lead to a sociopolitical unity.

Victory Outreach puts all of these shared cultural affinities to use, and for that reason, provide an excellent case study for the mobilization of shared African American and Chican@ cultural expression for the goal of interethnic unity. Victory Outreach commonly utilizes forms of vernacular expression including “oldies” music, hip hop music and style, lowrider car culture, and much more. These various cultural expressions, no doubt function to reach Chican@es, but are certainly not exclusive to Chican@es. They are all part of a long history of cultural exchange.
between Chican@s and African Americans in Los Angeles and throughout the Southwest. This, however, has been largely neglected in the literature on Victory Outreach. Sanchez-Walsh only briefly suggests that rap music, in particular, is “the common language that allows Latino youth to worship with African American youth” (141). As mentioned, many Victory Outreach congregations have a substantial level of African American membership (especially those in neighborhoods with high levels of African American residents) to some extent integrating what Martin Luther King Jr. once called, “the most segregated hour in America.” This is all the more notable given the often high tensions between the black and Chican@ communities.

Because though cultural affinity has been a fact, Chican@s and African Americans have only occasionally found common ground politically, and even then it has been tenuous (Pulido, 2008; Kun & Pulido, 2014). Among gangs on the streets and in the prison system, this tension has been even worse, especially in the 1990’s and early 2000’s when I was a teen in Southern California, stemming from a complex intersection of African Americans entering historically Chican@ barrios in search of subsidized housing, Latin@s becoming the majority in the traditionally black neighborhoods of South Central LA, and Mexican mafia orders to tax all others and drive black gangs and drug dealers out of Southern California barrios (Quinones, 2014). Most of these orders came from Mexican Mafia leaders incarcerated at the Chino Prison located only a few blocks from where the violence in my neighborhood was occurring (Quinones, 2014).

The fact that Victory Outreach can foster some semblance of cooperation, among many members who have been socialized into this gang and prison racial animosity, is quite impressive and could provide value for those who would seek to organize African Americans and Chican@s towards more political and social goals. This may also speak to some commonalities between
Chican@ and African communities that go beyond cultural exchange, for example shared “sadness” in all of its manifestations.

**The Chican@ tradition of engagement and exchange with African American cultural expression amidst political and racial tension**

Mexican culture, and Latin America in general, has its own long tradition of conquest, racial hierarchies, and its accompanying anti-black (and anti-Indian) racism. Unlike the United States however, Latin America has a long history of racial mixing among European, indigenous, and African peoples, stemming from a history of the Spanish conquest and colonization of indigenous peoples and the incorporation of black slaves. Latin America, then, developed a complex racial hierarchy with various classifications. Generally, however, those with more indigenous or African ancestry were (and are) placed somewhere near the bottom, and those with more European ancestry at the top (Wade, 1997).

Chican@s are certainly not immune to the US style of anti-black racism either (with its own long history of colonization and enslavement), in which African Americans are routinely framed in the media, popular discourse, and even political rhetoric (not too unlike Latin@s, ironically) as a group to be feared and despised (Rios & Mohamed, 2003). These histories of racism, both in Latin America and the United States, are surely factors in the fact that black-brown coalition politics in the US Southwest have historically been tenuous at best. Of course, other factors influencing the lack of black-brown coalition could include real cultural differences (linguistic, religious, etc), political divides (conflicts over jobs and resources, or differing political agendas), and a history of nationalism among both African American and Chican@ communities (Pulido, 2006; Kun & Pulido, 2014). In these ways racism, culture, and conflicting political agendas, goals, or ideologies may all be important factors. Perhaps equally
as important, however, is that it has often been politically useful for Chican@s to disassociate with African Americans, as Mexican Americans have often sought to distance themselves politically from black identity in order to reap the benefits of whiteness.

**Post war Mexican American-African American Politics: Tension and disassociation**

This strategy of creating distance from blackness in order to claim whiteness was especially common during the WWII, “Mexican American Generation.” For example, in the historic *Mendez vs. Westminster (1947)* court case, which ended de jure segregation of students of Mexican ancestry in California, Mexican Americans won the case, not by challenging the practice of segregating non-white people, but by claiming that Mexican Americans were, in fact, white (Foley, 2010). This strategy was repeated in desegregation court cases throughout the US Southwest. For example, Flores and Villarreal (2012) describe how Texas Mexicans, in the *Delgado vs Bastrop Independent School (1948)* court case, argued for desegregation by focusing on Mexican American citizenship, education, class, and a focus on heritage and descent rather than race. Flores and Villarreal argue that this also represented a rhetorical move towards whiteness, hoping to create distance from blacks. The political strategy of Mexican Americans attempting to claim whiteness in order to gain privileges ultimately left African Americans behind (Foley, 2010). In other words, racial segregation, inequality, and white privilege remained fully intact as Mexican Americans make these sorts of political moves that were not open to blacks and did not challenge the practices of black oppression. This strategy was only abandoned after Mexican Americans could finally claim equal protection based on non-white status following *Brown vs. Board of Education (1954)*, a decision that came about, perhaps ironically, due to the challenge leveled by African American parents of segregated schoolchildren (Wilson, 2003).
Beginning in the mid to late 1960’s, Chican@ politics began to see a more radical shift, in many ways akin to the transition in African American politics from Civil Rights style organizing to the more militant Black Power movement. In addition to more radical, often nationalist politics, the Chicano movement generation also saw the emergence of a strategy that rejected whiteness and emphasized indigenous origins instead. Interethnic coalitions were also deemed more desirable, as Black and Brown political organizations more frequently allied for common causes. In fact, militant Chican@ organizations such as the Brown Berets, were in many ways modeled after the Black Panther Party (Pulido, 2006).

For example, Laura Pulido (2006) describes the interethnic coalitions in Los Angeles in the sixties and seventies between El Centro de Accion Social Autonomo/ the Center for Autonomous Social Action (CASA) and the Los Angeles Black Panther Party. According to Pulido, these organizations were occasionally able to organize in coalition over shared political interests such as police abuse and political imprisonment. However, Pulido notes that CASA was “not free of prejudice towards blacks. In discussing CASA’s various contradictions, one member recalled that even though the organization defined itself as multinational, it was not uncommon to hear members refer to blacks as pinches mayates,(175)” which is a Spanish pejorative term for blacks that loosely translates to “fuckin’ black beetles.” Even in the age of coalition building, black and brown tensions still remained quite salient.

Post war music, style, and youth culture: Black and Brown cultural affinity

Though political coalitions between Chican@s and African Americans have generally been fragile, a certain cultural affinity, especially through music, style, dance and youth culture, has long been a mainstay of African American and Chican@ relations in Los Angeles and throughout the Southwest. For example, during the 1940’s, at the same time that Mexican
Americans were attempting to distance themselves from African Americans for political efficacy, zoot suit culture was taking black and brown youth by storm. With its ties to jazz and swing music and dancing, both Mexican American and African American youth (and others) embraced the zoot suit culture in an era of wartime conformity and an anti-black and brown climate. As Alvarez (2005) notes,

The zoot suit’s exaggerated pants, hat brim, coattails, and sometimes flashy colors, not to mention its generous use of fabric, were all deemed excessive in an era of wartime shortages and detrimental to popular campaigns to conserve resources. The “duckbill” or “conk” haircuts worn by young ethnic Mexican and African American men and their “Spanglish” or “jive” dialects further marked them as acting outside the boundaries of proper male behavior (145).

In this way, the Chican@ “duckbill” and the African American “conk,” become analogous. As does the Chican@ “spanglish” and the African American “jive.” The black “zoot suiter” is viewed as analogous to the Chican@ “pachuco.” Alvarez notes, however, that the zoot suit style was not everywhere the same. For example, black zoot suiters on the East Coast generally “preferred bright colors and flat-soled shoes,” much like that described by Malcolm X in his autobiography. Mexican Americans on the West Coast, however, “favored dark browns and blacks with double- or triple-soled shoes” (151).

Nevertheless, zoot culture often brought black and brown youth (and sometimes Asian and white youth) into contact and contributed to interethnic affinity. For example, as Macias (2004) details,

During the early 1940’s, with the rise of the bold, baggy zoot suit, African American hep cats and “slick chicks,” along with Mexican American pachucos and pachucas, became
the catalysts for a heated showdown over the public face of the modern metropolis. Not every Mexican American sported the “draped” zoot style, but many of them traversed Los Angeles, dancing the jitterbug to swing music with mixed race audiences near MacArthur Park at the Royal Palms Hotel, and downtown at the Avadon and Zenda Ballrooms, as well as the Million Dollar and Orpheum theaters. Relying heavily on public streetcars, Mexican Americans also mixed with African Americans at the Club Alabam, Jack’s Basket Room, and the Elks Hall on Central Avenue, as well as the Plantation Club in Watts, where they would see bandleader like Count Basie and Jimmy Lunceford” (694).

The music of the zoot suit culture also represented this same interethnic exchange and affinity. For example, Alvarez (2007) states that “the so-called pachuco artists like Don Tosti and Lalo Guerrero made the black tradition of scat singing their own by doing it in Spanglish, only to have black rhythm and blues artists like Chuck Higgins return the favor with songs like ‘Pachuko Hop’ (60). Perhaps not surprisingly, following the 1943 zoot suit riots, in which Pachuca@s in Los Angeles were attacked by servicemen, similar riots sprang up throughout the country, many targeting black zoot suiters as well (Alvarez, 2008).

Nevertheless, Chican@as and African Americans would continue to engage in cultural exchange throughout the late 1940’s and 1950’s. Macias (2004) states that in Los Angeles in the early 1950’s, “Mexican American fans, particularly car club members, played a key role in the success of local African American artists, as R&B records became the cruising anthems of neighborhood lowriders” (705). This scene continued into the mid to late 1950’s and into the 1960’s, as Art Laboe and Johnny Otis staged concerts in El Monte and promoted R&B acts to a largely Mexican American audience (Macias, 2004).
The Chicano movement era of the 1960’s and 1970’s also saw a continuation of this interethnic overlap in culture, art, and music. For example, Alvarez (2007) discusses Chicano movement poster art, literature and poetry as all being influenced by Black arts traditions, as well as an overlapping with the political struggles of various communities. Perhaps the most obvious intercultural exchange involving African Americans and Chican@s can be heard in the music of the era. The Chican@ lowrider car culture continued strong, and Chican@s continued to heavily support Black musicians during the era. In fact, certain Motown, Soul, and R&B tunes in the 60’s and 70’s by Black artists such as Al Green, Curtis Mayfield, Little Anthony and the Imperials, Smokey Robinson, Aretha Franklin, Billy Stewart, Gladys Knight and the Pips, The Dells, Mary Wells, Martha and the Vandellas, The Isley Brothers, Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, Zapp and Roger, The Marvelettes, The Temptations, The Four Tops, The Supremes, The Delfonics, The Intruders, William De Vaughn, and many more are still considered Chican@ classics. But Chican@ music itself also displayed this cultural affinity sonically. As Alvarez (2007) observes,

Recognition by Chicana/o poets and artists that their own struggle for dignity was not isolated from others was also seen in the more commercial character of “Brown Eyed Soul” music. The fusion of the Motown sound, soul, rhythm and blues, rock, and jazz with local musical traditions by Chican@s in Los Angeles, among other places, resulted in a rich mixture of African American and Chicana/o cultures. Artists from East Los Angeles like War, Brenton Wood, and El Chicano built on the tradition of multi-cultural bands in Southern California dating back to the 1940s and 1950s. Tejanos from the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas, like the heavily doo-wop and black soul influenced Sunny and the Sunliners, further stretched the spatial dimensions of this shared soundscape (63).
While the music and youth culture of the Chicano movement continued the long tradition of black-brown cultural exchange, Chicano movement politics also reflected somewhat of an attempt at political coalition with African Americans, however tentative it may have been (i.e. the coalition politics of Chican@ and black political organizations discussed earlier). This reach towards African Americans during the Chicano movement generation is a key distinction from the previous “Mexican American” generation, in which this same cultural exchange (i.e. zoot culture) existed side by side with political disassociation from Blacks (i.e. claiming whiteness in desegregation court cases).

As demonstrated, Chican@-African American intercultural exchange has long existed alongside a certain black-brown racial and political tension. In the present day, this history continues strong. However, in the period following the Chicano movement era, the most notable place for this interethnic cultural affinity is most certainly in hip hop culture.

**Hip Hop: Continuing the tradition**

As the political momentum of the late sixties and early seventies began to wane, the Bronx, NY was beginning to see the emergence of hip hop culture, including break dancing, deejaying, graffiti art and rap. Though hip hop culture is most closely associated with African Americans, hip hop culture also served as a bridge between rival gangs in the Bronx, a space for interethnic unity, and encouraged “battling” instead of fighting. For example, the early hip hop Zulu nation block parties during the mid 1970’s brought together youth from different neighborhoods, rival gangs such as the Skulls and Spades, and African American, Puerto Rican, and Caribbean youth, all in the name of the Zulu Nation motto: “Peace, Love, Unity, and Having Fun” (Chang, 2005). Since the origins of hip hop, Latin@s have had a presence in hip hop culture, especially in graffiti art and b-boying (Ogbar, 2007). Once hip hop spread to the
Southwest, Chican@s, in the same tradition of a historical relationship with jazz, swing, zoot suit culture, or R&B, soul, and Motown, have also been, and continue to be, heavily involved in hip hop culture. Chican@ deejays, break dancers, and hip hop artists proliferate. For example, a vibrant Chican@ graffiti art scene exists in the US Southwest, often incorporating elements of both graffiti art and Mexican mural styles.

But perhaps the most visible aspect of hip hop culture, especially today, is rap, of which Chicano rap constitutes an important subgenre. Unfortunately, however, the long history of black-brown cultural affinity has (incredibly) been lost among a few in the community. As iconic East Los Angeles Chicano rapper Kid Frost stated in a 2002 interview,

> What pisses me off the most is the hypocrisy….oh you fuckin, you rap? You’re a *mayate*, a black, a *negro*, your this your that, and then they drive away bumping Marvin Gaye, or bumpin’ the Isley Brothers….you say “oh we bump old school,” but those artists are black.

The frustration that Kid Frost expresses with so called “old school” Chican@s that stick to the classics, demeaning hip hop as “black music,” speaks to the unwillingness of some Chican@s to acknowledge the very obvious history of black-brown affinity and exchange through music, dance, style, and youth culture. Hip hop is only the most recent site of cultural exchange. In this way, Chican@ participation in hip hop is actually an extension of the long tradition in Chican@ culture and history of engaging African American forms of cultural expression. And in rap music, this tradition is just as alive as ever.

Rap music has long been a vehicle for political resistance and has historically had a strong black nationalist component to it (Cheney, 2005). Chican@s have also utilized rap music as a vehicle for politics and nationalism, including artists such as Lighter Shade of Brown,
Aztlan Nation, the aforementioned Kid Frost, and many more. According to Delgado (1998), Chican@s have embraced rap as a means for rearticulating a Chicano nationalist ideology. However, he also states that Chicano rap some cultural unity with African Americans: “Indeed, the borrowing of a largely African American cultural form may be a matter of cultural solidarity. This borrowing or appropriation is also a logical choice given the desire to express the frustrations of a group still on the economic, social, and political margins of the United States” (101-2). In this way, even in expressing what is often a narrow nationalism, the form of expression by Chicanos through rap, and other forms of hip hop, can also be seen as an acknowledgement of shared marginality and perhaps, even, solidarity with African Americans.

Delgado goes on to say that while Chicano rap represents shared black-brown experiences, it also draws on certain Chican@ traditions. He argues that just as African American rappers draw from the traditions of black jazz musicians, and black poetry, Chicano rappers also draw on their own traditions of poetry, especially those coming out of the Chicano movement, such as the nationalist 1972 poem *Yo Soy Joaquin*, by Corky Gonzales. He goes on to state that Chicanos use rap music as way to rearticulate the Chicano movement-style politics and nationalism that cultural forms such as Chican@ literature and poetry were vehicles for during the 60’s and 70’s. As Delgado puts it,

> Sharing a marginalized experience with African Americans, Chicanos have constructed parallel discourses that similarly question the meaning in and dominant ideology of America. Rap music conveniently and powerfully allows Chicanos to reproduce and specify the political and aesthetic dimensions of hip hop culture and Chicano nationalism.

> As a cultural form, rap serves as an analog to those cultural forms—theater, literature,
poetry—that articulated Chicano nationalism and sustained the Chicano movement in the 1960s (97).

However, other Chicano movement writers and poets were not necessarily as nationalistic as Corky Gonzales, and neither are all Chicano rappers. Alvarez (2007) points to the Bay Area’s Pocho-Che as an example of a Pan-Latino literary collective that stressed the importance of interethnic coalition and were influenced by the black beat generation, jazz, and James Brown, as well as Chicano and other Latino influences. Similarly, Pan-Latino, Afro/ Chicano rap group Cypress Hill (from Los Angeles) combines Chican@, Cuban, Black, Afro Latino, and West coast styles, cultivating “an Afro-diasporic and Pan-Latino perspective in their expression of hip hop” (Ogbar, 2007, 47). In this way, some Chicano/Latino rappers, just like some of their Chicano movement forebears, draw on a multiplicity of African American, Chican@, and other Latino cultural resources, as well as very diverse political perspectives.

What often goes unacknowledged, however, is the extent to which African Americans, and African American rappers, draw from Chicano culture, especially in the West Coast gangsta rap scene coming out of California. For example the “cholo” forms of male dress originally developed by Chicanos, such as khaki pants, white tees, nike cortez, and bandanas, have all been appropriated by African American west coast rappers such as Snoop Dogg, Kurupt, Dr. Dre, Tupac Shakur, and many more (Boyd, 2008). Also, Chican@ car culture has caught on among African Americans (see Chappel, 2010), including rappers. Rhymes and music videos featuring lowered rides, tricked out Chevy’s, and hydraulics are as part and parcel to African American West Coast gangsta rap culture as anything else. And just as in past generations, Chican@ hip hoppers continue to heavily support and identify with these black rap artists.
However, in the political arena, in the prisons, in the schools, and in the streets, black and brown continue to struggle over resources, political agendas, and jobs, as well as space, neighborhoods, turf, and gang affiliation (see Pulido and Kun, 2014). I myself have encountered many a Chican@ who loves Tupac Shakur or Ice Cube, yet harbors animosity towards black people. Cultural affinity should not be an end goal. Mobilizing that cultural affinity for political coalition that can potentially lead towards improving the life chances of both black and brown is the challenge at hand. Hip hop has a special role to play, not only because it is the latest cultural bridge between Chican@s and African Americans in a history of cultural affinity, but also because, true to its roots in the South Bronx, interethnic unity has always been an explicit Hip Hop goal dating all the way back to the incipient years of the hip hop movement. As mentioned, the Zulu Nation motto was, after all, “Peace, Love, Unity, and Having Fun.”

Notably, in the Los Angeles rap scene, there is an important development taking place in recent years that involves a few artists moving beyond a cultural affinity and towards an explicit politics of interethnic unity. For example, LA based rapper M.E.D. (who is half Chicano and half African American) calls for black-brown unity in his 2011 track “Blaxican.” Similarly, two more LA based rappers, the Chicano MC Sick Jacken, and the African American MC Chace Infinite, call for Black and Brown Unity as they share the mic in the 2009 track “Black and Brown Army.” Sick Jacken goes as far as rapping, “It ain’t black and brown, its brown in darker shades.” However, these moves toward unity remain in the underground hip hop scene and have yet to make it to mainstream channels and/or receive widespread support.

Hopefully, I have demonstrated that this cultural exchange is nothing new, even as more explicit attempts at unity are often tenuous. Chican@s and African Americans have a long history, dating at least back to WW II, of this sort of cultural affinity, most commonly expressed
through youth culture, style, and music. However, also demonstrated is the fact that political coalition or explicit unity is often tenuous and does not necessarily follow from cultural affinity. Victory Outreach, however, is an organization that has had some success in articulating black-brown unity and providing a space where Chican@s and African Americans can find common ground.

**Victory Outreach: A case Study of hip hop and black-brown relations**

Though the membership at Victory Outreach remains mostly Chican@, there is substantial African American membership, especially in neighborhoods with a sizeable African American demographic. To investigate the strategies that Victory Outreach uses to bring brown and black members together in what Martin Luther King Jr. once called “the most segregated hour in America,” I surveyed previous literature on Victory Outreach, used internet sources such as sermon podcasts, videos of dramas, promos, as well as interview and participant observation data at Victory Outreach Denver. By making use of the long history of cultural exchange between African American and Chican@ communities (especially hip hop culture), as well as moving towards a more explicit politics of black and brown unity, Victory Outreach has been able to create a less tenuous relationship between Chican@s and African Americans, something that activist organizations have been attempting to do for a very long time.

**Cultural exchange and Hip hop culture at Victory Outreach**

Victory Outreach Denver is located in Northwest Denver, CO, in a historically Chican@ neighborhood that has recently begun gentrifying. There are relatively few African Americans in the surrounding neighborhood, as most African Americans reside on the Eastside of Denver. As expected then, most church members are Chican@, but there is a small number of Black membership couple of White members.
Nevertheless, African American cultural influences are quite evident at VO Denver, including a high energy, call and response style of Protestant Christianity. This suggests that despite being so deeply steeped in Chican@ culture (especially Chicano gang/cholo culture), one reason for Victory Outreach’s success in attracting African Americans is likely because of their Evangelical Protestant orientations, utilizing the sort of charismatic worship and call and response style sermons characteristic of many black churches (Foster, 2001). This style of worship at Victory Outreach Denver struck me as a far cry from the often stoic atmosphere in many traditional Mexican Catholic churches, which I later found out, many of the church members were initially raised in. For example, at Victory Outreach Denver, Pastor Ruben often explicitly asks for audience approval and participation, shouting “anybody?!?!?” or “c’mon now!” The audience will often respond back with something like, “Alright now!” He also will often encourage audience members to interact with each other. For example he may say something like “Did you know God loves us? Turn to your neighbor and tell them God loves them,” or “We are all sinners, turn to your neighbor and tell them they are a sinner!” At the end of every sermon is the altar call, which is the most intense form of worship during the service, when members head to the base of the stage. As the worship band plays, members will dance, sing, hug each other, and often even cry or speak in tongues. In this way, elements of African American culture and religious traditions are fused with Chican@ culture in unique ways.

However, as previously demonstrated, Chican@ and African American cultures have historically intermingled in various ways anyway. Having originated in Los Angeles in 1967 (in the Chicano movement era, significantly), the culture of Victory Outreach generally reflects both the unique black-brown cultural exchange of the Chicano movement generation in older members, as well as the equally unique black-brown cultural fusion of the hip hop generation in
younger members. For example, on one Sunday at Victory Outreach Denver, the congregation invited a visiting pastor from California, Pastor Lalo, an “elder” who was around in the early days of Victory Outreach in East Los Angeles. As mentioned in Chapter 2, he began by picking up a guitar and singing a reinterpreted Christian version of one of those African American R&B/soul tunes that has achieved Chicano oldie status, Eddie Holman’s 1970 hit, “Lonely Girl.”

This “oldies style” is generally the cultural reference point for older members of Victory Outreach, but as Sanchez-Walsh (2003) describes, the more recent attempts by Victory Outreach to stay relevant and appeal to a new generation have brought different cultural practices into the mix, with hip hop taking a primary role. As she puts it, “music that conjures up images of the veterano is used to reach the veterano, and that same music also reaches today’s Gen-X gang member, except that hip-hop, a different kind of slang, and other fashions have become appropriated to preach to a new generation (143).” She states that, “Hip Hop culture, fashion, and music signal to youth that the church does not reject them, and, in fact, seeks to validate their life experiences” (146). She goes on to say that, “Victory Outreach…seeks not only to validate Hip Hop culture but also to rescue the gang member from his or her vanquished status in American culture” (146). She also notes that rap music, in particular, is “the common language that allows Latino youth to worship with African American youth” (141). A quick internet search reveals several Christian rappers who are members of Victory Outreach, and a number of Christian rap concerts, featuring both black and Mexican American rap artists, held at various Victory Outreach congregations. Accessed through Victory Outreaches website is a registration form for a “battle of the rap crews” event put on by the youth ministry, G.A.N.G. (God’s Anointed Now Generation), every year at the Victory Outreach annual youth convention. A quick internet search also reveals numerous bboys and bgirls, graffiti artists, and deejays
associated with Victory Outreach, and congregations throughout the country that routinely hold parties, dance battle competitions, hip hop shows, and concerts.

One of the main ways that Victory Outreach attempts to reach the community with their message is through “dramas,” which are traveling theatre plays performed at multiple Victory Outreach congregations throughout the United States, perhaps in the tradition of the Chican@ theatre (i.e. Teatro Campesino during the Chicano Movement era). Many of these plays pose social issues, including gang violence, drug abuse, or poverty, and provide solutions. Others act out Bible stories in unique ways. One one occasion, I showed up for a drama titled “The Fiery Furnace: A Hip Hop musical” at the nearby Victory Outreach congregation in Lakewood, CO, a suburb of Denver. This free event was directed especially at youth in the community, as it was also advertised as a “back to school night” in which the congregation gave out free school supplies to all youth who showed up. This “drama” featured a cast made up entirely of Chican@ high school age youth, and reenacted the Bible story of Daniel and King Nebuchadnezzar and the fiery furnace in the form of a hip hop musical complete with a hip hop soundtrack, rap and hip hop dance battles, and even a bald headed Chicano God. In this way, the Bible is interpreted to youth in their own language, Hip Hop.

Graffiti art is also a heavy hip hop influence on Victory Outreach. In fact, on the side of the Victory Outreach Denver building is a large graffiti mural that reads “Stop the Violence,” complete with stylized stop signs, two brown youth, and a backdrop of the Denver skyline. Interestingly, much like the Zulu Nation of the 1970’s Bronx, Victory Outreach Denver is using hip hop for the explicit purpose of easing neighborhood tensions, utilizing graffiti art, an element of hip hop culture, to unambiguously urge the community to practice non-violence.
Graffiti art was also featured in a service one Sunday morning, when Assistant Pastor David, the youngest of the pastors at VO Denver, used graffiti art as the central metaphor in his sermon. That morning, he began his sermon by telling the congregation that God has “called us to the inner city.” He then, strangely, started humming a song, which I first recognized as the introduction to the rapper Nas’s classic 1994 album, *Illmatic*. I then chastised myself for my amnesia, as I remembered that that tune was originally from *Wild Style*, the early 1980’s film about graffiti writing and the origins of Hip Hop in New York City. Pastor David then tells the audience about growing up in Denver and watching *Wild Style* with his friends. “We wanted to be like the guys on *Wild Style,*” he said, “bombing on the subways. But we didn’t have no subways in Denver, so we used to bomb the trains.” He goes on to say that he and his homies used to do what they called “motions,” which involved “hitting up” a moving train or bus. He relates this to taking advantage of opportunities that God sends your way. “It’s the same with God,” he says, “sometimes the vision is moving and you gotta catch it! If you are waiting for the bus and you walk into 7-11, you might miss the bus. Don’t miss it!” In the ways demonstrated, Hip Hop culture in various forms is a constant presence at VO. This not only speaks to Chican@ youth, but also as Sanchez-Walsh (2003) notes, utilizes a common language and culture that can serve as a way for Chican@ and African American youth to worship together.

Finally, the very fact that Victory Outreach welcomes and encourages various forms of African American and Chican@ cultural expressions is itself an important development that
allows a space for working class brown and black folks to feel comfortable and respected. For example, Rabaka (2012) argues that the African American church has been dominated by the black bourgeoisie, drawing strict lines between the forms of expression considered fit for the sacred space of the church, and those that are not. He argues that because of this, the majority working class and poor black folks that make up the institution of the African American church often end up feeling unworthy, because the various forms of black working class secular expression are repudiated as “profane.” Perhaps this has been similarly true in Chicano churches, whether they be traditional Mexican Catholic churches, or protestant churches, that repudiate what Marez (1996) describes as a working class “rasquache” Chicano culture that stands in defiance of both Anglo culture and the culture of the Chicano elite, including popular music, working class Chicano styles of art and dress, lowriders, and more. By welcoming working class black and brown secular culture into the “sacred” space of the church, Victory Outreach affirms the identities of working class and poor black and brown folks in the community, perhaps another key reason why so many of my interviewees described themselves as feeling more welcome, comfortable, and valued at VO than at any other church.

In this way, Victory Outreach incorporates various forms of African American and Chicano popular culture in a way that allows African Americans and Chicanos to find common ground as they affirm a long history of cultural exchange between the two groups. In addition, by combining the secular and the sacred, they offer an alternative for working class black and brown folks who may have felt that their identities and cultural expressions have been ignored or repudiated in mainstream African American and Mexican American bourgeoisie churches. However, Victory Outreach also goes beyond cultural politics, seeing black and brown conflict and interethnic violence as a social ill that must be addressed explicitly as well.
Black and brown politics at Victory Outreach

In this section, I seek to demonstrate the ways that Victory Outreach recognizes and highlights the various forms of shared black-brown cultural expression described, such as lowrider car culture and the long history of cultural overlap in popular music, as a strategy to openly push for better black-brown interethnic relations. To do this, I first describe another Victory Outreach drama, titled “Straight from the hood” which deals explicitly with African American and Chicano violence, highlighting the ways that the entire drama is accompanied by various forms of black and brown cultural exchange, including a heavy dose of lowrider car culture (both during the drama and putting on a car show prior), and a soundtrack of “oldies” and rap music (both during the drama and with a rap concert prior). This drama serves as a case study for the ways that Victory Outreach makes use of Chican@ and African American shared cultural politics to encourage interethnic cooperation. I then seek to demonstrate, through my interviews, the way that these strategies seem to be working at least to some extent, as Chicano male members at Victory Outreach Denver (many of them socialized into gang and prison animosity between black and brown) describe having either revised, or being in the process of revising, their attitudes and relationship towards African Americans after becoming members at Victory Outreach.

“Straight from the hood.”

While some Victory Outreach dramas, like “The Fiery furnace” contain an all Chican@ cast, one quite prominent drama is titled “Straight From the Hood,” which features a mixed Chican@ and African American cast. This drama provides a great case study to demonstrate how Victory Outreach not only uses hip hop and other black-brown shared cultural expressions, but often deals directly and explicitly with black-brown relations. Both before and during the drama,
Victory Outreach utilizes various forms of shared cultural expression to reach the mixed Chican@ and African American audience, including a lowrider car show and a hip hop concert prior to the drama, and an “oldies” and hip hop soundtrack accompanying the drama.

I was able to obtain a video recording of the traveling drama, “Straight from the hood” when it came to Victory Outreach Long Beach (using the football stadium at Jordan High School in Long Beach, CA) on April 23, 2005. Long Beach, CA is a community that has a significant black and Chican@ population, and like much of the Los Angeles region, has experienced serious interethnic conflict between Chicano and African American gangs (Quinones, 2014). The video shows the event in full, beginning with video footage of a pre-event car show held on site. As mentioned, Chican@ car culture has long caught on among African Americans in the southwest (see Chappel, 2010 and Sandoval, 2014), and footage of the event shows Chican@s and African Americans mingling at the car show, admiring classic lowriders, praying together, and then entering the football stadium to see the main event. Throughout, Christian-themed rap music plays in the background. The main event opens with a Christian rap concert that includes both African American and Chicano (male) performers, rapping about Jesus and Christianity over West Coast gangsta rap style beats. Next, two men take the stage, the first is a Chicano man and the second a black man. Each tell a similar story about being involved in a gang and drug lifestyle, then experiencing redemption after finding Jesus through Victory Outreach church. Finally the drama begins. The scene opens up dramatically as two tricked out lowriders drive into the stadium. One car is full of Chicano men, the other black men, presumably rival gangs. Both groups pull out guns and began shooting from vehicle to vehicle (shooting blanks). A few are handcuffed and taken away by the cops. Throughout this scene, “The Way I Am” by West Coast rappers Snoop Dogg and Knoc’turanl blares over the sound system. A Chicano pastor
shows up to tell them not to seek revenge, and to seek Jesus instead. The next scene shows a Chicano party, where Chicanos dressed in *cholo* gear are hanging out and dancing to the G-Unit track, “Poppin them Thangs.” They greet one of their homies who has just been released from prison. They began talking about “taking out” the rival black gang. The next scene moves to another party, where the black men are also partying, this time to The Game and 50 Cent’s track, “Westside Story.” They also greet a homie just released from prison, “Monster.” He and his younger brother “Travis,” will become main characters in the plot. The black gang also begins to talk about taking out the “Mexicans” only to be interrupted by Travis and Monster’s mother and then the same Chicano pastor that spoke to the *cholos* in the previous scene. Both encourage the young men to give up the violent lifestyle and come to church. As this tension is occurring, Travis meets a young Mexican American girl, and they begin to fall in love, as The Intruders 1973 hit “I Want to Know Your Name” plays in the background.

Travis and Monster’s (the two African American brothers) mother begs them once again to go to church, as Tupac Shakur’s “Dear Mama,” accompanies the scene. Eventually the black gang murders a member of the Chicano gang anyways, and the Chicanos show up at a club where the black gang is partying. After a confrontation between the two men who were recently released from prison, another gunfight breaks out, this time claiming the life of a young African American boy who was in the process of joining the gang. Because of these events, the
relationship between Travis and the Chicana girl becomes strained, and when Monster tells his brother to ditch her, Monster and Travis began to fight as “This is a Man’s World,” by James Brown plays in the background. Travis leaves only to come back and threaten his own older brother with a gun. The pastor and his mother step in again, convince him to give up the gun, and finally, convince him to accept Jesus. The next scene shows Travis repairing his relationship with his Mexican American girlfriend, telling her that he is done with this life and is going to church. Nevertheless, the Chicano gang shows up at that very moment, rushing Travis and fatally shooting him. Monster, the pastor, and Travis and Monsters mother all join his girlfriend at the scene, grieving for Travis’s death. Monster declares revenge, swearing that he “is gonna get them,” which sparks an argument between he and the pastor. The pastor once again begs Monster to “give your heart to Jesus,” and Monster eventually breaks down and cries as they pray together. The cycle of violence has finally ended. The (real) Pastor of Victory Outreach Long Beach, a middle aged Mexican American man, then steps on stage, asking audience members to come to the stage for an altar call. Black and brown audience members all come to the base of the stage, praying together. The last of the video footage shows black and brown girls, boys, men, and women hugging and holding one other in prayer. This is quite significant in a region with a long history of black and brown tension.

This event and drama, which explicitly deals with black and brown relations, makes great use of the history of cultural exchange between African Americans and Chican@s in Los Angeles, including beginning with a lowrider car show, opening with a rap show that featured both black and brown Christian rap artists, and using the sort of African American popular music so well-liked by both African Americans and Chican@s across multiple generations as the soundtrack to the drama. For example, while the use of music by popular rap artists throughout
the drama (most of them West Coast and “gangsta” rap artists), including Snoop Dogg, Knoc’turnal, Tupac Shakur, The Game, and 50 Cent speaks to black and brown youth (remember, this was 2005), the use of “oldies” by artists such as The Intruders and James Brown is geared towards the older, baby boomer generation, audience members. It is only fitting that Victory Outreach would tap into this culturally affinity in music for an event that is specifically tailored to promote unity, peace, and cooperation between Mexican Americans and African Americans in the community. Judging by the final scene, in which African Americans and Chican@rs can be seen praying together, hugging, and holding one another, this strategy seems to have made an impact.

**Interviews.**

Whether the Chicano men that I interviewed at Victory Outreach Denver had seen the traveling drama, “Straight from the hood” or not, it was clear in many of their responses that their membership at Victory Outreach had caused some changes in the way that they perceived their relationship to African Americans. This is because the drama serves only as an example of larger practices at Victory Outreach, as an organization, that tend to highlight shared culture, as well as speak explicitly about black and brown relations. However, much like men revising their conceptions of masculinity (or leaving drug addiction, the gang lifestyle, etc) members at Victory Outreach are in various stages of this transition away from racial animosity towards African Americans. Nevertheless, these revisions, however slight, are significant considering the quite salient tensions between African American and Chicano males, especially in gangs and prison.

In my experience at Victory Outreach Denver, members occasionally speak explicitly about black- brown relations. For example, in one sermon, Pastor Ruben told the story of having
just got out of prison and entering the Victory Outreach men’s home. One day, he said, he began ironing the shirt of a black man who was also in the men’s home, just as a favor. He said that the black man “freaked out,” and thought maybe he was being prepared for getting killed. He says that coming out of prison, “he couldn’t understand why a Chicano would iron a black man’s shirt,” but “God changes all that.” This comment speaks directly to the ways that many of the men, both black and Chicano, had been socialized into prison and/or gang cultures with intense black-brown racial animosity. It also speaks to the ways that membership at Victory Outreach can be transformative, as in “God changes all that.” In fact, many of the men at Victory Outreach Denver talked about having racist or prejudiced attitudes before becoming Victory Outreach.

For example, when I interviewed Assistant Pastor Paul, who also joined Victory Outreach after being released from prison, he told me this:

Before I came to Christ I was real prejudiced. I didn’t like blacks or whites. But God showed me that we are all the same. And he shows me all the time that we’re all the same, we have the same issues, we go through the same problems. We hurt, we cry, we are human beings……… But it took a while cuz, well even for a long time when I was in the home that’s where God showed me.

Luis was explicit about the need for unity between black and brown. He told me this:

Uhhh….before I came into the (Victory Outreach) home and everything I was hanging around still with the gangs a little bit. And gangwise, the blacks and the Mexicans don’t mix. I mean, but it’s always been like that since I’ve been a little kid in California, been like that. But I mean, I didn’t have no problem with them. It was just racial…a gang thing. But we need to work together. It’s just a street thing, it shouldn’t be like that. But everybody…we just need to work together…… Get more Hispanic together and more
Blacks so the people in the streets see that Hispanics and Blacks are working together.

And that show we are gonna build more churches and get people together and have more unity out there in the streets.

When I asked Jimmy, VO Denver’s worship leader and a former 18th st. gang member and drug dealer in Los Angeles, how to improve black and brown relations, he told me this:

The solution is to get the devil outta this world man. Cuz everything is built on anger everything’s built on hate, resentment. So I believe the only thing that helps is learning how to love one another, learning how to love yourself. And there’s really not a threat out there as far as color, as far as race. We are all human, we are all part of humanity. We gotta treat each other like humans. Amen?

Perhaps this sort of rhetoric is just cliché, the kind of colorblind or multiculturalist discourse that ignores historic patterns of oppression. In some ways, it is. But for former cholo gang members, having gone through street (and often prison) socialization into the animosity between black and brown, this is actually a substantial step towards African Americans.

However, as mentioned, the men at Victory Outreach are in various stages of their “recovery” or “rehabilitation,” whether it be from substance addiction, gang life, or destructive forms of masculinity. This means that members are also in various stages of change from the sort of gang and prison masculine socialization that pits black and brown males against each other.

Bobby, who was the newest member that I interviewed, and expressed to me that he was trying to change by joining Victory Outreach, had quite different responses to my questions regarding relations between Chicanos and African Americans. Bobby told me this:

…I work with a lot of black guys, older black guys that are real cool. But you get around these younger black guys and uhhh it aint cool at all ya know. They got that…it seems
like they think they’re…you need a be scared of em because theyre black or we owe em something because they’re people were in slavery. But in my own opinion it ain’t my fault that your ancestors just bent over backwards like that cuz mines didn’t. They killed and they fought for theirs. So don’t play that card like everybody owes me something cuz my people were enslaved. What about my people? There was never no brown president. There’s no brown nothing, ya know? They look at us like oh those dirty wetbacks or whatever and they look down on us and half the time people come up to me and they talk Spanish I’m like bro I don’t even speak a lick of Spanish I don’t even know what you’re talking about!

However, he also went on to say that it is a “two way street” and that we need to “realize that we are all equal.”

Nevertheless, as a new member, it was clear that he continued to hold animosity towards African Americans. He seems to ridicule (and feminize) African American history, constructing a revisionist history that denies the long history of resistance in the African American community, while simultaneously downplaying a history of conquest and oppression in the Chican@ community (we didn’t “bend over”), which serves to masculinize Chican@ history because, unlike African Americans, they “killed and fought for theirs.” At the same time, he resents African Americans for what he sees as entitlement, and perhaps also seems to resent the election of a black president, stating, “There was never no brown president. There’s no brown nothing, ya know?"

Finally, he compares the relationship that he has to African Americans as similar to the one he has to Mexican immigrants, attempting to create distance from Mexican immigrants as he also creates distance from African Americans. Jimmy also made this comparison as he talked
about relationships between African Americans and Chican@s, stating that, “but it also goes with Mexico too. Mexicans and Chicanos, Mexican Americans. There’s such a division because there a different country. Because you don’t speak Spanish right, because you don’t speak Spanish the way they speak Spanish…” Much like black-brown relations, there is a similarly long tradition of Mexican Americans attempting to distance themselves from Mexican immigrants in order to claim a higher social status, as well as a tradition of tension and tenuous coalition between the two groups (Ochoa, 2004; Pulido, 2006; Jimenez, 2009). The fact that both Jimmy and Tommy made this comparison speaks to the ways that the Chican@-Mexican immigrant relationship may be seen as quite similar to the Chican@-African American relationship in that the two groups respectively experience some political, cultural, and social, similarities and some differences, as well as a long history of tension and fleeting unity. In one sermon, pastor Ruben addresses the relationship with Mexican immigrants, or “border brothers” as he calls them, exclaiming, “Chicanos don’t like Mexicans, and all that. We talk about border brothers. Who drew the line on the map? God or man?” Importantly however, Chican@s and Mexican immigrants, as well as Chican@s and African Americans, (and African Americans and Mexican immigrants!) have often been put in conflict with each other over ghettos and barrios, working class jobs, and status at the lowest rungs of the nation’s economy and racial hierarchy. In the comments section of a youtube.com video of another 2009 track by rapper Sick Jacken titled “The Fall of Us” which also contains references to black and brown unity, one insightful commenter by the handle of “javier3ro” writes, “At the bottom we get crushed from above and explode against those by our sides that are under the same weight.”

**Shared sadness, shared hope, and shared struggle**
As outlined, even though unity and coalition has often been fleeting, Chican@s and African Americans have a long history of shared cultural expression. But those forms of popular culture and expression are not only similar in style, but also in content, and one theme that runs through both African American and Chican@ cultural expression is that of sadness. As described in great detail in Chapter 2, Victory Outreach attempts to address the wide range of “sadness” experienced disproportionately by Chican@s. The important point that I would like to make at this juncture is that this “sadness,” is by no means unique to the experiences of Chican@s. All oppressed, marginalized, semi conquered people, struggling for equality and dignity also experience this sadness in some form or another. This often takes the form of a collective, often intergenerational, grief. So perhaps, much more than even popular music, cultural expression, or youth style, this shared oppression and its accompanying “sadness,” is really that which binds Chican@s and African Americans. In fact, that might help to partially explain the long history of cultural borrowing in the first place. So African Americans do not find Victory Outreach attractive only because it incorporates elements of African American culture, but also because it addresses a range of shared experiences stemming from a history of both black and brown marginality, oppression, and struggle in the United States.

This is why the emphasis on shared culture is important, but an emphasis must be placed on a shared experience (though in historically different ways) of oppression and struggle, and connections must be made there as well in order to achieve any sort of coalition. As I have previously mentioned, cultural affinity does not necessarily equal social or political affinity, but there is a theme of sadness that runs through Hip Hop and other forms of black-brown cultural exchange that is important place to begin the difficult work of forging connections that are more than superficial. To demonstrate this, I point to the themes of sadness in both African American
and Chican@ forms of cultural expression, and then put African American spoken word artist Gil Scott Heron’s 1978 ode to the blues in conversation with Chicano rap artist MC Man’s 1994 track “Mind of a Mexican.” Then, I argue, in conclusion, that an emphasis on shared sadness in all of its manifestations must accompany the emphasis on shared culture, if we are to create cross cultural connections with the potential to alleviate sadness at its root. I began by pointing to the themes of shared sadness in both Chican@ and African American cultural expression.

**Shared sadness in African American and Chican@ popular expressions**

*My momma had em, daddy had em too. I was born with the blues.* -African American Blues musician Brownie McGhee, “Living with the blues”

*I got nothing to lose, I got the Chicano blues.* -Chicano rap group, The Funky Aztecs, “Chicano blues”

In the introduction to this chapter, I included a quote from Luis J. Rodriguez (1992), in which he states that the influence of African Americans on Chicanos in the 1970’s, “lay particularly deep in music: Mexican rhythms syncopated with blues and ghetto beats” (84). Tellingly, the blues is a musical genre that arose out of a particular pain and sadness (as well as struggle and triumph) experienced by generations of African Americans. But the legacy of blues remains, as the blues is also a form of music that has made a deep imprint on subsequent forms of African American music, including ragtime, jazz, bebop, R&B, and of course, Hip Hop and rap music (Rabaka, 2012).

The themes of sadness that characterized the blues live on in the sorts of African American cultural expressions that continue to resonate in both black and brown communities. The heavy cultural/musical exchange between African Americans and Chican@s in the Southwest, as well as a certain shared “sadness” that impacts both groups, accounts for why classic R&B songs like “Tears of a Clown” by Smokey Robinson and the Miracles remain standards in both communities. It also helps account for why a rap artist like Tupac Shakur, who
howled from the depths of despair, has achieved such a valued place in both black and brown communities, as the blues also continues to live through Hip Hop. In rapper Warren G’s 1994 track, “Do you See?” the song begins with a portion of African American poet/ spoken word artist Gil Scott Heron’s ode to the blues. As the beat hums, Heron’s voice overlays the track:

The blues has always been totally American. As American as apple pie. As American as the blues. As American as apple pie. The question is why? Why should the blues be so at home here? Well, America provided the atmosphere.

In the original spoken word piece from 1978, Gil Scott Heron goes on to say that,

The blues was born on the American wilderness. The blues was born on the beaches where the slave ships docked. Born on the slave man's auction block. The blues was born and carried on the howling wind. The blues grew up a slave. The blues grew up as property. The blues grew up in Nat Turner visions. The blues grew up in Harriet Tubman courage. The blues grew up in small town deprivation. The blues grew up in big city isolation. The blues grew up in the nightmares of the white man….. The blues is grown. But the country has not. The blues remembers everything the country forgot.

In this way, Gil Scott Heron links the rise of the blues, and hence the rise intergenerational grief and sadness in the black community, directly to a long history of slavery, “deprivation,” and “isolation” (but also in African American resistance and “courage”), that the white mainstream in the United States conveniently forgets. African American rap artists, such as the aforementioned Tupac Shakur and Warren G, among many others, continued this tradition, because of the musical forms they have inherited, because of the grief they have inherited, but also because the “atmosphere” described by Heron often remains the same more than it changes.

However, much like their African American counterparts, Chicano rap artists also
reverberate with tales of inherited grief and a continued “atmosphere” that begets “sadness.” For example, Chicano rap artist MC Man seems to echo Heron’s connection (as well as Velez-Ibanez’s) between sadness and oppression. In his 1996 track, “Mind of a Mexican,” MC Man begins verse one by rapping,

For 200 years they got me sitting in a state of shock,
First they take my land and then they rush me on my own block,
Take me to jail they lock me up and throw away the key,
Then they try to teach me that there’s no future ahead of me,
Stereotype me ‘cuz I fit the description,
They say doing crime is a minority addiction,
One after another, they try to break us down,
I think about my pride with my face to the ground.

He goes on to say,

I’m looking for a job but they give me hesitation,
I get nowhere without a white man’s education.

Then continues further, rapping,

They robbed my land and separated my people,
My brothers died first now they say I’m the sequel,
I find it real hard to try and rest my head,
Thinking one of these days I’m gonna end up dead.

He then goes on to conclude the verse by saying, “I’m brown and proud but on the way the pen, as you wonder what goes on in the mind of a Mexican.” In verse two, MC Man speaks of developing the “ways of a lunatic” who is “trapped in a cage” and “stuck in a maze.” His attempts to get out are difficult because “they cut my mind with some false education” and fed him “nonsense.” MC Man articulates that the reason why he cannot “rest his head” is a direct result of the history of the pain of oppression and colonization of Chican@s that he inherits (in a state of shock for 200 years, robbed my land and separated my people), but a history that is also a follow through to the modern day (first take my land and then “rush me on my own block”). Whereas Gil Scott Heron’s blues were born on the “slave ships” and the “auction block,” MC
Man points to the U.S. colonization that “cut my land in half,” in the school system where he was fed “nonsense,” in the economy where he is unable to find a job, and also in the criminal justice system, with his “face to the ground” and “on the way to the pen.” Like much rap music that has come during the rise of the prison industrial complex, MC Man necessarily points often to prison, police brutality, and criminalization that contribute to his state of sadness, fear of death, and loss of a masculine “pride.” Much of this is remarkably similar to the stories told by African American (especially male) rap artists, particularly in the so-called “gangsta rap” genre (Cheney, 2008).

This theme of oppression and sadness is especially salient for black and brown people, as we continually find these themes running through various forms of popular cultural expression by and for Chican@'s and/or African Americans. It is also a theme running through the discourse at Victory Outreach, as discussed throughout this project. So perhaps this is the real reason why Chican@'s and African Americans at Victory Outreach can find common ground in hip hop, as a music and culture that has inherited much from the blues. It is also why African Americans and Chican@'s can find common ground at Victory Outreach church more broadly, as it attempts to provide members a way to cope with this sadness, or blues, which has inflected both communities. In this way, Victory Outreach offers something that both Chican@ and African American communities are always searching for: hope. But as I will argue, true hope can only
come when we can address the various roots of this shared sadness, and not just the sadness itself.

**Getting to the roots: Mobilizing shared culture for shared struggle**

Though there are some in the Chican@ community that may be unable or unwilling to see it, engagement with black popular culture and cultural expression is as central to Chican@ culture and history as anything else. From zoot suit culture, jazz, and swing music, lowrider car culture, soul, R&B, Motown, and now of course, hip hop culture, and the legacy of the blues, to name just a few, African Americans and Chican@’s, especially in Los Angeles and throughout the Southwest, have historically intermingled and shared a certain cultural affinity (at least from the WWII era onward). However, despite this cultural exchange, as well as often overlapping concerns, shared “sadness,” and an experience of marginality and oppression that is at least in some ways similar, black-brown political coalition has proven difficult. The Victory Outreach case study may provide us with a model for how to successfully tap into the various black-brown shared cultural expressions to work towards unity. As the Victory Outreach case study also reveals, for today’s generation of Chican@ and African American youth, hip hop is the central site of cultural exchange and affinity. This suggests that, true to the Zulu Nation goals of interethnic unity in the early Bronx days, hip hop must be mobilized in order to achieve any level of Chican@ and African American interethnic alliance. So, like Victory Outreach, we must utilize this tool.

Chican@’s must first acknowledge our long tradition of cultural affinity and exchange with African Americans. But we must not stop at culture or simply ‘getting along.’ We must, in the spirit of unity, coalition, and love, address the true causes of our shared “sadness,” by relying on our common cultures to inform our common political struggles. If history is any guide, that is
a tall order. But so is a modern capitalist economic system that continues to impoverish black and brown people, so is a criminal justice system and prison industrial complex that continues to imprison ever increasing numbers of black and brown people, and so is an education system that continues to offer nothing for black and brown youth to build on, just to name a few of the countless other contemporary issues of common concern to both Chican@s and African Americans. And of course, so are the related multiple forms of sadness that infect our communities with death, pain, frustration, and violence. But the combined black and brown youth of the hip hop generation, just in sheer numbers, is a larger combined mass than any previous generation of black and brown youth in the history of the United States.

However, as demonstrated, black and brown Hip Hop and rap artists, blues musicians, poets/ spoken word artists, and scholars all point to this grief and “sadness” in our communities as having its roots in the tremendous inequalities, injustices, and violence, both historically and contemporarily, inflicted upon African American and Chican@ families and communities (as well as others). This means that our interventions must not only deal with the effects, but also deal with the root causes, if we are to really make progress. It also means that we must not repeat the heterosexism and homophobia that has been all too common in churches, popular music and culture, and social movements in both the African American and Mexican American communities, as these practices undoubtedly engender their own forms of sadness among folks in our own communities. This is why Rabaka (2012), says that “hip hop’s politics must be more multi-issue and multivalent than any previous form of politics” (213-214). In the chapter that follows, I will critically interrogate whether or not the rhetoric at Victory Outreach church seems up to the task of dealing with the structural roots of sadness, as well as how invested VO is in addressing the “sadness” experienced by the majority of people in our communities that do not
identify as heterosexual males. Because without those two key elements in our efforts, perhaps we reproduce sadness as much as we alleviate it.
Chapter 4: The supernaturalization of social ills, and the naturalization of gender hierarchies

So far in this project, I have made the case that in various ways, the rhetorical strategies at Victory Outreach have counterhegemonic and resistant potential. Included within this is the reformulation of Chicano masculinity that encourages non-violence, allows men to deal with their “sadness” in productive ways, and allows alternative avenues to dignity and respect, the push towards Black and Brown unity through the use of shared popular cultures, and the centralization on the poor and out casted as worthy and valuable people, to name just a few. However, true to the nature of vernacular discourses, there are ways in which the rhetoric at Victory Outreach can be quite hegemonic, reproducing and reaffirming the very structures that have engendered “sadness” in the first place. I agree with Ono and Sloop (1997) when they make the case that rhetoricians must engage with vernacular discourses critically, in the same way one might critique mainstream discourses. In this chapter, then, I point to two aspects of the rhetoric at Victory Outreach that are overwhelmingly hegemonic: the individualization and spiritualization/supernaturalization of social ills that deflects attention away from structures, and the gender hierarchy that remains unaffected even as men revise their conceptions of masculinity. I began, however, by outlining, once again, hegemony and vernacular discourses.

Hegemony and vernacular discourses

There are various ways to understand the nature of hegemony. Some versions of hegemony take more traditional Marxist notions of the concept as a form of ideological domination. For example, Cloud (1994; 1996) takes a more traditional view of hegemonic rhetoric as one that can “obscure” relations of inequality in capitalist economy stratified by class and racial inequality, and hence, produce consent for the parameters of subordination. Condit
(1994, 1997) on the other hand, rejects the domination/subordination dichotomy by advancing hegemony as “concordance,” which involves the negotiation of various groups, to produce a multivocal “accommodation,” which is the best compromise that can be managed under whatever the particular circumstances may be. Post-structural approaches generally see power as much more dispersed and often view rhetoric as open to various interpretations, normative, resistant or otherwise. (Fiske, 1986, 1989, 1994; Greene, 1998). Mumby (1997) critiques all three viewpoints, arguing that a traditional stance is too simplistic and “crude,” a “concordance” stance is potentially too accommodationist and limits critique, and a post-structural view runs the risk of romanticizing micro-resistance without taking into account larger structures and systems. Instead, he argues that hegemony itself is “dialectical,” always encompassing both domination and resistance, and is an ongoing, constantly contested process.

When it comes to the sort of vernacular discourse at Victory Outreach, this dialectical nature is especially true. Recall that Ono and Sloop (1995) draw two main elements of vernacular discourse: cultural syncretism and pastiche. Cultural syncretism refers to the fact that even though vernacular discourses emanate from “oppressed communities” they are not necessarily always reactive, resistant, and counter hegemonic. Instead they tend to both resist and affirm dominant ideologies (which Mumby would argue is a feature of hegemony anyway). Pastiche is related to this point, as it involves borrowing various cultural “fragments” to construct unique subjectivities. Because pastiche involves borrowing from mainstream cultures (i.e. hegemonic), it will always contain certain hegemonic aspects.

For Latin@’s and Chican@’s, this “cultural syncretism” and “pastiche” described by Ono and Sloop is especially salient, due to the “mestizaje” or “borderlands” existence of Chican@’s
and Latin@s (Anzaldúa, 1987). In this way cultural syncretism is itself a key feature of Chican@ culture. As Marez (1996) puts it,

Because Chicanos are themselves collages-an amalgam of Indian, Spanish, Mexican, and Anglo elements-their cultural products are also mixtures of fragments from diverse traditions. Collage is thus the stylistic corollary of mestizaje, the "impure" status of racial and national mixture. Essentially without clear-cut racial or national essence, working-class brown people become mixmasters (122).

But this creativity and “mixmastering” also has important ramifications for the role that hegemony and resistance place for Chican@s. Referring to the clash of various frames of reference (colonial, oppressive, resistant, decolonial, indigenous, alternative, etc), that characterize the borderlands existence, Anzaldua goes on to write that, “we get multiple, often opposing messages. The coming together of two self consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes un choque, a cultural collision” (100). In this environment, the analysis of hegemony and ideology is also one of coloniality, as the development of counter hegemonic discourses becomes simultaneously a process of decolonization (Holling and Calafell, 2011). In addition to all of this, Latin@s, occupying a marginal position in U.S. culture, have often had to rely on particular dominant logics in order to make political or rhetorical interventions in the first place (Anguiano and Chavez, 2011; Flores, 2012). These complex circumstances lead to a uniqueness of vernacular discourses in Latin@ communities. This is why scholars in the field of Communication have increasingly taken up Latin@ vernacular discourses, analyzing the cultural syncretism and pastiche, coloniality, and the interplay of hegemony and resistance in the discourses that circulate through the Latin@ community (see Holling and Calafell, 2004).
As demonstrated throughout, the mixmasters at Victory Outreach, like hip hop turntableists, combine various cultural fragments, Chican@, African American, gang, mainstream, Christian Evangelical, cholo, and more, to piece together a culture and ideology that has had an impact in Los Angeles, throughout the Southwest, in Denver, and even around the United States and now the world. Thus far I have characterized this ingenuity as being potentially resistant and counter hegemonic in various ways, including a push for healthier conceptions of masculinity that allow for men to collectively deal with sadness and reclaim love, and find dignity and belonging without resorting to violence, a focus on the marginalized and outcasted that is welcoming and affirms members identities, and a message of black-brown unity with the potential to spur change.

While this is true, the rhetoric at Victory Outreach also includes various elements that are quite hegemonic, normative, and perhaps not resistant at all. As mentioned, this is a key characteristic of vernacular discourses broadly, and this is why Ono and Sloop (1997) argue that vernacular discourses need to be critiqued in the same way that mainstream discourses are. In this chapter, I point to two aspects of the rhetoric at Victory Outreach that are overwhelmingly hegemonic: the individualization and/or spiritualization of social ills that deflects attention away from structures, and the gender hierarchy that remains unaffected even as men revise their conceptions of masculinity. I argue that these features of the rhetoric and culture at Victory Outreach can contribute to various forms of “sadness” even as VO attempts to combat sadness.

The individualization and supernaturalization of social ills: Deflecting attention away from structures

As outlined in previous chapters, multiple writers, scholars, and public health professionals (as well as various poets and artists), locate the root cause for social ills such as
gangs, addiction, depression, violence, and other forms of “sadness” in communities of color in the historic and contemporary structures and institutions that produce exploitation, state violence, economic inequality, trauma, alienation, intergenerational grief, and more experienced disproportionately by both Chican@s and African Americans (Vigil, 1982, 1983, 2002, 2001; Agnew, 1992, 1997, 1999; Rodriguez, 1993; Velez-Ibanez, 1996; Cintron, 1997; Agguire-Molina et. al, 2001; African American communities, n.d.). However, at Victory Outreach, this point towards structures and institutions is generally not the case. Instead of pointing to structures as the root cause for these various forms of “sadness” the discourse at Victory Outreach tends to point either to supernatural or individual causes and solutions. In this frame of reference, sadness and social ills come from the “devil” or “demons,” and is only rooted out through “spiritual warfare,” and problems within ones own life is construed as the result of sin, a curse, or not having “the right mindset” which can only be tackled through individual change. Whether causes and solutions are deemed to be supernatural or individual, both effectively deflect the focus away from the political and social structures and institutions that wreak havoc on our communities, focusing only on spiritual and/or individual agents. This precludes the possibility for collective social or political struggle, in line with hegemonic, neoliberal, ideologies that reproduce the structures that engender the very social ills that VO is combating.

**The individualization of social ills: Neoliberalism, prosperity theology, and the therapeutic**

This collapse of all social issues into the private sphere has its roots in a modern neoliberal logic that seeks to reproduce power by rendering all problems as personal, in a way that does not address the role that larger systems of power play in the day to life of individuals, families, and entire communities. Nunley (2011) describes neoliberalism as a logic “that constructs the market as the primary organizing principle for all social, economic, and spiritual
phenomena. It depoliticizes politics itself and reduces public activity to the realm of utterly privatized practices and utopias…” He goes on to say that, “It collapses the public into the private, rendering all social problems as personal (169).” A specific “racial neoliberalism” has been described by various scholars (Melamed, 2006; Mukherjee, 2006; Goldberg, 2009; Enck-Wanzer, 2011). Enck Wanzer (2011) describes racial neoliberalism as an “active suppression of race as a legitimate topic or term of public discourse and public policy” in which racism is privatized as only individual prejudice (never structural), and serves to rebuff any race-based claims for social justice as themselves racist (24).

But even non-white communities are by no means immune to the pervasiveness of racial neoliberalism or neoliberalism more broadly. Nunley (2011) goes on to discuss the influence of this neoliberal logic in African American culture and society, arguing that, “Black neoliberalism, then, relegates race and other discussions to the private realm; racism viewed as personal failing rather than a reflection of the nation-state and its institutions” (169). He goes on to say that, “…neoliberalism and Black neoliberalism do more than function as economic exchange and social relations: they seep into the very ground of subjectivity itself,” and, “seep into African American life and culture” (169). Perhaps neoliberalism similarly weaves itself into the fabric of Chican@ culture in the United States (Brown neoliberalism?), collapsing the public into the private an therefore rendering structural racism unimaginable. Considering the massive structural concerns of Chican@s (much like African Americans, i.e. Black neoliberalism), this development is troubling. And at Victory Outreach, where there is an explicit push to unite black and brown under a shared ideological system, this is all the more disturbing. However, unlike traditional neoliberal discourse, at Victory Outreach, the individual/private sphere is not the only place where social ills find their cause and solution, as the supernatural sphere, is also
prominent. So at Victory Outreach Denver this deflection from structures takes the form of funneling issues, including poverty, gangs, addiction, violence, and illness away from the structural and towards the individual as well as the supernatural.

**Therapeutic rhetoric and prosperity theology at VO**

On the side of the Victory Outreach Denver church is a large graffiti mural that reads “Stop the Violence.” This is an important message at VO Denver. In fact, when I asked Jimmy what was the role of Victory Outreach in the Community, he said those exact words, “Stop the Violence.” I include this mural because it communicates a lot both in what it says and what it doesn’t say. The graffiti, Hip Hop aesthetic, stop signs, and backdrop of the Denver skyline place it firmly in this urban community. However, it is not referring to, for example, police brutality, for a mural directed at police would not include the stop signs they blow through on the way to a call or the graffiti aesthetic developed by those they apprehend. This message seems to be directed exclusively at people in the community, placing the onus for change on individuals in the neighborhood, to stop, just as you would when approaching the red octagon sign at the intersection. It is a simple choice of whether or not to place your foot on that brake pedal. Also, “stop the violence,” rather than “stop the injustice,” “stop the inequality,” or even “stop the abuse,” is decidedly less politically confrontational, as these alternative slogans seem to confront the violence perpetrated by state actors and powerful institutions rather than those with considerably less power. While I have often heard folks at Victory Outreach call for an end to street violence, I have never heard anybody mention state violence in its various forms. In this way, on close inspection, this mural and its message, when
combined with a complete failure to recognized larger systems, falls in nicely with neoliberal rhetorics such as “personal responsibility,” that seeks to individualize and privatize all social issues. This privatization obscures larger social, economic, cultural, and political marginalities that can manifest in multiple forms of “sadness,” in this case violence. This makes people the target of change rather than systems, and allows those that benefit from said systems to wash their hands of the strife occurring in the barrio. However, the hegemonic content of this mural is itself obscured by the graffiti urban aesthetic, which blends into the urban environment, a sort of Trojan horse in the hood.

In focusing on the individual as the exclusive agent of change, Victory Outreach participates in this neoliberal privatization of social ills, and employs the rhetoric of therapy through the discourse of healing and recovery. According to Cloud (1997), therapeutic rhetoric is a hegemonic discursive pattern that translates social and political problems into the language of individual responsibility and healing, often couched in medical terminology. She argues that this form of discourse is a rhetorical strategy of contemporary Capitalism that involves channeling anger, dissent, discontent, or social unrest into individualistic or private sphere concerns, isolating all issues from structural critique and collective action. It offers self-care, consolation, coping techniques, and other individual benefits as a substitute for material or structural change, and is often deployed as a response to social conflict along the lines of race, class, and gender.

In many ways, Victory Outreach employs therapeutic rhetoric by positing individuals as the locus for change, offering coping techniques in the form of hope, self help, or encouragement in place of material or structural change, and often using the language of medical terminology. In my experience at Victory Outreach Denver, these themes of neoliberal privatization, self help therapeutic rhetoric, and prosperity type theology were especially common in sermons by
Assistant Pastor David, who regularly took the lead in church services. For example, in one sermon, Assistant Pastor David talks about having a dying plant. When they moved to a new home, it began to flourish. He says that, “The problem wasn’t the plant it was the place. And it’s the same with you. But it’s likely not a physical place but a mental place. God! Put me in my place! Find my destiny!” The crowd roared in applause. This suggests that for those dealing with multiple forms of sadness, one may only need to look within, to change your “mental place” and find your “destiny.” What needs to change is not injustice, but how we think about it. Pastor David then outlines the “9 P’s,” which are nine steps to get that “position with God.” They include praying, purpose (destiny comes from purpose, not just faith), passion, priority (put God first), preparation (so you can discover your true potential), provocation (being provoked by others), proclamation (you can speak things into existence), patience, and pain (makes you want to change). He says that once you do these things you get “the power,” and you can see God’s plan in your life. He says, “You are miserable! But God has a plan for you! He wants you to grow!” To conclude the sermon, he shouts, “I am great because he is with me! I am powerful!”

Ideas about “destiny,” “discovering your full potential,” “speaking things into existence,” and changing your “mental place” in order to change your life circumstances, are ideas that seem very similar to the sort of therapeutic, self help books and seminars described by Cloud (1997), even down to the catchy slogans, such as the “9 P’s.” This sermon also offers individual or spiritual consolation for the effects of structural inequalities, rather than political or collective strategies for resistance against those structures. In this case, “power” is achieved through individual agency, not collective struggle. And instead of political power, we achieve divine power from God.
In another sermon by Assistant Pastor David, he addresses what it takes to be “successful,” economically or otherwise. He says success comes from “having a goal,” and a place “where you want to go.” He goes on to speak of a need for “growth” and the “cutting edge.” This adaptation of self-help business/innovation rhetorics of “growth” and the “cutting edge” also fall in line with neoliberal discourses. By locating economic success only within the individual and their goals or vision for “where they want to go” the very real economic structures that produce have and have not’s are rendered non-existent, and the individual is solely responsible for his or her success, or perhaps, lack thereof as well.

Finally, VO utilizes therapeutic rhetoric through the employment of medical terminology and the rhetoric of illness. For example, Victory Outreach members often speak of “healing.” Another prominent term is that of “gang recovery.” The very idea that leaving a gang is termed as “recovery,” in the way that one may experience recovery from a mental or physical illness, demonstrates the implicit reliance on therapeutic themes and comes strikingly close to rhetoric that uses the discourses of pathology often directed at Chican@s. In classic therapeutic style, this strategy utilizes medical terminology and provides individual benefits while also isolating all issues from structural critique. It places the blame on individuals and communities by ignoring structures, even as it provides hope that we can get outside of those structures by the same act of denying them.

Much of this sort of discourse is also in line with popular strains of prosperity theology. Winslow (2015) describes prosperity theology as a form of Christianity that is especially popular among those that find themselves constrained by structural forms of oppression. He outlines that its rhetoric consists of wish fulfillment and visualization (think and you can do it/ have it!), positive confession of faith (say it and you can do it/ have it!), radical individualism and
autonomy (it’s up to you!), and rejection of structural constraints (nothing can hold you back!). This rhetoric is powerful because it provides hope to the poor and marginalized, but only by denying that every one of our lives is constrained by larger systems that are not entirely individual. In this way, this rhetoric is also thoroughly hegemonic and neoliberal, producing hope, but simultaneously producing consent to the parameters of structural oppression by denying that it even exists. As Winslow (2015) puts it, “This is the darker underbelly of prosperity theology that …. aligns well with the new rhetoric of the Undeserving Poor: if you do not have all you want, you only have yourself to blame.”

But often, at Victory Outreach, the influence of Christian ideology means that “sin” or “curses” stand in for traditional neoliberal discourses of “personal responsibility” or racist ideas of “pathology.” For example, after a well known Church member died of cancer, Assistant Pastor David said to the congregation, “Disease comes from sin. Sin leads to family curses, sickness, and disease. Aids, STDs and even cancer and diabetes come from sin.” For Pastor David, physical illness, which is another category of “sadness” experienced disproportionately by Chican@ss, is seen as the result of individual sin rather than wealth or health inequalities. And instead of a lack of intergenerational wealth, and a presence of intergenerational grief, etc. that may create a “family curse” it is that somebody in the family has sinned. This is also in line with the tenets of prosperity theology rhetoric, where various issues such as poverty, illness, disease, and failure can all have their roots in sin and curses that result from that (Winslow, 2015). It also can have wider implications for serving neoliberal political aims. As Winslow (2015) puts it, “when prosperity theology’s language seeps into public conversations it can shape policy in ways that align with wider neoliberal political and economic formations by drawing rhetorical justification from the idea that upward mobility is available to anyone who wants it” (52).
Perhaps with the addition of Christian ideas of “sin,” “curses, and redemption through God, this rhetoric becomes even more powerful than traditional secular neoliberal discourses and therapeutic rhetorics, because, “In this arrangement, existing hierarchies of power and wealth – even when they are massively unequal and intractable – are imbued with a fresh and timely sense of divine justification” (55).

**Demons, the devil, and spiritual warfare**

The individual, however, whether in the traditional sense or through the substitute of “sin,” is not the only location where structural racism, inequality, injustice, and violence are displaced on to at Victory Outreach. The causes and solutions to various social ills are also located in the supernatural realm. In my experience at Victory Outreach Denver, various forms of “sadness” are often attributed to demons and the devil. This tendency to view social ills as supernatural in origin, rather than systemic, is in line with a larger Evangelical ethos of which Victory Outreach is a part of (Sanchez-Walsh, 2003). As Sanchez-Walsh (2013) puts it, “If they once believed that their circumstances were caused by institutional sexism, racism, or economic injustice, conversion has reoriented their worldview to look at a supernatural agent as the root of their troubles” (p. 125). Because social ills were often seen as having a supernatural root, I repeatedly heard members at Victory Outreach Denver refer to their struggles to root out addiction, gangs, and sadness in the community as a “spiritual warfare.” In this section, I first demonstrate the ways that supernatural agents and “spiritual warfare” are frequently evoked at Victory Outreach Denver. Ultimately I argue that spiritual warfare, as a root metaphor at Victory Outreach is extremely limiting, precluding any sort of political struggle, or any strategies, for that matter, that deal with gangs, drugs, violence, poverty, or other social ills through earthly means.
At Victory Outreach Denver, supernatural agents are frequently evoked as the cause and potential solution to social problems in urban poor communities. For example, Pastor Ruben began one sermon by saying that Christianity is “a fight with the enemy. And the enemy is the devil,” who wants to “use you like a chump.” He goes on to say that at Victory Outreach Denver, outreach to the community to deal with gangs and drug addiction is battling “spirits of darkness.” He explains that every city or neighborhood has spirits that have been given authority over the area and influence the people that live in this area. When you show up to this area (to combat the spirits, presumably) the spirits “are warned that you are there…..but they ain’t got nothing on God!” He says that every person must serve either God or the devil, and “when you serve the evil spirits or the devil, they have control over you. So you should serve God. If not you are just getting punked by the devil.” As described in Chapter 2, many of the rhetorical strategies at Victory Outreach attempt to challenge men’s sense of masculinity. This is evident here, through use of terms like “punk” and “chump,” to characterize those who are not “serving God.” But what is also evident here is that the various forms of “sadness” in the community is framed as having a supernatural agent, in this case the devil or evil spirits, which can only be addressed through another supernatural agent, God. In this way, the various structural, institutional, social, and cultural forces leading to sadness become translated into demonic forces that wreak havoc on our communities.

At Victory Outreach, demons and the devil do not only wreak havoc in communities, but also in individual lives and in families. When I asked Assistant Pastor Paul what his advice would be for those struggling with gangs, drug addiction, violence, or poverty, he told me “Give Jesus a chance,” because sometimes there are “demonic forces controlling their lives.” He goes on to say that “the devil comes in and things start happening. Relationships break up,
jobs….different things, and then they get discouraged and they get caught back up in the same thing, and they’re sad.” Sadness, therefore, both on an individual and communal level, is the result of supernatural evils such as the devil and demons, which means that the only solution is supernatural “good,” or “to give Jesus a chance.” This is why the theme of “spiritual warfare” between good and evil supernatural forces was a common one in my experience at Victory Outreach Denver.

The common metaphor of “spiritual warfare” at Victory Outreach involves members engaging in a battle against social ills in the barrio on a supernatural front. This metaphor seems to undergird a lot of the actions taken by Victory Outreach Denver that attempt to deal with various forms of sadness but never even seem to consider that particular structures and institutions could be the culprit. In this way, “spiritual warfare” serves as a root metaphor of sorts at Victory Outreach Denver. Smith and Eisenberg (1987) describe root metaphors as “symbolic frames” that can “undergird a broad area of meaning.” These metaphors can “provide a base” for understanding and a worldview in an organization, but are often “unobtrusive” as they are used frequently and casually in everyday interactions (369). In manifesting ideologies and worldviews, they connect to other references, often unconsciously, and as metaphors, have implications for what is thinkable (Deetz and Mumby, 1985; Smith & Eisenberg, 1987).

The spiritual warfare metaphor at Victory Outreach Denver is hegemonic in that it renders earthly struggle “unthinkable” because since the causes and solutions to the ills inflicting our community are all otherworldly, so too is the fight. For example, when I asked Bobby what advice he would have for people struggling with gangs, drugs, crime, or poverty, he told me,

I just say God’s gonna bring em to that place….. it’s a spirit. Basically how my wife told me is, my enemy is not the next man, it’s the devil using the next man. We’re just pawns.
This is spiritual warfare goin on were just pawns. So I hear a lot of people say oh I’m
doin it I’m big I’m this. No your not you’re a pawn. And your on the wrong team cuz
your doin the wrong thing. And your gonna lose no matter what. If you aint praisin God
you aint with Jesus your gonna lose. Might not be today or tomorrow but in the end
you’re gonna lose….

Bobby first positions the good supernatural agent, God, as the solution, as he will “bring em to
that place.” He then positions the bad supernatural agent, the devil, as the problem, because he
“uses people like pawns.” Hence, dealing with gangs, crime, and poverty involves a “spiritual
warfare” and the only way to win is “being on the right team” which is the side of the good
supernatural agent. The structural dimensions and factors in these various social ills are rendered
unthinkable. Jimmy echoed this sentiment when I asked him what they do to try to reach people
in the community, telling me,

And I know you keep on talking about stuff that’s tangible. Everything you can touch and
feel. But I’m in a spiritual warfare. You can’t see it you can’t touch it. And I truly believe
that. I truly believe that it’s not the person but a spirit, a demonic spirit that’s wrecking
their life. Whether it’s a spirit of lying, cheating, hate, anger, lust, these are things that
can corrupt a person into believing that they don’t need anything else but to live like that
and it’s a lie. So my battle is spiritual. So how do we touch people is by attacking that
spirit in prayer. By coming against that realm of demonic possession, really, that’s how
we come in. To let God set them free man.

Unlike typical neoliberal rhetoric and discourses of “personal responsibility”, Jimmy,
much like Bobby, does not exactly blame people for their situation. Folks in the barrio are not
evil. However, evil has befallen them in the form of a “demonic spirit” that is “wrecking their
life,” in Jimmy’s words, or the devil “using you like a pawn,” in Bobby’s words. Once again, Jimmy characterizes “spiritual warfare” that consists entirely of things that we “can’t see” and “can’t touch.” The only option then is to “come against that realm of demonic possession.” In this case, it is not so much the privatization of social ills but the spiritualization and supernaturalization of social ills. In either case, it is certainly not the politicization of social ills. The question remains, why do Chican@s (and African Americans) bear such an unequal burden of this sadness? Are we just more sinful? Or does the “devil” target us more? And, if the causes of these issues are only spiritual, the struggle can be only spiritual, a “spiritual warfare,” as Jimmy puts it, which precludes any reason for political struggle on the basis of race, class or otherwise. This rhetorical strategy is hegemonic in that it effectively channels dissent and social unrest away from the institutional apparatus and into a realm beyond our comprehension, preserving and therefore reproducing oppressive structures, institutions, and earthly practices that engender social ills, such as structural racism, segregation, economic inequality, corporate capitalism, and the prison industrial complex.

In my experience, the “spiritual warfare” metaphor was extremely common and also extremely limiting. Research on the root causes of gangs, violence, addiction, and various other forms of sadness have shown that ‘multiple marginalities,’ including structural concerns such as institutional racism and poverty, are the chief factors leading to the rise of gangs and gang violence in particular communities (Vigil 1983, 2002, 2007). As described in Chapter 2, Victory Outreach reaches out explicitly to the marginalized, especially gang members and people with addictions. Also as described in Chapter 2, metaphors of “fighting,” and “battle” and “war,” combined with an explicit emphasis on non-violence, are extremely common at Victory Outreach as well, representing a sort of “root metaphor” in its own right. However, it seems as
though root metaphors can manifest somewhat differently in different cultural, political, and organizational contexts. So while the root metaphor of violence-fighting-war could potentially be manifested in notions of political struggle, the overarching apolitical Evangelical ethos at Victory Outreach funnels this metaphor away from politics and towards “spiritual warfare” as the only thinkable expression of non-violent fighting.

The problem with this spiritual warfare metaphor is that it renders it unthinkable to address earthly problems with earthly strategies and tactics. So while Victory Outreach seeks to alleviate the issues of gang violence, and, like gangs, places a high value on social marginality, the spiritual warfare frame closes off certain avenues for addressing gangs, violence, and social marginality. In many ways, it simply revises one of the problems with gang rivalries and territoriality. As Duran (2013) put it, the problem with gang rivalry and territoriality is that “the perceived threat to the gang becomes not structural racism but the ese or loca on the other side of town” (162). At Victory Outreach, evil spirits replace “the ese or loca on the other side of town”, but structural racism continues to remain unexamined. Additionally, though metaphors of non-violent fighting, battle, and war, are quite common, and could easily be interpreted in the form of social and political activism, these metaphors can only be expressed in a very narrow way that precludes politics due to a reliance on an apolitical Evangelical and prosperity theology philosophy. This “spiritual warfare” theme, then, reveals an underlying, implicit, assumption at Victory Outreach that social change is only accomplished through battle with cosmic forces, impacting “what is thinkable,” as it limits the combat to one that is engaged in with supernatural agents, never earthly actors. Finally, it helps to explain why, though Victory Outreach engages in outreach, rallies, and community service, they seem to steer clear of any issues or actions that could be considered even remotely political.
The Illusion of Politics

Though there is an absence of any explicit political activity at Victory Outreach, members often engage in activities that are similar to political organizing and also utilize the imagery and language of political struggle. In many ways, evangelism itself is much like political organizing, and members often walk door to door in neighborhoods, handing out fliers, recruiting members and attempting to draw local people to attend events such as dramas, rallies and even marches. These rallies and marches look very much like political agitation, with Victory Outreach members taking to the streets with signs, marching, and chanting. However, these marches tend to center around issues such as “peace,” or imploring the local community to stop violence, or “end sin.” Marches and rallies do not center on issues like justice and equality, as we would expect from political protest, and do not push state agents for structural changes. When I attended the drama, “The fiery furnace” at Victory Outreach Lakewood, I observed a group of young males that were all wearing matching shirts. On the shirts was an image of hand holding a grenade that said “VO” on it, and the words “radical evangelism.” In this way, not only does Victory Outreach participate in activities that would often seem like what would expect of political organizing and action, they also use the language and imagery of political militancy, in this case with words like “radical” and t-shirts that display a hand grenade. In
every single church service at Victory Outreach Denver, this “illusion of politics” was also present.

In the time I spent at Victory Outreach Denver, the same three Victory Outreach promotional videos were shown on the projector before every church service. First was a promotional video for a Victory Outreach youth retreat. The video has rap music in the background and shows throngs of young people worshipping and young men on stage preaching. Many of the clips show large crowds of young people wearing shirts that say “fight.” The next is a video promo for Victory Outreach “World Conference 2014,” which will be held in Los Angeles. This video is created to be very dramatic, with dramatic music ending in an explosion sound at the end of the clip. Once again, throngs of people are shown in a giant auditorium, and then images of members marching in the street with signs, creating the feeling of a massive social movement. The video then cuts into a clip of a pastor talking about “radical people of faith!” Words like “fight,” “radical,” and visions of marching in the streets or throngs of people united for a cause all add to a sense of a social or political movement, even though, in much of VO’s rhetoric, there is a noticeable absence of any form of explicit politics. Much of this resembles politics without the politics. Once again, because the battle is spiritual, a worldly matter such as politics is abandoned. Yet, this illusion of politics disguises a dearth of politics.

The other video is a promotional video for “Code Red” which is a Victory Outreach program organized by women in the ministry to “rescue prostitutes out of darkness.” Scenes are shown of the work of this event in many different cities that the larger organization has deemed to be “strategic” claiming that “we are here to bring them hope.” The video is meant to evoke emotion and to give the impression that all of these women are hopeless and desperately want to be “rescued.” A crowd of VO women is shown marching through an urban street with a Jesus
Christ sign. This final video similarly speaks to the sort of social movement imagery at Victory Outreach, such as marching through the streets with Jesus Christ signs. However, it also represents the gender politics at Victory Outreach, as phrases such as “rescuing prostitutes from darkness” are an outcome of the fact that, even as masculinity is revised, very traditional views of femininity based on controlling women’s sexuality, relegating women to the private sphere, and encouraging women’s subordination to men remain prominent in the very male heterosexual centered rhetoric at Victory Outreach.

Gender politics

At Victory Outreach, the (hegemonic) impulse to turn to masculinity as a response to sadness complicates the dialectic between hegemony and resistance beyond the deflection from structural causes of sadness. Because though this focus on masculinity allows men the opportunity to deal with various forms of “sadness” and violence, it continues to rely upon static, traditional, and hierarchical notions of gender. This becomes obvious in the overwhelmingly male heterosexual leadership and discourse, and the general attempt at subordination and/or marginalization of female members (as well as queer men). This is important because this sort of subordination and marginalization is itself a source of “sadness” for the majority of people in our community that do not identify as heterosexual males.

Balmer (1999) describes the common notion in Evangelical theology that women are the protectors of the home, often relegating women exclusively to the identity of virtuous homemakers and mothers. Sanchez-Walsh (2003) interviewed women at Victory Outreach and found that women are encouraged to accept traditional idealized roles that revolved around “purity,” obedience, and being dutiful, supportive wives and mothers. In my experience, this rang true, as females at Victory Outreach were encouraged to stay sexually “pure,” participate in
traditionally feminine activities, and remain supportive and subordinate to their husbands and
other male members. Finally, the rhetoric at Victory Outreach Denver is quite masculine, and
heterosexual centered.

Women at Victory Outreach are encouraged to stay “sexually pure.” For example, teen
girls at Victory Outreach Denver, who are members of G.A.N.G. Girl (the female equivalent of
the church’s youth program, which stands for God’s Anointed Now Generation), take an oath to
“choose purity,” which means to refrain from any sexual activity until marriage. At each
ceremony, a “purity ring” is given as a symbol of this commitment. The same is not required for
young males in G.A.N.G. And true to the illusion of politics theme, the G.A.N.G. Girl website
states that, “The G.A.N.G Girl ministry was created out of a need for a revolution!” G.A.N.G.
Girl, then, seeks to reproduce traditional and highly restrictive ideals that regard female
sexuality, unlike male sexuality, as something to be controlled, further defines women based
exclusively on their sexual activity (as that is the basis for being “pure” and “impure”), and
reproduces the virgin/whore dichotomy that has long characterized the ways that women,
especially Latinas, have been imagined in dominant versions of feminity (Flores & Holling,
1999). Despite the very non-revolutionary nature of G.A.N.G. Girl in terms of the gender order,
the illusion of politics at VO posits that G.A.N.G. Girl is, in fact, revolutionary.

Women at Victory Outreach Denver also participate mostly in very traditional feminine
activities, and our not allowed to be leaders in the congregation, except in all female spaces. For
example, at a rally that I attended in front of a motel, male members preached and led prayers,
while female members made and served sandwiches. However, women were generally given the
task of evangelizing to other women, while men evangelized to other men. Also, women are not
allowed to be leaders in the church, even though, on many Sundays at VO Denver, women were
the majority in the audience. All of the pastors, assistant pastors, and even ushers and tech crew members, are roles filled exclusively by men.

With an all male leadership, it is perhaps not surprising that the rhetoric at Victory Outreach often represents a narrow, heterosexual male-centered, view of community, leadership, and ideals. Sermons at VO Denver often take on a very heterosexual, masculine angle, speaking to the needs of men (presumably heterosexual men) to be leaders both in their families and in the community. This seems to be important for men that may feel that they are denied the right to fulfill traditional (white) masculine roles in society, but those “masculine” roles themselves, of leadership and power, are rarely problematized.

In fact, Pastor Jon, in his sermons, often asserted the role of men as leaders and framed women as troublemakers. For example, during one sermon he said that “God made men the head and women are always trying to take it away,” and that is “one of the main reasons why couples fight.” Language such as this reinforces male power and privilege as it blames problems in heterosexual relationships on women’s insubordination. In another sermon he encouraged men not to gossip by telling them, “Don’t be a chick. Women’s emotions are all over the place.” In this way, Pastor Ruben once again challenges male masculinity, but only by devaluing femininity (“don’t be a chick”) and patriarchal ideas of female irrationality (and the implicit male rationality).

In the various ways described, at VO Denver, traditional heteropatriarchy, and the unequal gender and sexuality relations that accompany those ideas, are reinforced and recreated, marginalizing women and forcing them into extremely traditional and constraining forms of feminity. Ironically, this all occurs as men are simultaneously reformulating and revising their conceptions of masculinity, opening up more space and more ways to perform manhood. It
seems as though the ability to play with gender and gender performance itself constitutes a male privilege at Victory Outreach, as women are not given the freedom to deviate from traditional forms of feminity in the way that men are provided the space to deviate from traditional forms of masculinity. And even this freedom to play with gender is really only accessible to heterosexual men, as queer identities are generally ignored in my experience at Victory Outreach Denver, and hence, rendered illegitimate. The only time I ever heard a reference to queer identity was during one service, where Pastor Ruben made an offhand remark that homosexuality was “confused.”

In this way, folks in our communities who are not male and heterosexual (which is the majority, by the way) are left out of the privileges afforded to heterosexual males at Victory Outreach, and further marginalized. This is important because heterosexual and queer women and queer men, no doubt experience their own forms of “sadness” as a result of patriarchy and heterosexism. In part because of their politics of gender and sexuality, then Victory Outreach reproduces sadness as it attempts to address it.

**Conclusion**

True to the nature of vernacular discourse, Victory Outreach pieces together various cultural fragments, hegemonic, counter hegemonic, alternative, and otherwise, from multiple cultural traditions. This is perhaps also a characteristic of Latin@ borderlands existence anyways. But as Ono and Sloop (1997) argue, vernacular discourses should be critiqued in the same way that mainstream discourses are by rhetoricians. In this way, we must critically analyze all discourses, even those that have emerged, grass roots style, from our communities. In this chapter I have attempted to do that.

In previous chapters, I have pointed out how, in more implicit ways, the seeds of politics and resistance are there at Victory Outreach: There in the reformulation of Chicano masculinity
that encourages non-violence, allows men to deal with their “sadness” in productive ways, and allows alternative avenues to dignity and respect, there in the push towards Black and Brown unity that utilizes shared popular culture, and there in centralization on the poor and out casted as worthy and valuable people, among other examples. These notions could very well serve as a starting point for a politics of resistance. But in order to avoid the pitfalls of romanticizing forms of micro resistance in terms of performances and cultural politics, I have taken a more traditional approach to hegemony in this chapter to provide space for rhetorical critique and not lose sight of the larger structural concerns in our communities that must be addressed. In doing so, I have argued that even as these seeds of resistance are there at Victory Outreach, by individualizing and spiritualizing/supernaturalizing social issues, this resistance cannot take root. And by continuing to uphold a heteropatriarchy that subordinates and/or marginalizes all women, as well as queer men, the majority of people in our communities are left out of the discourse. And in both of these ways, sadness is reproduced even as it is challenged, because when we ignore structural causes that perpetuate “sadness,” we allow it to reproduce, and the subordination and/or marginalization of women and queer men is itself a structural cause of sadness.

In this way, sadness is caused by the marginalization/subordination of women and queer identified people, and by employing hegemonic, neoliberal, therapeutic rhetoric, the resistant seeds at VO are scattered into another universe, in which that political resistance can never be realized (even as the rhetoric and imagery of politics is utilized). Pastor David, in a sermon, also used a scattered seeds metaphor during one Sunday service. He said, “Some seeds get eaten by birds, some in the weeds or on the rocks. You need to plant yourselves in good soil! Than you can grow and bear fruit. Maybe you have been in the wrong place for too long. Get off rocky ground and out of the weeds!” Though this message was part of a larger, individualized,
therapeutic, self-help style sermon, if I may take the liberty to reinterpret Pastor David’s
message, I can agree. We must get off this rocky rhetorical ground and out of these hegemonic
weeds that we have been in far too long, and find rhetorical soil where our seeds of resistance
can grow and “bear fruit.” Otherwise, “sadness,” in all of its forms, is inescapable.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

This project is the follow through from much personal experience in my early life in Southern California: from the curiosity I felt when I saw men from Victory Outreach evangelizing in the community, to my experiences growing up in various Christian churches, and my observations as a teenager of the paradox of black-brown cultural exchange amidst tension and violence. But this project is also deeply personal to me in the present as I also struggle to negotiate my own masculinity, and find ways to perform it in ways that are recognizable and persuasive in my own community while at the same time rejecting a destructive gender identity based on power and dominance over others, moving instead towards a holistic sort of love that can heal and create rather than injure and destroy. In order to this, it requires the perceptiveness to retain what is useful and discard what is problematic. I have learned much from the men at Victory Outreach in this regard, who are also searching for space to reclaim love, humanity, and non-violence amidst very narrow definitions of manhood.

And also like myself, and most others in Chican@ and African American communities (among others) I believe, folks at Victory Outreach are thinking very much about the various forms of “sadness” in our communities, trying to understand causes and solutions both on the personal and communal level. This is a very difficult thing, when the dominance of neoliberal thought and the general lack of organization that offers alternative avenues in our communities means that our responses to this sadness are extremely constrained. For me, coming to a critical consciousness is what changed my life, my relation to others, my conceptions of manhood, my definition of love, and what is thinkable. But I was extremely lucky, as I stumbled upon it due to some unlikely circumstances. Most others in our communities today don’t even get the chance.
So in many ways, myself and the members at Victory Outreach are in the same struggle: attempting to find alternative conceptions of manhood, understand and deal with various forms of “sadness,” pushing for love and peace, building bridges with other communities that recognizes our common humanity, and pursuing transformation more broadly to become, in its most basic form, better people and better communities. So my critiques of the rhetoric and practices at Victory Outreach that I argue do not adequately address structural concerns that engender sadness, and do not interrogate heteropatriarchy, are not meant to repudiate Victory Outreach and what they do. It is only meant to add my voice into the chorus of voices, not only at Victory Outreach, but across all of our communities that are trying to understand and accomplish the same things. My humble yet full-throated opinion is that we must demand of ourselves that we make structural concerns and gender equity central to all of our interventions into these issues, whether dealing with sadness, pushing for love, building bridges and recognizing common humanity with others, becoming transformed, and yes, becoming better people and better communities. Otherwise, our efforts to move towards any of those ideals are at least severely handicapped and perhaps, even impossible.

**Hegemony and rhetoric**

This is why I felt that analyzing Victory Outreach through the lens of hegemony was useful in this project. Mumby (1997) argues that hegemony itself is dialectical, encompassing both resistance and consent. This is certainly true of vernacular discourses, and Latin@ vernacular discourses in particular, as they are comprised of various different fragments that can even be contradictory (Ono and Sloop, 1995; Marez, 1996). So much like my discussion of masculinity, it is extremely useful to be able to analyze and pick apart the discourses that circulate in our own communities, so that we can emphasize what is useful in our struggle for
justice and equality, and challenge what is not useful, or even antithetical, to that struggle. For me, this requires a broad view of hegemony, because, as discussed at various points in this project, there are multiple ways to understand the nature of the concept. As scholars battle over what is the best way to understand hegemony, in the course of this project, I have come to the conclusion that these various interpretations of hegemony can all be useful at different points for different purposes. I agree with Mumby (1997) in saying that hegemony encompasses both resistance and consent. Victory Outreach, as a whole, exemplifies this. But in different micro areas, we can see discourse leaning more in one way direction the other. And at other times it is completely unclear what is going on, and the onus is placed upon us, as active interpreters, to create meaning, which is itself a potentially resistant act.

For example, the complex performances of masculinity at Victory Outreach Denver could be understood as hegemonic, counter-hegemonic, alternative, or otherwise depending on one’s angle. Even *cholo* masculinity itself can be interpreted in various ways (is it resistant against hegemonic masculinity? Is it a rearticualtion of hegemonic masculinity? Something else?). In these situations it is up to us to create meaning, and think through the implications of whatever meaning is created. This is where a more poststructural conception of hegemony is useful, as it allows us to *find* resistance or *find* consent, which in and of itself can be an act of resistance or consent or otherwise, and then we may either mobilize it or challenge it with a view towards social change. So when it came to understanding masculinity at Victory Outreach, I felt the need to make meaning out of something that was quite messy.

The discourse surrounding black and brown relations at Victory Outreach is less “messy” perhaps, but no doubt requires an interpretation for how to understand it. Though this rhetoric calls for black-brown unity, there is rarely, or never, any discussion of any sort of political
coalition or allusion to shared social concerns between black and brown. In general, it seems more about “tolerance,” itself a hegemonic concept. But when I thought of the context of these statements in my interviews, coming from former Chicano gang members, I had to appreciate the large step this was based on the circumstances. Is this a step towards resistance? Yes, absolutely.

This is why Condit's (1994, 1997) view of hegemony as “concordance” or an accommodation, was also helpful to me, as it takes into account whatever the particular circumstances may be. For example, thinking about masculinity at Victory Outreach in a more pragmatic way illuminates the ways in which men had to accommodate more traditional forms of masculinity, whether hegemonic, Chicano, or gang masculinities, in order to create space for transgression. This is not only important for individuals, but for creating social change as well. If we think of rhetoric in its most traditional definition, as “persuasion”, it helps us understand why this matters. After all, what good is it for men at Victory Outreach to construct a more productive form of masculinity that encourages non-violence, but that is not intelligible or persuasive in the communities in which they are engaged?

With all that said, I firmly believe that there is still a place for more traditional conceptions of hegemony, such as suggested by Cloud (1994; 1996). It is true that hegemony encompasses both resistance and consent, but sometimes, particular discourses can lean so far in one direction that it is necessary to call them out for their very destructive implications. And as Cloud (1994; 1996) would likely argue, we cannot focus on micro resistance and interpretations at the expense of addressing structural and material concerns. This is exemplified in my final chapter, where I take to task the blatant disregard of structural concerns, and the reproduction of gender inequity at Victory Outreach. So for me at least, the difficulty with the concept of
hegemony is not how to define it, but how to use it in various situations that are all complex, and never look exactly the same. And when we, as scholars, do invoke the term, it must be in a way that takes into account the implications, both ideologically and pragmatically, that our choice of interpretation has for what should be our more general goal of pursuing social justice.

**What now?**

At Victory Outreach, men are actively reformulating their conceptions of masculinity, intersecting both traditional and non-traditional forms of masculinity that open up space for love, non-violence, and dealing with sadness and pain, as well as providing hope and an alternative to gangs and drugs both individually and for the community. But in doing so, they also transgress boundaries, disrupting dominant ideas of Chicano masculinity and *cholo* performance in the mainstream imagination that might label them as “criminals,” and “thugs.” And in expressing a range of emotions and embracing non-violence even as they perform in traditional ways and refashion metaphors of “toughness” and “fighting” for their own purposes, they also subvert norms of hegemonic masculinity that might label them as “weak” or “feminine.” Additionally, in utilizing shared popular culture to bridge black and brown divides, they also subvert Chicano gang cultures that may label them as “traitors” or even worse. All this is accomplished in a space that reaffirms their identities and provides a sense of value and dignity, focusing on the marginalized and asserting their humanity. So instead of conforming to predetermined raced, gendered, and classed, scripts, succumbing to the pressures and judgments placed upon them from various directions, the men at Victory Outreach do it “God’s way,” even if they may toe the line in order to remain intelligible, respected, and persuasive in the community. In this sense, the men at Victory Outreach seem to embrace the idea that “Only God can judge me.”
This reformulation of masculinity, focus on the poor and marginalized, non-violent philosophy, and the explicit reach towards unity with African Americans using shared popular culture all represent potential seeds for a politics of resistance. But it remains largely dormant, because in a focus only on individual or supernatural causes and solutions to various social ills, the social structures that lead to a wide range of “sadness” explicitly grappled with at VO remain unchallenged. And by continuing to uphold a static and hierarchical gender order and heteropatriarchy, even as men renegotiate their own masculinity, heterosexual men receive the privilege of dealing with sadness at the expense of others. In both of these ways, “sadness” is challenged, but in the process, also reproduced, as the practice of obscuring the root causes of sadness allows sadness to continue to swell, unabated, and the marginalization and/or subordination of women and queer identities is itself a root cause of sadness.

What is needed, then, in order to really deal with the roots of various forms of “sadness” is the development of counter-hegemonic discourses that can challenge structures and systems, and then organization that provides avenues for people in the community to become collectively involved in pushing for social, cultural, and structural change. The great thing about organized resistance is that political action for material or structural change can simultaneously be that outlet for the expression of dignity and pride, as well as a way to provide hope for a better tomorrow for the entire community. Rodriguez (2005), for example, describes leaving the gang lifestyle for a life of community activism and struggle after coming to a critical consciousness at the height of the Chicano movement in Los Angeles. This was not an isolated case, as Chicano gang violence declined significantly during the Chicano movement because gang members found an outlet for pride, dignity, courage, belonging, and love that were not self and community destructive (Erlanger, 1979). This was true in Denver as well, as the Crusade for Justice made a
major impact on gang youth during the Chicano movement era (Duran, 2013). The biggest tragedy, then, is that the current lack of abundant avenues for organization in our communities for concrete social, political, cultural, and material change provides few alternatives. I call this a tragedy because the benefits of organizing to provide avenues to address social ills at their root are twofold, as they not only have the potential to change those very structures that produce the feelings of alienation, rage, sadness, and despair that plague our communities, but also provide a productive outlet for those very real and justifiable emotions in the process.

This is why both Brown (2002) and Duran (2013) have noted that cultural nationalism and cultural pride are a viable alternative to gang nationalism and pride, as they can serve similar needs for urban youth, but as Duran also notes, this cultural pride cannot come at the expense of gender equity. Various forms of gender inequity, marginalization, and violence, whether abstract or concrete, also contribute to the atmosphere of pain and violence that must be rooted out in order to truly reach the roots of these various forms of “sadness,” gangs or otherwise, in our communities. This is a task in and of itself, as the subordination or marginalization of women and queer identities has a long history not only in Western society and the history of colonization, but also (and perhaps, subsequently) in both Chican@ and African American cultures, including all of the various cultures of expression described in this project, such as zoot suit culture, popular music, political organizations and activism, churches, lowrider car culture, gangs, Hip Hop culture, and more; The struggles and acts of resistance by women and queer folks of color in these various spaces have also been well documented (Rose, 1994; Gaines, 1996; Cintron, 1997; Delgado Bernal, 1998; Martinez, 1998; Sandoval, 2003; Pough, 2004; Cheney, 2005; Rodriguez, 2005; Pulido, 2008; Sanchez & Rodriguez, 2008; Ramirez, 2009; Aldama, Sandoval et. al, 2012; Rabaka, 2012; Chavez, 2013; Rabaka, 2013). I would be
shocked if these struggles were not also occurring at Victory Outreach (that would be a great area to expand upon a project such as this). So a quest to provide alternative avenues for pride and dignity, means pride and dignity for all. In this way, gender equity must be a, if not the, main emphasis if we truly want to address “sadness” in all of its manifestations, at its root. Because, as repeatedly mentioned, for the majority of people in our community who do not identify as male and heterosexual, this sort of marginalization and subordination carries its own forms of “sadness.”

But neoliberal ideology, that funnels everything into the private sphere, makes for a situation where it is unthinkable to connect something like “sadness,” both on the individual and community wide level, to larger systems of oppression, whether based on race, class, gender, sexuality, or otherwise. Focusing on supernatural causation does not allow for that either. So in order to truly move towards change, we must first begin by being willing and able to see the complex and mutually constituting relationships among social structures in an unequal society, the discursive apparatus that upholds it, manifestations of personal and individual emotions, and widespread social ills such as gangs, crime, drugs, and violence. As Phillip Cushman (1995) puts it,

If we cannot entertain the realistic possibility that political structures can be the cause of personal, psychological distress, then we cannot face their consequences, we cannot mobilize to make structural changes, as we will have few ideas about what changes to make. We will become politically incompetent. (p. 337)

This is why we also must critically examine the ways that our interventions into these various forms of sadness can, much like gangs themselves, be both empowering and disempowering, and reproduce sadness and violence even when they have been created in
response to sadness and violence. This includes even those organizations, such as Victory Outreach, that have emerged, grass roots style, from the communities in which they serve. As discussed, the confluence of hegemonic and counterhegemonic cultural fragments is a key feature of vernacular discourses such as those at Victory Outreach. Our ability to identify these various cultural fragments and what their implications may be will determine whether or not we can develop discourses that are resistant while still being persuasive and intelligible. Only then can we seek to deal with the root causes of issues in our communities and develop counter-hegemonic narratives that challenge them on the macro-level. Of course, we cannot lose sight of the immediate needs of those in the community, while only focusing on large political projects. Organizations that provide crucial services in these moments of crises are necessary, but need not be undergirded by hegemonic values that uphold the sort of unequal society that has created these crises. Instead they must be accompanied by a push for systemic change that recognizes the source of these crises in the first place. Only then can we get at the root of this sadness that plagues individuals, families, and communities, and stop shedding so many tears.

Pastor Ruben, in a sermon, once said that, “You know God is present when you see a thug cry.” I’m not sure if that means that God is present, or that something else is happening. All I know is that when I ponder the reasons why so many in our communities, so-called “thugs” included, are crying, I want to cry. But this project brings me both tears of joy and tears of sadness. There are tears of joy that come from the pride I feel when I realize the strength, courage, and ingenuity of people, like those at Victory Outreach but also throughout our communities, that assert their dignity, self respect, humanity, and love for others in a society that has in many ways been organized to prevent those very things. The tears of sadness come when I
realize that, if we cannot also gather our strength and ingenuity to push for structural change and gender equity, there may be no end to the tears. And our tears are communal.
References


