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“Speech, Alcohol and Danger in Honduras”
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“What do you want to know?” Edgar at the bar asked me. “I will give you good information.” I told him I was interested in popular sayings about alcohol, and I gave him an example a friend had told me earlier in the day: “Children and drunks always tell the truth.” “No,” Edgar said, “there's one more! What is it, what is it? There's one more who tells the truth!” Edgar asked his drunken friend, “Hey, who else is it who tells the truth? The child, the drunk, and...” “El loco!” replied his friend. “Yes!” said Edgar “And it's true- drunks, children and crazy people do tell the truth!”

Alcohol is understood in Honduras to be a truth serum, and “truths” are often dangerous. Like children and *locos*, drunks have license to expose truths about gender and power that others are not able to say or perhaps even to think. Drunks can state that the emperor has no clothes in a manner which would be impossible in most non-drinking settings; for to speak thus would be *loco*.

Perceptions of alcohol in Honduras are tied to colonialist notions of the undisciplined sexualized native. When people subscribe to colonialist notions of themselves, alcohol can come to be seen as an agent that peels away the thin veil of civilization protecting them from their “true” natures. In this way, drunks in Honduras not only speak, but also embody and enact “truths” about gender and identity. Post-colonial subjectivities are shifting ones, however, and as Hondurans experience structural changes that shape their work possibilities, family structures, and living conditions, they must renegotiate what it means to be women and men. Alcohol-defined spaces, like bars and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, are highly-charged arenas of gender performance where much of this renegotiation is carried out. In this paper I draw on ethnographic fieldwork carried out last summer to examine some of the ways in which truths about gendered subjectivities emerge from alcohol-influenced discourse in Honduras.

Don Francisco, the general secretary of AA in Honduras, said to me in an interview, “from the time we are very little, our formation or lesson from our parents is that a man, if he’s really a man, should smell of alcohol, tobacco, and woman.” Many others I spoke with echoed this assessment. Alcohol is central to most definitions of masculinity in Honduras, despite a 1997 study and others like it done by the Honduran Institute for the Prevention of Alcoholism, Drug Addiction and Pharmaco-Dependency (IHADFA) showing that fewer than half of Honduran males over 15 had drunk alcohol in the previous year.

The supposed disinhibiting function of alcohol leads Honduran men to speak “naturally” as men, and therefore dangerously. As Edgar told me, “between friends when you're drinking, you can insult each other and it's no problem. Like for example I could say to my friend 'Hey you son of a whore, what's up?' and he wouldn't be offended, but if I said that to someone I don't know they would say 'Ey asshole, what the fuck do you want, you son of a whore?' Or say if I come into the bar and ask Sara here for credit”

Edgar smiled at Sara the bartender- “and she says no. Then I go to my friends over here and say '*puta* [whore], what shit here! It's SHIT here.' I mean, when you're drunk, you use strong language if you get angry too.”

Just as Hondurans often speak dangerously when they drink, they also drink *in order* to speak dangerously. Drunken men are allowed to act like children or *locos*, to symbolically shed the cloak of civilized discipline for the liminal period while they are drinking, to form bonds with other men, to badmouth their bosses and their government, and to otherwise act in ways they normally could not. They often use language which is degrading to women- who as Don Francisco noted are grouped along with other uncivilized substances in defining masculinity.

Bartenders, like Sara, in lower-class hangouts, are almost always women. When I expressed curiosity about why young women worked in such reputedly dangerous places, I was told that it was *because* of safety concerns that women “man” the bar. Drunks tend towards violence, the conventional wisdom goes, and it is better to have women tending bar because drunken men are more likely to pick a fight with a male bartender than with a female one. Women are seen as more trustworthy and better able than men to diffuse the possible danger posed by angry men. Men are expected to control their more violent “instincts” in the presence of female bartenders. Women are thus seen to perform a crucial stabilizing role- a “natural” one for them- in drinking settings.

While many Hondurans characterize bars as spaces of disorder and disinhibition, acceptable bar behavior follows strict cultural norms. Unspoken gendered rules exist to prevent violence- the “natural” outcome of male drinking- from breaking out. And as the spatialized gendering of the bar indicates, the performance of sobriety in the presence of drunks is just as important as the performance of drunkenness in shaping the drunken scene. Drunks resemble children and *locos* in their truth-speaking abilities and diminished capacity for sober judgement, and are treated accordingly. They differ, however, in that presumably the other two categories do not choose their state of alterity, whereas the first drink is always taken while sober. This fact makes it easier to blame drunks for what they do; despite the widespread view of alcoholism as a disease.

Since one “natural” outcome of male drinking is to become more like a man (whatever that may be), then *not* drinking presents a problem for men who adhere to such a definition. As the economic base for the patriarchy erodes, heavy drinkers who wish to sober up are faced with multiple challenges to their masculinity as well as to their sobriety. Like the bar, AA meetings in Honduras provide a disciplined setting in which men can assert and negotiate their masculinity with greater intimacy and “truth” than in non-alcohol-defined settings. The idea that drunks (called alcoholics in AA) are violent, coupled with the disease concept, central to AA, which holds that alcoholics are always alcoholics, leads to the notion that alcoholics always have a dangerous capacity for violence in a way that non-alcoholics do not. The disease model of alcoholism therefore perpetuates reified colonialist ideas of masculinity.

AA in Honduras, like bars, is strictly gender stratified. Although members proclaim the same universality as do AA groups everywhere, in fact only men attend. Women participate through Al-Anon, which they define as a program for mothers and wives of alcoholics and where, like bartenders, they learn to perform their stabilizing supportive role more effectively and in accordance with AA ideology. The effects of the disease model on the formation of masculinity is especially evident in AA groups that employ what is called rough therapy or “shock” therapy. Although many AA’s, or anonymous alcoholics, as they call themselves, disavow rough therapy, it is widespread in Honduras.

In Puerto Cortes for an AA convention last July, I stopped into a bar with my research assistant. There we met Omar, who had already had several beers and was delighted that we had chosen the bar over the convention’s tedious inaugural ceremony. He spoke to us about his own experience with AA. Omar had been in AA for 5 years, he said, staying sober and trying to get his life together. But it was too political, too hypocritical. People were only supposed to talk about themselves and not to judge others but it wasn’t like that in reality. One day in his group, one group member said to another “Hey asshole, while you were out there drinking another guy was fucking the shit out of your wife in your own house.” And right there in the meeting, the other man stood up and shot him dead. The group was called “*Buena voluntad*,” or “Good Will.” “The politic of AA is to not offend people,” he told us. “I stopped drinking for 5 years, but after that I swore I would never ever go to an AA group again.”

Omar’s narrative of this incident points to the goal in AA of reinterpreting masculinity as something that can only be attained through not drinking. It was, after all, because of his drinking that the accused suffered the ultimate indignity to his manhood-betrayal by a woman. However, as Omar implied, the paradigm of masculinity itself was not challenged. Violence resulting from dangerous speech in AA meetings parallels that of bars. Even in meetings which do not employ rough therapy, the specter of violent masculinity is constantly present, and tales like Omar’s serve as parables to warn of what can happen if the “disease” of alcohol and the hyper-masculinity accompanying it are not disciplined.

The gendering of the bar space and of AA rely upon a definition of alcohol as being an inherently violent and male substance, and alcoholism as an inherently violent and male disease. While violence is the biggest danger posed by male drinking, the threats posed by female drinking are perhaps even more dire. In speaking to treatment providers, AA’s, bar drunks, and other Hondurans, I found what seemed to me to be a disproportionate concern about a perceived increase in women’s drinking. As women’s roles change, fears about material threats to the patriarchy are expressed in moral terms, and women’s drinking is a particularly worrisome moral problem for many Hondurans. The growth of the maquiladora/export processing industry, where women are employed in far greater numbers than men, has led to intensified talk about alcohol and gender.

Jorge Constant, a researcher at IHADFA, told me that the maquiladora industry had prompted a reversal in gender roles. When I expressed doubt based on my own

participant observation among maquiladora workers, he insisted all the more adamantly. “No, I will show you! We will go to where the maquilas are and knock on people's doors and you will see that only the men are home! And when the woman goes out at night, he says to her [in a feeble voice] ‘Where are you going, dear? Who are you going to see?’ and she says ‘What the hell do you care! You can't tell me what to do! I'll go out with whomever I want! I bring home the bacon here.’ And when she comes home after work, she says ‘You! Put on those brown pants! We're going out now.’ And he has to obey... That's what I'm telling you about- role reversal, and then there are forms of conduct that have been in the man's domain, you know, macho, that the woman is taking on. I don't know how to explain- it's the macho woman, uh, the same role, but the problem... is that the woman always was abandoned by the man, and she always raised the children and brought them ahead. And if these girls turn into daily drinkers on us- and God forbid alcoholics- who will look after their children...?”

The inherent manliness of alcohol is challenged by women who adopt male patterns of drunken comportment, becoming publically like men. When the Other sex begins to lose its otherness, the subject's own status -and gender truth itself- are at stake. Jorge's argument that women should not drink, for the health of the nation (as childrearers) recalls similar arguments put forward in industrializing Victorian England, and in Nazi Germany. Based on a fantasy of inverted gender roles, his analysis points to the real threat to the economic base of patriarchal authority, and the precarious state of masculinity under modern conditions of gendered economic oppression in Honduras.

Truths about gender are never static, but gender performances are informed by reified colonialist notions of men, women, and tradition. Drinking in Honduras has been tied to an understanding of gender which is structured and maintained by the bar setting and by AA ideology. After interviewing Don Francisco I told my friend Teto what he had said about the smells of manhood- if you'll recall, they were alcohol, tobacco, and women. Teto replied “Yes, in his epoch.” When I asked what he meant he responded “Now men have to smell like gasoline and perfume. And preferably, dollars.” As the demographics of drinkers shift, so do the gendered “truths” that they speak and embody, and along with them, the dangers that they represent.