
Latinx's Testimonies on the Margins of Street-Life: Fragments and Tears

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This article examines two Latinx testimonies connected to street life in San Bernardino, CA, a Hispanic majority city in the Inland Empire. The city of San Bernardino has undergone high levels of urban decline, which in turn has created a web of urban issues, such as a rising unhoused population, high levels of urban violence and other issues of street life (drug usage, gangs, etc.) In the process, street ministries have emerged in the city and have attempted to assist people on the margins. In spaces like street ministries, non-traditional testimonies appear and remind us of narratives, which I term *testimonies on the margins*, that operate outside of more institutional spaces of religion. While traditional conversion narratives can have their own narrative arcs, what are we to make of testimonies of the street life that appear in pieces or fragments, and of women that transform their wounds to factors of healing? Exploring Latinx testimonies on the margins of San Bernardino as “fragmented testimonies” and “testimonies of tears,” this article reads these testimonies as overlooked accounts of how Latinx voices survive and heal from their social-historical conditions, compounded with issues of street life. It proposes that, while unorthodox, these testimonies are attempts to heal from wounds of street life—*wounds of erasure* and *wounds of loss*.

Introduction

The transient streets of San Bernardino, CA have changed in the past decades. As I walked down its infamous E Street and through the downtown area, I saw some murals that reflected the city's once prized cruising culture connected to the “Mother Road,” Route 66, and other murals of the city's old railroad stations and booming citrus industry.¹ Such paintings echo the city's heyday and its long history of industrious and transient roads. In the early twentieth century the railroad industry created jobs that focused primarily on transporting goods, and with its emphasis as a “transportation center,” the city would become known as the Gate City or the pass-site city. Further, as more super freeways were constructed in California, the freeways that were made in San Bernardino only caused more drivers to simply “pass through,” helping

to “sustain the city's image as a ‘gate’” (Jones & Palmer 2002, 40-41). With the passing of time, indeed the streets of the city have changed. As I walked further down E Street, the emptiness of downtown, the makeshift tents of unhoused people propped up against walls, the closed down malls and empty shopping centers, and the waste across the sidewalks only told of San Bernardino's modern history of decline.

In this Gate City, through my urban ethnographic work, I have sought to understand how religion engages and interacts with street-life. As I walked down E Street to explore the urban space of San Bernardino, I noticed over five Hispanic storefront churches and one larger Hispanic congregation in this short five mile radius [see figures in the appendix below] and decided to take pictures of them, along with several other

¹“Art & History.” *The Enterprise Building*. Accessed February 24th, 2026. <https://www.theenterprisebuilding.com/art>. To view different murals in E Street reflective of San Bernardino's history, visit this website above.

churches on this street.² The ubiquitous appearance of such Latinx storefronts reminds us that 70.2% of the city's population consists of Hispanics, making the city a majority Hispanic population (U.S. Census Bureau). To understand further how the streets and Christianity interweave in conversation with Latinx identity, I have been visiting different urban churches and street ministries. Amidst San Bernardino's transient streets, I have learned about *testimonies on the margins*.

During one of my regular visits to San Bernardino, I walked out of a service hosted by Hope City Church (HCC), where one Hispanic man shared about his experiences of street life in San Bernardino. His testimony, intermingled with tears, was full of vivid accounts of gang life, gun shots and wounds, vicious cycles of drug addiction and alcoholism, and other cycles of going in and out of jail. It was a testimony that captured street life at its finest.

Often at HCC, a small shabby rented building located on the corners of W Seventh Street and N H Street near the I-215 freeway, a group of evangelicals gather to feed and clothe the poor, share the Christian message and to tell their testimonies.³ This street ministry is led by an African American man named Pastor Jim Willard.⁴ Jim was born in the 1960s and grew up in Lynwood CA. Full of pastoral experience, he has served as a pastor in various urban congregations, including churches in Compton, CA. Since 2014, he has been the main pastor in HCC, serving the streets of San Bernardino. For context, in 2024, the number of people living on the streets in the county of San Bernardino was at an all time high with over 4,255 people. Out of this total, 1,417 of them were residing in the city of San Bernardino alone (Yarbrough 2025). Several urban churches and street ministries, like Hope City Church, responded to this growing problem, and through their religious and

social efforts have worked to care for people living on the streets.

Some of the Christians and attendees that come in and out of HCC are familiar with the streets of San Bernardino in intimate ways. As I walked out of a service on one Sunday afternoon, I sat across from a Hispanic man named Manuel at a table set up right outside of the church building. HCC was providing a late lunch for the attendees, and I decided to stay to chat with a few members. Manuel Ybarra, or Manny, is a bulky Hispanic man with several tattoos all over his arms. He often wears sun glasses with a snapback. Though his past life is strongly tied to the realities of street life, he is now a very calm person and attends HCC every week. He proudly calls it "his church." He sometimes comes with his mom and step-dad.

While sitting across from him, Manny spoke about the day when he first learned his real name. He was 12 or 13 years old and a letter came in the mail. It was his birth-certificate. He showed his mom and said: "Mom, who is this? Is this my brother? Does he have the same birthday as me? Who is Manuel?" They discovered together that it was his name. Apparently, his family used to just call him Tony or Anthony, which is Manny's middle name. Even at a young age, Manny's name was lost and needed to be found. As one can imagine, this created practical problems while he was attending school. Since the school used the name Tony they did not have his actual name. Manny even said he got a tattoo of his name, but misspelled it as: *Manual*. This question—Who is Manuel?—becomes a question that reflects the fragmented pieces of Manuel's life and identity that he was searching to restore. While we sat together, Manny tried to share with me his testimony, but his memories seemed scattered as he tried to piece his story together. Though fragmented, this testimony reflects an intimate weaving or even entanglement (Offutt 2023) of Christianity and street-life, and a story from the margins about survival. In the face of *wounds of erasure*, Manuel's telling of his testimony can be read as an attempt to resist

²In a way reminiscent of Kevin McCollister's (2009) images of Latinx Storefronts in East Los Angeles, I decided to walk down E Street to take photos of the storefronts on this infamous road in order to explore the urban religious make-up on this street. I discovered a strong Latinx evangelical presence therein.

³It is worth mentioning that while this group adheres to traditional evangelical beliefs, some regular volunteers were dismissive of "titles," and often identified themselves with a more authentic or "true" Christian faith.

⁴While not the main focus in this article, I included some brief background information of both of the spiritual leaders of two street ministries where I have carried out fieldwork to provide some context. Both of their names (Jim & Gus) are used with their permission.

erasure, heal from its wounds, and assert and reclaim his identity.

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Another street ministry that is serving in the city of San Bernardino on 29th and E street, called Celebrate Center Ministries (CCM), is also working to serve the poor and unhoused community. The group is led by the spiritual leader and chaplain Gualbert Augustin (aka Gus), who possesses an Afro-Caribbean background. Like Pastor Jim, Gus was born in the 1960s and has been serving the streets of San Bernardino for close to a decade. CCM meets outdoors on Saturday mornings in a church parking lot, and sets up tables full of food and clothing. On most Saturdays, they also provide a variety of medical and health services to the community. Among several volunteers, one Hispanic woman named Francine, serves at CCM frequently. Often as I visited and volunteered, I saw her sitting at tables and conversing with people who were in distress, in need of prayer, worn out and pressed by the conditions of street life. Giving them her full attention, Francine listened to them, shared with them about her own experiences of street life, offered spiritual help and prayed for them. Even if people came off the street, after their conversations she often gave them a tight hug and reminded them that God loves them.

In my first conversation with Francine, she told me that she grew up in Los Angeles and in the San Pedro area. She recalled to me that at a young age she became an orphan because her mother committed suicide by driving off a bridge. Following this, Francine went

through several hardships, and at one point, she herself ended up homeless. She said to me with tears that she remembers when she first moved to the Inland Empire and she was struggling, stretching out her hands and asking people for help. She was on the receiving end. Now, these hands are giving back to the streets of San Bernardino, assisting people and praying over their lives. Despite such multi-layers of losses, Francine has found ways to transform these *wounds of loss* into a means to bring spiritual healing to others.⁵

Testimonies on the Margins

Many conversion stories or testimonies are not linear or culturally static. They do not always neatly fit within the traditional conversion accounts that have a singular dramatic crisis with a redemptive arc (eg. Saul of Tarsus, Augustine) nor a slow and steady gradual development with definitive stages (eg. Bunyan), but oftentimes involve numerous crises tied to one's cultural context.⁶ They in turn become complex processes which may require diverse disciplines across the social sciences and humanities to study and understand them further (Rambo 1993). They need to take into account, for example, the context to understand an "ecology of conversion" (166) and its own cultural peculiarities. When these are understood, we begin to see how conversion stories may serve as a "foundational testimony" in an embedded context (Ramirez 2025).⁷

Of course, traditional narratives are significant and relevant, yet as Lewis Rambo (1995) mentions, drawing from John Lofland and Norman Skonovd's notion of "conversion motifs," conversion narratives

⁵In relation to my informant's names, Francine is a pseudonym. However, Manuel desired to use his real name. He specially told me, "I wouldn't feel right giving my testimony and changing my name." To honor his desire, I kept his name as is.

⁶In the traditional sense, even St. Augustine's conversion experience has been described as following the "Pauline crises," yet simultaneously following a gradual process as well (Hawkins 1985). Conversion narratives, in this sense, follow a "triadic pattern of spiritual searching, followed by conversion, followed by spiritual certainty" (Hawkins, 21). John Bunyan's account steers more so in the direction of a gradual process "made up of series of definite stages" (22). While these narrative arcs are significant and even relatable to many, it is equally important to keep in mind that conversion narratives do not always have definitive stages and are always influenced by "the theological and cultural milieu[s] from which both life and autobiography derive" (22).

⁷In her work, *Pentecostalism in Urban Oaxaca*, Michelle Ramirez (2024) focused on what she terms a "foundational testimony" of a man named Don Pedro, which had a strong significance and influence on a local church community in Oaxaca. Noting its relevance to its context, she writes: "This foundational testimony was embedded within larger cultural discourses of masculinity and alcohol that provide powerful evidence of God's healing power" (60). In order to strengthen her point, I think Ramirez could have used a different term rather than "foundational testimony" to instead emphasize the uniqueness of the cultural or social context, or the experience of the one giving the testimony.

take on many different shapes and can possess their own set of dynamics and features. For example they can appear as possessing *intellectual*, *mystical*, *experimental*, or *affectional* dynamics, or they can possess elements akin to *revivalism*, or even be *coercive* (14-16). Rambo reminds us that such narratives are not static or simple. Building off these authors, he proposes a stage model that is more *process oriented*; yet, even with this proposal he suggests a “spiraling effect” and “a going back and forth between stages” (17). Rather than using a sequential paradigm when studying conversions, he suggests one that is systemic, which takes into account aspects like context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment and consequences (17-18). How these aspects disrupt linear narratives, and relate and interact with one another during the process of conversion, only highlights the phenomena’s complexity further. This reminds us that conversions can be “messy” and unorthodox.

This does not mean we should overlook the power of unique conversion stories. Robert Wuthnow (2023) reminds us of the relationships between religious discourses and power, highlighting the different ways religious narratives possess their own influence upon the lives of ordinary people (54). For example, he explores ideas like the “founding myth” (70) showing how one story can bind a group together in terms of “divine guidance and growth,” fostering trust and creating a sense of collective identity (70-71). Empowerment comes from the first narrative of transformation—typically the founder of the group—and carries over into the lives of other members (71).

However, what do we make of Christian testimonies that are not always heard, or that seemingly

do not represent what is expected? What of the testimonies of common men struggling with addiction and alcoholism that appear as stories that are shattered, re-arranged, unclear and complex—or to use Stanley Brandes’ (2002) words to describe *historiales*⁸—“small fragments of a . . . story—sometimes tentatively interconnected, sometimes entirely discreet from one another” (81)? And further, what do we make of the testimonies that are full of spiritual lessons and miraculous events, yet not told by a traditional male figure or leader, but by a woman serving on the streets, and thus stand “outside the narrative forms of ordinary evangelical culture” (Griffith 1997, 16)? Voices deemed as legitimate sources of power become flipped, and power is granted to unexpected voices. The voices of people—not coming from the pulpit—can be brushed off to the side, but can such testimonies, that are not always centered, teach us something about a community or the places in which they reside? This article explores what I term *testimonies on the margins*—which are filled with multiple street-life wounds (such as crises); they are testimonies directly interconnected with street-life.⁹

Testimonies, in Christian thought and literature, are typically conversion narratives, which are told to tell the tale of one’s religious transformation with the goal of evangelization. Among evangelicals they are regularly shared as a way to talk about their faith and how it has shaped their life (Luhmann 2012). Different scholars have noted the empowering effects of testimonies, their connections to religious identity formation, religious socialization and the fostering of unique religious experience (Wuthnow 2023; Hansen 2018). It has also been noted how testimonies are an egalitarian religious practice among storefront

⁸In his work on studying A.A. in Mexico, Brandes (2002) highlights how members of this group tell their *historiales* or “personal stories.” Typically they involve retelling the “shameful, humiliating deeds, carried out while an active alcoholic” (44). Brandes’ focus on these types of fragmented stories center narratives that come from ordinary men and that are not linear. They are told in pieces and struggle to maintain coherence; in this article, I consider fragmented testimonies that have a similar nature.

⁹The practice of *testimonio* has informed much scholarship that engages personal narratives in the U.S., such as critical race theory, Latinx Studies, and other critical studies. Indeed, in line with this article, *testimonios*, especially in Latinx studies, have been a means of—to name a few—self-reflection, social awareness, speaking out against oppression, memory reconstruction and survival (Reyes & Rodríguez 2012). As a short definition of the practice, scholars have noted: “This type of writing entails a first person oral or written account, drawing on experiential, self-conscious, narrative practice to articulate an urgent voicing of something to which one bears witness” (Reyes & Rodríguez, 525.) Often the goal of *testimonio* “is to bring to light a wrong, a point of view, or an urgent call for action” (525). As early as the 1960s, several thinkers outside the U.S. (including Latinx scholars) drew on *testimonios* to write narratives in the first-person, describing selected social events as “unjust or illicit as stamps of oppression” (526). Several Chicana scholars in the 1980s and 90s drew on *testimonios* in a reflective fashion “using such concepts as agency, subaltern, or native” (526). In these respects, an important goal of *testimonios* is liberation, especially from historical and social forms of oppression (527).

churches that allow laity to participate in religious services (Solivan 1996). Testimonies can also function as “resistant narratives,” which people share to subvert structures of power, create counter stories to the “singular stories” or dominant stories told about them, and to reinterpret their life (Dunlap 2021). I am in agreement with these views, especially with Susan J. Dunlap’s perspectives, and would like to add that *testimonies on the margins* afford and offer means of healing the wounds of street life—both in *content* and in *structure*.¹⁰

Specifically, testimonies on the margins—even though in pieces or less orthodox—still have the ability to “shape the self by narrating it into an archetype of trial, decision, and transformation,” and can inject “life with a sense of significance and forward motion” (Hansen 2018, 37). Yet this shaping of the self is not told with ease. It is told with struggle as one recalls and revisits wounds. Yet, in face of the numerous wounds of street life, which include *wounds of erasure* and *wounds of loss*, the attempt to repeatedly and constantly recreate a sense of self and recenter one’s significance through testimony can be a means of healing.¹¹

Under the looming practices of institutional religion, many testimonies in the pews can go unheard. Testimonies from the pulpit may be given more attention and the ordinary voices of men and women can become lost; thus, representations of communities at times are not adequately presented. Often, non-traditional religious spaces—like storefronts and street ministries—become spaces that allow practitioners to share their stories, especially women (Solivan 1996). Further, in these spaces, fragmented and silenced testimonies are able to shed light not only on the communities they exist in, but on social-historical experiences of ethnic-religious identities (Gonzales 1996). Indeed, such religious stories can be told in pieces and enveloped in tears, yet despite their non-

traditional features, they echo how people on the margins survive, experience religion and spiritual healing in their Christian lives.

Fragments & Tears

Centering Latinx voices on the margins, what might such broken stories and broken hearts tell us? Perhaps they represent larger *broken histories* and *social wounds* many Hispanics communities experience when their worlds are interwoven with drugs (Garcia 2010), gangs (Duran & Campos 2019; Contreras 2024) and other problems of street life, and how they are trying to reconcile with these issues, turning to religion in the process. Out of these conditions, testimonies on the margins can appear in various ways: in this article, they will be explored as *fragmented testimonies* and *testimonies of tears*. A common thread between these two is their experience of healing in conversation with wounds of street life. Physical and spiritual healing are explored in these testimonies—yet, in my view, what is in the process of being healed include the *wounds of erasure* (in the case of Manuel) and the *wounds of loss* (in the case of Francine). The stories people tell, even if they are not from the pulpit, still hold significance because they remind us how those on the margins heal.

Fragmented testimonies that do not have a full sense of cohesion and logical sequence remind us of social realities of Hispanic individuals whose lives feel displaced, yet nonetheless still seek to tell their stories. In Justo Gonzales’s (1996) words—they represent a social historical experience common among many Hispanics in the U.S.—the experience of the *mestizaje* or exile, that is, the feeling “of belonging, yet not belonging” (14). In this state of displacement, compounded further with the wounds of street life, Hispanic lives only become more fragmented. Yet, despite this, to tell one’s story is to attempt to survive

¹⁰In my view, *testimonies on the margins* allow voices caught or once caught in the ravages of street life to tell their stories. The wounds of street life, existentially, can place one in a state of fragmentation and loss. However, by leveraging their testimonies, its religious content and its ability to reinterpret and reshape one’s sense of self, people find ways to begin to heal.

¹¹In a similar way to Paul Blankenship-Lai (2025), I view religion as a means to confront the “social wounds” of the streets. Exploring spirituality on the streets, Blankenship-Lai, who discusses social wounds in proximity to street life, uses a concept called “soul woundedness” to describe “a spiritual person whose life is being ravaged by a confluence of social wounds” (8). Centering the unhoused population, he adds: “It is an experience of being uprooted from oneself through violent social force and becoming existentially and then materially homelessness.” Yet, when people turn to spirituality on the streets, they discover “a last finger on the ledge of life. It is the pursuit of a presence that can help make a life worth living.” In short, amidst the ravages of street life, as people turn to spirituality or religion, they discover something that grounds and orients them.

and heal from such social-historical fragmentation.¹² In the example below, I read Manny's attempt to tell his testimony—piece by piece and wound after wound—as a constant attempt to reach for healing in a holistic sense.

“Testimonies of tears”—not limited to women—also involve multiple wounds, and echo the powerful stories of marginalized voices in less-institutional religious spaces who are able to transform their wounds of loss and suffering into channels of spiritual healing for others. As one involved in street ministries and less institutional forms of religion, Francine's conversion possesses miraculous accounts, but it is intermixed with a life deeply acquainted with street life, multiple wounds of loss, and non-institutional religious experience. Through the story of Francine, we are able to see how tears metaphorically underscore a level of “intimacy with God” that stands outside of the conventional conversion story, showing how God becomes proximate and personal in continual moments of human loss. Outside institutional religious narrative and spaces, tears become bridges to access divine presence and power (Orsi 2016). Francine's story reminds us how Latinx women in urban spaces like street ministries, transform their pain, and become key voices and players that foster spiritual healing in their communities.

In relation to both Manny and Francine, drawing from social-psychological literature, Robert Wuthnow reminds us how life stories and narratives function as ways for people to make sense of their own chaotic lives (65-66). He recalls the sort of emotional healing people undergo, as they recall the process of their lives “from negative (meaninglessness, isolation, despair) to positive (meaningfulness, acceptance, elation)” (66). Significantly, Wuthnow adds that through telling their life stories people experience an “improvement in . . . [their] sense of agency, through having made an empowering discovery about oneself or from being infused with divine power” (66). Thus, in this sense, testimonies on the margins are not about creating a coherent, sequence-based conversion narrative (Rambo 1993), but are more so about taking ownership of one's life in face of constant crises, telling

it in a way that is constructive for the speaker's spiritual experience, and in regard to this article, being healed from a convergence of social wounds.

In the face of the constant wounds, below, we will see how Manny's testimony pieces together a narrative that seems to be fragmented, yet demonstrates personal healing—spiritually and physically—amidst the dissemblance of street life in San Bernardino. Further, from a woman's perspective of street life, in Francine's testimony, we will see a life that transforms loss into gain again and again. Her tears brought her intimacy—thus a level of interaction (Rambo 1993)—with God long before her initial conversion, which overtime infused her with “divine power” and granted her a level of agency. This in turn brought further healing in the context of the transient streets of San Bernardino.

San Bernardino, the Streets & Narratives of Healing

As noted above, San Bernardino has been described as a city that has undergone urban decline during the twentieth century (Jones & Palmer 2000). Headlines in 2025 reported that San Bernardino was listed as the “dirtiest city” in the United States (Salem 2025). The public representation by the media of this city over the recent decades described it as a “broken city” full of urban problems. After the city filed for chapter 9 bankruptcy in 2012, the *LA Times* referred to it as a “distillation of urban woes in America” (Mozingo 2015). Again, to describe its recent history, some scholars have even characterized the city's modern decline as full of issues of “transience” (Jones & Palmer 2002).

Scholars have noted how the city's economic structure was altered when it lost “the big three,” that is, three major industries: Norton Air Force Base, Kaiser Steel, and the Santa Fe Railroad. With these closures, over 90,000 jobs were lost (Shafroth & Lawson, 2013). The more recent economic and social problems surrounding the city have only exacerbated these issues. San Bernardino has tried to make progress economically since its bankruptcy in 2012,

¹²Recalling the history of Hispanics in northern New Mexico, the dispossession of their land, and how Hispanics attempt to preserve their heritage through “cultural preservation and memorialization” in face of its erasure, Angela Garcia (2010) describes memory as “a kind of *survival strategy* against the increasing fragmentation of daily life” (95). In her study, she situated the traumas of heroin addiction within these social-historical struggles, underscoring how drug usage—like some sort of “life force”—was able to tend to a “broken heart” (202).

and just in 2022, a federal judge closed its bankruptcy case.¹³

In addition to solving its financial problems, the city has attempted to deal with the high levels of violence on the streets. As of now, the percentage of crime is at the lowest it has been in 25 years. It has dropped down by 25% across four major categories such as homicides, robberies, assaults and burglaries (Yarbrough 2026). Noting its national significance, in *The Sun*, Breau Yarbrough indicated: “In 2025, murders or homicides . . . were down 68% from 2020 in San Bernardino, compared to a 46% drop nationwide.” Furthermore, at the forefront of the city’s concerns in recent years was the significant rise of people living on the streets. In the same article, Breau Yarbrough stated: “According to the 2025 Point in Time Count, San Bernardino had the highest proportion of homeless residents of any community in the Inland Empire: 682 per 100,000 residents, compared to a county-wide average of 198 homeless people per 100,000 residents.”

The complex web of street issues seen in this city is not a pleasant sight. As I walked and volunteered with street ministries, I often saw several large and small encampments, and with time, the disappearance of the unhoused in different areas when they were forced out. On these transient streets, as one walked through them, one could feel a lingering sense of emptiness and uneasiness. When I visited the two street ministries mentioned above, people told me different stories about the streets: the gunshots that go off at night, the streets as unsafe and terribly scary, the gang wars that escalated in the 1990s, the drug scene, and the gang activities and lifestyles that even infiltrated people’s homes. Yet, amidst these chaotic stories,

some were able to share with me how they got off the streets, “got clean” and went back to the very same alleys and neighborhoods where their friends were to share the good news of the gospel.

In my study of people’s lives in this city, I took time to listen to their stories and testimonies. Street ministries operate in what Nancy Ammerman (2021) describes as interstitial spaces, or “settings [where] religious authorities and institutions of all kinds are weak, and lived religious practice, where it is present at all, is more individualized, diffuse, and fluid” (42). Outside of more structural elements of religion, it involves a level of “individual improvisation” (42). Yet, at times, it may still have institutional elements. Structural elements of religion are less defined in these spaces—yet this allows everyday stories to be given attention. Eloquent speakers and male leadership do not become the sole bearers of the Christian message, but rather, the voices and experiences of the laity, and especially women (which often can be overlooked), can be heard. Additionally, in these spaces, though interracial, the Latinx community is strongly present (especially in CCM), reflecting a dominant presence of Hispanic people in the city.¹⁴

While discussing the need to explore narratives in the study of lived-religion, Ammerman also explains how narratives can possess both institutional and interstitial dynamics, and appear in ways that are shaped by an “entangled social context” (184). This allows stories or testimonies to refer to authoritative religious ideas yet also to language that is more down-to-earth and in touch with their context and lived-experience.¹⁵ Ammerman specifies how “in interstitial contexts . . . stories may come from many sources, and the elements of explanatory stories must be pieced

¹³See the following article: Associate Press. “A decade later, San Bernardino’s bankruptcy case is finally closed.” *LA Times*. Published on September 13th, 2022. <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2022-09-13/san-bernardino-bankruptcy-case-closed-decade-later>

¹⁴For example, in CCM, according to their main leader, the average number of attendees that come to receive food and clothing weekly are about 70 people. In my observation more than half of this number is made up of Hispanics.

¹⁵For example, some scholars have explored how some Latinx conversion narratives are deeply impacted by their social context and social milieu at large. Among Latinx individuals, a rupture from one’s “dysfunctional past” (120) has been reiterated by scholars like Jonathan Calvillo (2020). He notes how spiritual healing was often a “tipping point” for a definite “commitment to faith.” (121) While “definite points” in conversion narratives are significant, they are still just a part of the socialization experience of *how* one ought to tell a conversion narrative (122-123). As Calvillo states: “Converts construct and shape their narrative based on the ways in which they are socialized to discuss their personal experiences” (123). Yet, Calvillo would also underscore how conversion is often spurred by factors outside of the institutional sphere and context and by the social milieu at large (123-124). Indeed, there are still “tipping points” in narratives. Yet, told in non-institutional ways, that is, in fragmentary ways and in isolation from authoritative and institutional frameworks, such testimonies take on different shapes, while still holding relevance.

together” (184). In the process of weaving their own testimony, people may draw on scripture and “overarching cultural resources” in order to forge their own particular narratives (184-186). Entangling the streets and religion (Offutt 2023), these testimonies on the margins remind us of how people weave and tell their own unconventional and non-institutional stories from the margins in order to heal on their own terms.

Following Rambo’s process-based yet fluid orientation to conversion, we are reminded of how conversion narratives can fluctuate due to the interrelationships between culture, sociology, history, the individual person, and religion’s role in the process (8-12). While listening to their personal testimonies, I tried to note how my informants’ lived-religious experiences, testimonial accounts and details speak to the broader social, cultural and historical dynamics of their lives, noting the unorthodox tendencies of their testimony and the specific themes they drew upon.¹⁶ In my interpretation of their testimonies, these testimonies—in *content* and *structure*—work to heal the wounds of street life they have undergone and continue to face.

Manuel Ybarra - *Fragmented Testimonies*

“But the second time, the cop shot me. And that’s what saved me—the cop shot me.” Recalling many intense episodes that involved confrontation with the police, Manny told me how in one of these occurrences four bullets missed him, yet four others hit him. Full of wounds, the police did not take him to prison this time, but first to the hospital and then to a jail center where he had to wait a whole day to be released. Manny said, “I didn’t get out till three the next morning!” When the police let him out of jail he was confused. “I never got out of jail like that.”

Leaving a jail center off Etiwanda Avenue, Manny asked a man on the road, “Which way is San Bernardino?” The man responded, “Just go over that bridge and keep walking.” He walked for hours and hours and eventually the street became pitch dark. Difficult to see afar off, Manny heard footsteps as someone approached him. Greeted by a man headed in the opposite direction, Manny asked him, “Hey man, how much further to Valley Boulevard?” The

man told him he needed to turn back and that he had gone five to six miles in the wrong direction. Being rerouted, tired and lost, Manny headed back up the road. Here and there people stopped their cars and looked at him. He said, “But when they saw the blood all over me, they just [drove away]. There was a bunch of blood and stuff on my shirt. The cops had changed my shirt. They said, ‘We can’t let him go out like this. He’s full of blood.’” Manny expressed how the cops tried to hide the blood because they did not have any real charges against him, but they could not hide all of it. At the initial scene, “somebody just called [the police] and said they are fearful for their life and they came and shot me.” With a bloody shirt, Manny wandered down the street, as he had been accustomed to most of his life.

Backtracking in his story—which Manny did often—he recalled, “The first time when they [the police] got me was like [in] 1996 on 8th Street.” He returned back to the second encounter with an uncertain date: “The next time was in 2000 something, right here in my backyard.” While Manny was in his yard, holding tools and doing some mechanic work, he explained: “They knew I didn’t have no gun—nothing. And they came up—one had a 9 millimeter. The second time, it was with beanbags—a shotgun with beanbags in it. He shot me at point blank range—right in front of me. There was maybe one foot? He got me four times. And then they took me.” Often, when Manny described these encounters with the police and going in-and-out of jail, he would mix and confuse dates and jump to different encounters as though these memories were intermixed or merged. Similar to Brandes’ (2002) account of men sharing their *historiales* in AA meetings in Mexico, chronology is not so clear (83), but themes emerge (84) like “vicious cycles,” “police encounters,” “wounds,” “salvation” and most importantly “healing.” Manny’s mentioning of gun shots, “wounds,” and hospital visits also seemed to easily trigger other memories, causing him to conflate different moments of the past. Ironically, it was a gunshot he said that “saved” him. With this reading, it is as if a significant turning point was not at a church altar, but at the mercy of a violent gun wound.

At another point, Manny switched gears and began talking about his deliverance from drugs:

¹⁶In this article, I try to read Manuel and Francine’s testimonies in the context of their experiences with street life. While this involves understanding social and historical dynamics as suggested by Rambo, I try to not allow this to overshadow their voice, but privilege their voices as active agents in the construction of their own narratives.

Jesus, he did deliver me from heroin, and that was something I thought I'd never get off of. You're just into it so deep. And the money just keeps coming. The girls keep coming. The drugs keep coming. I thought I'd never get off of it. It's a hard life, bro. It really is, and I thank God that he delivered me from that. I really do. And I have no desire to return to it. I've been off of that heroin, dope since 2001. *January 17th, 2001*. So I'm going on 25 years.

Amidst these back and forth episodes, Manny is able to point to a specific and significant date. It seems to be a "sobriety date" or "clean date," which he was able to recall as clear as day. While that was the day he got off heroin, he would still struggle with using other drugs like methamphetamines. With multiple drugs to deal with, one "tipping point" only led to another. Rambo (1993) was correct to note how crises, as catalysts for conversion, can "vary in intensity, duration, and scope" (166). And, one can add, there can be multiple, culturally embedded crises. Nonetheless, woven within the "hard life" of drugs, glimmers of hope appeared and God is recalled as entering into the fabrics of street life, delivering him one drug at a time and eventually saving Manuel.

"I don't know how to share my testimony."

Pastor Jim Willard, the main leader of Hope City Church introduced me to Manny and his family. Jim explained that this family had experienced the toughest hardships in San Bernardino first hand. When I initially asked Manny if he could share his testimony with me, he surprisingly said, "Share my testimony? I don't know how to share my testimony." I gently responded to him that it does not need to be perfect. I just wanted to hear his story.

Manny is a native of San Bernardino, and was born and raised in the city. He also lived in other cities like Redlands, Colton, and Mentone, but mostly stayed around San Bernardino. But Manny did not begin his story with where he was born. As Manny sat across from me, he began to share about his life of selling

drugs, going in and out of jail, and getting shot multiple times. As noted above, some specific dates were hard to recall, many events were out of order, and memories merged with one another. While the order of events was hard to make out, one can still perceive that Manny underwent a real and significant change.

In my view, in agreement with Helena Hansen's (2018) points on testimony, *fragmented testimonies* attempt to piece together stories to generate "a sense of self." Street life is pervaded with realities of fragmentation, and as people are caught in *wounds of street life*, *wounds of erasure* are only exacerbated.¹⁷ Growing up in the context of street life, Manny's story underscores these points in poignant ways: not knowing his name, not knowing how to tell his story, endless cycles of street life, and the sense that his story goes in multiple directions. Yet, his testimony—though fragmented—registers God's involvement in the different, scattered moments of his life, and amidst such pieces, we see a life reconstructed with his own words. It is recalled as a life that becomes spiritually and physically healed.

A Fragmented Story

"My story just seems everywhere," said Manny as he tried to piece together different parts of his life.¹⁸ After the age of 13, Manny told me how he started to misbehave on the streets. He did not know why, but suggested that maybe it was because he did not know who his father was growing up. Around this age, he started getting involved with drugs, and in time he became a drug dealer and began to sell heroin.

It was normal that around his home, which was just two blocks away from Hope City Church, people carried guns and guarded the house while drugs were being sold. As I listened to him, in Manny's accounts there continued to be a tension between fragments and organization. On his nineteenth birthday, he recalled that he got busted for selling drugs and went to jail. He served some time, but this began a cycle of being incarcerated: going in and out, avoiding his parole officer and getting arrested again. He expressed that this happened "over and over, again and again." I

¹⁷In relation to how society treats people living on the streets, Paul Blankenship-Lai (2024) uses the phrase: "wound of rejection." In a slightly similar way, I am thinking in terms of how society at times stigmatizes people acquainted with the streets broadly (drug life, gang life, unhoused, etc.). In my view, *wounds of erasure* recall a state of personal and social fragmentation that historically dispossessed people undergo, along with the realities of street life that only aggravate such states of fragmentation.

¹⁸Interview with Manuel, October 20th, 2025.

asked him, “How many times?” He could not respond with a definite number. For twenty years of his life, until he was about 39, he kept going in and out of jail. He echoed phrases like “in and out” and “over an over” dozens of times as though it was an endless cycle.

This cycle went side by side with his own drug habit. Manny said: “I couldn’t get high enough bro. I tried just about everything.” Manny used various drugs and at times even in combination. “I’d go to the methodon, take my methodon, come home and slam. I was doing a speedball—cocaine.” Simultaneously selling drugs, he added: “And the money just kept coming in.” Yet, even amidst this lifestyle, Manny recalled to me that he still attended church here and there. In Rambo’s (1996) words, this would afford moments of “encounter” with advocates of religion.¹⁹ Because of his mother’s religious practice, he was exposed to Christianity at a young age.

Related to his family life, Manny said that he once had a wife and they had three kids together. Unfortunately, two of his kids passed away: “They lived about five months and then died. One from sudden infant death syndrome and the other one from crib death.” In time, he also split with his wife and divorced her. At the time, he did not want to lose her and prayed to God that he wouldn’t, but—referencing his drug addiction—he said, “The habit had me. Or I had the habit.” Eventually in 2000 or 2001, Manny said he got tired of his lifestyle and started to have feelings to turn himself in. In desperation he prayed for God to deliver him and said: “God took it away. God answered it and when he did it, I didn’t feel no pain . . . I didn’t even remember what the pain was. I don’t even remember kicking.” While he was trying to give up drugs, the cycle of “going back and forth, [and] back and forth” to jail only continued. Apparently, the police always had something on Manny, so it was easy for them to lock him up. During these cycles, he served multiple one year sentences.

Right before Manny decided to turn himself in, he and his mother went to have a meal together. Tired of street life, he said: “I just didn’t want to live like that anymore.” Drawing from the scripture that he learned at a young age, Manny recalled a pivotal moment of prayer. He said, I just prayed, “Lord, I want to see what

you got for me. Because he says *I know the plans I have for you*. . . . And then I remember not only that, he says *the rivers, they won’t overflow you. You won’t drown*.” Manny admitted that he doubted God and even several things in the Bible, but then explained: “The things that I had been reading throughout the years were coming to my mind.” Outside of the traditional church service, scriptures from his early childhood came to his remembrance while in the thick of street life.

While listening to Manny’s testimony, dates and details are complex, yet what we begin to see is a fragmented cycle and pieces of memories that interweave jail time, drug addictions, moments of desperate prayer to God, brief biblical passages, police raids and shootings. As mentioned in his opening story, Manny’s experiences of police raids and cop shootings were events that would be woven with ideas of *salvation*, blurring the before and after conversion moments. Religion and street life, unlike religion’s role in the “safe haven” thesis, become more “entangled” (Offutt 2023). Weaving God’s presence and salvation further into his experience on the streets, Manny recalled, “I’ve been shot three times in total: (1) one in my stomach and one of my arms; (2) my legs and one arm; and (3) the other one was just one arm. The Lord’s been with me. He’s been with me, going back and forth to the hospital.” In the midst of these hospital trips, medication doses, excessive bouts of drinking and—as we will see—rare health issues, Manny recalled God as present with him: “You know, he’s saved my life. Literally. Literally saved me. And some things, I couldn’t control.”

With these last comments, God is seen in the very margins of street life, not distant nor afar off, but with Manny as he went “back and forth,” in these endless cycles. In these details, as Rambo notes, the aspects of conversion narratives—like context, crises, encounter, interactions—are not that simple in this case, but indeed are complex and create cyclical, back-and-forth, unexpected and unconventional experiences. God is present in the bloodiest moments and endless cycles of drug addiction and street life; entangled in street life, Manny felt God’s presence during every hospital trip.

¹⁹Rambo (1996) writes: “The encounter stage brings people who are in crisis and searching for new options together with those who are seeking to provide the questions with a new orientation. Congruence of interests are not always found, however” (167).

“Something about those olives.”

It’s not always the authoritative or sound doctrines that cause people to have religious insight or to experience “something” that they deem as “special” or religious (Taves 2009). At times it is just the simple “objects, places, events and experiences” to which people ascribe religious, mystical or spiritual meaning (40). The outcome often produces, in Ammerman’s words above, moments where one’s personal and cultural understandings are fused with more authoritative doctrine.

At one point, amidst Manny’s cycles, he began to feel heavily sick and weak all the time. Specifically, he began to have pain in his jaw. He discovered that he actually had a tooth disease that was shooting poison into the rest of his body. When he received medical attention, they told him: “From one cavity, the poison is traveling to your teeth. You have a rare case. Your teeth are conjoined. You’re ingesting your own poison.” Manny added: “[Because of this] my stomach hurt. What do you call it? De-habilitating. I couldn’t stand up.” To numb the pain, Manny began to drink alcohol and became a heavy drinker.

Before he got medical treatment for the pain, he told me that he coincidentally learned about olives. At the time, he had a side hustle and was fixing cars. There was a man who brought an ice cream truck to Manny to receive some mechanic work. Manny was introduced to this man’s wife and learned that she purified olives. She explained to him: “I’ve been doing this since I was a little girl in my country. Olives always have to be washed all the time. Every day.” As Manny heard the story he said: “It sounded like salvation.” She went on: “They wash them in salt to take away the bitterness, to make them edible, so they can eat them.” As he listened to the women, it reminded him of the “forgiveness of sins. You got to keep doing that throughout your life as a Christian.” In his own way, Manny received a message—the cleaning of the bitterness of olives represents the cleaning and washing of the bitterness of sins from his life.

Struck by the woman’s story, Manny said he kept repeating to himself: “there is something about those

olives.” Prior to his days in Hope City, one day he was leaving a mega church in San Bernardino and he asked for prayer. He decided to go immediately to the hospital to get his teeth looked at. He recalled that as he walked on D and Olive Street, he noticed a little medical business trying to start up and take-off right at the intersection. A small little lady caught his attention as she was putting out a sign with balloons, which read: “We take Medical.” Manny explained: “And when I looked up, it was Olive Street. And the place on the corner was a dental place.” After explaining to the women his jaw pain and seeing if he was eligible for care, the woman invited him in. Manny recalled, “They started pulling out my teeth. And I started feeling better, better and better. They pulled five at a time. When they took out 10, I started feeling better. And then after that were root canals. They pulled the tooth, root canal, pulled the tooth, root canal, pulled the tooth, until like 19 teeth later.”

For Manny, this memory becomes a defining moment, which conflates physical and spiritual healing. The significance of Olive Street and the women’s story of purifying olives for him hinted at a moment of God intervening in his life. God led him to Olive Street, which reminded him of the spiritual significance that he personally connected with the cleansing of olives. Thus, this account was imbued with the experience of the forgiveness of sins, a cleansing away of bitterness from his life, and the healing from physical pain.²⁰ Despite stories appearing fragmented and unorthodox, Manny reached for a significant account directly from the streets that brought him spiritual cleansing and physical healing.

Francine - Testimonies of Tears

As noted above, Francine is a Latinx volunteer who serves frequently at CCM. Though she has just more recently gotten involved, her level of commitment is strong and she often serves as a co-facilitator with the main leader Gualbert Augustin. During my fieldwork at CCM, I noticed Francine leading in some shape or form, praying for people, or

²⁰In Christian thought, olives and olive oil signify the Holy Spirit. For example, *Gethsemane* means oil press. We know that this is where Jesus Christ prayed prior to His crucifixion on the cross—the garden of *Gethsemane*. With this reading, Christ was pressed at the cross to then release the oil, or the Holy Spirit. I mention this because I find Manuel’s reference to olives in direct connection to salvation fascinating; for him a street sign (Olive Street) and a story that he learned from a woman about cleansing olives during his street-life days—culminated in spiritual and physical experience of forgiveness and healing.

consoling people in a one-on-one and intimate way; her role primarily involves the latter.

Francine's testimony is one that centers the voices of women, especially in street ministries and urban churches.²¹ As one who serves in the community and not merely from the pulpit, Francine's story affords an opportunity to underscore a Latinx woman's first-hand experience of the divine, her own agency in constructing her own lived-religious experience, and her vital role in this street ministry.²² Divine experience, intimacy, and power is redirected, perceived and told from the perspective of a Latinx woman, and more, from one tending to the needs of the community and the streets of San Bernardino; Francine's testimony uniquely shows how divine encounters can precede direct conversion experiences, how divine power can be leveraged outside of traditional leadership roles, and how it can be used to tend to the wounds of others.

Further, on one hand, Francine's testimony of tears confronts the constant *wounds of loss* interrelated with street life, and echoes an unconventional conversion narrative of numerous crises, which in turn are transformed into sources of religious power and healing; on the other hand, her tears symbolically remind us of the value of intimate experiences in themselves. "Intimacy with God,"²³ embodied and expressed through tears, becomes an analytic in which to read Francine's possession of her own religious capital (Stark & Finke, 2000).

Passing Through Hard Times

Francine initially heard about the street ministry CCM through her connection with Gualbert Augustin (aka Gus), who at the time was also a hospice chaplain at the facility she was working in. Initially, Gus invited her, but Francine was never able to attend. However, once she decided to start volunteering, she shared: "Wow! I felt such joy to do something for other people, [the] less fortunate. Because I was in that position myself." Recalling her own past and experience of street life, Francine explained how she grew up in Los Angeles "in a very poor environment" and how she lost her family through drugs and alcohol. Both of her parents passed away due to the wounds of street life. "They committed suicide. So I've been through hard times," she recalled.

Despite these early *wounds of loss*, Francine looks at the present with a thankful perspective, glad that she is alive and able to help others in need who are living on the streets. Serving at CCM, she hopes that people would "just believe that God will help them." She described how at CCM they take in people living on the streets who come in "screaming and yelling." Yet, she says: "I have no fear whatsoever to speak to them." Francine's early life prior to her conversion was full of human loss, and as we will see below, she also experienced a moment of crises and divine interaction which involved "crying out to God" even before her

²¹Notably, Rambo (1996) early on noted the lack of study of women conversions. It is also surprising that while, for example, Hispanic Pentecostal street ministries are often dominated by women (Hansen 2018), the narratives that capture their role and importance are very limited. Hansen (2018) provides some useful insights as to why this might be the case: among street ministries in Puerto Rico (with specific drug related programs), while the *reformation* of *machismo* fits neatly with Pentecostal narratives, it is not so favorable toward the needs of women (114). In relation to these street ministries, Hansen further notes that women are given authority in public spaces when they frame that "authority in terms of their roles as mothers" (129). In my observation of street ministries, women have a key role in serving and supporting the community; their voices should be centered to understand their conversion and religious experiences in these contexts.

²²Following scholars like Ada María Isasi-Díaz (1996), who uses *lo cotidiano* or "liberative daily experiences" of Hispanic women (66) as a source of her *mujerista theology* as a way to capture "acts of subversion" against normative or absolute frameworks (i.e. "mainline theology") (72-73), in this article I draw on lived-religious Latinx experiences to counter dominant, singular narratives to carve out space for women's voices. This in turn gives voice and agency to Latinx women to define their own stories and role in urban churches.

²³Scholars like Tanya M. Luhrmann, would refer to this sort of intimate cultivated talk with God as "imagined dialogues," which in evangelicals experience is "the inner voice that comments, guides, interprets, and reflects, not always nicely—and works to make some of the dialogues both more real and more good" (131).

distinct conversion experience.²⁴ Amidst these numerous interactions with God during moments of tears and loss, Francine came to know God more—learning how to hear his voice.

“Please don’t let me die.”

With streams of tears, Francine began to recall a significant *crisis* in her life—an illness that prompted a *quest* for God and an *encounter* with a church (Rambo, 1996, 49-50, 166-170). She recalled that for a long time she had been “living in the world,” when suddenly she got sick and was diagnosed with cancer. She explained she had a large mass on her neck. After some time of seeking medical treatment, she began to get tired of the hospitals and the treatment of nurses. Eventually she cried out to God, and in tears prayed: “Please don’t let me die.”²⁵

After this desperate prayer, Francine began to attend a church. Someone told her about a specific church that was performing miraculous forms of healing. At first she was skeptical. She said she held more to her Catholic tradition and did not want to believe in miracles. Yet, she decided to at least visit. She explained that when, “I went to the church, these people were being healed and my eyes were in shock. It really scared me.” The preacher began to give an altar call, asking people to come to the pulpit. Francine said she did not want to go up and that her body was unable to move. Yet, through the persuasion of the preacher, she surrendered. “I remember falling to my knees and I said, ‘Okay, I surrender. If I give my life, Lord, do not let me die.’”²⁶

Having walked up to the altar, Francine said she had “fallen back” and it felt as though she was being choked. In hindsight, she realized and interpreted this moment as “a demonic source that was trying to come out” of her. After this “convulsion type” experience,

she said she felt relieved but still perplexed: “It was just weird because I saw the other people do it, but you think it’s fake. You don’t believe it until it happens to you.” After this altar encounter, while lying down on her bed at night Francine discovered that she was healed. She went back to the hospital and there was no mass on her neck. In relief, she exclaimed: “That is a miracle in itself to be healed by the Lord. And since then I gave him my life.”

Francine’s healing experience involved a radical, demon exorcizing “altar experience.” Uniquely, it is told from the perspective of a woman who experienced a physical healing that solidified her beliefs. Francine’s miraculous access to “divine healing” points to a specific and physical example, which in turn legitimizes and concretizes her religious experience. In a way, this recalls Elaine Peña’s (2011) ideas of “devotional capital” written upon the bodies of religious participants, yet here it was acquired not through labor, but through an act of surrender. Her first-hand experience with healing became a means of religious capital—that is, access to God—which only continued to develop.

The Voice of the Lord: Your Season is Over

On one hand, Francine discussed with me about her understanding of the Bible. She mentioned how prior to her divine healing, she felt she had little knowledge of it, “but now I have an understanding [of it] and now I listen and I follow the rules and I obey.” Through her regular reading of the scriptures, she “feels that the Lord is guiding [her] in so many different ways.” On the other hand, unlike direct encounters with the Bible or God’s word, one of the moments that shifted her life is when she experienced a divine calling through a direct voice. Due to embarrassment, some evangelicals may disavow

²⁴For Rambo, interaction is a stage in conversion that can develop much later, and involves *relationships, rituals, rhetoric* and *roles* (107-108). As we will see, in Francine’s account her experience of “crying out to God” and the rhetoric she used in her experience points to an intimate interaction even prior to her altar experience.

²⁵Interview with Francine, October 29th, 2025.

²⁶In both Manny and Francine’s stories, “surrendering,” giving in or giving up becomes a significant aspect of their conversion experience. The pressures of street life and illness led them to commit in unexpected ways. Lewis Rambo (1993) defines this as an “inner process of commitment,” and as “one of the most difficult aspects of conversion to understand” (132). He adds: “Surrender is an inner yielding of control, and acceptance of the authority of the leader, group, or tradition, which enables the convert to devote himself or herself completely to the group” (132).

hearing God's voice directly shortly after sharing they in fact heard his voice (Luhrman, 2012, 232-233), however, for Francine this did not apply. While sitting in her old office, she said that a day came when "I heard a voice say that *'Your season is over.'*" And there was nobody inside the office." She explained that this voice spoke these words to her more than once. In the process, she began to breathe very heavily, went to her boss and immediately quit her job. She interpreted the message as directions to leave her company, and later to begin serving God. Direct access to God's voice can be viewed as a privileged role and can be a means of religious capital. For God to speak directly to Francine, underscores a level of unorthodox religious experience, insight and power.

Yet, even prior to this moment, Francine was acquainted with God's voice, thus disrupting the linearity of conversion narratives, and creating precursive experiences particularly through early moments of crises. When she first encountered God's voice, Francine did not know it was him. Her sister had passed away at the age of 36 and left behind five children. Francine recalled, at the time, "I was so mad. I was so mad at God and I said, 'Why did you take my sister? You took my whole family, why did you take my sister?'" In frustration she went to the backyard of her house and cried out to God in prayer. As a form of ritual, Rambo (1993) describes prayer in the interaction stage, noting: for Christians, prayer fosters, "a sense of intimacy with a deity through the experience of talking with God, using either structured prayer or free-form, spontaneous prayer. Connecting with the creator of the universe in a personal, intimate way is a powerful experience for most converts" (118). Yet, even before her conversion, it was as though the wounds of loss forced Francine to reach for such raw, intimacy with God. She explained:

It was 5 o'clock in the morning and I was on my knees and I was yelling at *him* [God] and I said, 'Why did you do this to me?' I'll never forget I heard a man's [voice] like a deep *'get up'*. . . and then I heard it, and then I was just like still. I was kind of quiet because it kind of shocked me . . . like who's telling me that? It was 5 o'clock in the morning and nobody was out there. And there was just like a street light on and then it said it again. It

said *'get up.'* And then by the third time, he said, *'get up because you need to take care of your daughter,'* and my baby was only a year and a half. She was only my baby . . . Nina. She was young.

Francine explained to me that she felt like the voice could not be human and she was perplexed that it referred to her one and a half year old daughter, Nina. At the time Francine felt unable to go on and live. Crying, she recalled, "God probably knew that. So he really said that. I needed to live for my baby and now my baby's 21. That was the first time that I heard his voice, "Get up! Get up!"

Francine explained how in her life now, the same God continues to speak to her. In connection with her altar experience and significant turning point, it is as though the voice had long been present, appearing before, during and even after her conversion. "Things happen like that to me all the time. I hear his voice. He's very direct. I know I need to obey him now too. I don't play. I obey a lot." At times the voice asks her to go pray for someone. At first, Francine was resistant but because the voice insisted and pressed her she felt the need to follow it. With direct access to God's voice, she emphasizes how she is a person who intimately knows his voice and is in constant conversation with him: "I have a relationship with God. I speak in the Holy Spirit. He says that when you speak in the Holy Spirit, you're having a conversation. Nobody knows what you're saying. Nobody knows, but I know this one-on-one conversation." Gained through accumulated *wounds of loss* and tears, Francine's continued intimacy with God and access to God's divine voice allows her to obtain a level of religious power and agency in street ministries often limited to patriarchal leadership, religious authorities and institutions.²⁷

Healing on the Margins

At CCM, Francine is not on a podium giving a message, but she talks to people on a one-on-one basis, listens to them, speaks words of encouragement, and prays for them. Frequently, when I visit Celebrate Center Ministries, I see her speaking with people face to face and engaging them often with tears. Unlike a person giving sermons to others and remaining distant,

²⁷Some may argue that traditional conversion narratives possess dynamics like miracles, healing, hearing God's voice, visions, etc. Yet many of these can neglect the voices of women. Furthermore, this article explores how such dynamics interact with the context of street-life, and in turn problematize sequential patterns of conversions.

she enters into the community, listens to their struggles and shares spiritual encouragement.

Describing a specific encounter with a person she met at CCM, Francine said there was a woman who was waiting to receive a prayer from her. The woman was experiencing shoulder pain. Francine was assured that God is a healer and began to pray for her. But Francine also shared that behind the scenes she sensed something else was taking place:

Because of what I've experienced, I know now that there are demons. We are not aware of the things that hold us back—anger, unforgiveness, depression. All things that are not of God are demonic. Sorrow, depression, anxiety . . . I can go on and on and on. All those words are not of God. And that lady was carrying that. And I know because I've been around so many situations and I was watching people being killed by those things.

When Francine began to pray over her and placed her hand on her shoulder, the woman began to move her body as if she was throwing up. The woman shook back and forth, Francine said, "Because the demon doesn't want to come out." Francine then said that she spoke directly to the woman and the demon causing the pain, "'Cough.' And I said, 'Get out of her . . . today's the last day.'" Continuing to emphasize her access to spiritual power, in Francine's view, she is following what "Jesus told his disciples: to go out and heal." She recalled that the early disciples received a power from God to cast out demons, and she believed she received the same. "It wasn't them that were healing. It was the Spirit of God that they were blessed with and He gave them . . . the anointing power . . . This is called deliverance." For Francine, this "anointing power" to heal the community did not come through one dynamic encounter with God, but through *wounds of loss*, tears, numerous encounters with his voice, and constant conversation with God.

Through Francine, we are reminded of the ways in which women serve in communities in essential ways, and their experiences of tears that foster divine intimacy; despite long encounters with various wounds of loss, they transform such pain in order to be a factor of healing in their own communities.

Conclusion:

Testimonies on the margins of street life, in Latinx perspective, remind us of the overlooked narratives

that are being forged by ordinary voices. Often people who seemingly "do not know how to tell their testimony" or voices of women relegated to the sidelines can remain unheard and silenced. Yet some street ministries afford them a space to tell their story. While these Latinx testimonies from San Bernardino may appear in fragmented pieces or as unorthodox, they point to experiences familiar to people acquainted with street life. Conversion amidst street life is not linear, it's messy, cyclical, "back and forth," unorthodox and becomes redefined; it is filled with a multiplicity of wounds and crises. Yet, amidst the streets, "intimacy with God" is discovered and appropriated, especially by women who know his voice and divine power. In turn, fragmented testimonies and testimonies of tears reveal to us some of the lived religious experiences of people on the margins; and amidst such margins, often Latinx individuals are finding ways to navigate their social-historical conditions, which have been compounded with modern urban problems in inner cities. Street life can create its own wounds—*wounds of erasure* and *wounds of loss*; it can fragment identities and envelop them with mourning. Yet, despite this, individuals who tell their testimonies remind us that in the face of wounds they have reached for healing, and have brought healing to others.

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Appendix

Figures 1-6 (Latinx Churches on E Street)





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