

Keeping busy when there's nothing to do:

Labor, Therapy, and Boredom in a Puerto Rican Addiction Shelter

Caroline Mary Parker
Presidential Fellow of Medical Anthropology
Department of Social Anthropology
University of Manchester
Arthur Lewis Building, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL, United Kingdom
Caroline.parker@manchester.ac.uk

Acknowledgements:

This research was supported by a grant from the National Science Foundation Cultural Anthropology Doctoral Dissertation Research Improvement Grant (1729646, awarded to Caroline Mary Parker).

Running Head:

Keeping busy when there's nothing to do

Abstract

This article interrogates the ethic of busyness espoused by men in an addiction shelter in Puerto Rico. Initially, *La Casita's* ideology of moralized work patterns and time-discipline seems a throwback to the 19th century factory floor and tool of market discipline. A closer look at residents' experiences, however, reveals that busyness has less to do with capitalist subject formation than with finding an alternative way of living when excluded from the market economy. If the capitalist project turns on the productive commodification of time, *La Casita's* work ethic – despite official avowals to the contrary – is an attempt to convert unproductive time into an ascetic practice of ceaseless self-work. Though not always successful, keeping busy becomes a way that residents carve a meaningful way of living from an overabundance of time.

Key words: keeping busy, labor, capitalist subject formation, boredom, addiction treatment, Puerto Rico

Resumen de Investigación

Este artículo cuestiona la ética del “estar ocupado” adoptada por hombres dentro de hogares para adictos en Puerto Rico. Inicialmente, parecería ser que la ideología moral de sus patrones de trabajo y disciplina del tiempo laboral fuera un retorno al “piso de la fábrica” decimonónica, o una herramienta de la disciplina mercantil. Una mirada más cercana a las experiencias de los residentes revela que el “estar ocupado” tiene menos que ver con la formación de sujetos capitalistas que con encontrar una forma alternativa de vida cuando se les excluye de la economía de mercado. Si el proyecto capitalista gira en torno a la mercantilización productiva del tiempo, la ética de trabajo de La Casita—a pesar de que las declaraciones oficiales digan lo contrario—es un intento de convertir el tiempo improductivo en una práctica ascética de auto trabajo incesante. Aunque no siempre resulta exitoso, mantenerse ocupado se convierte en una modalidad en donde los residentes adoptan una forma significativa de vida de su sobreabundancia de tiempo.

Thirty men stood in a circle on a wooden terrace. It was 6.30am. Mountain air pressed moisture onto the windows of the men's dormitories. Each clasping his neighbor's hand in prayer, their voices rang out and filled the valley.

I give you my hand,
set my heart in rhythm with yours
and I pledge us both before God—
bringing myself and you
to honor life.ⁱ

When the prayer was over each man took his seat. For a few moments there was silence. Rocky, a formerly homeless heroin user and US army veteran, was leading this morning's therapy. Because there had been eight new arrivals this week he began with a re-cap of the rules. Confidently, as he had done this many times, he rattled through them. Men were to get up at 6am and have thirty minutes to shower and make their beds. "Why get up at six?" he asked. Then, answering his own question, he said: "To teach independence. The early mornings prepare you for work." Pausing, he eyed the men in the circle. "At 6.30am, we pray. After we pray, we eat breakfast." Residents were to wear proper clothes in the canteen, he instructed, "that means no flip-flops, no tank tops, and no talking. Is that clear?" Thirty voices shot back in unison: "*Si hermano.*" Straightening his posture, Rocky continued, "At 8am, we do labor therapy. That means you clean the toilet, you do the laundry, you prepare lunch, or, for those with experience," he said, nodding towards the jumbled pile of grates and scaffolding that towered beside the

terrace, “you can help with construction; there’ll be plenty of building work during the next few weeks. “Why do we do labor therapy?” he asked, scanning the circle. “By learning how to work we are learning independence and breaking our dependencies, all of our dependencies.”

Rocky continued in this declamatory manner for the next half hour, stopping to take the occasional question. When the short stream of queries dried up, he turned to introduce the other staff members: Rafi, Tito, and Jorge. “All of our counsellors are from the streets, just like you. Trust me, we know what you’ve been through and we know what it is like to lose everything.” As the session drew to a close, he turned to face the new recruits, who stood side-by-side, looking dazed. “Here you are going to work. You will work in construction. You will work in the canteen. You are going to work with your problems and work with yourself.” “Some of you may need to see a psychologist,” he said. “But what most of you need is time. Time is the best psychologist.”

I draw this scene from the eight months I spent observing daily life at *La Casita*, a privately-owned non-profit organization that is licensed by the Puerto Rican government to provide residential treatment for drug addiction. Group therapy took place every morning and was one of several daily practices, along with domestic chores and manual labor, through which *La Casita* sought to create “independent” and “hard-working” men who would be capable, so the handbook said, of “returning to society.” Over the course of a year, which could turn into several, days were filled with a busy daily schedule of group therapies, prayer, chores and tasks, all strictly regulated through a system of rules, rewards and punishments. Through hard work, treatment leaders said, residents would break the dependencies that had brought them there in the first place. In time, the center’s

letterhead said, men would gain the necessary skills and dispositions to become “useful members of society.”

This article considers an effort to “keep busy” demonstrated by a cohort of male residents who live in a self-help addiction shelter that advertises itself as a “residential drug treatment center.” Though organizations like *La Casita* are widely criticized by human rights groups for their use of unscientific treatment methods (IPR 2015), anthropologists and others have shown that these organizations also function as poverty survival strategies and, as such, their therapeutic practices (and failings) must be considered according to their surrounding structural realities, such as urban neglect and welfare re-structuring in Philadelphia (Fairbanks 2009), or drug violence in Mexico (Garcia 2015).

In the Puerto Rican context, I should state from the outset that the organizations purported to be providing “residential drug treatment” are better understood to be in another line of business. In the first place, their clientele is not uniformly (or even largely) defined by addiction.ⁱⁱ Many of the men I got to know at *La Casita* had enrolled for other reasons: most commonly, court orders related to drug dealing, but also family-instigated admissions related to domestic conflict and self-referrals prompted by housing insecurity. In the second, even for those who self-identify as “addicts,” what these organizations provide is largely uninvested in the 12-steps or other recovery management techniques that have been documented in mutual-aid systems care for drug addiction in the United States and Latin America (Brandes 2010; Fairbanks 2009).

In departure from drug ethnographies that explore how notions of “addiction” and “recovery” can vary culturally and historically (Hansen 2018; Garcia 2010), this article

interrogates *La Casita's* orientation to work with a view to better understanding what an imperative to “keep busy” or “be productive” might mean when wage labor is widely unattainable. One of my aims is to dislodge totalizing narratives of neoliberal discipline in research in therapeutic settings. Studies of addiction treatment, psychiatry, and homeless shelters have often interpreted specific therapeutics as disciplinary tools for cultivating independent, responsible and productive neoliberal subjects (Bourgois 2000; Braslow 2013; Hennigan 2017; Kaye 2019; Zigon 2010). Closer examination of *La Casita's* regimen of labor therapy reveals, however, that “keeping busy” is not preparing men to live independently or to re-join the lower tiers of the labor market. For most of these men, waged labor is not on the horizon. Instead, keeping busy should be recognized as forming the basis of an alternative livelihood and encompassing mode of belonging based on unproductive work and enduring economic dependency on the shelter.

I also wish to make clear, however, that committing to this alternative way of life is difficult and fraught. It is not just the (sometimes achingly apparent) artificiality and repetitiveness of the tasks available, but the social engineering of work itself proves unsound. Residents confront a daily contradiction between an institutional imperative to be “useful” and “productive” and a therapeutic endeavor that fails twice: neither ensuring a steady supply of useful things to do onsite nor preparing men for work outside. Instead, futile assignments are often presented as therapies of last resort. Even in this outpost of surrogate employment, boredom, an overabundance of time, and a feeling of futility remain abiding existential possibilities. Hardly unique to Puerto Rico or to drug rehabilitation, this temporal problem of how to fill the time within an advanced capitalist economy that ensures there is less and less work to do is a globalizing problem. It afflicts

both abject, marginalized communities (Van den Berg and O’Neill 2017), and, particularly under the shadow of the Covid-19 pandemic, the relatively affluent and educated classes too (Nieuwenhuis 2020). How differently situated over-accumulations of time will knock against “unrealizable” work ethics in capitalist economies in coming years remains to be seen, but the difference – and the significance of such distinctions – will likely depend on the duration of “lockdowns” and the after-effects of pandemic policies for temporalities of labor and social life.

The problem with (a lack of) work

This article draws on three strands of anthropological thought that each tell us something about the “point” of work, approached through three alternate frames: wage labor as a foundation of social belonging under Fordist capitalism, unemployment as a source of social suffering under neoliberalism, and therapeutic labor as a tool of market discipline.

Among the major achievements of labor historians has been the documentation of nineteenth and twentieth century transformations in temporalities of the life course in Euro-America (Greenberg 2009; Johnson-Hanks 2002). Gradually, increased formalization of distinct “life stages” saw the gendered mapping of adult development onto wage labor, such that being a man became locked into the notion of waged work and the image of the “breadwinner” (Creighton 1996; Greenberg 2009), while womanhood became synonymous with the domestic sphere and labor there devalued as “unproductive” (Folbre 1991). In the now familiar narrative, though twentieth century industrialization and two world wars saw increasing numbers of women absorbed into the labor market, wage labor remained secondary to motherhood as a grounds for

womanhood. As workers, women were dismissed as “supplementary earners” (Safa 1995).

In the late twentieth century, as changes in economic policy privileged profit-making over full employment, entire swaths of the population were rendered surplus within the new post-industrial economy (Sassen 2014). Since the 1990s and 2000s, scholars have documented the mounting problem of men without work. From Puerto Rico and indigenous American reservations on the US mainland, to Romania, Ethiopia, and India anthropologists have described how unemployment inflicts boredom, excess time, and even drug addiction (Jeffrey 2010; Jervis et al. 2003; Mains 2017; O’Neill 2017; Singer 1992). Unable to meet culturally valued metrics of manhood, unemployed men have been said to suffer the “temporal hardship” (Jeffrey 2010, 466) of being stuck in a “permanent male adolescence” (Hansen 2018, 105). Unoccupied, bored, and consigned to “doing nothing” (Van den Berg and O’Neill 2017) this state currently afflicts millions already throughout the world.

But in Puerto Rico mass male unemployment is nothing new. Whatever brief (and, by most accounts, grueling) ‘heyday’ Puerto Rico’s sugar-cane workers may have experienced following US occupation in 1898 and the growth of the corporate sugar plantation system, sizable seasonal fluctuations in agricultural production meant that regular periods of idleness continued to be the norm throughout the early 20th century (Mintz 1951). Post-war industrialization did little to help. The closure of the sugar plantations disproportionately displaced men from the labor market (Dietz 1986; Safa 1995) – the male labor force participation rate crashed by 19% between 1950-1980, from 80% to 61% (Safa 2011). So severe was unemployment during the postwar period

(widely considered the zenith of US-style modernization) that the commonwealth state had to promote mass emigration as part of its economic development strategy (Dietz 1986). The consensus among analysts of Puerto Rico's labor history, then, is that whatever its ascribed status as a "showcase" for American capitalism, postwar modernization roundly failed to deliver prosperity (Dietz 1986; Safa 2011; Lapp 1995). Moreover, the long valorized ideal of the "male breadwinner" has in fact constituted a "modernization myth" that never materialized in Puerto Rico (Safa 1995).

If broad participation in employment was never the role in Puerto Rico, what are we to make of *La Casita's* work ethic? Is the stubborn injunction to work just another pernicious form of "cruel optimism" (Berlant 2011): an aspiration instilled only to set its believer up for failure? Or is it perhaps a colonial iteration of the "ghostly presence" of capitalism's affective past (Muehlebach 2011, 62), in this case, a shard of the "imperial debris" of American Fordism (Stoler 2008)? Studies of both spiritual and secular addiction therapies provide at least three readings of therapeutic labor.

By far the predominant framework is that of capitalist subject formation. Drug ethnographies demonstrate a long-standing (albeit variable) moral significance placed on work in therapeutic settings. From agricultural work configured as "moral therapy" in early twentieth century US hospitals (Campbell, Olsen, and Walden 2008), to occupational training mandated by contemporary US drug courts (Kaye 2019), and labor therapy practiced in Orthodox Christian HIV and drug rehabilitation in Russia (Zigon 2010), these variable kinds of therapeutic labor have generally been viewed through the lens of capitalist or neoliberal discipline. The implicit premise, of course, is that such therapeutics render their subjects better disposed to submit to "routinized labor

exploitation” (Kaye 2019, 167), a premise that is increasingly untenable in the United States, and less and less generalizable to other places, given wage labor’s decline. A second reading treats therapeutic labor as a technology of self-transformation and spiritual rebirth (Odgers-Ortiz et al. 2020). Notably, Christian readings of self-transformation are often presented as complementary to, or at least compatible with, capitalist subject formation (O’Neill 2015). Jarett Zigon, for example, argues that Orthodox Russian Christianity reproduces neoliberalism by cultivating “responsible” subjects able to live “a normal life” under neoliberalism (2010, 3).

But such accounts are less helpful in understanding the work that happens at *La Casita*, an institution that offers little in the way of formal religious instruction and, more importantly, is strikingly uninterested in promoting market-based employment. Despite its overt commitment to supporting residents to “return to society,” in practice, *La Casita* suspends its residents in an enduring state of unproductivity and economic dependence, providing an encompassing parallel order and alternative way of life for the duration.

A third and more apposite reading can be found in Helena Hansen’s (2018) ethnography of Evangelical addiction ministries in Puerto Rico. As Hansen tells the story, addiction ministries are sites where displaced Puerto Ricans create an alternative social order. As is true of gangs, the drug trade, and various other nodes of the informal economy in Latin America (Millar 2014; Flores 2014), addiction ministries offer surrogate grounds of belonging and operate, in effect, as citizenships “of last resort” (Hansen 2018, 290) for those excluded from wage labor. This explanation certainly works well as a structural diagnosis, but as “thick description” (Geertz 1973) it works relatively less well because it says little about how or why residents and staff at *La Casita*

should come to place such strong moral emphasis on “working hard” and “being productive.” Nor does it address the theoretical implications of a compulsion to work in places where opportunities for productive labor are desperately lacking and socially necessary tasks are often in short supply.

Rather than treating this local work ethic as a misfitted tool of market discipline for a Fordist economy that never existed in Puerto Rico, instead I attune to the rhythms and temporal arrangements of work, therapy, and prayer at these addiction shelters with an eye towards their encompassing tendencies. Heeding Han and Das’ (2015) call to consider how “newness” is entrenched in older forms of politics and social life, I explore life at *La Casita* through a comparison with early Christian monasticism. Specifically, I explore points of resonance and departure between its own work ethic and that of the early Christian Egyptian Fathers of the fourth century and the Benedictine monasteries of the Middle Ages. Insights from these older homosocialities enable me to crack open overdetermined accounts of capitalist subject formation and recapture the anthropological value of religious frameworks for comprehending (and critiquing) new belongings and memberships beyond wage labor.

Put bluntly: If the capitalist project has been successfully characterized as the productive commodification of time (Thompson 1967), *La Casita*’s project on the contrary can be read as a breakaway endeavor to transform wasted time into an ascetic practice of interrupted self-work and secular-spiritual prayer. Though fraught and frequently plagued by inventory shortages, this regimen can at least be said to go some way in alleviating the suffering of being excluded from the market economy and

consigned to persist in a shelter shorn of any real hope of progressing to something different or better.

Addiction shelters

La Casita is one node in an extensive archipelago of private non-profit agencies licensed by the Puerto Rican government to provide residential treatment for drug addiction. Like most of the island's addiction shelters, as I came to recognize them, it provides long-term communalist residence and basic sustenance, and imposes a strict daily regimen of *terapia laboral* (work-therapy). When I conducted fieldwork in 2016-2017, there were 132 such shelters collectively providing care to roughly 4,500 people, overwhelmingly to men (IPR 2015). Other drug treatment modalities were limited, comprising: 11 detox centers, five outpatient mental health clinics, six state-run methadone clinics, two needle exchange agencies, and a handful of private buprenorphine clinics (ASSMCA 2014).

Puerto Rico's addiction shelters vary in terms of their size, funding structure, and religious orientation. *La Casita* was among the two-thirds of Puerto Rico's residential programs that are registered as "community-based," with the remaining third registered as "faith-based" (IPR 2015). Despite this binary classification, these community-based organizations cannot be accurately characterized as 'secular.' At *La Casita*, a vernacular Christianity prevailed. Though staff members would often emphasize that "all religions are welcome here," most residents and staff identified as Christian (though not necessarily a specified denomination), and I never encountered anyone who said they belonged to another faith.

Prayer, though officially "non-obligatory", was an organized daily practice in which most residents participated. It took place several times each day to mark the

morning's beginning, the onset of every meal, and the day's end, and was usually held in group spaces (canteens and dormitories), there being no designated place of worship onsite. While a small minority of residents chose to remain silent during prayer, most would join the circle to stand hand-in-hand, with prayers spoken out loud and in unison. On Sundays, men had the option of attending Pentecostal and Catholic services in nearby churches, something that about a quarter of residents chose to do. This vernacular Christianity contrasts with Puerto Rico's faith-based programs, where residents are usually mandated to participate in bible-study, fasting, and religious worship, and which tend to be run by pastors and to have designated places of worship onsite (Hansen 2018).

Though Puerto Rico's addiction shelters have sometimes been likened to therapeutic communities on the US mainland, their genealogy is distinctive. On the mainland, many therapeutic communities in operation today were originally founded by former members of Synanon. Established in 1958 in Los Angeles, Synanon had famously expanded into a multi-millionaire dollar treatment franchise, or many would say cult, shedding members along the way who often went on to set up their own therapeutic communities (Synanon eventually disbanded in 1991 after proclaiming itself a religion). In Puerto Rico, in contrast, most addiction shelters owe their founders and design to a homegrown therapeutic community called "Home for the Re-education of Addicts" (Spanish acronym, *Hogar CREA*) which was founded in 1968 and is now the single largest provider of residential drug treatment in Puerto Rico. Like the island's Evangelical addiction ministries, Puerto Rico's therapeutic communities have their own local history: they took root in the middle of the twentieth century on the heels of

industrialization and thrived in a local context colored by colonialism, post-industrial decline, carceral expansion, and Christianity (for history, see Hansen 2018; Parker 2020).

La Casita was founded in 2007 by Jorge Santiago, a former heroin addict and therapeutic community graduate. Jorge had spent ten years living and working as a *terapista* (peer therapist) at *Hogar CREA*, but split off to establish his own program after inheriting a burnt-down property. Initially envisaged as a self-help therapeutic community for the “re-socialization of drug addicts,” owing to funding necessities it had recently extended its remit to co-serve as an *albergue* (shelter). This bureaucratic makeover facilitated access to more stable sources of funding. It also expanded *La Casita*’s clientele to include formerly homeless men, judicial assignees, and a growing stream of probation referrals.

By the time I first visited in late 2016, *La Casita* had been converted into a brightly painted two-story home. Surrounding the main building were a tiled and spacious terrace where group therapies were held, a stone table and seating area littered with cigarette butts, and an improvised out-door gym in the corner of a gravel carpark. The terracotta house was flanked on both sides by neatly tended infant palm trees, each encircled by painted rocks. The view of the valley gave the place a healthful, bucolic feeling.

I began fieldwork in August 2016, almost exactly a year before hurricane Maria would crash through the island, devastating communities and eventually leading - at time of writing - to between 3000-5000 excess deaths (Arnold 2019). That year, Puerto Rico’s public services were already under considerable strain. After ten consecutive years of economic decline, in June 2015 Puerto Rico’s former Governor, Alejandro García Padilla, declared Puerto Rico’s \$72 billion debt “not payable” (Corkery and Walsh 2015).

In the year that followed, public hospitals found their electricity supplies cut off for failing to pay their bills, thousands of public sector workers were laid off, and hundreds of public schools were closed down (Rappleye 2016).

Between August 2016 and September 2017, I conducted short-term observations at fifteen state-licensed “residential treatment centers,” and just over eight months of intensive observations at *La Casita*. On a typical day, I’d arrive at 6:30am in time to join morning prayer. I’d participate in group therapies, accompany residents as they completed their assigned tasks and duties, and leave after evening prayer. Though not an official “volunteer,” I would often help out with managing donations, mostly clothes, food, and furniture, and routinely accompanied residents to court, family-visits, and off-site medical appointments. I conducted over twenty formal interviews with residents, as well as daily informal conversations.

Working hard, keeping busy

Angel was one of the people I came to know well.ⁱⁱⁱ His first day at *La Casita* had coincided with mine and as apprehensive newcomers we’d sought each other out. Highly committed to what he saw as his “last chance” to prove himself, Angel was a former drug trafficker who had spent the last ten years in and out of prison. His heroin addiction began about five years ago, and he’d been cajoled into treatment by his terminally ill mother, who had told him that unless he did so, he would not inherit a thing, including the house they both lived in. On his first day he was assigned laundry duty, a role he held onto for several months until being re-assigned, to his annoyance, to toilet duty. The

laundry room (in fact, a balcony) was usually much quieter than the other communal areas and became a place where we could talk. One afternoon in February, about a month into Angel's time at *La Casita*, we sat chatting by the washing machine as he hung up pair after pair of boxer shorts, with a dozen or so laundry baskets lined up waiting their turn.

That day, Angel seemed to radiate energy. Having just finished hanging out a round of laundry, he now stood up on a stool as if it were a ladder. Grasping a pole with a sock wrapped around the end, he stretched upwards and began scrubbing the exterior walls of the dormitory as if they were windows. Though the walls were not obviously dirty (in fact, another resident had already cleaned them earlier that same day), Angel committed himself to the task, his concentration interrupted only by my repetitive questioning. "Why are you doing that?" I asked for the third time. "It's important to keep busy," he eventually answered, "it's important to use my time productively." After several more energetic strokes with the handmade sock-mop, each carefully executed to extend all the way from the top of the wall to the bottom, he stopped. "I didn't used to do any of these things," he said, now turning to me, "getting up early, doing my chores, working up a sweat of my own brow." After several more minutes of intense scouring, he finally got down from the stool and gazed upwards to admire his handiwork.

During the eight months that Angel came to spend at *La Casita*, he took the idea of "keeping busy" seriously. In the eyes of senior leadership, and as explicitly set out in *La Casita's* handbook, one of the shelter's primary goals was "To help the participant develop a disposition to work." To this end, idleness was frowned upon and hard work was woven into the choreography of the day. Time was strictly regulated according to a

repetitive series of discreet units of activity. Each unit was therapeutically repurposed so that chore time was “labor therapy,” prayer time was “spiritual therapy,” and, for one hour a day only, free time was “recreation therapy.” Each of these units formed part of a larger temporal ordering of shelter life in which keeping busy *was* therapy.

That tasks of necessity — cooking, cleaning and other in-house chores — were rarely plentiful enough to occupy the hands of all residents on any given day did not afford license to relax. Instead, when contingencies of group living failed to generate enough tasks to keep all members busy, Sisyphean assignments were concocted. Washing a car that had already been cleaned, scouring already pristine floor tiles with a toothbrush, or mopping the kitchen ceiling, were commonly prescribed last-resort (or repeat) tasks to keep residents busy when there was nothing else to do. Laborious and futile tasks were also prescribed as punishments for lateness or rule breaking: staying up through the night to scrub walls and floors, or being sent out, in the midday heat, to cut the grass with scissors.

Residents lived, worked, and prayed to bells. From the 6am hand bells that signaled the day’s onset, to the 10pm bells that sent men walking to their dormitories, bells set the time for eating, sleeping, praying and working. By calling residents to attention, and by signaling the onset of a new activity, the bells functioned as summons to labor. In fact, goads to labor were impossible to escape at *La Casita*. Blending Christian invocations of exertion as spiritual toil with neoliberal notions of personal responsibility, they were posted on the walls: ‘Work dignifies my person,’ ‘Food is not free,’ and ‘Responsibility is liberation in action.’ They sounded in the hand bells. They even seemed to be drawn out, tightly, across the immaculately made bunk beds.

This might feel familiar to students of early capitalism. Writing about England during the 18th and 19th centuries, Thompson (1967) argued that the advent of industrialism entailed a “re-structuring of man’s social nature and working habits,” where it ceased to be morally acceptable for workers to merely “pass the time” (1967, 91). Through a variety of technologies (e.g., clocks, bells, and fines) a sharp demarcation was enforced between “leisure time” and “work time,” with the latter reconfigured as a valued currency, every last bit of which had to be “consumed, marketed and put to *use*” (ibid: 91). In an analogous manner, when residents spoke of their adaptation to *La Casita*, they described a similar moralization of regular work patterns and vilification of time that is not used. Re-socialization at *La Casita* involved cultivating habits such as getting up early, being punctual, conducting one’s assigned tasks and duties properly, and avoiding wasting time. “Before, I didn’t do anything with my time,” one resident explained to me. “I would sleep until noon, then hang out with *mis panas* (my friends). But now I get up early. I keep busy. I’ve learned to use my time productively.”

Yet, unlike Thompson’s mill owners, for whom the central aim of time-discipline was to maximize industrial output, *La Casita* derived little in the way of income or value from its residents’ labor. Having men do their own chores reduced operating costs, to be sure, but socially necessary tasks were actually in scarce supply, and a lot of the effort that was expended at *La Casita* appeared – at last to the outsider – to be pointless. Nor was therapeutic labor obviously configured as a stepping-stone to formal employment. *La Casita* was actually exceedingly ill-equipped to assist residents with finding paid work. Residents were not generally permitted to leave the premises without special permission (granted for medical appointments, court hearings, and the like). The only occupational

therapy that I witnessed consisted of a single occasion when a visiting student held a workshop on writing resumes.

That considerable time was expended on materially unnecessary tasks highlights an important characteristic of *La Casita's* work ethic: the continuity of work is more important than the work's yield. Thus, the careful accounting for time spent, the imperative to keep busy, and the thing that looks like, and is often spoken about, as "using time productively," has no basis in the production of commodities or marketable services. More encompassing in its reach than the clocks driving capitalist production (Thompson 1967), *La Casita's* was the regimen of a "total institution" (Goffman 1961), more akin to a convent or monastery than to the factory floor.

The importance placed on continuous work bears a striking resemblance to the Egyptian Fathers of the fourth century, and also to the later Benedictine monasteries of the Middle Ages, where idleness was considered "an enemy of the soul" (Benedict 1906), and manual labor was considered itself an act of prayer and "Holy Art" (Eberle 1977). In the monastic literature, "meditation" was the technical term for this of this hybridization of manual labor and prayer (Agamben 2013). Roman monk Jean Cassian, describing the life of the Egyptian Fathers, observed how they were "constantly doing manual labor" in such a way that meditation was "celebrated continuously and spontaneously throughout the course of the whole day" (Cassian 2000, 92). Indeed, the continuity of prayer as extended through manual labor and house-keeping was said to define the monastic condition: "the whole purpose of the monk," wrote Cassian, "and indeed the perfection of his heart amount to this- total and uninterrupted dedication to prayer" (Cassian 1985, 101).

All very noble, but hardly how men like Angel understood their experiences. When asked about the point of work-therapy, they tended to toe the party line: the point was to “learn how to work,” “to use time productively,” or as Israel put it, “to get off the street, stop selling drugs, and do something useful with my life.” Such worldly narratives seem a far cry from the “sublime discipline” of the monk (Agamben 2013), or, closer to home, from the “otherworldly” aspirations of Puerto Rico’s Evangelical converts (Hansen 2018).

So what then are we to make of this local moral ethic of unending work, of a compulsion to labor that has lost its grounding in the satisfaction of human need, or in the execution of divine office? Weber might have diagnosed a case of “ascetic compulsion” (2015): the affliction that struck modern capitalism’s stewards who, on abandoning religion after the industrial revolution, found themselves locked in an “iron cage” (2015: 105) of dis-encharmed, hyper-rationalized and bureaucratized labor. But what interested me most was not this correspondence between *La Casita* and the Protestant ethic. Rather, what intrigued me was the extent to which residents’ accounts of their everyday experiences suggested that what they felt most acutely was not a compulsion to work but its frustration. Instead of feeling busy, residents often complained of having “nothing to do.” Instead of feeling that they were advancing towards independence, many worried they were “stuck,” “wasting time” and “falling behind.” Less ‘iron cage,’ more glass house; *La Casita*’s work regime was constantly on the verge of shattering.

Spiritual boredom

Let me put this plainly: despite continual injunctions to work hard, “busy” was often an impossible state to maintain. As a disciplinary device for regulating time, the

daily schedule was only marginally effective. Continuous work was regularly disrupted by electricity blackouts (there were many), material scarcities or, most commonly, by a lack of basic supervision. The latter had to do with *La Casita*'s patchwork of funding sources, which brought with it hefty administrative obligations. Just ensuring that residents made it to their court appointments – which on any day might be held at several different municipal courts, each court requiring an accompanying staff member – was frequently enough to overtax *La Casita*'s modest workforce. This meant that group therapies, labor therapies, and other repurposed-as-therapy activities were often cancelled because there was no one around to supervise them.

Residents' everyday talk was often saturated with a bored frustration about *not being able to do anything*. With lengthy sentences to complete, and with so much time to fill, being *estancuado* (stuck) was a major source of anguish. Take Angel, by mid-December he was just two months down and had an anticipated sixteen more to go. It was a dreary day. The sky was cloudy and the rain threw spots on the gravel car park. I found him behind *La Casita*'s van where he was lifting weights. He was visibly irritated. Upon finishing each round of arm curls he tossed the dumbbells to the ground, allowing them to clang as they knocked into the other equipment. He was sick of it, he said. "It's not easy being stuck up here when you are used to being free." Though he was doing all his assigned chores – "putting in the effort," as he saw it – it was hard to imagine sixteen more months of this. "I'm thirty-eight," he said, his voice beginning to crack. "It can't take me till I'm forty to get over this." Wiping off the raindrops that had settled on his forehead, he resumed another round of arm exercises.

When the two o'clock bell rang, we trudged up the driveway expecting to attend group therapy, but it had been cancelled. Though the chairs had already been set out in a circle, there was no one around to facilitate. Chores completed, we wondered what to do. Taking advantage of a temporary lack of supervision, we sat on the sofa on the terrace and watched Animal Planet. I brushed away the flies that kept landing on me. Afterwards, we ate pasta and drank iced tea in silence in the windowless kitchen.

Bored frustration. An avowed effort to keep bodies and minds in motion that was constantly stymied by a lack of necessary tasks. When work was interrupted, either because tasks were scarce, or because planned activities had failed to materialize, questions arose. The acid prickling of doubt could settle in. Rather than feeling improving, soothing, *useful*, the passage of time at *La Casita* could start to feel unsound, questionable, and even dangerous. "I know I can be a useful person," Angel said imploringly to me one day. "But it's the boredom. Boredom is bad for us addicts."

Boredom has figured as an illuminating analytic in recent work on unemployment and the experience of time under advanced capitalism (Jeffrey 2010; Jervis et al. 2003). Vivid depictions of daily life among unemployed people have analyzed boredom as a form of social suffering that afflicts a growing surplus stratus that globalization has "cast aside" (O'Neill 2017). Daniel Mains (2017) analyzes boredom as an "overaccumulation of time" that instills among Ethiopian youth a heightened and painful awareness of their inability to actualize gendered expectations of progress. In one sense, Angel was suffering from this "too much time, not enough progress" kind of boredom. *La Casita's* inability to assure steady work left many men with a sense that they were "stuck doing nothing" and ultimately failing "to be useful." Ironically then, in teaching men to "value

time,” *La Casita* sowed the seeds for its own crisis of credibility. But as Angel’s words attest, boredom at *La Casita* was also haunted by the lore of relapse: a chronicity of addiction (Garcia 2010) that in this case had a discernably Christian meter. It was tinged with the expectation of trouble and moral undoing. In this Christian register, Angel’s experience of boredom was an exposure to temptation, as expressed by fourth century theologian Jerome (1989, 417): “Engage in some occupation, so that the Devil may always find you busy.” The sense of teetering on the edge of trouble that could creep in during idle moments points to the need for a conception of boredom that can account for its Christian resonances.

Let us therefore return to look more closely at residents’ experiences of boredom. As a form of affective hardship, boredom was not actually confined to periods of inactivity. Complaints of boredom were also commonplace during organized activities. Even, that is, when residents succeeded in making themselves “busy” things could still be boring.

I recall one hot afternoon in April. That afternoon’s session was led by an advanced resident, since half of *La Casita*’s staff had been called to a district meeting and the remainder were preoccupied with court hearings. That day, the group was restless and the heat uncomfortable. Some of the younger members broke into muffled protest as the session began, tutting their way through the prayer half-heartedly. Today’s therapy, announced the facilitator, would involve drawing on a piece of paper something that “represents your personality,” then mixing the drawings up in a hat so that they could be redistributed and anonymously discussed in turn. There was a collective moan as the wad

of scrap paper made its way around the circle. “There is way too much therapy here,” muttered Angel, “It’s just therapy, therapy every day.”

Later that evening, I found Angel in the kitchen where he was scrubbing the kitchen floor. He seemed down and I asked him if he wanted to watch the TV show that was blaring out on the terrace for recreation-therapy. “I just don’t understand how people can live here for years and years,” he said. “It’s the same thing every day.” “It’s just like, let’s do chores and more chores, therapy and more therapy, prayer and more prayer, then chores again until night-time. How do they just live here for years and years? I just wanna get back to normal life.”

Nor was he alone. Residents’ distress as they contemplated the prospect of months or years of the same repetitive daily routine was striking in its resemblance to *acedia*, a form of spiritual suffering often considered a distinctively monastic affliction. The predecessor of the cardinal sin of sloth, *acedia* was among the eight types of ‘demons’ or ‘tempting thoughts’ (*logismoi*) that preoccupied Egyptian Christian monks in the third and fourth centuries (Bamberger 1970). While English renditions include apathy, torpor, and lassitude, scholars of Christianity usually understand *acedia* as a spiritual and sinful species of boredom induced by the rigidities and repetitiveness of ascetic life (Crislip 2005). Often likened to a slowing down of time, Kathleen Norris (2008, 6-7) has described *acedia* as an “intense and comfortless awareness of time,” in which the future looms as an “an appalling, interminable progression of empty days to fill.” In *The Praktikos*, fourth-century Christian monk *Evagrius Ponticus* marveled at *acedia*’s tendency “[to make] it seem that the sun barely moves, if at all, and that the day is fifty hours long” (Bamberger 1970, 18).

For *Evagrius Ponticus*, *acedia* was morally threatening because it seemed to mock the monk's good intentions by recalling the worldly life he had left behind and bringing "before the mind's eye the toil of the ascetic struggle" (Bamberger 1970, 29). *Acedia* was said to "instill in the heart of the monk a hatred for the place, a hatred for his very life itself, [and] a hatred for manual labor," and to eventually lead the monk "to drop out of the fight" and abandon ascetic life (1970, 29). To me, this seemed to encapsulate Angel's anguish as he stood there in the kitchen scrubbing the floor, missing the life he'd left behind, panicking about how much time lay ahead and wondering whether his efforts might all be pointless.

Left unchecked, *acedia* could escalate into an outright loss of faith. Something like this happened one weekend in March. It was a Wednesday afternoon and I was chatting (in English) with Diego, a Bronx-born resident. Diego had come back to Puerto Rico just two years earlier to live at *La Casita* after being put on probation for drug dealing in New York. Though he had now completed his compulsory 18-months, he said he was "stuck treading water," with no way of supporting himself and no home to return to.

We chatted as he cleaned the car with a sponge. He gestured over to a group of residents who were pouring cement outside the main building where there would soon be a new laundry room. "I'm so tired of this bullshit," he said, looking angrily at the bucket of soapy water. He'd spent the whole morning cleaning and he was exhausted, he said, explaining to me what this had involved. Scrubbing all of the floors, moving the fridge, sweeping all of the cockroaches out from underneath, washing all of the walls inside and outside. "I could be working," he said, shaking his head and taking a drag of his cigarette. "I have skills. Back in New York, I was a plumber. I used to make fifty dollars an hour. I

could be working now. Instead, I'm stuck here washing walls and floors and not being paid anything." Flicking his cigarette onto the ground, he kicked over the bucket of water sending slimy liquid gushing around our feet.

Trying to be useful while stuck in a shelter and relying in large measure on a series of draining, repetitive and not infrequently futile tasks turns out to be a rickety foundation for an alternative way of life. In their efforts to keep busy, men constantly had to reckon with both the tedium and chore of filling up the time. Despite the constant injunctions to labor – the early mornings, the plethora of domestic and manual tasks – idleness was sometimes inevitable. And the boredom that settled in during these idle moments speaks volumes about the design faults of this surrogate labor regime. It is simply unable to ensure a steady supply of things to do.

And yet, residents' torment was not reducible to idle suffering. The perhaps more serious problem here was the spiritual *acedia* that settled in even when men succeeded in using their time "productively." Even as these men took their medicine, so to speak, and duly and piously strove to keep busy as instructed, the repetitiveness and futility of the tasks at hand were often too painfully apparent to ignore. Like the monks of Benedict's abbey, many struggled to maintain their faith in a monotonous way of life that mimicked "eternity in its changelessness" (Norris 2008, 5). When the effort to keep busy proved too draining, too repetitive, or too meaningless, the thought that these pains might all be futile sunk into *La Casita's* novitiates as betrayal. Having placed their faith in a restoration project promising progress and liberal independence, after all their efforts they found themselves in exile. "I can't fucking stand it here," said Diego. "I'm wasting my life."

For Diego, the regimen of continuous labor that *La Casita* devised to try to keep its residents busy was not the kind of work he wanted. It may have “filled the time” (some of it), but ultimately it did not enable him to achieve progressive changes in his life: to get a car, to live independently, and to move back to New York. Not unlike the newly “busy” workers of Ethiopia’s economic boom (Mains 2017), for whom the passage of time still failed to be meaningful because it did not live up to cultural expectations of progress, Diego found work at *La Casita* a “waste of time” because it was not leading him somewhere different or better.

Nor was Diego alone. I encountered many men at *La Casita* who were aware of the program’s final inability to improve their life circumstances. “This therapy doesn’t work,” residents told me. “Trust me, all the guys that graduate will be back here in under a year.” Still, there were men who *did* value their time at *La Casita*: men like Angel and Israel who felt that they were “making progress” and for whom the passage of time at *La Casita* was personally fulfilling. So in the final section, I dissect those residents’ experiences of progress, focusing specifically on their claims to be “working on their personalities.” I argue that this secular-spiritual genre of self-work made it possible for some men to come to terms with their inability to change their life circumstances, enabling some to commit to this alternative way of life.

“Work on your personality”

It was my first day back at *La Casita* following two weeks of non-stop interviewing at other shelters. I made my way up the driveway and saw Israel, a fifty-

five-year-old former truck driver, doubled over and bathed in sunlight. The handlebars of a large wheelbarrow, loaded with cement, were resting on his knees and he stood panting. As I approached, he gestured up the trail towards to the stone table where a group of residents stood smoking amid the construction. Slowly, we made our way up there.

Israel was approaching the end of his third stay at *La Casita*. Since the 1990s, he had cycled in and out of addiction shelters spending years, on-and-off, as both resident and live-in *terapista*. That day he had just returned from court, where the judge at his hearing had inquired about his “exit strategy.” As yet, Israel had none, nor did he seem thrilled by the prospect of leaving. “I try not to think too much about it,” he said. “I’m very cautious about making plans for getting out.” “If they don't work out, that's where the frustration comes, and maybe a relapse.”

During the various conversations I had with Israel in the eight months that we overlapped at *La Casita*, he would often veer between a peaceful calm over the prospect that he might well be here for a while, and a frustrated panic that so much of his life had been spent in shelters. I recall one occasion, after Rocky floated the idea that he stay on as a *terapista*, Israel had seemed troubled, even alarmed: “I’ve already been doing this for many years,” he exclaimed. “Next year I’ll be fifty-six.” “That’s way too old to be living in shelters.” He’d visibly shuddered at the prospect.

But today, as he stood finishing his cigarette, his stance towards shelter volunteerism as a future life plan seemed more positive. “I’d like to stay on here, if I can,” he said. “It’s a good option for me.” “I already have a lot of experience working in addiction.” He told me about the two years he’d spent working as a volunteer at a Pentecostal addiction ministry. “It was a mistake to leave that place,” he said. “That was

how I ended up back on the street.” Seeming to collect his thoughts, he continued: “Right now, I’m just focusing on working. And I’m making a lot of progress. I’m working on my personality and working on myself.”

This idea of personality re-construction was an explicit therapeutic teaching at *La Casita*. Staff often characterized recovery as a process of “re-education” that involved “rebuilding” or “reorienting” personality. Consider one of several similar statements I catalogued that year, this one made by Rafi, a self-identifying *re-educando ex-adicto*:

When you start consuming [drugs], the whole personality changes. Your temperament gets more aggressive, irritable, you become impulsive, you get violent. A person who is addicted is a person who has lost all their morals...and lost the value of life.

During my conversations at *La Casita* and at other shelters, I encountered many ideas about what addiction was and whether and how it could be treated. One competing framework was the chronicity model, which likens addiction to chronic diseases such as asthma, hypertension or diabetes (Garcia 2010). Another cast addiction as a brain disease, which posits that substances have subverted the brain’s reward system, leading to addictive behavior. It was actually not uncommon for my interlocutors to juggle between these theories, often within a single conversation.

Much can be said about how people in institutional settings take up and internalize scientific theories, which is why the institutional scripting of subjectivity has proven such a fruitful area of inquiry. Drug treatment ethnographies in particular are highly attuned to

how institutional refrains – for example normative gender ideals (McKim 2014), Orthodox Soviet theology (Zigon 2010), or sociological ‘culture of poverty’ theories (Kaye 2019) – are implicated in the cultivation of therapeutic subjects.

In addition to examining how institutional power can shape subjectivity through scripting, however, it is also worth considering what scripted ways of speaking can be seen to accomplish for the speakers themselves. Carr (2009) addresses this question in her work on rehabilitation in the United States, where she shows how learning to speak through scripts such as: “Hi, my name is [x], and I am a recovering crack addict,” can be a way for people to achieve personal goals. In one example, Carr (2009) describes how this script assisted the speaker to stake a claim as a legitimate peer representative.

Similarly, the striking thing about residents’ claims to be working on their personalities was not that their speech was scripted – it was – but that it seemed to be meaningfully implicated into their sense of progress. Over time, as I paid more attention to what residents were trying to accomplish when they said they were working on their personalities, I noticed that it often seemed to take the form of a prayer. It was something that residents claimed, or even clung to, especially following bouts of boredom or in moments of doubt about the usefulness of time at *La Casita*.

Consider another conversation I had with Israel, as he contemplated leaving. Shaking his head, he said:

No, it’s important to know oneself. I’m not ready. Besides, I’m changing a lot here. I’m developing my maturity, yes, according to my age. I’m developing in terms of

being responsible, being tolerant and patient. Here, I'm developing a true personality and way of being.

In one sense, Israel's words denote social suffering. Scholars might reach for circulating concepts of 'symbolic violence' or 'internalized stigma' in order to grasp how men like Israel, who are unable to obtain jobs, marry, or achieve other liberal markers of male adulthood, come to locate their suffering internally, thus occluding the social conditions that cause their pain.

But in another sense, Israel's words were also prayerful. Prayer, as Mauss (2003) reminds us, is rarely just the outcry of an individual in anguish. More commonly, it is a communal language that brings people into relationships with one and other, and through which people seek to bring about changes in their life circumstances (Bandak 2017, 2). The contrast matters. Whereas co-circulating theories of addiction ("it's like diabetes") tended to be articulated expositively – as a way of packaging a complicated condition into something recognizable – 'working on my personality' denoted *labor* and, more specifically, *continuous* labor. Operating in a manner surprisingly analogously to monastic meditation – the continuous recitation from memory of scripture (albeit a secular therapeutic script, rather than biblical text) - its meaning lay not so much in its lexical connotation (addiction is a problem of pathological personality), but in its total harnessing of time into a form of work.

By sculpting what could look to outsiders like being stuck in a superfluous state of "doing nothing" into the language of internal growth and uninterrupted work, *working on my personality* tore open a window of possibility for existential advancement in a context

where opportunities for culturally valued forms of material and social advancement were lacking. Signaling an alternative way of living, based not on wage labor, independent habitation, or family life but rather on a commitment to self-improvement in the shelter unfazed by economic dependency, it functioned as a kind of pledge that gave meaning to an investment of time whose purpose or value was not always obviously apparent.

For *Evagrius Ponticus*, the remedy for the monk who, battling the demon of *acedia*, had come to doubt the value of ascetic life was spiritual persistence through the enactment of prayer, scripture, and manual labor. “The time of temptation is not the time to leave, devising plausible pretexts,” he instructed. “Rather, stand there firmly and be patient” (Bamberger 1970, 24). As residents buckled down to work on their personalities, cognizant of the pleasures and freedoms they had left behind and facing months or years of the same repetitive routine, persistence was all they had left. I have often wondered, were the Egyptian Fathers to have observed these criminalized drug users and marginalized men who for all their many stigmas strive to persist at *La Casita* – men who let go of modern desires for material advancement and who commit instead to internal growth – might they have seen kindred souls?

Let us consider one final conversation, this one with Angel. It was a Monday morning in February and the electricity was down again. I’d joined him on the terrace where he was drinking coffee and watching the rain. He seemed down. Yesterday, it transpired, had been family visiting day and his parents had not shown up. *Fue un castigo* (it was a punishment) he said. “I know it.” “It’s because they are trying to test me.” Angel glared into space for a while, seeming to wrestle with himself. I asked him if he’d requested permission to call them when something like resolve seemed to click in his

mind. “No.” he said. “I know that wouldn’t be the right way. I keep working, I keep working on my personality.” Staring into the clouds, he recounted his parents’ last visit two weeks prior. At some point, his father had told Angel that he loved him. “He’s never said that before,” said Angel. “I had to go to bathroom and cry.” In tears, he continued:

I’m thirty-eight years old. That’s too old to be learning the difference between right and wrong. At first when I arrived, I was in such a rush, like, I can’t be here when I’m forty. But now I’m here and I see there are lots of older men. I know I shouldn’t rush because I’m not ready yet. I’ve been learning who I am here.

Angel’s torment seemed to index several feelings: discomfort with place, regret for a misspent past, a desire for something better, and the early seeds of recognition that his best option might be to stay put. That last feeling might also be read as the initial stages of an acceptance a life plan based not on advancement to something materially better, but instead on a pledge to persist in the knowledge that things might never change. Writing of technological industrial transformation in Europe, Koselleck (1979) has argued that with the onset of modernity “progress” became locked into the expectation that the future will be different and qualitatively better than all that has been experienced in the past. For Angel, in marked contrast, progress hinged on letting go of expectations for a radically different or better future and on committing instead to harnessing time in the present into internal growth. Largely unconcerned with market discipline, *working on my personality* can be read as a secular-spiritual prayer that involves converting a lack of work into self-

work, and turning and an overabundance of time into a sense of internal spiritual progress.

Conclusion: A rickety belonging

Writing of Abba Paul, who lived alone in the Porphyrian desert and collected palm fronds each day only to burn every year all that he had made, John Cassian wrote: “Although the obligation of earning a livelihood did not demand this course of action, he did it just for the sake of purging his heart, firming his thoughts, persevering in his cell, and conquering and driving out *acedia*” (2000, 233). Here, I have argued that a similar kind of unproductive, socially unnecessary, spiritually exhausting, and isolating self-work is making a comeback in surrogate outposts of male employment like *La Casita*. Here, men strive to “keep busy” not because capitalist production or reproduction demands it but because embracing this secular-spiritual ascetic practice of continuous work provides an alternative sense of meaning and progress. Keeping busy helps to alleviate, to some extent, the suffering and tedium of being excluded from the market economy, but it doesn’t do so reliably.

The problems men encounter at *La Casita* on a daily basis -- a lack of meaningful work, an ability to actualize gendered markers of adulthood, an excess of time, and a monotonous and repetitive daily routine enveloped by a frenetic compulsion to “be productive” -- are not unique to Puerto Rican addiction shelters. These globalizing afflictions manifest in various permutations among millions of people around the world: from marginalized men with “nothing to do” in post-socialist Europe and post-colonial Africa (Mains 2017; Van den Berg and O’Neill 2017), to the recently laid off white collar

workers in Southern Europe (Molé 2012), to the creative writers (and anthropologists) who find themselves under Covid-19 induced lockdowns, desperately trying to “be productive” in the midst of shrinking employment opportunities (Smith 2020).

At *La Casita*, some men responded to advanced capitalism’s globalizing challenges by committing to an alternate conception of progress that expresses, in secular-spiritual terms, the asceticism that lay at the heart of the early Christian monastic project. Theirs was a life plan based on a continuous striving for internal improvement in the absence of material advancement, on staying put to work on oneself in the face of eternal boredom. There is, of course, a major difference. Unlike the Egyptian monks of the fourth century, or the Evangelical converts of Puerto Rico’s addiction ministries (Hansen 2018), residents at *La Casita* were denied the promise of eternal salvation. Some, to be sure, may have derived sustenance from this expectation privately, but *La Casita* did not formally subscribe to the Christian promise of an afterlife. This life, with all its hardship, would have to do. But how did it stack up? I have suggested that *La Casita* offered a “rickety” form of belonging -- “thicker,” perhaps, than other alternatives to wage labor (Ferguson 2015) - but not necessarily any more secure.

I opened this essay with a prayer:

I give you my hand,
set my heart in rhythm with yours
and I pledge us both before God—

bringing myself and you
to honor life.

While the addiction shelter is built on a pledge – of honoring the life you have now, of persisting without expecting material progress, and of continuing to work no matter how unproductive or socially unnecessary that work might be – for many this pledge proves an unreliable foundation on which to build a life. Boredom, a feeling of futility, and a weariness of soul created by the addiction shelter’s inability to ensure meaningful work leave many men questioning their commitment to this alternative way of living. The regime of ceaseless work that this secular monastery offers as a surrogate livelihood for men without jobs is embraced only partially and with great difficulty. What may be most remarkable is the sense of purpose that some of these men, some of the time, were nonetheless able to derive from this troubled endeavor.

Bibliography

- Administración de Servicios de Salud Mental y Contra la Adicción (ASSMCA). 2014. “Puerto Rico Mental Health and Addiction Services Administration (ASSMCA), *Certification, Licenses and Safety Division*, October 2014.”
- Agamben, Giorgio. 2013. *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*. Stanford University Press.
- Arnold, Carrie. 2019. “Death, Statistics and a Disaster Zone: The Struggle to Count the Dead after Hurricane Maria.” *Nature* 566, no. 7742 (5 February 2019): 22-25.
- Bamberger, John E. 1970. “Evagrius Ponticus: The Praktikos.” *Chapters on Prayer, Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications*.
- Bandak, Andreas. 2017. "The Social Life of Prayers – Introduction." *Religion* 47 (1): 1-18. Taylor & Francis.
- Benedict, Saint and David Blair. 1906. *The Rule of St. Benedict*; London: Sands & Co.; B. Herder.

- Berlant, Lauren Gail. 2011. "Cruel optimism." In *Cruel Optimism*, 0. Duke University Press.
- Bourgois, Philippe. 2000. "Disciplining Addictions: The Bio-Politics of Methadone and Heroin in the United States." *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 24 (2): 165–95.
- Brandes, Stanley. 2010. *Staying Sober in Mexico City*. University of Texas Press.
- Braslow, Joel Tupper. 2013. "The Manufacture of Recovery." *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology* 9: 781–809.
- Campbell, N. D., J. P. Olsen, and Luke Walden. 2008. "The Narcotic Farm: The Rise and Fall of America's First Prison for Drug Addicts." *New York: Abrams*.
- Carr, Summerson. 2009. "Anticipating and Inhabiting Institutional Identities." *American Ethnologist* 36 (2): 317–336.
- Cassian, John. 1985. *John Cassian: The Conferences*. Translated by Colm Luibheid. New York: Paulist Press.
- Cassian, John. 2000. *John Cassian: The Institutes*. Translated by B. Ramsey. New York: Paulist Press.
- Corkery, Michael, and Mary Williams Walsh. 2015. "Puerto Rico's Governor Says Island's Debts Are 'Not Payable'." *The New York Times*, 29 June 2015, sec. Business.
- Creighton, Colin. 1996. "The Rise of the Male Breadwinner Family: A Reappraisal." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 38 (2): 310–337.
- Crislip, Andrew. 2005. "The Sin of Sloth or the Illness of the Demons? The Demon of Acedia in Early Christian Monasticism." *Harvard Theological Review* 98 (2): 143–169.
- Das, Veena, and Clara Han. 2015. *Living and Dying in the Contemporary World: A Compendium*. University of California Press.
- Dietz, James L. 1986. *Economic History of Puerto Rico: Institutional Change and Capitalist Development*. Princeton University Press.
- Eberle, Luke. 1977. *The Rule Of The Master*. Cistercian Studies Series 6. Mich: Cistercian Publications.
- Fairbanks, Robert P. 2009. *How It Works: Recovering Citizens in Post-Welfare Philadelphia*. University of Chicago Press.
- Ferguson, James. 2015. *Give a Man a Fish: Reflections on the New Politics of Distribution*. Duke University Press.
- Flores, Edward. 2014. *God's Gangs: Barrio Ministry, Masculinity, and Gang Recovery*. NYU Press.
- Folbre, Nancy. 1991. "The Unproductive Housewife: Her Evolution in Nineteenth-Century Economic Thought." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 16 (3): 463–484.
- Garcia, Angela. 2010. *The Pastoral Clinic: Addiction and Dispossession along the Rio Grande*. University of California Press.
- Garcia, Angela. 2015. "Serenity: Violence, Inequality, and Recovery on the Edge of Mexico City." *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 29 (4): 455-72.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. Basic Books.
- Goffman, Erving. 1961. *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. New York: Penguin.

- Greenberg, Joshua R. 2009. *Advocating the Man: Masculinity, Organized Labor, and the Household in New York, 1800-1840*. 1 edition. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Hansen, Helena. 2018. *Addicted to Christ: Remaking Men in Puerto Rican Pentecostal Drug Ministries*. University of California Press.
- Hennigan, Brian. 2017. "House Broken: Homelessness, Housing First, and Neoliberal Poverty Governance." *Urban Geography* 38, no. 9: 1418-1440.
- Intercambio Puerto Rico (IPR). 2015. "Humiliation and Abuse in Drug Treatment Centers in Puerto Rico." Accessed 23 March 2021. <https://es.scribd.com/doc/265551445/Humillaciones-y-Abusos-en-Centros-de-Tratamiento-Para-Uso-de-Drogas-PR>.
- Jeffrey, Craig. 2010. "Timepass: Youth, Class, and Time among Unemployed Young Men in India." *American Ethnologist* 37 (3): 465–481.
- Jerome. 1989. 'Select Letters'. Translated by Wright F.A. The Loeb Classical Library.
- Jervis, Lori L., Paul Spicer, and Spero M. Manson. 2003. "Boredom," trouble," and the realities of postcolonial reservation life." *Ethos* 31, no. 1: 38-58.
- Johnson-Hanks, Jennifer. 2002. "On the Limits of Life Stages in Ethnography: Toward a Theory of Vital Conjunctions." *American Anthropologist* 104 (3): 865–880.
- Kaye, Kerwin. 2019. *Enforcing Freedom: Drug courts, Therapeutic Communities, and the Intimacies of the State*. Columbia University Press.
- Koselleck, Reinhart. 2004. *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*. Columbia University Press
- Lapp, Michael. 1995. "The Rise and Fall of Puerto Rico as a Social Laboratory, 1945–1965." *Social Science History* 19 (2): 169–199.
- Mains, Daniel. 2017. "Too Much Time: Changing Conceptions of Boredom, Progress, and the Future among Young Men in Urban Ethiopia, 2003–2015." *Focaal* 2017, no. 78: 38-51.
- Mauss, Marcel. 2003. *On Prayer*. Edited by WSF Pickering and Translated by Susan Leslie. New York: Durkheim Press/Berghahn Books.
- McKim, Allison. 2014. "Roxanne's Dress: Governing Gender and Marginality through Addiction Treatment." *Signs* 40 (1).
- Millar, Kathleen. 2014. "The Precarious Present: Wageless Labor and Disrupted Life in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil." *Cultural Anthropology* 29 (1): 32–53.
- Mintz, Sidney Wilfred. 1951. *Canamelar: The Contemporary Culture of a Rural Puerto Rican Proletariat*. Columbia.
- Molé, Noelle J. 2012. *Labor disorders in neoliberal Italy: mobbing, well-being, and the workplace*. Indiana University Press.
- Muehlebach, Andrea. 2011. "On Affective Labor in Post-Fordist Italy". *Cultural Anthropology* 26, no. 1: 59-82.
- Nieuwenhuis, Marijn. 2020. 'The Significance of Covid-19 as Crisis'. *Somatosphere* (blog). 21 May 2020. <http://somatosphere.net/2020/the-significance-of-covid-19-as-crisis.html/>.
- Norris, Kathleen. 2008. *Acedia & Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer's Life*. Penguin.
- O'Neill, Bruce. 2017. *The Space of Boredom: Homelessness in the Slowing Global Order*. Duke University Press.

- Odgers-Ortiz, Olga, Thomas Csordas, Ietza Bojorquez-Chapela, and Olga Olivas-Hernandez. "Embodiment and somatic modes of attention in the evangelical care model in drug rehabilitation centers (Tijuana, Mexico)." *Social Compass* (2020):1-17.
- Parker, Caroline M. 2020. "From Treatment to Containment to Enterprise: An Ethno-History of Therapeutic Communities in Puerto Rico, 1961–1993." *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 44 (1): 135–57.
- Rappleye, Emily. 2016. "Power Cut off at Puerto Rico Hospital That Owes \$4M." *Becker's Hospital Review*. Accessed March 11 2021. <http://www.beckershospitalreview.com/finance/power-cut-off-at-puerto-rico-hospital-that-owes-4m.html>.
- Safa, Helen. 2011. "The Transformation of Puerto Rico: The Impact of Modernization Ideology." *Transforming Anthropology* 19 (1): 46–49.
- Safa, Helen. 1995. *The Myth of the Male Breadwinner: Women and Industrialization in the Caribbean*. Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford: Westview Press.
- Sassen, Saskia. 2014. *Expulsions*. Harvard University Press.
- Singer, Merrill, Freddie Valentin, Hans Baer, and Zhongke Jia. 1992. "Why Does Juan Garcia Have a Drinking Problem? The Perspective of Critical Medical Anthropology." *Medical Anthropology* 14 (1): 77–108.
- Smith, Zadie. 2020. *Intimations: Six Essays*. Penguin.
- Stoler, Ann Laura. 2008. "Imperial debris: reflections on ruins and ruination." *Cultural anthropology* 23, no. 2: 191-219.
- Thompson, Edward P. 1967. "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism." *Past & Present*, no. 38: 56–97.
- Van den Berg, Marguerite and Bruce O'Neill. 2017. "Introduction: Rethinking the class politics of boredom." *Focaal* 2017, no. 78: 1-8.
- Weber, Max. 2015. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Skyros Publishing.
- Zigon, Jarrett. 2010. "HIV Is God's Blessing": *Rehabilitating Morality in Neoliberal Russia*. University of California Press.

ⁱ Translation by Ana Negrón. In Spanish: *Te doy mi mano, pongo a latir mi Corazón al compas del tuyo y por ti por mi, me comprometo frente de Dios. Me comprometo y te comprometo a honrar la vida.*

ⁱⁱ The terminology used to refer to people who use drugs and become addicted to them is in flux. While the term "addict" can stigmatize those it labels, in this article I do use the term, specifically (and only) where residents use it themselves to describe their own or each other's experiences.

ⁱⁱⁱ To protect the identity of participants, names and institutional identifiers have been modified, with the exception of *Hogar CREA*, a therapeutic community that has been written about extensively in public media (for example, IPR 2015).