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The Matamoros “drug cult” murders: Borderland perceptions and the shaping of belief

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THE MATAMOROS "DRUG CULT" MURDERS:
BORDERLAND PERCEPTIONS AND
THE SHAPING OF BELIEF

A THESIS

By

VICTOR GOMEZ

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Texas-Pan American
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

May 2005


MAJOR SUBJECT: HISTORY

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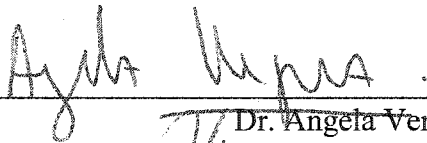
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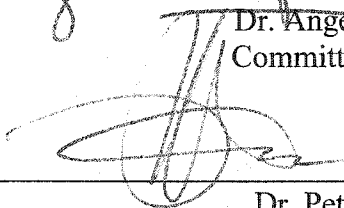
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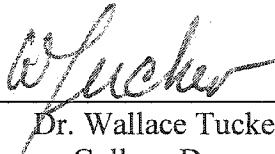
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May 2005

ABSTRACT

Gómez, Víctor, “The Matamoros Drug Cult Murders: Borderland Perceptions and the Shaping of Belief” Master of Arts (MA), History, May 2005, 113 pp., 109 titles.

Media coverage of the Matamoros “drug cult murders” highlighted the abduction and murder of twenty-one year old college student, Mark Kilroy, while enhancing negative images of Mexican people. What makes the Kilroy coverage a watershed in history is how racism played a part during and after print media coverage of the discovery at Santa Elena. Through U.S. media especially, Anglo beliefs of cultural backwardness, Mexican police corruption, and religious misrepresentation are expressed by way of stereotypes held about Mexican border people. In this day and age, U.S. media uses these superficial beliefs to portray one group of people, and enhances these beliefs by distorting belief systems that print media characterize as being part of third world images.

DEDICATION

Este trabajo está dedicado en su totalidad a la memoria de:

Mis abuelos Víctor y Catalina Gómez, Jesús y Domitila Herrera

Mi primo hermano José Luis Treviño Herrera

Mi tía Marcelina Mendoza Herrera

Mis amigos Jorge, Cindy, Lenny, y Kiti.

Mi amigo y maestro Dr. Paul "Pablo" Henggeler

and the "other" fourteen bodies recovered at Rancho Santa Elena
whose stories were quickly forgotten.

Descansen En Paz

Rest In Peace.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my best friend and partner in life Rocío Y. Gómez. For your support, encouragement, and understanding during the completion of this work I am truly grateful and indebted for. Thanks for helping me put the pieces of the puzzle together. *A mis padres Víctor y Domitila Gómez les agradezco sus esfuerzos para ver me sobre salir y por formar parte de mi identidad.* Lastly, I would like to thank Dr. Paul Henggeler, whose priceless teachings I will forever cherish and carry with me throughout my development as a future scholar.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THE MATAMOROS “DRUG CULT” KILLINGS

“In Brownsville and Matamoros they all started trembling, because that satanic cult, they’re not afraid to kill.”¹

Media coverage of the Matamoros “drug cult” murders that occurred in April of 1989 focused on the abduction and murder of twenty-one year old college student, Mark Kilroy. Presenting Kilroy as an innocent victim, the media enhanced negative images of Mexican people along the South Texas-Northern Mexico border. What makes the Kilroy coverage a watershed in history is the images of cult activity, increased “trans-border” misunderstanding, and misrepresentation of so-called “witchcraft” along the South Texas-Mexico border. Historians, such as Arnolde de León, and Gilbert G. González, who have studied U.S media perceptions, have focused on racial attitudes or on culture and people.² However, Milo Kearney and Anthony Knopp, historians at the University of Texas-Brownsville, have briefly discussed the background to the Matamoros killings, but not specifically on media representations of border people and culture following this

¹ Los Suspiros de Salamanca. *The Tragedy of Matamoros*, Discos Rámex, May 1989.

² Gilbert G. Gonzalez, *Culture of Empire: American Writers, Mexico, and Mexican Immigrants, 1830-1930* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004); Gilbert G. Gonzalez and Raul A. Fernández, *A Century of Chicano History: Empire, Nation, and Migration* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Arnolde de León, *They Called Them Greasers: Anglo Attitudes Towards Mexicans in Texas, 1821-1900* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983).

incident.³ While this thesis covers aspects of racial attitudes and culture, it will focus on the Matamoros “drug cult” killings and argue that with the resulting Matamoros murders, the U.S. media perpetuated stereotypes, “generalized beliefs about a group that are widely held within a particular culture,” and racist biases upon Mexican people, enhancing images of cult activity and distorted religious perceptions of the South Texas-Mexico border community.⁴

The Matamoros “drug cult” murders occurred in an area where media headlines are dominated by the “War on Drugs” and Mexican police corruption. Although this region is perceived as harboring such illegal activity, the Matamoros killings enhanced and perpetuated stereotypes of drug and corrupt activity along the U.S.-Mexico border. U.S. media re-enforced stereotypes of border people as backward, poor, submissive to corruption, and living in a place that is a haven for cult activity. This, in turn, offered adverse consequences as negative stereotypes became the basis for behavioral scripts.⁵ Since many people along the Lower Rio Grande border practice folk healing, the U.S. media focused on the practice of *brujería* (witchcraft); hence rituals that were practiced by the “drug cult” were seen as commonplace in this area. These “drug cult” rituals, which included human sacrifice to obtain protection against public officials for drug dealers’ illegal were classified as “Santería,” an African derived religion active primarily in Southern Florida and the Caribbean. U.S. media distorted the identity of Santería for

³ Milo Kearney and Anthony Knopp, *Boom and Bust: The Historical Cycles of Matamoros and Brownsville* (Austin: Eakin Press, 1991).

⁴ The term “drug cult” is a term created by the U.S. media to identify the group that committed the crimes. Therefore, “drug cult” killings or murders will be used simultaneously. The term “stereotypes” will be used according to the definition of Mary Lee Humert in Mary L. Humert et al., “Cognitive Processes Affecting Communication with Older Adults: The Case of Stereotypes, Attitudes, and Beliefs about Communication. In Jon F. Nussbaum and Justine Copeland eds., *Handbook of Communication and Aging Research* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), 106. According to

⁵ Judith Van Evra, *Television and Child Development*, 2nd ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998), 85-88.

its involvement with the “drug cult.” Specifically, the sacrificing of humans was considered part of Santería’s normal rituals and used by drug lords at the time to obtain protection from authorities. However, this religion’s main practice does not involve the sacrificing of humans and does not grant invincibility, something contrary to media reports.⁶

As this story unfolded, newspapers from Brownsville and Matamoros began blaming one another for the killings, lack of cooperation from authorities, and the portrayal of Matamoros as either safe or dangerous, depending upon which side of the border reports originated from. Much was written about the Lower Rio Grande Valley and Matamoros, Mexico, shaping the collective belief of people not familiar with this region. By using the Matamoros killings, the media distorted the beliefs and culture of a whole community. According to George Gerbner’s, cultivation theory, viewers who watch too much television as they begin to associate social reality with that of the media’s content, causing a “perceived reality” to occur.⁷

The Matamoros “drug cult” murders and after effects transpired in the spring of 1989, March through May, in the northern city of Matamoros, Tamaulipas. This event unfolded after twenty-one year old University of Texas-Austin pre-med student, from Santa Fe, Texas, Mark Kilroy was abducted during a spring break drinking binge in the red light district in Matamoros.⁸ According to three of his childhood friends and also college students attending spring break with Kilroy, Bill Huddleston, Bradley Moore, and Brent Martin, Kilroy was waiting along the street while Huddleston relieved himself in an

⁶ Migene Gonzalez-Wippler, *Santería: La Religion* (St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Español, 1999), 1-7.

⁷ George Gebner, “Living with Television: The Violence Profile.” *Journal of Communication*, 26 (2), 173-199.

⁸ Even though he disappeared on the 14th of March, Kilroy’s disappearance was first reported in the media on March 16, 1989. “Student Missing in Matamoros,” *The Brownsville Herald*, 16 March 1989, 1B.

alley.⁹ Retracing memory, Huddleston remembers seeing a man described as short, with a bushy mustache and a fresh “round-type” scar on his left cheek, motioning towards Kilroy, but did not think much of it--he believed it was somebody Kilroy had met while bar hopping.¹⁰ After Huddleston returned, Kilroy had mysteriously vanished. Although, Kilroy’s companions do not recall exactly what happened that night, it appears that the four of them were too intoxicated to recall, making it easy to take advantage of them. In a personal interview, Profesor Andrés F. Cuéllar, historian and archivist at the Museo de Casamata Archive in Matamoros, stated that he and other historians from Matamoros are “convinced that Kilroy had something to do with the ‘drug cult’.”¹¹ Whether he was out to buy some drugs from the cult or part of their drug trade, Cuéllar believes “not all blame belongs on Matamoros’ identity.”¹² According to Tomas Doreste, Kilroy was completely drunk, making his abduction much easier to fulfill. Doreste adds that according to the caretaker, Domingo Reyes Bustamante, the night of Kilroy’s abduction, Kilroy was seen “*pasado de copas* (drunk) and appeared to be laughing.”¹³ *The Brownsville Herald’s* first article published on Kilroy’s disappearance quoted Bradley Moore as saying, “he was drunk, we were drunk.”¹⁴ When asked if Cuéllar’s comments were true, George Gavito, presently Chief of Police and Security at the Port of Brownsville, a key element in the investigation, was quick to say that the statement was false. “This was a good guy who had a 3.8 grade point average in medical school,”

⁹ “Student Missing in Matamoros”, *The Brownsville Herald*, 16 March 1989, 1B; Jim Kilroy and Bob Stewart, *Sacrifice: A Father’s Determination to Turn Evil Into Good* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1990), 17-18.

¹⁰ “Search Continues for Missing Man,” *The Brownsville Herald*, 17 March 1989, 1B.

¹¹ Andrés Cuéllar, interview with author, written notes, 1 September 2004, Matamoros, Tamaulipas, México.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Tomas Doreste, *Los Narcosatánicos de Matamoros* (Mexico: Grupo Editorial Planeta, 1995), 51.

¹⁴ “Student Missing in Matamoros,” *The Brownsville Herald*, 16 March 1989, 1B.

Gavito stated. "People like this guy (Cuéllar) were not personally involved like I was, with the family and all; he didn't meet his friends either."¹⁵ Although Gavito mentioned that Kilroy and his friends were out drinking that night, "that still does not justify the actions of the cult."¹⁶

An extensive search led by Kilroy's parents, Jim and Helen, U.S. Customs agent Oran Neck, Cameron County Sheriff Lieutenant George Gavito, and head of the Mexican Federal Judicial Police Comandante Juan Benítez Ayala was in effect for almost a month, from March 14 through April 11, the day of the *Rancho Santa Elena* discovery.

Constant reminder of their son and his memories badgered the Kilroys as their search ended with no sign of Mark. The media played a valuable part, as the community of Matamoros and the Rio Grande Valley were kept aware that the search continued. Media serve specific functions that helps society maintain harmony and stability in society.

According to sociologist Robert K. Merton, structural functionalism, the manner in which society and media work together to ensure society's state of equilibrium, occurs when society finds itself during times of disruption.¹⁷ For example, an episode of America's Most Wanted was dedicated to the disappearance. It aired on March 26, 1989, with actors portraying Kilroy and his kidnappers, including the "mysterious" man that approached Kilroy.¹⁸ The re-enactment was based on the accounts of Martin, Huddleston, and Moore, which could have been inaccurate because of their state of mind that night.

¹⁵ George Gavito, phone interview with author, written notes, 27 January 2005.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (New York: Free Press, 1968), 104-108.

¹⁸ "Kilroy's friends re-enact night of disappearance," *The Brownsville Herald*, 26 March 1989, 1D.

As the search continued, the reward of what amounted to more than \$15,000 for information leading to Kilroy's whereabouts became a game to others. On April 5th, two inmates from an unspecified jail used prison pay phones to ask the Kilroys for ransom money for the return of Kilroy. The deal between the Kilroys and the "kidnappers" consisted of the \$15,000 reward money for the return of Mark, with the threat of cutting off some of Kilroy's fingers if the police were to be involved.¹⁹ Regardless, Helen Kilroy soon pulled away from the situation when one of the suspects said they had Mark's wallet and other personal items. Helen Kilroy had Mark's wallet in her possession after they had recovered it at the Sheraton Hotel in South Padre Island, the last place Kilroy stayed before his disappearance. Still, Helen Kilroy agreed to meet with the supposed kidnappers at a local cemetery in order for the police to apprehend them, but the "kidnapers" never showed up. Instead, phone calls were able to be traced, and on April 27, a total of five people were convicted for aggravated robbery for threatening to cut off Kilroy's fingers.²⁰

Frustration is an understatement. The situation the Kilroy family and law enforcement agents found themselves in seemed bizarre. James and Helen Kilroy retired to Santa Fe, Texas in an attempt to continue their lives and continue their search from their hometown. From there, they supported the efforts Joe Rodríguez, a local business representative for Coors R&R Distribution Company, who led a campaign with other Brownsville businessmen to increase the reward money from \$5,000 to \$15,000.²¹ Moreover, Oran Neck and George Gavito were now being asked to return to their formal

¹⁹ Kilroy and Stewart, 79-86.

²⁰ Kilroy and Stewart, 79-86.

²¹ "\$15,000 reward offered for Kilroy," *The Brownsville Herald*, 22 March 1989, 1B; Kilroy and Stewart, 55.

positions, rather than focus completely on the Kilroy situation. According to James Kilroy, "Neck and Gavito were increasingly coming under criticism from officers in other law-enforcement agencies who tired of the high profile generated by the publicity."²² The time had come to start getting results from their intensive searches or quit the operation until Kilroy's whereabouts, or remains, were revealed. However, before all was left unsolved, Comandante Ayala notified Gavito of the discovery at the Santa Elena ranch. The phone call the Kilroys most feared was made-"stay near the phone...we think we may have found Mark...I believe they've found his body."²³

The discovery of the most gruesome acts in Matamoros quickly made the national news as a total of fifteen shallow graves were discovered, including one that belonged to Kilroy. As the "pieces to the puzzle" were set, a drug ring that sacrificed humans for what they believed would bring them protection against law enforcement officials was quickly captured. Specifically, this drug ring supposedly believed that by sacrificing humans to their "gods," they would become invincible against bullets and law enforcement officials. This crisis was widely reported in the media, which during times of crisis becomes the most reliable source of information.²⁴ The drug ring operated out of Matamoros, headed by the Hernández family, part of the then famous *Cartel del Golfo*. By the time Mexican officials discovered the Santa Elena ranch,²⁵ located about 20 miles west of Matamoros, the culprits had sacrificed fifteen men, including Mark Kilroy. Of importance, even before Kilroy was first reported missing, thirteen maybe fourteen other

²² Kilroy and Stewart, 73.

²³ Kilroy and Stewart, 107.

²⁴ The term "crisis" will be used based on the definitions of George Gerbner. Gerbner defines "crises" as "natural or manmade events that pose an immediate and serious threat to lives and property." See Doris A. Graber, *Mass Media and American Politics 3rd ed.* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1989), 305.

²⁵ After the discovery, Santa Elena Ranch became property of the Mexican government, later to be divided between surrounding farmers. "Narcosatánicos: Sólo Quedan las Paredes," *Palabra*, 11 April 1999, 10-11.

men were missing without the attention or interest that Kilroy received. While this drug ring was headed by the Hernández family, the “drug cult” was led by Adolfo de Jesús Constanzo.

Constanzo, also known as “*El Padrino*” (The Godfather), a name given to Santería priests, was a twenty-six year old Cuban-American, said to come from a family background that practiced Santería. Whether or not Constanzo belonged to a Santería family is unknown. But, based his actions towards kidnapping victims, one can come to some conclusions. Fascination over the life of Constanzo was ever present in media coverage, as he was perceived as a dangerous yet powerful individual. Reared in Florida and Cuba, Constanzo lived in Mexico, where he would make a living in the drug trade. Constanzo also performed *limpiezas* (spiritual cleansings) and card readings to mob bosses and other wealthy personalities, charging thousands of dollars per consultation.²⁶ Some of the presumed artists that Constanzo performed *limpiezas* on included Yuri, Irma Serrano, Lucía Méndez, and Óscar Athié. Although these and other artists denied any affiliation with Constanzo, testimony of the captured members states otherwise. According to the testimony of Omar Orea Ochoa, one of Constanzo’s lovers, Athié and Constanzo met for the first time at VIPS, a Mexican restaurant, where Athié agreed to spiritual cleansings in return for recommendations to other artists about Constanzo’s services.

With time, intimidation, and manipulation, *El Padrino* was able to take over much of the Hernández’s drug dealings in Matamoros. Constanzo, who Mexican and U.S. law

²⁶ Clifford L. Linedecker, *Hell Ranch: The Nightmare Tale of Voodoo, Drugs, and Death in Matamoros* (Austin: Diamond Books, 1989), 25-27; “Narcosatánicos: A 10 Años de una Historia de Horror,” *Palabra*, 11 April 1999, 12; *El Bravo*, 10 May 1989, B-10; Edward Humes, *Buried Secrets: A True Story of Serial Murder, Black Magic, and Drug-Running on the U.S. Border* (New York: Dutton, 1991), 100-101.

officials knew very little of at the time, introduced the Hernández drug ring to what they believed was Santería.²⁷ Throughout the dealings of Constanzo's dominion over the Hernández's Matamoros drug ring, Constanzo caused fear and nervousness. Serafin Hernández, known amongst the drug ring as "little Serafin," and a criminal justice major at Texas Southmost College, was quick to state in his testimony the concern he and other cult members had if they had abandoned the cult. "I got [sic] into the religion for good luck," stated Serafin, "I stayed because I was scared to leave...Constanzo was no one to cross."²⁸ According to James Alan Fox, Professor of Criminal Justice at Northeastern University in Boston, "like Charles Manson and Jim Jones he convinced normal people to do crazy things...he gave them a substitute family."²⁹ But Constanzo was not alone in his endeavor for power and wealth. With the help of Sara Aldrete, considered the priestess of the "drug cult," Constanzo was able to easily influence the Hernández family. Her relationship with one of the Hernandez's leaders, Elio, uncle of Serafin, fostered Constanzo's takeover.

Sara María Aldrete Villarreal, or *La Madrina* (the Godmother), 24 years old at the time, lived in Matamoros and Brownsville. Aldrete was an honors student at Texas Southmost College by day and some think a "witch" by night. Aldrete was without a doubt a natural leader. As a physical education major, she served as president of the Soccer Booster Club, member of "Who's Who" and Physical Education Club, honored as the "Outstanding Physical Education Student" and was the recipient for the National

²⁷ Humes, 21-23. According to Humes, the Hernández drug trafficking family had been "directionless" and "desperate".

²⁸ "'I am one of the ones scared, nervous,' cult member says," *The Houston Post*, 15 April 1989, 14A.

²⁹ "Death Cult a Familiar Pattern," *San Antonio Light*, 17 April 1989, A6.

Collegiate Health Physical Award.³⁰ Additionally, Aldrete was well liked and respected, not only for her outstanding academic record, but for her friendly and caring personality by college faculty and staff. News of her involvement with the “drug cult” came as a shock to her former professors and friends.

During her latter years in college, many noticed change in personality as well as appearance. Aldrete’s style of dress slowly began changing as she was seen more with high fashion jewelry, darker fashions of clothes, and peculiar pendants; even threatening harm and evil towards her friends if they touched her pendants and amulets.³¹ As a financial aid recipient, classmates began questioning her brand new 1988 Ford Taurus equipped with cellular phone, which Aldrete paid more than \$200 a month for in phone charges, and her love of gold.³² In fact, a former class mate wondered how she was able to maintain her new car and phone bills with a \$3.25 an hour work-study job.

In the cult, Aldrete had been Constanzo’s lover. But they separated after Constanzo told her that he was bisexual. Still, Aldrete’s beauty served as Constanzo’s recruiter for the cult. Aldrete recruited men that would fulfill Constanzo’s orders by making them watch *The Believers*, a movie starring Martin Sheen in which a similar cult sacrificed humans to obtain power over others. Additionally, Aldrete’s intimate relationship with Elio Hernández served as a spring board to recommend the services of Constanzo for the Hernández’s drug business. Others of Constanzo’s followers would

³⁰ Texas Southmost College, annual year book, Volume 57, 1988; Kilroy and Stewart, 140.

³¹ In several organization group pictures, Aldrete is wearing a hefty amount gold bracelets, rings, and necklaces. Texas Southmost College, annual year book, Volume 57, 1988; “Sara Aldrete warned people not to touch her strange pendants,” *The Brownsville Herald*, 14 April 1989, 1A.

³² “Sara Aldrete warned people not to touch her strange pendants,” *The Brownsville Herald*, 14 April 1989, 1A.

soon be part of the Hernández family, including Álvaro de León Valdez, also known as “El Duby,” Omar Orea Ochoa, and Sergio Martínez Valdez.³³

The discovery of the 15 bodies and of the drug ring was a mere coincidence. A day before the discovery at Santa Elena, Serafin Hernández was arrested by Mexican officials for marijuana possession and leading Matamoros police on a high speed chase. When caught, Hernández confessed to having kidnapped Kilroy off the streets of the Matamoros’ red light district.³⁴ Caretaker, Domingo Reyes Bustamante was taken in for questioning and after Benítez routinely showed him a picture of Kilroy, he remembered feeding Kilroy a plate of eggs, bread, and water hours before he was killed. Furthermore, during the visit to the ranch by Mexican authorities, a tool shack was discovered where nauseating smells escaped. The shack was not fully investigated until after the confessions of Serafin and Bustamante. It was this same shack that Adolfo de Jesús Constanzo sacrificed victims.

Once the discovery of the fifteen bodies was reported, Constanzo, Aldrete and de León fled to Mexico City where they found temporary refuge. Those arrested in Matamoros included Elio and Serafin Hernández, David Serna Valdez, and Sergio Martínez Salinas. Of importance, Sergio Martínez, nicknamed “*La Mariposa*” (the butterfly) was the nephew of the Matamoros police chief at the time, Silvio Brusolo, himself later charged with involvement in the “drug cult.”³⁵ Through Martínez, Constanzo and the “drug cult” obtained police favors and equipment. Thus, Martínez was able to use handcuffs and police sirens while searching out victims.

³³ Humes, xii, for a detailed listing of the members of the “drug cult”.

³⁴ Kilroy and Stewart, 102; Humes, 14-15.

³⁵ “Cult drug ring had police ties,” *The Brownsville Herald*, 13 April 1989, 1A; Kilroy and Stewart, 122-123.

As an intensive search for Constanzo and Aldrete continued, many disturbing facts were discovered. Mexican law enforcement raided the apartment of Sara Aldrete and found a bloody altar with religious paraphernalia. After the discovery at Aldrete's apartment, rumors panicked citizens of Northern Mexico and South Texas, as even more rumors of child abduction by the "drug cult" were quick to hit the airwaves. Additionally, cult members caught in Matamoros informed police that Sara Aldrete and Constanzo introduced them to what they believed was Santería, an African derived religion practiced primarily in the Caribbean Islands and Southern Florida. By practicing Santería, the cult believed this religion would bring them good luck and protection in their drug trade. Yet Santería does not include the human sacrifice in its rituals and ceremonies. Following the cult murders, Santería was distorted and misrepresented in the media. Santería was distorted based on the sources media relied on. Source for the media included law enforcement agents rather than scholarly or religious sources. Law enforcement officers were relied on as attractive sources rather than credible sources.³⁶ This shocking episode in border history ended in Mexico City after Mexican law enforcement raided and captured remaining cult members, except Constanzo, who ordered his own death rather than face being captured. Members caught included: Sara Aldrete, Álvaro de León, and Omar Orea Ochoa.

Álvaro De León Valdez, Constanzo's bodyguard, was later convicted by Mexican authorities for the death of Constanzo and Martín Quintana Rodríguez, Constanzo's lover. De León gunned both men down, as ordered by Constanzo on May 9, 1989. Francisco Omar Orea Ochoa, another Constanzo lover and journalism student at the

³⁶Shelly Chaiken, "Communicator: Physical Attractiveness and Persuasion." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 37, 1387-1397.

National University in Mexico City, was arrested in Mexico City with Aldrete and de León. Ochoa would die of AIDS several months later. Today, de León is serving a prison sentence of more than 100 years at the Penitentiary of *Almoloya* in Mexico City.³⁷ Aldrete is serving time at *El Reclusorio Norte*, a heavy guarded prison for women in Mexico City. She still has the possibility of obtaining her freedom, pending further testimony from cult members that claim her innocence.³⁸ Ten years after the fact, Aldrete's sentence was reduced from 647 years to 30. If set free, the possibility of being held in custody for U.S. law enforcement remains. Since Serafin, Elio Hernández, and Sergio Martínez were arrested in Matamoros, they are serving time in the Tamaulipas state penitentiary. James and Helen Kilroy remain active in the war on drugs in their community of Santa Fe, Texas, and have established the Mark Kilroy Foundation, which promotes drug awareness and education. Every March 14, when the Texas House of Representatives meet, they do so in memory of Mark Kilroy, to honor "the important legacy he left behind."³⁹

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Three types of literature have been important to this project: work specifically dealing with the Matamoros killings, the literature looking at U.S. media representation of Mexicans and Mexican Americans, and the Santería religion. Several books focus on the Matamoros cult killings. While these books present information about this event, they share several superficial themes: sacrifices in Mexico, regardless of who performed them can be tied to Aztec rituals; the border is seen as a place that is culturally backward,

³⁷ "Narcosatánicos: A 10 años de una historia de horror," *Palabra*, 11 April 1999, 12.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 12; Sara Aldrete, "Personal Webpage," <http://saraaldrete.galeon.com>.

³⁹ Texas House of Representatives Resolution. 14 March 1999, 76(R) HR 417.

superstitious, commonplace for corruption, and a safe haven for drug activity. Among the books written about the Kilroy murder is Jim Kilroy's *Sacrifice: A Father's Determination to Turn Evil into Good*. It is the most important book written on the murders, presenting a first hand view of the life of Mark Kilroy and giving a week by week detailed account of his family's struggle during the search and then discovery. Kilroy's book is the first to detail the interrogation process of the cult members. The author describes Mexican authorities as being corrupt and of drug activity being a norm along the South Texas-Mexico border. This book, along with *Cauldron of Blood: The Matamoros Cult Killings* by Jim Schutze, also focuses on the Matamoros killings. Both books present attitudes and perceptions expressed by "middle America" on the border, especially regarding Mexican authorities. When discussing the role of Santería, Kilroy and Schutze misunderstand the religion and use public officials as their main sources, instead of academic work or religious figures.

Clifford L. Linedecker's *Hell Ranch: The Nightmare Tale of Voodoo, Drugs, and Death in Matamoros*, gives some insight into the Matamoros killings, but focuses more on the activity along the border and tries to explain why situations such as these occur in northern Mexico. U.S. authorities are described in this book as victims in their attempt to guard the border from deviant acts and illegal border crossings. The author explains Santería accurately by introducing its history and rituals. On the other hand, he claims that human sacrifices are part of African religion rituals. *Buried Secrets: A True Story of Serial Murder, Black Magic, and Drug Running on the U.S. Border*, by Edward Humes, focuses primarily on the life, rituals, and beliefs of Adolfo de Jesus Constanzo. Humes does an excellent job in researching this case, examining events that are dismissed by

other works. Gary Provost's *Across the Border: The True Story of the Satanic Cult Killings in Matamoros* is a descriptive account of the case in general. Provost gives accurate information on Santería and the purpose of the religion based on interviews with religious figures and anthropologists. Provost tries to answer why Satanism is even mentioned by using different events, such as killings and occult rituals around the United States and how newspapers tied these events to the Matamoros killings.

There is a large historiography that has examined the ways in which the U.S. media has looked at Mexicans and Mexican Americans. While the majority of the authors are involved with some sort of U.S. media, they are important as they distort the history of Santería, the Matamoros killings, and the views of border people. Historians have also followed the pattern of presenting racial or community views to other ethnic groups or regions. Mexican American historian Gilbert Gonzalez does this in his latest work, *Culture of Empire: American Writers, Mexico, and Mexican Immigrants, 1880-1930*. In this book Gonzalez discusses how American writers, in this case, businessmen, journalists, engineers, and academics, share their views on the U.S.-Mexico border. Gonzalez focuses on "the significance this literature had in explaining Mexico and Mexicans to the American audience."⁴⁰ As a consequence, Americans perceived Mexicans as inferior, a huge social problem during this time frame, "and the term 'Mexican Problem' entered into literary discourse."⁴¹ This book follows the course of American media shaping negative views Mexico, the border and its people. It also is an example of how historians have effectively used media discourses to discuss events in history, in this case U.S-Mexico relations.

⁴⁰ Gilbert G. González, *Culture of Empire: American Writers, Mexico, and Mexican Immigrants, 1830-1930* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 8.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

Gonzalez along with Raul A. Fernandez co-authored *A Century of Chicano History: Empire, Nations, and Migrations*, where he explains creation of the “Mexican Problem” in the United States by Anglo writers. This creation was a way to use literature and media to create stereotypes and fear of Mexicans and Mexican Americans. This idea “not only advocated the economic domination by the United States over Mexico, but also...for various oppressive public policies.”⁴²

Other works that lay the framework for literature and media perceptions is *Common Border, Uncommon Paths: Race, Culture, and National Identity in U.S.-Mexican Relations*, edited by Jaime E. Rodriguez and Kathryn Vincent. This volume contains an article entitled “Writing the Border: The Languages and Limits of Representation” by Norma Klahn that discusses U.S. perceptions of Mexico and its people. Klahn also looks at “the invented images that arise from such texts and registers the changes...as interpretations of the border zone.”⁴³ In this same book, prominent Mexican-American historian Luis Leal writes “Beyond Myths and Borders in Mexican and North American Literature,” which follows a similar pattern as Klahn. Leal focuses on the “myths that occur most frequently in literature and that have been the source of conflicts between representatives of the two great cultures that settled in the New World.”⁴⁴ Leal discusses the way literature can create myths and perceptions about people’s attitudes, space, and identity to readers that are physically absent from the place discussed. Arnolde De León’s *They Called Them Greasers: Anglo Attitudes Toward*

⁴² Gilbert G. González and Raul A. Fernández, *A Century of Chicano History: Empire, Nation, and Migration* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 67.

⁴³ Norma Klahn, “Writing the Border: The Languages and Limits of Representations,” as seen in Jaime E. Rodríguez and Kathryn Vincent, *Common Border, Uncommon Paths: Race, Culture, and National Identity in U.S.-Mexican Relations* (Wilmington, DE.: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1997), 125.

⁴⁴ Luis Leal, “Beyond Myths and Borders in Mexican and North American Literature,” as seen in Jaime E. Rodríguez and Kathryn Vincent, *Common Border, Uncommon Paths: Race, Culture, and National Identity in U.S.-Mexican Relations* (Wilmington, DE.: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1997), 145.

Mexicans in Texas, 1821-1900, sets the overall standard for historians using newspapers as a source. In this work, De León analyzes how Anglo newcomers to Texas or Mexico used the media to shape the beliefs of people against *México-Tejanos*. In *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, Rodolfo Acuña discusses how media perpetuated stereotypes following the *Report of Immigration Commission* of 1910. This report, written by Victor S. Clark, stated that immigrants that were in the United States as a result of the Mexican Revolution were “physically weak, undependable, indolent”, and who’s only virtues were that they were passive and worked for low wages.⁴⁵ As a result, newspapers of the time began establishing stereotypes by repeating the report’s myths and setting blame on immigrants in times of economic depression.⁴⁶

In his dissertation, *The Influence of the Mexican Revolution on the Mexico-Texas Border, 1910-1916*, Rodolfo Rocha examines how the Carrancistas used the Matamoros newspaper, *El Demócrata*, to persuade people to turn against the Villistas. The Carrancista article pleading for recruits, called for the annihilation of the “Villista traitors.”⁴⁷ This is an example on how the Carrancistas used newspapers to shape the collective belief of people along the Mexico-Texas border during the Mexican Revolution. Another prime example where historians analyze how the U.S. media affects society’s beliefs and attitudes in a community can be seen in *Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief: The Great Chicago Fire, The Haymarket Bomb, and the Model Town of Pullman*. While this book does not focus on border history, urban historian Carl Smith

⁴⁵ Rodolfo Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, 5th ed (New York: Pearson Longman, 2004), 161.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ *The Brownsville Herald*, 9 July 1915, p.4, as seen in Rodolfo Rocha, “The Influence of the Mexican Revolution on the Mexican Border, 1910-1916” (PhD. Dissertation, Texas Tech, 1981), 212-213.

discusses media manipulation and how the media blamed the poor, immigrants, and other under privileged citizens for problems in society.

Historians have effectively studied media perceptions and their distortions. These studies are vitally important to the historiography Mexican American history, as they focus upon attitudes and community beliefs; in this case, the South Texas-Mexico border. More importantly, historians offer important methodology crucial in analyzing documents such as newspapers to present attitudes on cultures, ethnicities, and “border” spaces.

The Santería religion is important to this study because of negative images created and perpetuated in Mexico and along the South Texas-Mexico border. While folk healing and *curanderismo* is commonplace along the border, *brujería* or black magic is given excessive attention in U.S. media coverage of the Matamoros killings. To examine the Santería religion, anthropologist Migene Gonzalez-Wippler’s book, *Santería: La Religion*, details the origins and history of Santería. This book is a good platform when discussing Santería and the way the U.S. media misrepresented it during the Matamoros killings. Other books that present the history of African religions in the western world are Olmos-Fernandez and Margarite L. Paravisini-Gebert’s, *Creole religions of the Caribbean: an introduction from Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo*, and *Santería from Africa to the New World: The Dead Sell Memories* by George Brandon. Brandon examines the arrival of Santería to the Americas and how African slaves used icons of Christianity to keep their African religions alive. This book also examines how the religion has changed from its origins in Africa to the Americas. The book is important in explaining how aspects of Santería have been used for criminal activities.

RESOURCES

The majority of the primary documents will consist of primarily newspapers from the Lower Rio Grande Valley and the United States. English speaking newspapers from the Lower Rio Grande Valley such as the *McAllen Monitor*, the *Valley Morning Star*, the *Brownsville Herald*, and the *Raymondville Chronicle*, dating from March to May of 1989 are valuable primary sources for this research. These newspapers provide a sense as to how the media portrayed South Texas/Northern Tamaulipas border people. These newspapers are found in the McAllen Memorial Public Library Archives and at the University of Texas-Pan American Library. Newspapers from around Texas, such as the *Dallas Morning News*, *Corpus Christi Caller*, *Houston Post* and the *San Antonio Express News* found at the McAllen Memorial Public Library archive voice the opinions and reflections of people from around Texas on the Lower Rio Grande Valley. These newspapers present many stereotypes and perceptions to people unfamiliar with this region. The same can be said about newspapers from across the United States, such as the *New York Times*, the *USA Today*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Chicago Tribune*. These newspapers, found at the University of Texas Pan American library and at the University of Texas-Austin periodicals archive. Magazines such as *Time*, *People*, and *Newsweek* are good examples of how the media directs the beliefs of people not exposed to certain regions of the country. These magazines presented the Matamoros killings as part of satanic actions, Kilroy as the center of attention, and the border as a safe haven for drug activity. *Texas Monthly Magazine* and *Texas Crime Chronicles*, also pursue themes of the above magazines. These magazines are housed at the McAllen Memorial Public Library Archive.

Local Spanish speaking newspapers are important as well. Mexican newspapers give their own take on the Lower Rio Grande Valley border area. Newspapers such as *El Bravo* and *La Opinion* from Matamoros not only cover this case locally, but express competing discourses following this event, and consider Santería as a branch of devil worship. These newspapers are housed at the Casamata Museum Archive in Matamoros. Spanish language magazines such as *Palabra*, *Siempre!*, *Fem*, and *El Norte* found at the *Informe* online database, are extremely important because they voice the opinions and views of Mexican journalists.

SUMMARY OF CHAPTERS

This work will cover the months of April through May of 1989, from the kidnapping to discovery of the body of Mark Kilroy. These months are specifically targeted because these months are when the cult murders took place and unfolded. Chapter one covers the pattern of how media shape the beliefs of border people during important historical events. This first chapter discusses the literature that has analyzed media perceptions and how historians have utilized their methodology to uncover racial attitudes and important time periods in history. This chapter also introduces the Matamoros “drug cult” murders, and how this event contributes to the historiography. Followed here are patterns of the U.S. media creating and enhancing perceptions of the Texas-Mexico border, culture, and people.

Chapter two discusses the portrayal of the South Texas-Northern Tamaulipas border and its people through U.S. media outlets. This chapter focuses on “*post*-killings” conditions of the border and how this event became a watershed in border history.

Specifically, after this case unfolded, the border region of the Rio Grande Valley and Northern Tamaulipas became known as a safe haven for drug activity, cult deviance, and at times a backward culture. This chapter follows a continuity of the border historiography, discussing U.S. perceptions about Mexico and its people.

Competing media discourses will be discussed in the third chapter. As the hunt for the leaders of the “drug cult,” who sought refuge from legal authorities, became intense. This evolved into a competition between newspapers from Brownsville and Matamoros, speculating as to who was to blame for the origins and development of the murders. While U.S. authorities and media uttered concern for the corruption of Mexican authorities and their cooperation in search for the cult leaders, Mexican media and authorities began blaming U.S. authorities for not detaining the culprits in time. Furthermore, economic concerns were being expressed by Mexican media while defending their space as “safe.” On the other hand, U.S. media portrayed Matamoros as a dangerous place to visit.

The fourth chapter discusses Santería and its role in this case. Santería is special. It was used by Constanzo to obtain protection for his illegal transactions. But specifics of the religion were distorted in many ways. While a deviant form of the religion was practiced by Constanzo, media perceptions accepted it as gospel. For example, this African derived religion uses animal sacrifices for its rituals, but not human sacrifices. In the United States, Santería was accepted as being part of the cult’s ritual, human sacrifice as part of its normal ritual. In Mexico, media created perceptions of Santería as a branch of devil worship. This chapter shows how Santería became completely distorted and misrepresented by newspapers, editors, writers, and especially U.S. citizens who were

concerned that Santería had spread throughout the Mexican border region. Thus, satanic actions were pinpointed in everything that hinted of such actions; from heavy metal music, graffiti, movies and television programming. Everything along the border came under careful watch of “society.” Hence, the coined terms “*NarcoSatanicos*” by the Mexican media and “Devil’s Ranch” by the U.S. media quickly spread. All in all, it became a media scare on both sides of the border. This chapter discusses the reaction from the U.S.-Mexico media focused on the different perceptions derived from misunderstanding of both sides of the border. Also, of importance is the way the border is perceived after this religion began appearing and used for criminal intent.

Chapter five will conclude and summarize the thesis and its main points. This chapter will not only discuss how this case fit into the historiography of border literature, but will place it within the historiography of the U.S.-Mexico border. In addition, this final chapter will discuss transnational that media outlets have used and are using to shape the belief of people along the U.S.-Mexican border. The case in Ciudad Juarez, for example, with the disappearing women is a prime example. Also, a recommendation for further research on perceptions created and enhanced by media on the Kilroy affair will be included.

CHAPTER 2

U.S. MEDIA PERCEPTIONS OF BORDER IDENTITY

*"The idea (of sacrifices) is not unusual in rituals you find in parts of the world where people are in the early stage of development."*¹

Existing Lower Rio Grande Valley culture maintains strong connections to Mexico. Border culture itself does not always coexist with belief systems of other cultures and ethnicities. Cultural traditions, for example, such as *curanderismo* are deemed superstitious by many well-meaning outsiders. Throughout borderlands history, its people and identity have come under close scrutiny by the forces of discrimination. During U.S. media coverage of the Matamoros "drug cult" killings, this pattern continued. After the discovery at Santa Elena, U.S. media brought forth once again the question of religion, identity, and culture of Mexicans. Of importance, media during crisis, becomes the most sought out for the latest and reliable source of information on an event. Communications scholar Wilbur Schramm contends that media's functional importance increases as the demand for coverage increases.² Therefore, media comes under pressure to update audiences with the latest information, even if it means becoming center of people's lives. The customs and values of border people were called to question

¹ "Slayings are called a combination of devil worshipping acts," *The Brownsville Herald*, 12 April 1989, 1A. Quote stated by Amy Bruce, anthropologist.

² Wilbur Schramm, "Communication in Crisis." In Stanley B. Greenberg eds., *The Kennedy Assassination and the American Public: Social Communication in Crisis* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1965), 1-25.

in many press releases. U.S. coverage of the cult killings continuously mentioned the ongoing drug trade from Mexico and the violent side of Mexican culture. This event raised questions of Mexican police corruption and actions taken by drug lords in continuing their drug transactions. U.S. media coverage of the Matamoros slayings highlighted aspects of border culture that do not coincide with a people's everyday life. For example, Mexican border identity was distorted as U.S. media portrayed Mexican border towns as places where Mexican women satisfy the "lusts" of American men, are a haven for drugs and human smuggling activity, and are culturally backward. U.S. media distorted Mexican border culture, and religion while highlighting border violence. Unfortunately, these distorted images of Mexican border culture went out to a broader American audience unfamiliar with the South Texas-Northern Tamaulipas region. Media has an effect on these beliefs as stereotypes frequently transmitted through media are taken into account by cultures outside of the Mexican tradition.

The Matamoros "drug cult" killings presented audiences around the world with characteristics of sensationalism and surreal experiences. From the beginning of media coverage, even people in Mexico wondered why politicians and media outlets were not pressuring authorities to intensify "missing people" cases. While Mexican citizens were raising these questions, U.S. politicians were being praised in the media for their efforts in searching for Mark Kilroy. But then, corruption in Mexican law enforcement agencies became a concern and topic of discussion. For example, U.S. media questioned Mexican judicial systems, wondering if Mexican judicial standards and practices were enough to find steep punishment for suspected "drug cult" members. This came about after several U.S. politicians had requested the extradition of suspected cult members from Mexico.

As U.S. media reported findings of mutilated bodies and cauldrons with human hearts and brain matter, reporters were quick to speculate on the religious practices of Adolfo de Jesús Constanzo. The act of human sacrifices were and are extremely rare in the Americas, but being that these acts occurred in Mexico, media linked them to ancient Aztec rituals. Practices such as *brujería* (black magic) and *curanderismo* (folk healing), which are vital customs of Mexican American and Mexican cultures, began to be questioned and distorted by media outlets. Santería, a religion of the African diaspora, came to be associated with devil worship, as U.S. reporters failed to fully understand and develop a precise understanding of the religion.

Superficial perceptions perpetuated and enhanced by predominantly Anglo journalists following the cult killings will be later addressed in detail to understand the portrayal of Mexican culture to broader American audiences. This particular pattern was seen during ante-bellum and post ante-bellum periods of Texas history with the portrayal of *Tejanos* as socially and politically inferior to Anglo settlers.³ Nearly 100 years later during the epoch of the *Mexican Problem*, media has linked Mexican Americans and Mexicans living in the United States as immigrants living in substandard or “low class” conditions.⁴ Communication scholar Gordon Allport, puts the latter explanations into the context of the cognitive-transactional model of stereotypes. This model explains stereotypes of minorities in U.S. media, and why they occur. Allport’s model offers several explanations for the occurrences of minority stereotypes including: the acquisition of stereotypes, development of self-schemas, and responses based on media-activated

³ Arnoldo De León, *They Called Them Greasers: Anglo Attitudes Toward Mexicans in Texas, 1821-1900* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983).

⁴ Gilbert G Gonzalez, *Culture of Empire: American Writers, Mexico, and Mexican Immigrants, 1880-1930* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004); Gilbert G. Gonzalez and Raul A. Fernandez, *A Century of Chicano History: Empire, Nations, and Migrations* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

stereotypes.⁵ The acquisition of stereotypes develops after one ethnic group draws generalizations of other ethnicities after experiences with that group; the development of self-schemas, or scripts, are mental representations of one's self-esteem after confronting stereotypes; and responses based on media states that media content can activate stereotypes and affect how people respond to various groups in society, and "evaluate themselves against media standards."⁶

Upon the discovery at Santa Elena, Mark Kilroy was seen as the tip of a much greater problem. It became a case where people on both sides of the border were sharing the same reaction: "If the group had not kidnapped an American student, this (the cult) could have been undetected for a very long time."⁷ Most media articles highlighted the abduction of Kilroy, and expressed a sentimental sorrow for the young premedical student. Clifford Pugh, *Houston Post* reporter reflected that feeling stating, "at the border, women stood on the street selling roses...it seemed a fitting tribute to the American who never came home."⁸ The four friends from Santa Fe, Texas were seen in U.S. media as "serious students, the kind of boys you would like your daughter to date or marry."⁹ While press releases continuously mentioned the murder of Mark Kilroy with great sorrow, people of Mexico were presented in negative ways. It was as though media had an axe to grind against the Borderlands community. This in turn leads to the acquisition of stereotypes as the experiences of an ethnic group with another, in this case, were not positive. In consequence, the press openly pointed out the "dark" side of

⁵ Elizabeth M. Perse, *Media Effects and Society* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2001), 173-177.

⁶ Ibid., Susan T. Fiske and Shelly E. Taylor, *Social Cognition* 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991), 181-182.

⁷ "Buried: Kilroy, 11 others victims of Voodoo slayings," *The Houston Post*, 12 April 1989, A-15.

⁸ "Border town's streets vacant, silent at night," *The Houston Post*, 12 April 1989, A-14.

⁹ Gary Cartwright, "The Matamoros Devil Murders," *Texas Monthly*, June 1989, 153.

Mexican culture while describing the geographical region in which the murders took place. By doing this, media helped shape the development of self-schemas by presenting Mexican border people and culture negatively. Descriptions given about the border region were distorted, particularly discussions written about Mexican women. U.S. media trying to understand the environment that attracts American “spring breakers” to Matamoros and other border towns, wrote that the roles women in “red light” districts have in these areas are conducive to violence.

DISTORTED IMAGES OF MEXICAN BORDER PEOPLE AND CULTURE

Mexican women that work in “districts” were considered whores sought by American men to satisfy their sexual lusts. When describing the Mexican “party” atmosphere Jim Schutze, author of *Cauldron of Blood: the Matamoros Cult Killings*, stated that these areas “were one of the safer ways a restless white man from the American side could vent up his pent-up ambitions and dabble in some mildly exciting racial and ethnic taboos.”¹⁰ American “spring breakers” flock to Mexico because drinking age limits are lower and club scenes are more popular than in the United States. However, most of the women available for the “pleasure” of “lustful” “spring breakers” are American women themselves. “Party” districts in Mexico contain well established and organized bars and dance clubs that attract the dollars of American tourists. These establishments are not “holes in-the-wall saloons” where American men can find “saucy women and the promise of a good time.”¹¹ U.S. media described *zonas*, or “boystowns,” as places where prostitutes are found as sources of entertainment. Mexican border

¹⁰ Jim Schutze, *Cauldron of Blood: The Matamoros Cult Killings* (New York: Avon Books, 1989), 3.

¹¹ “Despite changes, border still attracting partyers,” *The Houston Post*, 16 April 1989, A-1.

women are described as “companions for whatever price can be negotiated.”¹²

According to Jim Schutze, “zonas are old whore districts where Mexican and Indian women and boys have been selling themselves...since the days of the Texas Republic.”¹³

On the other hand, some of the perceptions and stereotypes portrayed by newspapers described conservative women of Mexico as wearing “black dresses and bone combs,” as their fashions of dress.¹⁴ Of importance, the word “whores” is loosely used by different sources of news media when mentioning or referring to Mexican women.

Unfortunately, Mexican women are never associated with the beautiful arts or culture of Mexico. Instead, they are described to a broader American audience as outlets to satisfy American men. Mexican women did not warrant such stereotypical descriptions when describing the people and environment of Mexico. The song “*El Paso*” by Marty Robbins, in which an Anglo cowboy gets fatally shot after falling in love with a Mexican bar waitress comes to mind as both topics strikingly portray Mexican women as outlets to satisfy the “lusts” of American men. In this age, stereotypes concerning Mexican women have not changed much.¹⁵ But, Mexican women along the border were not the only ones being degraded by U.S. media. Based on print media coverage of the cult killings, media wrongfully portrayed Mexican society and culture also perpetuated and enhanced stereotypes.

Like the word “whores,” when referring to Mexican women, the word “*campesino*” was used by Jim Schutze in *Cauldron of Blood* when referring to

¹² “Despite changes, border still attracting partyers,” *The Houston Post*, 16 April 1989, A-1, A-24.

¹³ Schutze, 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁵ George Gerbner et al., *Growing up with Television: The Cultivation Perspective*. In Jennings Bryant eds., *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994), 17-23. In this book article, Gerbner discusses the stereotypes of women and minorities in media, specifically, television, and how they have been underrepresented.

Mexicanos who live in Northern Mexico. According to Schutze, *campesinos* are not only people who sleep in the streets to work the crowds for nickels and dimes, but are “ancient people, the remains of ancient cultures, who have survived here because they were beneath everyone else’s attention.”¹⁶ While portraying *campesinos* as culturally backward, Schutze adds that they do not come to Brownsville looking to buy electrical equipment, watches, and modern things with their “twenty dollars” they earned at the end of two or three days of hard labor. Instead, they come to Brownsville to look for *curandero* artifacts, such as “*Las Siete Potencias Africanas*,” The Seven African Powers, which Schutze claims are the “gods of *campesinos*.” Additionally, *campesinos* are portrayed as along a lone highway standing “barely looking up with Indian eyes,” wrapped in the same “blankets and hats of their forebears.”¹⁷ In overview, Schutze states that *campesinos* are nestled among rich people’s trash looking for a way to bring order with their folkways to this “madhouse of monsters, rich whores and malevolent police.”¹⁸

From the beginning of the cult killing coverage, border culture is portrayed as culturally backward, meaning not contributing to economic development.¹⁹ Poverty, folk healing, and Mexican “corruption” were seen as persistent in the culture. For example, when confronted with such thinking, Anglo journalists generalized upon their own definitions and understandings of *curanderismo* and distorted this tradition in the process. U.S. media, erroneously considered Mexican people superstitious since their belief in *curanderismo* were supposedly tied to the “drug cult’s” actions. True, *curanderismo* is part of Mexican and Mexican American culture. Many Mexican and Mexican Americans

¹⁶ Schutze, 46.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* In this case, the “madhouse of monsters, rich whores and malevolent police” is Mexico.

¹⁹ For more definitions of this word, see Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We: The Challenges to America's National Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004).

seek help from *curanderos* (folk healers) for cures with special herbs, massages, and child birth. But not as much a part of their lives as lawyer and doctors were to the Kilroy family. For journalists like, Gary Cartwright, superstitions are a way of life.²⁰ Mexican affiliation and practice of folk healing became a racialized story. Consequently, other aspects of this belief became distorted. Folk healing was used to prove that Mexican culture was culturally backwards and superstitious. A distorted Cartwright example was of a *maquiladora* worker who accidentally injured himself with a piece of machinery. Accordingly, the factory closed down to allow a *curandero* to dehex the machine which injured the worker.²¹

One of Mexico's prime-time or soap-operas, popular in Mexico and in the United States, was used by U.S. media to further distort Mexican beliefs. *El Maleficio*, or "The Evil One," in which the plot consisted of a businessman involved in black magic and devil worship to gain luck and wealth, was presented to demonstrate Mexican fascination with strange beliefs.²² Additionally, Cartwright contended that the Mexican press was "fascinated" by events at Santa Elena. To the Mexican press "death was far more fascinating than life."²³ "This wasn't a story about drugs," he added, "it was a story about magic."²⁴ Cartwright continued that the Mexican press saw nothing "distasteful" about publishing articles of dead corpses, in which he described the caption as saying "*sin genitales*," without genitals.²⁵ That *comandante* Juan Benítez Ayala, chief of Mexican federal agents, had strings of garlic and peppers, candles, and other folk healing

²⁰ Cartwright, 80, 156.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 80.

²² *Ibid.*, 80.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

artifacts produced a sense of curiosity. That he had a folk healer perform a spiritual cleansing on the “drug cult’s” sacrificial shack produced fear. That Benítez had a folk healer perform a final ritual cleansing of the shack, and had it burned to the ground produced sensationalism.²⁶

Again, being that the “drug cult” murders occurred in Mexico and involved the practice of human sacrifice, U.S. journalists linked the killings to Aztec rituals of some 500 years in the past. Aztecs sacrificed people in an attempt to satisfy their god of sun and war, *Huitzilopochtli*. The “drug cult” sacrificed men in order to obtain protection against law enforcement, not to satisfy their god of sun and war. But the distortion continued on--“the human sacrifice is similar to rituals performed by Mayan, Aztec or Inca ancients,” stated Victoria Pramble of Mama Cari’s magic shop.²⁷ Juxtaposing Aztec and “drug cult” rituals, Pramble added, “young virile men were sacrificed.”²⁸ Alan Richman, columnist for *People Magazine* contended that “the amalgam of evil created by Constanzo also contained elements of...*santismo*, a bloody Aztec ritual, but the essential element was human sacrifice.” The word “*santismo*” means being associated with saints which Catholic and Aztec religions practice. It does not connect with Richman’s manifestation of “bloody Aztec rituals.” During confessions of cult members, Elio Hernández stated that when committing a sacrifice he was able to rip-out hearts while the victim was still alive. “He could keep a victim alive long enough to split the chest and

²⁶ “Cult Murders fuel fears, superstition,” *Corpus Christi Caller Times*, 30 April 1989, 1A.

²⁷ “Experts skeptical about voodoo link,” *The Houston Post*, 12 April 1989, A-12.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

rip the heart out,” stated Jim Kilroy, father of Mark, “just as his forefathers, the ancient Aztecs, had done.”²⁹

While U.S. media associated “drug cult” rituals with those of the ancient Aztecs, other journalists placed human sacrifice with the context of Mexican identity. J. Michael Kennedy, reporter for *The Los Angeles Times*, claimed that human sacrifice was used in folk healing rituals, where “it (human sacrifice) is said to be used occasionally in rituals in which one person is killed as part of curing another.”³⁰ “The idea of human sacrifice,” stated anthropologist Amy Bruce, “is not unusual where people are in their earlier stages of development.”³¹ Since rituals performed by the “drug cult” were coupled with aspects of curanderismo, opinions such as those Kennedy’s and Bruce’s distorted Mexican culture and enhanced stereotypes.

Stereotypes about Mexican Americans and Northern Mexico’s bizarre environment after the discovery at Santa Elena persisted in the media. Mexican Americans and Mexicans in Northern Mexico were seen as submissive to border crossers and drug dealers. Brownsville, Texas was considered the “Crossroads of the Hemisphere” for drugs and poverty, while drug smuggling in the “bleak brown plains of Mexico’s Rio Grande valley was as common as a coyote’s yowl.”³² Brownsville was portrayed as being plagued with so-called border crossers, or with what Jim Schutze bluntly refers to as “*mojados*,” or “wetbacks.”³³ Anglo subdivisions in Brownsville have beautiful landscaping at their homes since “cheap labor that swims and sneaks through

²⁹ Jim Kilroy and Bob Stewart, *Sacrifice: A Father’s Determination to Turn Evil into Good* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1990), 114.

³⁰ “12 Bodies Found Near Border Called Drug Cult Victims,” *The Los Angeles Times*, 12 April 1989, 16.

³¹ “Slayings are called a combination of devil worshipping acts,” *The Brownsville Herald*, 12 April 1989, 1A.

³² Richard Woodbury, “Cult of the Red-Haired Devil,” *Time Magazine*, 24 April 1989, 30; Schutze, 41.

³³ Schutze, 56. The term “wetbacks” is a derogatory form of referring to undocumented border crossers.

storm sewer pipes,” are employed. Boca Chica Beach in Brownsville was considered as a place where state park officials needed to warn visitors of illegal entry to campers and trailers as this place is haven for refugees and smugglers.³⁴ According to Schutze, the Valley’s main source of income derives from those crossers who use the fence holes to cross the border, not realizing that many “border crossers” from Iowa, Kansas, Nuevo León, and México City spend millions of dollars yearly shopping in border cities.³⁵ An example of how Mexicans are portrayed can be seen in the elaborate, yet misleading, drawings of the June 1989 edition of *Texas Monthly*. With the headline “The Matamoros Devil Murders,” Gary Cartwright distorts images of Mexican border people. By claiming that different aspects of *curanderismo* and *santería* were involved in the slayings, Cartwright mistakenly ties *santería* with devil worship and “mestizo superstition.” The drawings he shares with U.S. audiences simulated fear and paranoia. For example, one drawing shows Constanzo holding a machete over a cauldron placed on top of firewood while smoke exits his nostrils. At the same time, an evil spirit lurks around during a ceremony, while two *Mexicanos* comfortably witness the ceremony eating and praying or chanting.³⁶ Another picture depicts Constanzo sacrificing a chicken while a member of his cult, who appears to be guarding a blindfolded Mark Kilroy, is eating during the ceremony.³⁷ These images perpetuate stereotypes of Mexicans as being brutes and uncivilized, uncaring for human life. These examples of media stereotypes expressed towards Mexican border culture and people fall within the cognitive-transactional model as U.S. media portrayed Mexican border culture and people negatively. Mexican media

³⁴ Ibid., 42.

³⁵ Ibid., 59.

³⁶ Cartwright, 79.

³⁷ Ibid., 83.

responded to stereotypes U.S. media created, but U.S. media had a more powerful effect on the development of self-schemas and the overall shaping of belief. More specifically, the experiences that the media encountered in covering the cult killings with the atmosphere they perceived as common was presented to a greater audience. Hence, these acquisitions of stereotypes by the media of Mexican border spaces, created negative “responses” as U.S. media acquired stereotypes and compared U.S. society with that of Mexico.³⁸

U.S. MEDIA PORTRAYAL OF MEXICAN LAW ENFORCEMENT AND U.S. POLITICIANS

U.S. media introduced the Mexican border region as plagued with violence. Soon, audiences across the United States were reading about other killings that occurred along the U.S.-Mexico border. Before the “drug cult” killings were discovered, mass killings occurred in Agua Prieta, Mexico where nine bodies were discovered inside a dried water well, while in Tucson, Arizona five bodies were found.³⁹ However, since no U.S. citizens were killed, the incidents did not immediately become public in the United States. Incidents that occurred years earlier were being published in the press to inform readers of ongoing violence in Mexico. An incident in Matamoros, where gunmen entered a clinic and gunned down the leader of a local drug ring along with other people, was published to let U.S. audiences know of the harsh realities of border violence and the never ending war on drugs.⁴⁰ Border Patrol agent, Gus García, recalled how as a youth

³⁹ “Parents’ pain: Why was son killed,” *USA Today*, 12 April 1989, 3A; “12 Bodies Found Near Border Called Drug Cult Victims,” *Los Angeles Times*, 12 April 1989, 16.

⁴⁰ “Police blame border killings on gangland feud over drugs,” *Houston Post*, 25 April 1989, 7A.

he and his friends enjoyed swimming in the Rio Grande “with no thought of danger.” “Now, people don’t dare go near the river,” he added, “there’s so much junk being brought across.”⁴¹ In the meantime, Matamoros residents were upset that Mexican officials “ignored” the disappearance of the other fourteen victims of the “drug cult” until a U.S. citizen was kidnapped.

Tamaulipas state attorney general Anibel Pérez Vargas and Matamoros Mayor Fernando Montemayor Lozano were confronted by 100 angry Matamoros citizens who complained at the lack of concern by Mexican authorities for “missing people” cases. Pérez, Montemayor, and other Mexican officials were accused of searching for “missing people” only after being pressured by U.S. law enforcement searching for Kilroy. Additionally, reporters were accusing state officials of corruption. “That’s your opinion,” stated Pérez to a reporter accusing state officials of accepting bribes and “allowing criminals out of prison early.”⁴² Pressed by reporters as to why disappearances in Mexico were not given the kind of attention given in searching for Kilroy, Montemayor “interrupted and said Pérez had to leave for an appointment in Monterrey.”⁴³ Yet while being criticized for the lack of funds made available to fight crime, Pérez and Montemayor reminded audience members that “police were investigating all disappearances reported to them, including reports of victims found at Santa Elena.”⁴⁴ Aside from criticism Mexican officials received at Matamoros town meetings, U.S. officials were criticizing the competence of Mexican law enforcement for responding slowly to crimes that involve U.S. citizens. Then again, Mexican residents living in the

⁴¹ “Torrent of Violence by the Rio Grande,” *New York Times*, 17 April 1989, A-14.

⁴² “Matamoros thron angry at officials,” *The Houston Post*, 14 April 1989, A-18.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

United States expressed resentment towards U.S. opinions of Mexican law enforcement. “Many here in the United States were saying in the news that it would be impossible for the Mexican authorities to catch them,” stated Leticia González of Matamoros, “and we’ve seen that they caught them.”⁴⁵ Fact of the matter was that Mexican officials and law enforcement were being portrayed as completely corrupt.

Popular belief in the United States depicts Mexican law enforcement involved in trafficking drugs and granting drug organizations protection. Moreover, Mexican police bear a stigma of profiling and harassing U.S. citizens in Mexico. “People drive like madmen in Matamoros...accidents are always disasters for Americans,” stated Jim Schutze.⁴⁶ “The matter of the *mordida*, or bribe, is always delicate with police,” Schutze adds, “trouble if you don’t pay...trouble if you offer when you are not supposed to.”⁴⁷ Media coverage of the cult killings questioned the credibility of Mexican police for various reasons. First, U.S. and Mexican officials conducted unprecedented press conferences following the discovery at Santa Elena that allowed media representatives from both sides of the border to ask suspected cult members questions. During these press conferences Cameron County Lieutenant Sheriff George Gavito and U.S. Customs agent Oran Neck explained in detail the kidnapping of Mark Kilroy, based on confessions of detained cult members in Matamoros. According to Gavito and Neck, Kilroy’s kidnappers had police sirens, professional handcuffs, and other police equipment, which facilitated “*los Aihjados de Satán*” to kidnap people. Former State Judicial Police Chief, Silvio Brusolo, uncle of cult member Sergio Martínez, was said to provide the cult with such items, including protection. “They were protected,” stated Gavito, “these people

⁴⁵ “Border residents express relief,” *Corpus Christi Caller Times*, 8 May 1989, 4A.

⁴⁶ Schutze, 45.

⁴⁷ Schutze, 45.

were big, and big people buy protection.”⁴⁸ “The main facilitators of that process,” stated Jim Schutze, are “the officials, who are really in charge, are the smugglers.”⁴⁹

Second, *comandante* Silvio Brusolo was believed to not only be paid off by the Hernández family, but also fled the country after being threatened by Benítez, who discovered Brusolo’s affiliation with the “drug cult.”⁵⁰ Benítez revealed Brusolo’s affiliation with the “drug cult” after cult member Sergio Martínez claimed to be Brusolo’s nephew. Upon hearing that Martínez and members of the Hernández family had been arrested, Brusolo acted quickly to take over the investigation from Benítez. At Rancho Santa Elena, Benítez and Brusolo had a major confrontation over the jurisdiction of the discovered ranch, since Brusolo was *comandante* of the State Judicial Police, in charge of state-wide murder cases. “You tell your men to get back into their cars,” cried Benítez, “turn them around and head back into town.”⁵¹ “Your nephew is one of the killers,” added Benítez, “they used red lights and handcuffs like the police. As far as I am concerned you are a suspect!”⁵² Gavito stated that the confrontation became a tense situation once Benítez and his men began cocking their weapons.

A third reason Mexican police were considered corrupt, came after Richard Hoffman, attorney of Serafin Hernández Rivera, brother of Elio Hernández and who was arrested in Houston, Texas, made the press aware of torture tactics Mexican police were using to get confessions out of captured cult members. Hoffman was concerned that testimonies obtained through “corrupt torture sessions, in the presence of special agents,”

⁴⁸ “Estaba Protegida por la Policía de Matamoros: Jorge Gavito,” *El Bravo de Matamoros*, 18 April 1989, B-10; “Cult drug ring had police ties,” *The Brownsville Herald*, 13 April 1989, 1A

⁴⁹ Schutze, 60.

⁵⁰ George Gavito, phone interview with author, written notes, 27 January 2005.

⁵¹ Kilroy and Stewart, 122.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 122-123.

were going to affect his client who was in U.S. custody.⁵³ Some torture tactics reported in U.S. media included suffocation with a plastic bag over heads of suspects, squirting mineral water up their noses, and electrical shock to various body parts.⁵⁴ When asked in a press conference how Mexican authorities got the suspected cult members to confess so quickly, Gavito pointed to a bottle of mineral water and stated that Mexican police like to “squirt mineral water up the noses of reluctant witnesses...it leaves no physical evidence of abuse.”⁵⁵ Although Gavito had denied witnessing any mistreatment of cult members in custody, he had made references of torture tactics by Mexican police. “You have to remember, there’s a difference in confessing in Mexico and confessing over here,” stated Gavito, “take it from there.”⁵⁶ In an interview conducted by a *Houston Post* reporter, Sara Aldrete claimed she was tortured by way of electrical shock, suffocation, and “almost raped.”⁵⁷ Although Aldrete did not show signs of suffocation or physical abuse, she used the forum to plea for innocence.⁵⁸

Thus, Mexican police were categorized as corrupt. Weeks after discovering Santa Elena, Mexican police, who arrested Miguel Ángel Félix Gallardo, head of the Guadalajara drug cartel, were questioned by the press. U.S. coverage of Félix Gallardo’s apprehension portrayed police as corrupt and granting the kingpin protection for his drug operations. Like in the case at Santa Elena, while Mexican media were content with efforts of the police to stop drug trafficking, U.S. press highlighted the possibility of police corruption and affiliation with drug lords. Furthermore, the media praised Juan

⁵³ “Cult suspect in Houston jail,” *The Houston Post*, 18 April 1989, A-1; “Attorney: U.S. officers watched torture of cult suspects,” *The McAllen Monitor*, 5 July 1989, 9A.

⁵⁴ “Cult killing suspect’s attorney alleges torture,” *The Brownsville Herald*, 21 May 1989, 2A; “Aldrete claims she was tortured,” *The Brownsville Herald*, 26 May 1989, 2A.

⁵⁵ Cartwright, 82.

⁵⁶ “Attorney: U.S. officers watched torture of cult suspects,” *The McAllen Monitor*, 5 July 1989, 9A.

⁵⁷ “Aldrete claims she was tortured,” *The Brownsville Herald*, 26 May 1989, 2A.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

Benítez Ayala for his cooperation with U.S. law enforcement. Some newspaper articles questioned his future collaborations and efforts to combat the drug wars. “The level of cooperation ... is unprecedented,” stated Jane Grandolfo, *Houston Post* reporter, but “it may be too soon to tell what direction this young *comandante* will take.”⁵⁹ Grandolfo added that according to the Mexican Association of Editors, “neutral” journalism group, Benítez stood “accused of torturing prisoners and extorting money from drug lords,” as *comandante* in Oaxaca.⁶⁰ As U.S. media portrayed Mexican officials and law enforcement agents as submissive to corruption and drug cartels, the posturing of politicians such as then San Antonio Mayor Henry Cisneros and Texas State Attorney General Jim Mattox, were seen as helpful and key elements in the search for Mark Kilroy and discovery at Santa Elena.

During the search for Kilroy, Henry Cisneros met with Matamoros Mayor Fernando Montemayor Lozano to help search for Kilroy. Cisneros was Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari’s college roommate at Harvard and had come to Matamoros to help accelerate the search. After the search for Kilroy reached its fourth week, law enforcement agents noticed a steady decline in news coverage and phone calls with possible tips. Jim Kilroy suggested to George Gavito that Cisneros needed to be contacted to help in the search. “All the people down here, in the Valley and in northern Mexico, are his fans,” affirmed Gavito, “I think he can do us some good because he is so well liked...like Fernando Valenzuela.”⁶¹ Cisneros, agreeing to help the Kilroy family,

⁵⁹ “The man who led the chase,” *The Houston Post*, 18 April 1989, A-8.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Kilroy and Stewart, 78; “Cisneros, Mattox receive credit in case,” *The Houston Post*, 12 April 1989, 13A.

held a press conference in which he pleaded for information that led to Mark Kilroy's whereabouts.

At some stage in his conference, Cisneros stated, "I have no presumptions about what one more appeal can do...I do know these are very good people who have been dealt a bad hand."⁶² A day before the discovery at Santa Elena, Cisneros had a meeting with Benítez, to encourage him to continue working with U.S. law enforcement in the search for Kilroy. "I am a very good friend of the president," encouraged Cisneros, "I am going to write him a letter to tell him that you are the only one who has cooperated in trying to find Mark Kilroy."⁶³ A day after the meeting between Cisneros and Benítez, Mexican law enforcement discovered Rancho Santa Elena, but more importantly, the whereabouts of Mark Kilroy. Therefore, since the discovery occurred a day after Cisneros held a press conference and talked to Benítez, Cisneros obviously received credit for pressuring Mexican law enforcement. "Matamoros police and Tamaulipas state police dragged their feet," maintained Gavito, "the vigor of the Mexican probe illustrated the weakness of the inquiry conducted by local and state Mexican police."⁶⁴ Additionally, Oran Neck and George Gavito were given praise in U.S. media for their roles in finding Kilroy. Gavito appeared on talk shows such as *Oprah*, *Geraldo*, and *Larry King Live*. Benítez and other law enforcement agents, on the other hand, were beginning to have their credibility questioned in the U.S. media outlets.

Upon discovering the body of Mark Kilroy, U.S. politicians, active in searching for the premedical student, began granting interviews in the U.S. press. Most notably,

⁶² "Mayors Meet to Discuss Kilroy Disappearance," *The Valley Morning Star*, 11 April 1989, 9A; "New appeal made in Kilroy case," *The Brownsville Herald*, 10 April 1989, 1A.

⁶³ Kilroy and Stewart, 95.

⁶⁴ "Cisneros, Mattox receive credit in case," *The Houston Post*, 12 April 1989, 13A.

Texas Attorney General Jim Mattox. Everywhere television and photography cameras turned, Mattox appeared. He had arrived at the scene of the crime immediately after its discovery and appeared in television interviews answering questions about the discovery at Santa Elena. In some cases, the attorney general made such unusual comments that his appearance at the crime scene came into question by other politicians. "Parts of the men's bodies had been cooked and eaten by gang members," said Mattox.⁶⁵ When asked about the horrifying event, Mattox compared it to "the kind of thing you'd expect to see in the deepest, darkest Africa."⁶⁶ This horrendous comment became a ticket for Mattox to appear on *Larry King Live* and radio call-in shows explaining the "Africa" comment. Mattox explained that his comment was taken out of proportion, claiming that "the Mexican satanic ring had perverted some of the culture and religions that had been based in Africa and the Caribbean."⁶⁷ While this statement is in some aspects true, Mattox began receiving calls from even the British press. "I'm getting calls from the British Press," stated Elna Christopher, spokeswoman for Mattox, "they're really interested in the satanic aspect."⁶⁸

Texas Governor Bill Clements understood quite well Mattox's motives for appearing at the crime scene and conducting interviews. "I know he has no authority whatsoever," stated Clements, "he has no jurisdiction. He has no purpose...except to get in front of a television camera...his involvement might be a publicity stunt."⁶⁹ Skeptics believed that Mattox wanted to appear as an active member in the search and discovery

⁶⁵ "Mark Kilroy was victim of drug war," *The Raymondville Chronicle*, 13 April 1989, Vol. 68, no.15.

⁶⁶ "Wagging tongues debate Mattox's motives for visiting Valley," *The Houston Post*, April 15, 1989, 14A.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid; "Clements questions Mattox appearance," *Dallas Morning News*, 13 April 1989, 26A; "Clements blasts AG's visibility," *The Houston Chronicle*, 13 April 1989, 16A.

of Kilroy since he was seeking the Democratic nomination for the 1990 Texas gubernatorial race. To dispute allegations of political grandstanding, Mattox claimed that his appearances came after the Kilroy family asked for his help in searching for Mark. "I am somewhat distressed that somebody like the governor, who has not lifted a finger," stated Mattox, "would criticize some of us that have been involved."⁷⁰ Nevertheless, Mattox received credit in the press for pressuring Mexican law enforcement during the search for Kilroy. He was praised for making phone calls to officials in Mexico making sure the search was not dropped.⁷¹

Soon after the discovery, politicians complained at the lack of a Mexican death penalty and capital punishment available for apprehended cult members. Politicians were appalled at the maximum sentence time in Mexico, which consisted of fifty-years in prison. The media began describing the conditions and processes of the Mexican judicial system. Given that Mexico's judicial system is not similar to that of the United States, media descriptions were that of a "third world" judicial system, where there are "no courtroom, no jury, and no taking the witness stand."⁷²

In Mexico, defenses and prosecutions submit written statements and evidence supporting their case. The assigned judge to the case then reviews each submission and determines whether a crime is considered a crime under Mexican law. On the other hand, court procedures "looks like theater, the lawyers look like actors on stage," said Ignacio Burgoa Orihuela, Mexican legal expert.⁷³ Burgoa also stated that an American judge has too much power compared to Mexican judges who are highly trained and elected or voted

⁷⁰ "Mattox disputes charges of political grandstanding," *Dallas Morning News*, 14 April 1989, 14A.

⁷¹ "Clements blasts AG's visibility," *The Houston Chronicle*, 13 April 1989, 16A.

⁷² "Mexican justice different brand than U.S. system," *The Houston Post*, 16 April 1989, A-1.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, A-24.

into their position of power.⁷⁴ Overlooked by the press is that the Mexican judicial system is modeled after Napoleonic laws. Mexico practices Civil Law. The United States is modeled after British Common Law. The perception is this-Mexico adopted Civil Law, the system in which the tyrant Napoleon ruled. The United States adopted British Common Law, modeled after the “founders” of the United States. Being that the maximum sentence for detained cult members would consist of fifty years, Texas State Representatives decided to take formal action to have detainees extradited for the murder of an American citizen.

State Representative Larry Warner, D-Harlingen, launched an effort to introduce legislation that would allow the state of Texas to prosecute people who kill “Texans” outside of the state.⁷⁵ “If one of our citizens gets murdered abroad, the people back in Texas are the ones who have the right to avenge the victim,” stated Warner, “see it for the victim’s family that justice is done.”⁷⁶ We must remember and realize that many U.S. citizens have been killed in Mexico for various reasons without getting this type of attention. “I think it’s just spontaneous reaction to what happened,” stated Representative Juan Hinojosa, D-McAllen.⁷⁷ Proof of Texas politicians being melodramatic to cult killings came by way of a proposed law that would allow Texas judges to order fingers cut off of apprehended drug dealers as punishment. State Representative Al Edwards, D-Houston, stated that “this whole thing about how cruel and unusual this would be for criminal doesn’t look quite so cruel after what happened to Mark Kilroy and the

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ “Site of cult murders put crimes within jurisdiction of Mexico,” *The Houston Chronicle*, 13 April 1989, 16A.

⁷⁶ “Prosecution in Mexico likely,” *The Houston Post*, 13 April 1989, A-24.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

others.”⁷⁸ “Originally, the upper part of the pinky finger would be removed from the drug dealer’s hand,” stated Edwards, that “will change to the finger of the judge’s choice.”⁷⁹

U.S. media views Mexican drug lords and smugglers as extremely dangerous and powerful. Within Mexican culture, an aspect of resisting a system of dominance is to honor the one who fights against it. The late prominent Mexican American historian and folklorist Américo Paredes reminded his readers that both cultures that share the Río Grande border have great differences and each culture does not accept certain things from the other. While Americans do not accept positive images of smugglers or drug lords, “in (Mexican) folklore there is a tendency to idealize the smuggler,” stated Paredes, “as a variant hero of cultural conflict.”⁸⁰ It is an important concept to remember when looking at the temperament and mind of a people.

CONCLUSION

One common theme of media representations of Matamoros and other border cities is that they are places of danger. “The (U.S.) news media and the people interviewed made it sound as if this could only happen in Mexico,” stated April K. Elpers, resident from Houston, “but it happens in the United States as well.”⁸¹ Still, the image has continued that Matamoros and surrounding communities are to be approached with great caution. In the spring of 2005, with the border violence resulting from the drug cartel wars from Matamoros to Nuevo Laredo, U.S. media relayed news that

⁷⁸ “Slayings could boost bill, legislator says,” *The Houston Post*, 19 April 1989, A-8.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Américo Paredes, “Mexican-American Identity and Culture,” as seen in Sucheng Chan et al., *Peoples of Color in the American West* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1994), 270.

⁸¹ “Horrible killings occur here in the U.S. as well,” *The Houston Chronicle*, 21 April 1989, 11B.

frightened American tourism away from Matamoros, hurting the local economy. While warnings, issued by the American Consulate depicted Matamoros as a dangerous place, the health of its economy has plummeted.

Valley based television station KRGV News Channel Five contributed to this theme, presenting Matamoros as dangerous in various broadcasts. This station broadcasted the government warnings and the “dangers” of crossing into Mexican border towns. The broadcast aired the opinions of people who attempted to cross the border into Mexico. People interviewed in the process of crossing into Mexico returned back home after the television reporter advised them about government warnings. Some, who were interviewed near the border, expressed their views about the border violence, and agreed that due to the dangers and warnings, “they had absolutely no intentions of crossing into Mexico.”⁸² In 1989, “the Americans wanted to magnify the occurrences of Matamoros,” stated Andrés Cuéllar, archivist from Matamoros, “and portray this city as damned.”⁸³ Well, based on the warnings of 2005, Matamoros has been damned.

Another theme consistently found throughout the portrayal of Mexican border people and their culture is the development of the cognitive-transactional model of stereotypes, formulated by communications scholar Gregory Allport. Of importance to this research is the different ways in which media gathered, perpetuated, and enhanced images and stereotypes of coverage during the Matamoros cult killings. Communications expert Travis Linn claims that news coverage of events “relies on stereotypes, because producers need to illustrate news stories with representative examples.”⁸⁴ The examples

⁸² KRGV News Channel Five, Late Local News Broadcast, January 26, 2005.

⁸³ “Narcosatánicos: Solo quedan las paredes,” *Palabra*, 11 April 1999, 10.

⁸⁴ Travis Linn, “Media Methods that lead to Stereotypes.” In Paul M. Lester ed., *Images that Injure: Pictorial Stereotypes in the Media* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996), 15-18.

shared throughout this chapter exemplifies the cognitive-transactional model, however the impact stereotypes had during media coverage of the cult killings carry within themselves a stigma that are seen in this day and age during the portrayal of Mexican border space as dangerous in the spring of 2005. The next chapter will discuss this theme in general, as U.S. media began portraying Matamoros and surrounding communities as dangerous places.

CHAPTER 3

THE "MEDIA SCARE"

*"This will affect Matamoros. But it didn't happen in the U.S., and I don't think it will make any difference here."*¹

*"Now we're on the blacklist. People are going to think that Matamoros is full of bad and dangerous people."*²

The above quotes demonstrate differences of opinion between business people on both sides of the border following the gruesome discovery at Rancho Santa Elena. The latter quote represents common sentiments of Matamoros business men and women, while the former expresses overall feelings of business men and women from the Rio Grande Valley, as they uttered relief that the "drug cult" murders did not occur in the Valley. As outbreaks of rumors and false accounts caused panic and community distress on both sides of the Rio Grande, children became the center of attention. Specifically, media reports of rumors concerning the possibility of fugitive cult members abducting children as part of their "dark" ceremonies caused parents to pull their children out of school. This panic occurred throughout South Texas and Northern Tamaulipas. As mentioned in chapter one, rumors are inevitable during the beginning stages of the

¹ "Killings may affect tourism," *The Houston Post*, 12 April 1989, 12A. Quote stated by Joe Vera, member of the Hidalgo County Chamber of Commerce.

² "Matamoros faces image woes in wake of grisly murders," *The San Antonio Light*, 4 April 1989. Quote stated by Julio De La Cruz, Matamoros Merchant.

media's, coverage of crisis.³ During the crisis in Matamoros, panic overcame normal reactions of people. As this unprecedented event struck Northern Tamaulipas and the Valley by surprise, the media became an important source of information. However, because of structural functionalism, in which society and media work together to bring society back to order, media must practice "press management." The mismanagement of information during crisis can lead to panic and disorderly conduct in affected societies.⁴ Obviously, with rumors being widespread after the discovery at Santa Elena, media failed to manage their press coverage.

Additionally, public opinion⁵ is shaped based on rumors, even stereotypes discussed in media. Public opinion, in turn, is shaped by the dependence of society on media, as explained by Sandra J. Ball-Rokeach and Melvin DeFleur in their "dependence model of media effects." In the dependency model, Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur, explain that audiences depend on media during times of crisis, but media in turn creates uncertainty in society, and thus, an increase in the need for information.⁶ Consequently, dependency on media shapes public opinion. Fact of the matter was that as rumors through media coverage were widespread, concerned parents began responding to media reports of child abductions and of satanic worshippers seeking revenge.

³ Elizabeth M Perse, *Media Effects and Society* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers), 57.

⁴ Doris A. Graber, *Mass Media and American Politics* 4th ed. (Washington DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1993), 232-235.

⁵ Doris A. Graber defines "public opinion" as group consensus about matters of political concern which has developed in the wake of informed discussion." See Doris A. Graber, "The Impact of Media Research on Public Opinion Studies." In Ellen Wartella et al., *Mass Communication Review Yearbook*, Vol. 3, (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1982), 556.

⁶ Sandra J. Ball-Rokeach and Melvin DeFleur, "A Dependency Model of Mass-Media Effects." *Communication Research*, 3, 1976, 16-18.

RAMPANT RUMORS: CHILD ABDUCTIONS AND DEVIL WORSHIP

As reports continued to spread about the Matamoros cult murders, tourism to Matamoros began plummeting. Similarly, front page headlines in Matamoros began placing blame on U.S. authorities for the cause of the “cult killings” and for the escape of Constanzo and Aldrete. They were reported to be in McAllen and Brownsville temporarily before fleeing to Mexico City. On the other hand, U.S. headlines began tarnishing the identity of Matamoros and blaming the city for the never-ending war on drugs along the border. While there is no doubt that the drug trade was at fault for the so-called Matamoros “drug cult” killings, placing a city at fault is not accurate.

It is thus important to focus upon competing media discourse between the Brownsville/Matamoros areas as they both were impacted by the cult killings. While members of the “drug cult” who became fugitives upon the discovery at Rancho Santa Elena, media rumors about their whereabouts became most important and distorted. For example, newspapers were reporting how cult members were spotted on both sides of the border on different occasions. Or how in some instances they were detained but let go, clearly demonstrates a competing media discourse. Specifically, rumors of child abduction by fugitive cult members, rumors of similar “drug cults” existing in the United States and Mexico, and of the whereabouts of remaining Matamoros cult members made headlines on both sides of the border, creating a sense of panic and dismay. In Matamoros, embarrassed by the whole ordeal, city officials began canceling city events, such as *Expofiesta '89*, a festival in which music superstars perform and carnival and game rides are enjoyed. Some politicians lobbied for the return of *Expofiesta* in June of

1989 because the attractions were scheduled to generate millions of *pesos* into Matamoros' ailing economy.

It is no secret that the Matamoros "drug cult" killings created a sense of abnormal concern. People on both sides of the border were increasingly terrified as explicit details of the case were revealed. Basically, with panic came rumors, and with rumors came the shaping of belief. Thus, rumor and everyday gossip hurt Matamoros tourism. A tragedy so shocking and inexplicable in an area where foreign capital is one of the main sources of income did not benefit the city of Matamoros in any way. Soon, Winter Texans and spring breakers avoided Matamoros, especially after the discovery at Santa Elena generated fear of more abductions and murders.

Like other major news stories, speculation to fulfill coverage of events is a must as media outlets rush to bring the latest news of events. But, too much speculation can lead to rumors, which tend to shape the beliefs of people if taken too seriously. Media coverage of the Matamoros cult murders, for example, began speculating upon the performed actions of the "drug cult." Specifically, while people were wondering exactly how to classify the cult, many reporters labeled the cult's actions as a part of "devil worship." That blood letting and human sacrifice are considered part of satanic rituals, based on the blood shattering and the human sacrifices performed, parents began fearing for their children's safety. Consequently, news reports of fugitive cult leaders at large brought forth rumors of child abductions. This rumor further developed after Mexican police raided the apartment of Sara Aldrete and discovered a blood stained alter, along with infant clothing. Mexican police and news reporters began speculating upon the possibility of children being used in the rituals; thus alarming parents about their

children's safety as Sara Aldrete and Constanzo remained at large. Kidnapping rumors quickly circulated immediately following the discovery of Rancho Santa Elena, particularly throughout the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

On April 11, the day the Santa Elena murders were discovered, the Pharr, San Juan, Alamo (PSJA) Independent School District first reported that over 80 concerned parents, well aware of the "reality" of child abductions, took their children out early from Alamo Junior High.⁷ Panic erupted following a report from a Mexican radio broadcast that the fugitive members of the "drug cult" were to soon kidnap 40 students for satanic use.⁸ Moreover, parents were not only exposed to rumors of child abductions by the fugitive members, but by satanic worshipers that were out seeking revenge for the capture of the Matamoros cult. Other reports claimed that fugitive cult members were to kidnap children unless the captured cult members were released.⁹ A telephone operator at the Federal Police office in Matamoros put it best, "they (news media) are creating the psychosis with all these rumors."¹⁰ At this point in time, media coverage and law enforcement investigation of the "drug cult" still were operating under the devil worship phenomena. Rumors of satanic cults in the Valley spread even further. Rumors were supported by the fact that on April 11, *The Age of Fire Church*, a church in which the surrounding community presumed to be associated with "devil worship," was burnt to the ground by unknown arsonists. Pharr Fire Marshall Juan Ruiz stated that arson was not suspected and that no evidence of satanic paraphernalia was ever found.¹¹ Rubén de León, Alamo Police Chief, stated that the pastor for *The Age of Fire Church* told him that

⁷ "False rumors panic many Valley schools," *The Brownsville Herald*, 14 April 1989, 1B.

⁸ "Cult Kidnap rumor stirs Valley panic," *The San Antonio Express*, 14 April 1989, 1A.

⁹ "Cult child-stealing rumors worry Matamoros parents," *The Valley Morning Star*, 20 April 1989, 1B.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

his church was Christian and strongly opposed to Satan.¹² After the fire, the PSJA school district was engulfed by rumors of child abductions by enraged devil worshipers, which resulted in parents taking their children out of school early. The principal of Alamo Junior High, Scott Owings was quoted in *The Brownsville Herald* as saying that while over eighty parents picked up their children early from school, one-fourth of the students attending his junior high did not attend classes.¹³ Ernesto Alvarado, former assistant superintendent in the PSJA School District, reported that 40 percent of elementary students and 14 percent of secondary students were absent on Friday April 14, three days after the Rancho Santa Elena discovery.¹⁴ In addition, secretaries at the Edinburg Consolidated School District reported receiving over 100 phone calls from concerned parents. Overall, some 400 children had missed school in three different districts.¹⁵

To repudiate rumors of child abduction and help parents maintain calm, Scott Owings claimed that the absences were “due to the rainy weather than fear of Satanists.”¹⁶ Additionally, Rubén Yzaguirre, PSJA Board President, sought to promote the education of parents about Satanism, “to make them aware of symbols and other things to watch for.”¹⁷ Cameron County Sheriff Lieutenant George Gavito also helped in the effort to refute false rumors as well. As one of the main investigators in the “drug cult” episode, he and his family had to personally deal with rumors of his son being abducted by devil worshippers, attending St. Joseph Junior High at the time. Yet as Gavito’s wife expressed concern for their child’s safety, Gavito did not want to take him

¹² “Rumors of child abductions sweep the Valley,” *The McAllen Monitor*, 14 April 1989, 7A.

¹³ “False rumors panic many schools,” *The Brownsville Herald*, 14 April 1989, 1B.

¹⁴ “Cult Kidnap rumor stirs Valley panic,” *The San Antonio Express*, 14 April 1989, 1A.

¹⁵ Jim Kilroy and Bob Stewart, *Sacrifice: A Father’s Determination to Turn Evil into Good*. (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1990), 142.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

out of school. He wanted to set an example and prove that the rumors were false. "I told my wife not to take him out of school," stated Gavito, "because doing so would cause commotion."¹⁸ Yet, rumors still persisted, not at all diffusing the constant reports of Satanism in the border region.

According to Scott Owings, "pranksters" were making phone calls to schools to "instill fear in people."¹⁹ False reports of elementary and junior high students making claims of dangerous activity around their campuses made the "rumor-mill" stir. For example, a student reported a suspicious woman standing in front of Farias Elementary School holding a knife, and an Alamo Junior High student claimed to be chased by a man with "a star on his head" down Business Highway 83.²⁰ A fourteen year old high school girl claimed to have discovered a note on the school grounds that stated that she was going to be killed. These reports were investigated and resulted as rumors instigated by students. In the city of Alamo alone, over 200 calls were reportedly made to the police department of people inquiring about the rumors of child abductions from Farias Elementary and Alamo Junior High. Principle Scott Owings stated, "there were rumors flying all over the place. Every time I heard one, it would be changed."²¹

"It's like a horror movie," stated Margie McCarthy, public relations director at PSJA, "the young children may be affected by all this news coverage."²² McCarthy, critical of uncensored news coverage that affected people, specifically children, understood the media process. On one hand, she claimed that media coverage was

¹⁸ Port of Brownsville Chief Of Police/Security George Gavito. Phone interview, hand written notes, 27 January 2005.

¹⁹ "Rumors of child abductions sweep the valley," *The McAllen Monitor*, 14 April 1989, 7A.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ "False rumors panic many schools," *The Brownsville Herald*, 14 April 1989, 1B.

²² "Children vulnerable to reports," *The McAllen Monitor*, 16 April 1989, 1A.

important to keep the public aware of the tragedy and of “satanic” activities the community was experiencing at the time. Her main concern was the overall effect that media coverage could have had on children, because “news media may not realize that young children are very impressionable.”²³ McCarthy suggested that the media needed to focus on covering safety for children rather than scattering “undue fear and panic.”²⁴

Like Margie McCarthy, many Valley teachers emphasized parental involvement in educating children to suppress their fears after the discovery at Rancho Santa Elena. Carlos Benavídez, a history teacher at Homer Hanna High School in Brownsville, expressed his concern, “I felt that kids were visibly upset about the whole thing,” stated Benavídez, “I feel like it needed to come out.”²⁵ Upon hearing the stories being reported in the media about discovered shallow graves, Benavídez believed children needed to express their feelings about the grisly discovery in Matamoros. Benavídez was worried for his students as some began expressing the need to carry weapons for protection.²⁶ Many school administrators and teachers feared that students would turn to occult practices resulting from uncensored media coverage saturating the Valley. In order to discourage students from participating in cult activity and from partying in Matamoros, teachers believed students’ opinions and thoughts needed to be heard and expressed. Child psychiatrist, Gary Whit-worth from McAllen, Texas stated that while parents did not have all the answers to their child’s worries and fears, “listening and showing they care will enable the child to open up to their parents.”²⁷ But the Valley was not the only community in which parents were trying to help their children understand the latest

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ “Teachers say Matamoros killings should be discussed,” *The Brownsville Herald*, 13 April 1989.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

events. In Texas towns such as Hemphill, Pecos, Lubbock, and Santa Fe rumors of kidnappings by fugitive cult members and satanic worshipers seeking revenge were out of control as well.

In Hemphill, a 930-student district, hundreds of students were absent on Friday April 21, ten days after the "drug cult" had been discovered.²⁸ But rumors in this town spread in a different way. While the rumors of student abductions were passed along, gossip was that teachers were involved with cults to kidnap. Concerned parents picked up their children early from school, interfering with the schedule of six weeks exams. Teachers and law enforcement agents inferred that the rumors were part of students' pranks to get away from taking the exams.²⁹

In May, similar rumors plagued Pecos, Texas nearly a month after initial rumors had begun. But parents did not go as far as pulling students out of school early. Instead, they were aware of existing reports that a group of devil worshippers were planning to meet Sunday May 7, somewhere between Pecos and Fort Stockton, Texas.³⁰ According to the reports, the supposed devil worshippers' meeting was to plan the abduction of seventeen children under the age of four to use them in sacrificial rituals.³¹ Rumors persisted in areas at least 500 miles away from Matamoros. Hempstead, for example, 550 miles away from Matamoros, felt the impact of the Matamoros cult murders as well. In Lubbock, Texas, religious groups led a successful campaign to cancel Halloween festivities in October due to the continuous fear and rumors concerning children's

²⁸ "Rumors of kidnapping, ritual killing scare Hemphill students," *The Houston Post*, 23 April 1989, 15A.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ "Kidnapping Rumors Sweep Pecos," *The Valley Morning Star*, 2 May 1989, 9A.

³¹ *Ibid.*

safety.³² One specific rumor in Lubbock contended that devil worshipers were out to kidnap “blond” children, giving the town more reason to cancel Halloween.³³ In addition, the community of Santa Fe, Texas, home of the Kilroy family, similar rumors spread. More specifically, news of Constanzo and Aldrete hiding from law enforcement created rumors in Santa Fe about the fugitives seeking revenge on the Kilroy family and on the community.³⁴ A rumor at Santa Fe junior high school circulated that a head of a black cat was seen rolling down the halls.³⁵

The Texas region was not the only place in which rumors were widespread. Matamoros and Valle Hermoso, a town south of Matamoros, established in the 1930s by Mexicans who were victims of U.S. repatriation, shared the same concern about the safety of their children. Unlike the Valley and the rest of Texas, citizens in Matamoros and Valle Hermoso awaited the “drug cult’s” next actions rather than taking their children out of school early. While citizens of Matamoros were concerned for the safety of their children, *Matamorenses* were disturbed by the report that Elio Hernández claimed to have sacrificed his own nephew. Hernández asserted that he was not aware that the child was his nephew, José Luis García, until they were proceeding to bury him.³⁶ José Luis García, a Mexican citizen age fourteen, became the youngest victims of the “drug cult.” Although younger than Mark Kilroy, José Luis’ disappearance never got the same press coverage as Kilroy, nor did he have political figures calling for press

³² Dr. Michael L. Faubion, Associate professor of History, UT-Pan American, Personal Interview, February 2, 2005, Edinburg, Texas.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Kilroy and Stewart, 175.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ “Calles sin niños,” *El Bravo de Matamoros*, 17 April 1989, A6.

conferences to advise the public about his disappearance.³⁷ In fact, the parents of José Luis, Isidoro and Ericada García, did not have financial backing to afford a body bag to bury their son, found decapitated by the “drug cult.” To explain how José Luis would end up as a victim of the cult, it is believed that José Luis either witnessed a shipment of drugs arriving at the Santa Elena Ranch, or was picked up as he tended to the family’s livestock along the roads leading to the cult’s ranch.³⁸ According to Ángel Virgen Alvarado, reporter for *El Bravo de Matamoros*, Hernández’s confession stated that after the “drug cult” could not find anyone else to sacrifice, the cult sequestered a kid who was looking for a lost goat to use in one of their dark ceremonies.³⁹ Breaking news of José Luis being the nephew of one of the cult’s leaders created terror in Matamoros. The common sentiment shared in Matamoros was that if the “drug cult” was sacrificing members of their own family, there was no telling who the cult would use for their occult practices. Soon, the streets of Matamoros were clear of any children playing soccer or other sports. Like in Texas, parents in Matamoros guarded their children carefully from any suspicious activity. To add to the confusion and fear, teachers throughout Mexico were planning a strike to demand a wage increase. While no kids were reported kidnapped in Matamoros, a rumor in Valle Hermoso of an attempted kidnapping that supposedly occurred spread quickly.

According to Mexican newspaper reports, two men driving a black late model Ford Grand Marquise tried to abduct two school girls walking to their homes from *El*

³⁷ “Family has no body bag in which to bury son, 14,” *The Brownsville Herald*, 13 April 1989, 1A. In this article, his mother makes this claim, but stated that if it were not for Kilroy she would have not found her son.

³⁸ “Calles sin niños,” *El Bravo de Matamoros*, 17 April 1989, A6; “Family has no body bag in which to bury son, 14,” *The Brownsville Herald*, 13 April 1989, 1A.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

Jardín de Niños School in Valle Hermoso. While many questioned the credibility of a report made by the girls, a man, riding his bicycle near the supposed incident, witnessed two men trying to lure the students into their black car.⁴⁰ To secure the town, several branches of the Valle Hermoso's police department set up search posts to investigate all cars that matched the description of the reported black car. Additionally, police advised teachers not to let children out of classrooms throughout the day, for fear of fulfilled threats by "*Los Ahijados de Satán*," (devil's godchildren).⁴¹ In the meantime, precautionary mothers preferred picking up their children after school rather than having them walk alone or ride the public transportation system. Local police and parents were not taking chances while the leaders of the "drug cult", or *Narcosatánicos* (drug-Satanists), were on the loose.⁴²

Similar to Valley rumors, rumors in Northern Tamaulipas of "devil worshippers" seeking revenge by kidnapping kids if the captured cult members were not released were out of control. To protect students and professors alike, on April 17, classes in some Tamaulipas cities were suspended indefinitely. According to school teacher Aurora Pérez García, classes were canceled so that "parents could keep a closer eye on their children just in case the satanic cult fulfills their threats."⁴³

Obviously, the rates of panic between Mexico and the United States varied according to the immediacy of the case at hand. Law enforcement agents in Mexico emphasized a greater deal of precautions than law enforcement in Texas, even though

⁴⁰ "En Vehículo Negro Pretendieron Secuestrar Ayer a dos Niños," *El Bravo de Matamoros*, Sección Valle Hermoso, 18 April 1989, B9.

⁴¹ *Los Ahijados de Satán* is a term coined in the Mexican press when referring to the "drug cult."

⁴² *Narcosatánicos* is a term coined by the Mexican press when referring to the "drug cult."

⁴³ "Suspenden las Actividades Escolares por Temor a Secuestro de los Niños," *El Bravo de Matamoros*, Sección Valle Hermoso, 18 April 1989, B9.

prior investigation discovered that Constanzo had fled to Mexico City. Of importance, not all rumors circulated just about safety of children and of “devil worship.” Rumors of the fugitive cult members’ whereabouts and future actions, as reported in the media, caused a sense of panic around the United States and Mexico. Furthermore, after the capture of Aldrete and the remaining cult members, doubts of Constanzo’s death and news of similar cults existing in different areas of the United States brought forth analogous sentiments of panic and trepidation throughout the country.

RAMPANT RUMORS: THE CULT IS ON THE LOOSE

Rumors of Constanzo’s next move in the United States became a game of “hide and seek,” as law enforcement speculated on *El Padrino*’s whereabouts. Since Constanzo was originally from Miami, Florida, television station WPLG in Miami reported of the possibility that Constanzo might seek refuge in Miami.⁴⁴ This became apparent given that his mother, Aurora González Del Valle, lived in the Florida city. According to the news bulletin, the Metro-Dade Police had been alerted by other law enforcement agencies to stay on alert about the possibility of Constanzo heading towards his hometown.⁴⁵ Receiving news about Constanzo heading to Florida not only put the police on alert, but also the community, beginning to feel the fear of an event that happened more than 1,000 miles away. In Texas, rumors that Constanzo might be found in Houston began hitting media airwaves. Houston was seen as a possible hiding place for Constanzo after car titles and department store receipts were confiscated in some of his apartments in Mexico, revealing that Constanzo did personal transactions in Houston.

⁴⁴ “Manhunt launched for cult leader,” *The McAllen Monitor*, 13 April 1989, 1A.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

According to the FBI, Houston seemed like a logical place for Constanzo to seek refuge since the Hernández family had drug connections in the metropolitan city.⁴⁶

Additionally, in 1988, Houston police discovered altars, analogous to those found in the apartments of Aldrete and Constanzo in Mexico, during several house raids that belonged to drug traffickers. As a result, law enforcement officials began speculating Houston to be a possible hiding place for Constanzo and other cult members.

As details unfolded about Constanzo's drug ties throughout the United States, the state of Illinois also went on high alert. But no single city was specifically pinpointed as a target. While questions began to surface as to why of all states Illinois was chosen as an area of interest for Constanzo, Illinois State Police Master Sergeant Clifford Mann speculated that Constanzo might have interest in hiding in Illinois since part of Hernandez's drug network started in Illinois.⁴⁷ As if these rumors were not enough to cause panic in areas throughout the United States, according to an eyewitness, Constanzo was spotted in a convenience store in Clovis, New Mexico.⁴⁸ Moreover, Alvaro de León, alias "*El Duby*," was supposedly spotted in Matamoros crossing the U.S.-Mexico border by car. According to the report, a tense and nervous "*ahijado de satán*" was seen as a passenger in a grey Chrysler Celebrity, almost lying down in the car's seat.⁴⁹ Since U.S. and Mexican authorities did not recognize the fugitive cult member, newspaper articles reporting the presence of De León in Matamoros stated that authorities did not recognize

⁴⁶ "Gang leader had ties in Houston," *The McAllen Monitor*, 19 April 1989, 10A.

⁴⁷ "Police say leaders may go to Illinois," *The McAllen Monitor*, 15 April 1989, 1A and 10A.

⁴⁸ "Gang leader had ties in Houston," *The McAllen Monitor*, 19 April 1989, 10A.

⁴⁹ "¡El Duby Está en la Ciudad!," *El Bravo de Matamoros*, 1 May 1989, B-11.

“*El Doby*” because the Matamoros “drug cult” murders had now been left in the “*archivo del olvido*,” (archive of the forgotten).⁵⁰

Then, *El Bravo de Matamoros* speculated that the “godson of satán” was in the city possibly to recruit cult members to continue his dark practices and seek revenge. This in turn created a new sense of panic among *Matamorenses* and the surrounding Valley community. Even though this report would soon prove to be false, as “*El Doby*” would turn up in Mexico City, the media tried to keep the public psyched as to existing dangers that the fugitive cult members presented. More precisely, fear of the “drug cult” reorganizing and causing more harm continued to develop. Hence, incessant rumors persisted in various communities throughout the United States and Mexico. But, not all rumors made their way to the media airwaves. For instance, at the same time rumors presenting dangers for school children were being stretched thin in different communities, Mexican authorities were announcing the possible execution of Sara Aldrete by Constanzo. Accordingly, María Teresa Quintanilla, sister of Constanzo’s body guard Martín Quintana, arrested by Benítez Ayala for suspicion of participating in the drug cult, confessed that Aldrete had fallen victim to one of Constanzo’s sacrificial rituals.⁵¹ In part, rumors such as these brought forth even more panic to communities, and “proved” that cult members were killing even each other.

On May 6, 1989, rumors and possible sightings of cult members were put to rest as the fugitives were arrested after a forty-five minute shoot-out with police in Mexico City. The police had received a helpful tip which led them to the apartment complex where the cult sought sanctuary. A woman from a neighboring apartment had called

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ “¿Sara Ejecutada?,” *El Bravo de Matamoros*, 18 April 1989, A-1.

Mexican law officials to report six gunshots following a loud and vulgar argument between a group of people, specifically a man and a woman.⁵² A street vendor, whose cart was damaged by the gunshots, added that the loud argument was heard from the street.⁵³ As police approached the area they were surprised with an array of bullets coming from an apartment located on the third floor at *Rio Seña 19*. Constanzo knowing that the end was near threw bundles of U.S. dollars and gold coins out the window while shooting his automatic weapon. According to Aldrete and “*El Doby*,” Constanzo did not want the police to enjoy his money, deciding to throw it out the window instead. De León claimed that he was awakened by Constanzo screaming and shouting: “it’s all over, everything is lost!”⁵⁴ Seeing that police were quickly approaching the apartment door, Constanzo demanded his own death at the hands of De León. While wondering why Constanzo wanted to die, a hesitant De León was beginning to be yelled at by Constanzo, who threatened his faith in Hell if he did not shoot him and Quintana. In a press conference that followed the apprehension, De León stated that Constanzo warned that if he did not pull the trigger, he was going to have a very difficult time in Hell. At the same time, De León stated that Aldrete continuously urged and screamed at him to pull the trigger, screaming “*¡hazlo, hazlo ya!*” (do it, do it now!), a claim Aldrete denies. De León, convinced he would kill Constanzo, recalled in the press conference seeing Constanzo hugging Martín, watching them sitting down inside the apartment’s closet, and closing the door waiting for “*El Doby*” to deliver the final blow. Shortly after De León

⁵² Gary Provost, *Across the Border: The True Story of the Satanic Cult Killings in Matamoros* (New York: Pocket Books, 1989), 220-221; “Cult member says he killed Constanzo,” *The Brownsville Herald*, 8 May 1989, 1A.

⁵³ “Cult member says he killed Constanzo,” *The Brownsville Herald*, 8 May 1989, 1A, 10A.

⁵⁴ Provost, 221.

pulled the trigger, Mexican police broke into the apartment, apprehending the remaining cult members.

After captivity of the fugitives, DEA agents in the United States began publicly doubting the presumed death of Constanzo. These doubts about capturing the “drug cult” kingpin, created even more rumors in the media questioning the death of Constanzo. Armando Ramírez, resident agent in charge of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration in Brownsville, claimed that the two bodies that were found in the closet of the cult’s hideout “could not positively be identified.”⁵⁵ Ramírez speculated that Constanzo could have ordered two body doubles to give them time to escape. Ramírez was quoted as saying, “we wouldn’t put it past them to kill two people and substitute (the bodies).”⁵⁶ Doubts surfaced after Mexican Federal Judicial Police stated that the two bodies were not identified as Constanzo and Quintana, and that Mexican authorities were beginning to suspect foul play.⁵⁷ Other members of the “drug cult” insisted that the bodies belonged to their leader and his lover, but authorities could not trust their testimonies until a final autopsy. At this point, nobody knew what to believe since the faces of the two bodies were bullet ridden beyond recognition.

To confirm whether or not the bodies belonged to Constanzo and Quintana, dental and fingerprints records from the Miami Police Department were sent to Mexico City, putting doubts and rumors to rest. Of importance, since pictures confiscated from Constanzo’s personal belongings were much different than the body Mexican police found, many feared the worst. When found in the closet, Constanzo had a mustache and

⁵⁵ “DEA doubts Constanzo really dead,” *The Brownsville Herald*, 8 May 1989, 1A; “Creen que Constanzo Fraguó su Muerte, Huyó y Dejó dos Cadáveres como Falsa Pista,” *El Bravo de Matamoros*, 8 May 1989, A-1.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

a shorter hairstyle, far different than the long haired individual seen in pictures confiscated in his and Aldrete's apartments. With fingerprint matches and tattoos that matched those of other cult members, authorities were able to identify the body of "*El Padrino*." During a press conference, media representatives were allowed to ask questions of Aldrete, De León, Ochoa, and two other women believed to be recruiters for the cult in Mexico City. Out of this press conference, Aldrete was quoted as saying, "*hay otro Padrino*," ("there is another Godfather").⁵⁸

During the press conference, Mexican police stated that an endless chain of members belonging to Constanzo's cult existed in different areas of the United States and Mexico. This claim would be confirmed by Aldrete, De León, and Ochoa. Also, Mexican police believed that another Godfather, dubbed "*un gran Padrino*," existed.⁵⁹ With this new information, media outlets in Mexico and in the United States jumped upon the comments provided by Mexican authorities. If a greater *Padrino* far powerful than Constanzo existed, then what were the odds of another cult "break-out" occurring in Mexico or in the United States? "Who is the *GRAN PADRINO*?" asked Ángel Virgen Alvarado member of the Matamoros press, "could he be From Tamaulipas... Mexico... Matamoros... where?"⁶⁰ Similarly, in the United States, "*La Madrina*" was quoted by the U.S. press, which attended the press conference, as saying "cult members live in Miami."⁶¹ According to Aldrete, Constanzo's cult had followers in Miami, which in many ways seemed plausible since Constanzo's family resided in the Florida City. It was believed that Constanzo even received his training in Santería from Miami based *Santero*

⁵⁸ "Hay Otro Padrino," *El Bravo de Matamoros*, 9 May 1989, A-1.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ "¿Otro 'Padrino'?", *El Bravo de Matamoros*, 9 May 1989, A-5.

⁶¹ "Aldrete says cult members live in Miami," *The Brownsville Herald*, 10 May 1989, 1A.

priests. Additionally, Mexican authorities announced that according to captured cult members, Constanzo from time to time used newborn babies in his ceremonies.⁶²

Stimulating these rumors was the infant clothing discovered in Aldrete's Matamoros apartment. More importantly, anthropologist Raphael Martínez, an expert in Afro-Caribbean occult activity, stated that Constanzo had "fallen so far that he probably believes that only baby's blood can purify him."⁶³

The manner in which both Mexican and U.S. societies handled the rumor situation varied. In the United States, people were not as closely familiar with the issues stemming from the war on drugs. The general public in Matamoros, on the other hand, aware of the dangers that existed because of drug wars, took no chances. If history were a guide, and if rumors being spread in Matamoros carried any truth, rumors were certainly not going to be taken for granted. While public opinion in Matamoros began taking exception to the on-going violence, Matamoros Police agencies began resenting the published articles that generated media rumors.⁶⁴ For example, Matamoros police, specifically, *La Procuraduría General de la República*, were very critical of media coverage that, according to the agency, was nothing but "yellow journalism" created by "certain" Matamoros newspapers. In defense of their content and coverage, the editors of *El Bravo de Matamoros* published a letter claiming that their coverage of the Matamoros cult slayings was in fact necessary due to the dangers that the Matamoros society faced. A case of this magnitude, stated the letter, "is unquestionably a case full of sensational

⁶² "Afirman que Constanzo Usaba Recién Nacidos," *El Excelsior de Mexico*, 12 May 1989. B-1.

⁶³ Kilroy and Stewart, 172.

⁶⁴ "La Sociedad Matamorenses Está Cansada de Tanta Violencia: FML," *El Bravo de Matamoros*, 21 April 1989, A-1; "A Todos Nuestros Lectores," *El Bravo de Matamoros*. This was a letter written by the editors of the Matamoros newspaper to defend their right to cover the Matamoros "drug cult" killings.

characteristics only to be found in the annals of the criminal justice world.”⁶⁵ While not fully addressing initial accusations of “yellow journalism,” the letter went on to state that while they understood that their final product had always been something a whole family can share, the gruesome details of the coverage were necessary to get the message across of a dangerous cult.

Whereas, newspapers and other media outlets in the United States were more discrete about the graphics of their coverage, newspapers in Matamoros published explicit pictures of mutilated bodies and occult objects found at the Santa Elena Ranch.⁶⁶ Furthermore, the editors’ letter stated that their information was very valuable as it became the ultimate source for “media colleagues” from around the world. As highlighted by this letter, *El Bravo* was the major source of information for newspapers such as: *EFE* from Spain, *ANSA* in Italy, *DPA* in Germany, *TASS* from the Soviet Union, *SIN HUA* in Japan, *France Press* in France, among other papers from Central and South America and the United States which also reported the cult killings in their respected countries.⁶⁷ Inclusively, the front pages of a number of newspapers from around Texas and Mexico were published to demonstrate the material that other newspapers other than Matamoros’ were publishing.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ *La Opinión de Matamoros*, 12 April 1989, A-1. The front page has pictures of the decomposed bodies recovered at the ranch, see “‘La Madrina’ y ‘El Doby’ Serán Juzgados en la Ciudad de Mexico,” *El Bravo de Matamoros*, 8 May 1989, B-8. This article contains two pictures of the mutilated bodies.

⁶⁷ “A Todos Nuestros Lectores,” *El Bravo de Matamoros*. A more detailed list of American, Asian, and European countries that covered the Matamoros “drug cult” killings is provided.

COMPETING DISCOURSES

Ironically, where as Mexican Police agencies complained about Matamoros media coverage of the killings, the Matamoros press began publishing reports about how the United States and Mexico had similar problems. The Matamoros press published several articles that claimed the United States shared equal blame with Mexico for occurrences of the Matamoros killings. The Mexican media began publishing articles that blamed U.S. authorities for Constanzo fleeing law enforcement agents. The Matamoros press published several critiques of how U.S. authorities handled the investigation. Citing several police sources, the Matamoros press claimed that the Brownsville police received detailed information from Mexican police about the possibility of Constanzo hiding at the Holiday Inn in Brownsville. But, the Brownsville police never approached him for questioning. Also, the press reported that since Mexican police would be out of jurisdiction to search the Brownsville hotel, Mexican police had specifically given U.S. authorities the room number of the hotel room Constanzo was occupying.⁶⁸ The sentiment that the article fostered was one of police concerns that U.S. authorities were not furthering the investigation in the United States. In an interview, Port of Brownsville Chief of Police and Security George Gavito admitted that U.S. investigators had arrested two cult culprits, not including Constanzo, in the United States, but let them go by mistake, something, he claims “happens all the time.”⁶⁹

Furthermore, the Matamoros press was claiming that besides trafficking drugs Constanzo was crossing undocumented workers into the United States. According to the

⁶⁸ “Policía de Brownsville Deja Huir a ‘El Padrino’ Satánico, Afirman los Agentes Federales,” *El Bravo de Matamoros*, 19 April 1989, B-10.

⁶⁹ Port of Brownsville Chief of Police and Security George Gavito. Phone interview, hand written notes, 27 January 2005. The names of the two culprits that were caught and let go were not identified by Gavito.

article, Silvestre Reyes, former McAllen Police Chief, had been quoted as saying that border agents had been aware that Constanzo was being investigated for smuggling people into the United States before the discovery at Santa Elena Ranch. While Reyes' claims turned out to be false, the intentions of the Matamoros press were to relay a message that U.S. law enforcement agents were not doing enough in their power to capture "*El Padrino*."⁷⁰ Another example of how the Matamoros press portrayed the Valley as equally dangerous was during the child abduction rumors. Alfonso Gómez Argüelles, reporter for *El Bravo de Matamoros*, wrote an article claiming that students from Pan American University confirmed that terror existed in the Valley. While no real article had been written purposely about the terror that plagued Matamoros, this article stated that college students were aware of the terror that plagued the Valley and the satanic activity among them and grade school children.⁷¹

Without a doubt, rumors about the cult killings contributed to the downfall of tourism in Matamoros. An event of this magnitude, along with leading "drug cult" members on the loose, presented dangers to Americans in Matamoros. Port of Brownsville Chief of Police and Security George Gavito stated that the government warning issued in the spring 2005 is one that should have been issued in '89 after the gruesome discovery of Rancho Santa Elena. In the spring of 2005, different warnings were issued throughout the month of January alerting Americans about the dangers in Matamoros with the ongoing violence created between two different drug cartels. Gavito stated "it was then (1989) that the American Consulate needed to have issued warnings to

⁷⁰ For a better understanding of this article, see "'El Padrino' También Traficaba Ilegales a los Estados Unidos," *El Bravo de Matamoros*, April.

⁷¹ "Los Estudiantes de la Panamericana Confirman que hay Terror en el Valle," *El Bravo de Matamoros*, 16 April 1989, A-1.

Americans crossing into Mexico while Constanzo was on the loose, because U.S. citizens were being abducted. Not now when drug dealers are killing themselves.”⁷² He claims that while tourism was heavily affected in Matamoros, he recalls being personally blamed for the decline. While having dinner in Matamoros with other agents, the owner of a very popular restaurant accused Gavito for the decline of tourism in Matamoros. “The owner of the restaurant approached me,” stated Gavito, “he told me, ‘you know, this is your fault that we don’t have any business’. ‘No’, I told him, ‘it’s the fault of the people who murdered those fifteen men, not us.’” The restaurant owner was not the only person expressing his feelings and concerns in public. Matamoros natives residing in other Mexican states made it clear that they had no intentions of returning to their resident city in spite of the cult slayings.⁷³

Matamorenses who lived in other states were fearful of the activity developing in Matamoros. They did not intend to return to what they felt was a “dangerous place.”⁷⁴ A concerned father, whose son was attending a university in Monterrey, Nuevo León, stated that his son had informed him of the efforts conducted by the Monterrey media to promote awareness and the dangers in Matamoros to discourage *regiomontanos*⁷⁵ from visiting Matamoros, hoping tourists preferred visiting Monterrey. “My son called me this afternoon,” stated the concerned father, “he told me that there was a campaign in Monterrey to prevent people from visiting Matamoros and surrounding beaches,

⁷² Port of Brownsville Chief of Police and Security George Gavito. Phone interview, hand written notes, 27 January 2005.

⁷³ “Oriundos de Matamoros No Desean Regresar Jamás a su Ciudad Natal,” *El Bravo de Matamoros*, 17 April 1989, A-2.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Term used to refer to people who live in Monterrey, Nuevo León, Mexico.

including South Padre Island.”⁷⁶ The Matamoros newspaper that published this article also kept its Matamoros readers abreast of the different media outlets across Mexico and the United States that were discouraging people from visiting Matamoros.

Meanwhile, people in Texas continued to voice negative views about the atmosphere in Matamoros. To get a feel for conditions across the border, Guy Cantwell and Mary Flood, reporters for *The Houston Post*, interviewed several Valley travel agents and business managers. Rather than being objective, the reporters published an article that portrayed Matamoros as a dangerous place. Joe Delgadillo, manager of the *Value-Fest Supermarket* in Port Isabel, stated, “oh yeah, it’s scary to go to Matamoros...on the Fourth of July, they shoot their guns in the middle of the street...the party gets wild they shoot their cars...that’s how bad it is.”⁷⁷ Delgadillo even mentioned that Matamoros needed the law to be stricter and control police abuse towards Americans, stating “that if a cop takes you to jail or gives you a ticket, you just give him ten bucks, and he’ll let you go.”⁷⁸

Similarly, Kristi Hallock, a travel agent in McAllen, shared the overall feelings of Valley people when quoted as saying she was afraid of being kidnapped and killed in Matamoros. “I went to the border all the time,” stated Hallock, “but not anymore.”⁷⁹ Some of the opinions in the article expressed relief that the “drug cult” murders had occurred in Mexico, not in the Valley. Joe Vera, who represented the Hidalgo County Chamber of Commerce, and involved in promoting tourism in the Valley, told the Houston reporters that the killings will affect Matamoros, but “it didn’t happen in the

⁷⁶ “Oriundos de Matamoros No Desean Regresar Jamás a su Ciudad Natal,” *El Bravo de Matamoros*, 17 April 1989, A-2.

⁷⁷ “Killings may affect tourism,” *The Houston Post*, 12 April 1989, 12A.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

U.S., and I don't think it will make any difference here."⁸⁰ Vera even reminded the reporters of other dangers that existed in Mexico, such as the car hijackings that were consistently taking place in remote highways across Mexico in the mid-1980s, and how that stopped tourists from going into Mexico. Joan Thomas, manager of a travel agency in Brownsville, who was taking extra precautions before sending her child to Spring Break, also reminded readers of the dangers Mexico presented, and of the "rash of bandidos holding people up on the highway and killing and raping."⁸¹

Due to negative media images of Matamoros, the press published articles quoting public officials and business owners expressing indignation over the failing economy and negative images that the "drug cult" murders brought to the city. At the same time, newspaper articles were written regarding city plans to restore tourism and Matamoros' image. Media intentions were to make the public aware of plans and concerns to help recover the economy. To protect the identity of his native city, Matamoros city official, Héctor Martínez Barrón, self-righteously declared that Matamoros was the complete opposite of what media outlets presented it to be. "This is an area of hard working people," stated Martínez Barrón, "an area of sectors that try hard to pursue the highest socio-economic status for our region."⁸² He went on to say that due to the lack of authority in the community, business proprietors were paying the consequences--the high rate of delinquency in Matamoros, aside from the killings, was the main reason tourism was declining.⁸³

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² "La Campaña de Desprestigio Contra Nuestro País Incide en el Turismo," *El Bravo de Matamoros*, 20 April 1989, A-1.

⁸³ Ibid; "Hechos disminuyen el turismo," *El Bravo de Matamoros*, 21 April 1989, B-11.

Weeks after the discovery of the cult slayings, tourism and business in restaurants had declined by more than 50 percent.⁸⁴ Consequently, city officials in Matamoros began directing meetings to organize campaigns in order to restore Matamoros' image. On April 19, business owners and city officials met to establish what Dr. Enrique González, vice-president of the National Chamber of Commerce, called, an "energetic" campaign to lift the "bad images" implanted on Matamoros. As an outcome of the meeting, participants agreed to begin an intense campaign to advertise tourism in major cities across the United States.⁸⁵ The campaign's main goal was to advertise the "good" side of the city and refute negative images as presented by media outlets. Américo Villarreal Guerra, Governor of Tamaulipas at the time, approved of the advertising campaign, adding that "those businesses dedicated to tourism, severely affected by the response to the bad press targeted at Matamoros," needed to be specially advertised "to promote awareness among foreign audiences about the positive aspects of the city's hard working community."⁸⁶ At the same time, in Mexico City, campaigns to promote nationwide tourism helped the cause in Matamoros. Promotion of Mexico's tourist attractions were aimed at the major cities in the United States and Canada. As a result, *La Cámara Nacional de la Industria de Restaurantes y Alimentos y Condimentos* (CANIRAC) began advertising campaigns in the Valley, specifically in South Padre Island. According to Raúl de la Rosa, president of CANIRAC, businesses and restaurants across Matamoros agreed to offer significant discounts to attract tourists. Additionally, travel agencies,

⁸⁴ This statistic was provided to the Matamoros press by Raúl de la Rosa, president of la Cámara Nacional de la Industria de Restaurantes y Alimentos y Condimentos (CANIRAC). For more information see "La CANIRAC Inicia Campaña Turismo para Borrarr Mala Imagen por lo de Santa Elena," *El Bravo de Matamoros*, 29 April 1989, A-7.

⁸⁵ "Es Necesario Empezar una Acción Energica Para Impulsar el Turismo," *El Bravo de Matamoros*, 21 April 1989, A-1, refer to this article for more on the meeting's outcome.

⁸⁶ "Deben Unificarse los Sectores de la Ciudad Para Restablecer su Imagen," *El Bravo de Matamoros*, 23 April 1989, A-1.

along with hotel and restaurant owners agreed to offer travel packages that included meals, tours, and hotel fare--hotels were also struggling economically aside from curio shops and travel agencies.⁸⁷ Yet, not all city officials were as supportive of the publicity campaign.

The organizing committee for *Expofiesta Matamoros* concluded in a meeting held weeks after the discovery at Rancho Santa Elena that the committee needed to slash funds from activities of the *palenque*, part of *Expofiesta Matamoros* celebrity artists performance. More over, the traditional cock fights, also part of the *palenque* schedule were going to be canceled. Usually the cock fights produce the necessary money to help bring and pay for the guest celebrities. In 1989, for example, 240 cock fights were scheduled, 480 cocks participating, with each cock bringing in 300 thousand *pesos*, totaling to the amount of 124 million *pesos* that *palenque* organizers needed to pay for the performers. The *Expofiesta* committee concluded that as a result of the cancellation of the cock fights, the committee could only afford to pay half of the salaries requested by the performers. This created problems for the organizing committees since most of the artists were charging somewhere in the "neighborhood" of \$50,000 per performance.

With artists scheduled to perform, such as Los Invasores de Nuevo León, Vicente Fernández, Rocío Durcal, Yuri, Rocío Banquels, Lupita D'Alessio, José Luis Rodríguez "El Puma" and Juan Gabriel, (alone was set to make \$150,000), the committee faced a dilemma. The total money committed to these artists and other expenses for the *palenque* were more than 406 million *pesos*, most of which depended upon profits derived from the

⁸⁷ "La CANIRAC Inicia Campaña Turismo para Borrar Mala Imagen por lo de Santa Elena," *El Bravo de Matamoros*, 29 April 1989, A-7.

cock fights.⁸⁸ The reason the *Expofiesta* committee decided to do away with most of the *palenque*'s activities was because *Expofiesta* committee members believed that the people of Matamoros did not deserve to enjoy the presence of such artists, "because these types of entertainment promoted 'violence', like the occurrences related to the *narcosatánicos* of *Rancho Santa Elena*."⁸⁹ Thus, the *palenque* closed for the summer of 1989 and the profit from the tourists, who were expected to bring in millions of dollars into Matamoros' already ailing economy, were lost.

CONCLUSION

Agenda setting, which is how media highlights what events, people, and issues are important to shape the belief of its audience.⁹⁰ Media coverage during a crisis can affect the belief of people in many ways. Since there is an overwhelming demand for news coverage during the initial stages of crisis coverage, information tends to be incomplete and misleading.⁹¹ While the news media is informing the public of important events, misinformation about certain aspects of a crisis almost always gets distributed. Charles R. Wright, author of *Mass Communication: a Sociological Perspective* discusses the four functions of mass communication: *surveillance, correlation, socialization, and entertainment*, and some of these functions can be put into context with the media

⁸⁸ "Carta Abierta A La Opinión," *El Bravo de Matamoros*, 28 April 1989, A-12. This is a letter written by José Guerra Velasco, member of the organizing committee directed towards the *Expofiesta* committee, specifically Fernando Montemayor Lozano, president of the Municipal Council. This letter was published in *El Bravo* to inform the public of the committee's plans to cancel the *palenque*.

⁸⁹ "Carta Abierta A La Opinión," *El Bravo de Matamoros*, 28 April 1989, A-12.

⁹⁰ Elizabeth M. Perse, *Media Effects and Society* (London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2001), 98.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 70.

coverage of the cult killings, specifically, *surveillance* and *correlation*.⁹² These four functions are considered goals, or aims of communication. *Surveillance* deals with the mass media collecting and reporting information. This function can increase perceptions and ultimately be “dysfunctional” as “war nerves”—a phenomenon that emerges during crises—in which people become stressed and anxious “because of information overload” forms.⁹³ *Correlation* is a function Wright claims mass media tells what the news coverage means to us.⁹⁴ Evidently, *Correlation* becomes dysfunctional for the reason that “if people rely heavily on the media’s interpretation of news, they may lose their own critical abilities to evaluate information on their own.”⁹⁵ Hence, the rumor atmosphere created in the media and competing discourses between newspapers of Matamoros and the Valley led to a process of transnational agenda setting in a very negative way.

⁹² Charles R. Wright, *Mass Communication: a Sociological Perspective* (New York: Random House, 1968), 16.

⁹³ Perse, 56.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 55-56; Wright, 16.

⁹⁵ Perse, 55-56.

CHAPTER 4

SANTERÍA, DEVIL WORSHIP, AND THE “DRUG CULT.”

“What have we stumbled on? Serial killers, maybe? I’m afraid it’s worse than that. What? It looks to me like we’ve got an Afro-Caribbean cult.”¹

The “satanic scare” developed in the media following the Matamoros cult killings had much to do with the actions performed by Adolfo de Jesús Constanzo and the “drug cult.” Constanzo’s acts created panic, as they were seen as something out of the ordinary by local people. Rumors created fear in South Texas and Tamaulipas as a result of a “satanic scare” that had been created by media “experts.” Also, the scare was hyped by terms such as “*Hell Ranch*,” “*Narcosatánicos*,” and “*Ahijados de Satán*.” Paraphernalia found at Santa Elena, and actions taken by cult members, were considered satanic worship by the predominantly Catholic community. As people in the Valley and Matamoros tried to comprehend motives behind the events taking place, religion came to dominate discussions. Santería, a religion of the African Diaspora,² came to be of focus by U.S. media, while the Mexican press tied the practices to satanic rituals. Yet, U.S. media based their definitions of Santería on what they had experienced and seen while

¹ Conversation between Oran Neck and George Gavito upon the discovery of the first seven bodies at *Rancho Santa Elena*. Jim Kilroy and Bob Stewart, *Sacrifice: A Father’s Determination to Turn Evil into Good*. (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1990), 110.

² The term African diaspora is a term used by historian R. Andrew Chesnut in his book, *Competitive Spirit: Latin America’s New Religious Economy*, when referring to a specific African derived religion, such as Santería, Candomblé, among others.

reporting the discovery at Santa Elena. In essence, media on the U.S. side of the border recreated and distorted religious perceptions of Santería. Of importance, media on both sides of the border misunderstood the origins and history of this religion.

The cultures that form both sides of the Rio Grande Valley and Northern Mexico share many folk beliefs and traditions. Customs such as *Día de Los Muertos* and practices such as folk healing or *curanderismo* lie within these shared traditions. Curanderos such as *sobadores*, *yerberos*, and *parteras* (bone setter, herbalists, and midwives) have special places within Mexican and Mexican American barrios and *colonias*. Folk healers help economically challenged people on both sides of the border seek a different health care alternative to hospitals. Undocumented people living in the United States, for example, seek help from curanderos. Undocumented woman, seek help from *parteras* since many can not afford to be attended in hospitals, do not want to face being turned in to U.S. immigration services, or can not overcome language barriers. The same occurs for Mexican American women who can not afford professional health care or feel embarrassed seeking help from male doctors. *Yerberos* are consulted by Mexican and Mexican Americans for their ability to cure with herbs, while *sobadores* are employed to tend to bone sprains and fractures using herbs and special massages. While these are merely few examples of some of the traditional roles *curanderismo* has in cultures sharing the border, other cultures and ethnicities fail to understand this aspect of Mexican culture.

Seeing that Mexican and Mexican American people use natural products such as eggs to cure “evil eye” or other ailments, Anglo Americans not fully aware of such practices condemn Mexicans as superstitious or naive. The trained medical field has

condoned traditional practices of *curanderismo* for business purposes, even though such professionals such as psychiatrists or medical physicians know that *curanderismo* in many ways works. U.S. media coverage following the discovery of Santa Elena linked *curanderismo*, specifically *brujería* (witchcraft), with rituals of the “drug cult.” News coverage on both sides of the border tied *brujería* with drug traffickers, claiming witchcraft brings them good luck in their operations, such as the case with the Hernández family.³ Superstition and *curanderismo* was also mentioned after the discovery of the shack Constanzo used to perform sacrifices at Santa Elena. Upon its discovery, Comandante Juan Benítez Ayala hired a *curandero* to cleanse the shack’s inner atmosphere of evil spirits before investigating inside. For this same fear, Ayala had the shack burned to the ground. U.S. media were quick to report these actions, using terms such as “superstition” and “witchcraft,” while doing so.

Spiritually, religion plays a very important role in the South Texas border region. While Catholicism dominates the belief system of Mexican and Mexican Americans, image or actions of non-Catholic faiths can be deemed “uncivilized” or “un-Christian” if Catholics are unfamiliar with them. An example of this would be the events following the confession of Elio Hernández. During interrogation by police agents, Hernández stated that Santería was the religion Constanzo had taught to his cult and practiced on fifteen men.⁴ U.S. media quickly reacted to Cameron County Sheriff Lieutenant George Gavito’s comments about Santería during a press conference shortly after the discovery at

³ Gary Cartwright, “The Matamoros Devil Murders,” *Texas Monthly*, June 1989, 78; *The Brownsville Herald*, 12 April 1989 1-2A; “Murder not part of most cults,” *The McAllen Monitor*, 13 April 1989, 15A; “Ligan la Magia Negra con el Narcotráfico,” *El Bravo de Matamoros*, 13 April 1989, A-3; “Atrás de los diabólicos esta el Narcotráfico,” *El Bravo de Matamoros*, April 1989; “Ocultismo, Satanismo, Misa Negra,” *El Bravo de Matamoros*, 1 May 1989, A-4; “Expertos Hablan de las Ciencias Ocultas y del Narcotráfico,” *El Bravo de Matamoros*, 28 April 1989, B-11.

⁴ Jim Kilroy and Bob Stewart, *Sacrifice: A Father’s Determination to Turn Evil into Good* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1990), 114-115.

Santa Elena. Gavito stated that he brought up Santería by mistake after being questioned about the cult's actions. "It was my fault that Santería was blamed," stated Gavito, "I mentioned it in a press conference and immediately got calls from *los chingones de Florida*. I decided to invite *el mero mero*"⁵ to explain to the media what had occurred.⁶ Also, it can be said that media bought into Gavito's explanation of Constanzo's acts, as he would be considered an "attractive source" by media.⁷ In other words, Gavito was considered a credible source since he and other law enforcement agents were heavily involved in the discovery at Santa Elena. Hence, media accepted Santería as being associated with the cult's acts. In turn, audiences accept the association of Santería with the cult and with devil worship given to by media. Media audiences accept information as presented by mass media, as it is considered a credible source of information. According to Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann's *spiral of silence* theory, mass media is a "powerful force, not only in establishing public opinion, but in reducing the number of divergent opinions in society."⁸ Therefore, Santería was accepted by the public as being involved in Santa Elena and devil worship, similar to how Gavito gave media a "scoop" to present.

Juxtaposed to customs of the "drug cult," Santería does not include the practice of human sacrifices in its rituals. Neither does Palo Mayombé, an African derived religion

⁵ Slang word Gavito used to refer to top religious experts in Florida.

⁶ Port of Brownsville Chief Of Police/Security George Gavito. Phone interview, handwritten notes, 27 January 2005. By saying "*los Chingones de Florida*" Gavito refers to the experts of religious studies in Florida.

⁷ Shelly Chaiken, "Communicator: Physical Attractiveness and Persuasion." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 37, (1979), 1387-1397.

⁸ Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann, "The Theory of Public Opinion: The Concept of the Spiral of Silence." In James A. Anderson, ed., *Communication Yearbook Vol. 14* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1991), 256-287.

that made a similar transition to the Americas as Santería.⁹ The “drug cult” modeled their acts after *The Believers*, a movie in which a similar cult performs sacrifices to obtain power. L. Rowell Huesmann calls this act of learning and practicing violent behavior from media, the *information-processing model*. Huesmann states that the information-processing model is the act of learning violent behaviors from violent media scripts.¹⁰ Eventually, by learning violent scripts, are stored in memory, and with time, “become guides for behavior.”¹¹

A traditional practice in the African diaspora religion involves sacrificing animals such as sheep, pigeons, and other fowl, never humans. Animal sacrifices in Santería are practiced within a religious context. Following the Matamoros aftermath, rather than examining proper rituals or places of origin of these religions, many journalists and so-called “experts” came to their own conclusions, giving “Hollywood” type accounts. For example, Clifford L. Linedecker, author of *Hell Ranch: The Nightmare Tale of Voodoo, Drugs, and Death in Matamoros*, claims that Santería “derived from the dark, mystical jungles of Africa,” giving this religion a perception of barbarism and savagery.¹² While Santería derived from Africa, the religion and its rituals do not connect with Linedecker’s characterization.

⁹ Migene Gonzalez-Wippler, *Santería: La Religion* (St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Español, 1999); *The King Does Not Lie: the Initiation of a Priest of Changó* dir. Judith Gleason et al., Filmmakers Library, 1992, videocassette. In this documentary, Gleason, through interviews with Santería followers, explain the importance of using animals for rituals.

¹⁰ L. Rowell Huesmann, “Psychological Processes Promoting the Relation between Exposure to Media Violence and Aggressive Behavior by the Viewer.” *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol. 42, No. 3, 1986, 125-130.

¹¹ *Ibid*; Elizabeth M. Perse, *Media Effects and Society* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2001), 205.

¹² Clifford L. Linedecker, *Hell Ranch: The Nightmare Tale of Voodoo, Drugs, and Death in Matamoros* (Austin: Diamond Books, 1989), 91.

HISTORY OF SANTERÍA

Santería comes from Nigeria. It is part of the Yoruba culture. This culture originated in this part of Africa under complex, organized, and powerful kingdoms, specifically, Benin, Dahomey, and other Yoruba city-states.¹³ Today, the Yoruba kingdoms and tribes are known for their beautiful bronze artwork, mythology, structured societies, and religion. These kingdoms were ruled under an aristocracy, meaning that they were governed by a hereditary ruling class. The Yoruba people were strong believers of *Oduduwá*, or *Oduá*, considered the creator of the earth and originator and forefather of the Yoruba tradition. It is believed that *Oduá* began his work in a place called *Ile Ife*, the holy city of the Yoruba tradition, analogous to Mecca in the Muslim religion. In tune with nature, everything visible and aroused emotion was of importance to human existence. It encompassed the central belief of the Yoruba religion.¹⁴ The saints or spirits that Yoruba culture worshiped were known as *orishas*. Before the existence of humans, *orishas* were believed to have lived well. They had special powers or attributes that guided their followers.¹⁵ Later, other *orishas* became humans, who had astonishing deaths worthy of recognition.¹⁶ The Yoruba supreme deity was *Olodumare* who, in this tradition, was the creator of the universe. *Olodumare* was secluded from humans, had no human characteristics, and was never represented in images or art. These beliefs are still intact in Santería and in remaining Yoruba cultures.

¹³ Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, *Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 24; George Brandon, *Santería From Africa to the New World: The Dead Sell Memories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 9; Migene González-Wippler, *Santería: La Religión* (St. Paul MN: Llewellyn Español, 1999), 1-7.

¹⁴ Brandon, 11.

¹⁵ Brandon, 14

¹⁶ Ibid.

The African slave trade was a watershed in the history of the Yoruba culture. Upon the arrival of Christopher Columbus to the New World, the Europeans began “unhauling” tropical crops such as coffee and sugarcane. Sugarcane became the main crop introduced to the Caribbean Islands.¹⁷ Mass production of this crop meant great wealth for Europe. But, European diseases soon eliminated Caribbean natives, forced into slave labor by the Spaniards. Due to their dependency on forced labor and their stubborn drive for wealth, labor shortages in the Caribbean Islands forced the Spaniards to participate in the African slave trade. With the importation of Africans into the Americas, people of the Yoruba tribes were caught and sold into slavery, as the Nigerian coast formed part of the slave trade route.

The African slave trade was without a doubt a clash of cultures. The people of the Yoruba tribes had their own beliefs that contradicted Spanish and other European beliefs. The Spaniards introduced and forced Catholicism to people of the Yoruba tradition. One of the Spaniards’ main goals in the New World was to teach and spread Catholicism to those they deemed “brutes” or “savages.” Catholicism became the official religion of Spain after the “*reconquista*” in 1492. This religion would unite the rest of Spain after the marriage of Fernando and Isabela, Spanish monarchs from the houses of Castile and Aragon. At the same time, Catholicism was used in the Americas to “purify” any natives that Spaniards encountered. This practice became problematic for African slaves, as their religious customs became prohibited under Spanish hegemony. Upon their arrival in the Americas, Africans were soon baptized by Catholic priests. African

¹⁷ R. Andrew Chesnut, *Competitive Spirits: Latin America’s New Religious Economy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 103.

slaves had no options, for resistance to Catholicism brought severe punishment.¹⁸

Nevertheless, African slaves, specifically those belonging to Yoruba culture, learned to practice and conceal their religion and other traditions from Spaniards.

As a form of resistance to Catholicism, African slaves used special hideouts known as *cabildos* to continue with their rituals and religious beliefs.¹⁹ *Cabildos* were hideouts where slaves retreated to continue pre-slavery practices and traditions. At times, *cabildos* were used for special ceremonies, dancing, and other activities. Slaves retreated to *cabildos* late at night when plantation owners retired for the night. Once discovered by the bishop of Havana in the 1820s, Pedro Agustín Morrel de Santa Cruz, each *cabildo*, was appointed a priest to continue teaching slaves the Catholic creed.²⁰ But many other *cabildos* survived undetected, and it was in these *cabildos* that Santería was reborn.

Caribbean plantation owners knew of the existence of African religions. Slowly, slave owners became tolerant of Yoruba beliefs for three reasons. First, lack of doctors in remote areas found slave owners with severe illnesses seeking their slaves, or *padrinos*, for medical relief.²¹ With special herbs and prayers, some slaves slowly earned the respect of their owners after saving their lives. Slave owners also sought help from slave healers to improve their luck in matters of love and business.²² Secondly, oral accounts of African tales of magic, adventure, and mysticism transmitted from blacks to whites helped Santería gain acceptance throughout the Caribbean Islands.²³ Since Whites

¹⁸ David J. Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 126, 132; Juan J. Sosa, *La Santería: A Way of Looking at a Reality* Thesis (MA), Florida Atlantic University 1981, 57.

¹⁹ Sosa, 57; Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, 24. In *The Spanish Frontier in North America* Weber, in this work, defines *cabildos* as a town council, see pg 183.

²⁰ Sosa, 57.

²¹ Julio García Cortez, *El Santo: Secretos de la Religión Lucumí* (Miami: Editorial Universal, 1971), 67.

²² Sosa, 59.

²³ Lydia Cabrera, *Ayapaí: Cuentos de Jicotea* (Miami: Ediciones Universal, 1971), 13.

of European descent had not heard of such tales, a sense of wonder and eagerness to embrace African stories was their reaction. A third and final reason Santería gained recognition in the Caribbean is that too few priests were assigned to work with Yoruba culture.²⁴ The expulsion of the Jesuits, one of the largest missionary orders of the time, from the Americas in 1767 also helped the development of Santería, as a decrease of religious figures in the Americas was outnumbered by an influx of Africans.²⁵ As a result, slave culture was pretty much free to substitute *orishas* with images of Catholic saints.

Santería is part of the African diaspora in the Americas. Santería is also a form of syncretism where one religious tradition is blended with another, in this case, Yoruba Santería and Christianity. To continue worshiping *orishas*, slaves began substituting images of Catholic saints with *orishas*. Some *orishas*, for example, were paired with Catholic saints based on colors associated with *orishas*, similar ways of dress, and specific personalities that saints and *orishas* shared. Others were paired based on a special day of the week or by a particular animal sacrificed on their behalf. *Las Siete Potencias Africanas*, or Seven African Powers, created with these ideas are examples of Catholic/Yoruba syncretism. *Las Siete Potencias Africanas* are seven images of Catholic saints coupled with specific qualities of seven of the most followed *orishas* in Yoruba tradition. The image of each Catholic saint is given the name of an *orisha*. Today, these seven images can be seen in candles and prayer cards and they control every aspect of their believers' everyday life.²⁶

²⁴ Sosa, 61; Weber, 242-243.

²⁵ Sosa, 59-61.

²⁶ Andres Pérez y Mena, "Spiritualism as an Adaptive Mechanism among Puerto Ricans in the United States." *Cornell Journal of Social Relations* (12) 2, 1977, 125-36.

Image 1: Example of Las Siete Potencias Africanas.



Some examples of *Orisha* pairing with Catholic Saints are as follows: *Obatalá* is the god of peace and purity and is identified with the image of Our Lady of Mercy; *Elegguá* is the guardian and protector of the home who presents opportunity to its followers and is identified with the Holy Guardian Angel; *Oshún* is the goddess of the rivers and is compatible with Our Lady of Charity as her image hovers over a river protecting three of her followers; *Changó* controls the forces of nature and is similar to Saint Barbara for her royalty figure, symbols of lightning, and red and white colors in more traditional images; *Yemayá* represents fertility and maternity, and resembles the image of Our Lady of *Regla* as she is associated with children in her image; *Orunla* is called upon for healing and compassion similar to Saint Francis; and finally, *Oggún*, patron saint of metals is symbolic to Saint Peter because he holds keys in traditional Catholic images. Another orisha of importance is *Olofi*, who is paired with Jesus Christ because, like Jesus, who is the son of God, *Olofi* is the son of a higher orisha.²⁷

Of importance to modern Santería and its followers is that *Oshún* is an important symbol in Cuba. *Oshún* is paired with Our Lady of Charity, Cuba's patron saint. Before

²⁷ More characteristics of each *orisha* are detailed in Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, 37-50.

ceremonies dedicated to *Changó*, called upon in rituals using smooth stones from rivers, followers as *Oshún* permission to obtain such stones.²⁸ Additionally, *Changó* is seen by its followers as a problem solver, and as the *orisha* Santería followers derived from. *Oggún*, the patron saint of metals, has a very special role in the lives of followers. One of the major attributes *Oggún* shares with followers is protection against criminals and criminal mischief. At the same time, *Oggún* is considered the father of tragedy, for it is solely responsible for deaths caused by metal weapons during times of war or violence.²⁹ This *orisha* also symbolizes the knife used during sacrifices in Santería rituals. These descriptions are contrary to how newspapers portrayed *Oggún* and other *orishas* after the discovery of the “drug cult” murders. For example, the *San Antonio Express News*, which attempted to explain in detail the religion aspect of the Matamoros killings, considered *Oggún* as patron saint of criminals in Palo Mayombé.³⁰

Palo Mayombé, derived in Africa, is considered a dark religion by Christian believers, as it tends to alarm people with its rituals involving the use of human remains and cemetery dirt. Palo Mayombé rituals are intended to bring good luck to followers, and allow *Paleros* to use spirits of nature and souls that belonged to the remains with intentions of good.³¹ With newspaper coverage attempting to “understand” the meaning of these African diasporan religions that are uncommon along the U.S.-Mexico border, Palo Mayombé receives undue blame and attention for rituals practiced by the “drug cult.” While human remains and bones obtained from forgotten graves are used in Palo Mayombé, evidence of human sacrifices has not been recorder prior to the actions of the

²⁸ Judith Gleason et al. 1992. This documentary is very important in explaining the life of Santería’s followers, and details an actual ceremony, contrary to the actions of the “drug cult.”

²⁹ Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert, 41.

³⁰ “Cult of Death,” *The San Antonio Express News*, 16 April 1989, 1-N.

³¹ González-Wippler, 220. *Palero* is a Palo Mayombé practitioner.

“drug cult.”³² Despite this, if Constanzo were to be associated with Palo Mayombé, he would be described as *no-bautizado* or *judíos*. These types of *paleros* are considered non-Christianized and use remains from diseased criminals, violent people, or those who committed suicide.³³ Non-Christianized *paleros* are known to follow the orisha *Kadiampembe*, equivalent to the devil in Christian belief. However, *paleros no-bautizados* do not sacrifice humans or shed innocent blood for fear of their *orishas* getting obsessed with human blood.³⁴ In overview, rituals of various types of Palo Mayombé practitioners do not parallel with those of Constanzo.

Startling is the different ways in which U.S. media shaped people’s beliefs when explaining the roles of African diasporan religions. Instead of portraying these religions as institutionalized or innocent of such acts, news media distorted and misrepresented them. At times, law enforcement agents who had prior knowledge of Santería based on criminal acts in Florida, committed injustices against this religion, particularly when quoted by media as their sources of information regarding Santería and Palo Mayombé. In essence, Santería was victim to *Agenda Setting*. As media coverage linked and characterized the “drug cult” to devil worship immediately following the discovery at Santa Elena, concern for the significance of Constanzo’s actions by media audiences diminishes at latter stages of media coverage. Yet basic perceptions held by media audiences were that Santería was branch of devil worship.

³² González-Wippler, 219-221.

³³ *Ibid.*, 220.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 220- 225

SANTERÍA: DEVIL WORSHIP AND A DEVIANT RELIGION

Since a great number of people are fluent in Spanish along the South Texas-Mexico border, Mexican media plays an important role in news coverage. Even with news broadcasts in Spanish in the Valley, much of the Spanish speaking audiences tune to Mexican news broadcasts from Mexico. Mexican newspaper titles such as *El Mañana* and *El Bravo de Matamoros* provide Spanish speaking people from South Texas opportunities to read local news in Spanish. In comparison to U.S. media, Mexican newspapers deliver much more graphic news. For example, during Mexican news coverage of the cult killings, pictures of discovered decomposed bodies were included in news coverage. Of greater impact was the media scare created in Matamoros, as the cult killings were seen in Matamoros as acts committed by people possessed by the devil. Hence, we have the creation of such media terms such as “*Los Ahijados de Satán*” and “*Los Narcosatánicos*.”³⁵ The “satanic scare” that contributed to rumors spread in the United States and Mexico were a result of this panic. Mexican headlines contained words such “*diabólicos*,” *satanarcos*,” and “*magia negra*.”

To protect the identity of Matamoros against labels associated with devil worship, Mexican media began publishing news articles stating that devil worship was common in the United States and not in Mexico. For example, Forensic Scientist Dr. Fernando García Rojas claimed that “the so called satanic homicides were exotic ideas not commonly found in Mexico.”³⁶ Mario Méndez, specialist in paranormal and religious studies, concurred that “satanic sects are normally found in California with the

³⁵ The term *ahijado* (godson) referred to the culprits’ description of Constanzo being their *padrino* (godfather) under the Santería religion.

³⁶ “Habla el Forence que Hizo la Autopsia a Constanzo,” *El Excelsior de México*, 8 May 1989, A-1.

establishment of Church of Satan in the 1940s.”³⁷ Additionally, Rigoberto Castro Velázquez, journalist from Matamoros, claimed that Matamoros was surprised at the news of a “black sect” existing in the area. “We are surprised by the news,” stated Castro Velázquez, “it is more common in the United States to hear about this topic since satanic sects and churches exist there.”³⁸ Consequently, the Mexican media and public perceived the cult’s rituals as devil worship, creating a sense of awe, fear, and caution. Throughout Matamoros every aspect of people’s lives became associated with satanic references. From heavy metal and rock ‘n’ roll music to soccer club names like *Diablos Rojos* (Red Devils) to satanic symbols in wall graffiti, every day life of Matamoros has been impacted.

On the other hand, U.S. media publicized the cult’s actions as Santería. That U.S. media acknowledged that human sacrifice was part of Santería rituals is troubling. In the late stages of media coverage, Palo Mayombé began being associated with the “drug cult” by law enforcement agents. Although not all media publications shared these beliefs, some linked the cult’s acts to satanic worship. For example, under the headline “Drugs and the Devil,” *Newsweek Magazine* published an article that associated the cult’s rituals with devil worship.³⁹

Headlines of the discovery at Santa Elena created fright and disbelief. Never had acts of human sacrifice been seen along the U.S.-Mexico border. On April 12, 1989, headlines across the U.S. ascribed devil activity to the slayings. *The Brownsville Herald* added to the Santería fear by calling it a combination of devil worshipping acts.⁴⁰ This

³⁷ “Los Satanarcos de Méjico,” *El Bravo de Matamoros*, 28 April 1989, A-5.

³⁸ “Lo Negro,” *El Bravo de Matamoros*, 14 April 1989, A-8.

³⁹ “Drugs and the Devil,” *Newsweek*, 24 April 1989, 55.

⁴⁰ *The Brownsville Herald*, 12 April 1989, 1A.

article explains how Rey Martínez, an ex-police officer who specializes in Satanism, coupled the acts of the “drug cult” and Satanism. Martínez came to this conclusion based on objects found at the crime scene, including an *nganga* or cauldron, a goat’s head, tree limbs, rooster heads, and smoked cigars; items traditionally used in Santería and Palo Mayombé ceremonies. What appeared to be part of Santería and Palo Mayombé religious artifacts, were being linked to Satanism. Then, the headlines for April 13, 1989, were trying to inform the public of rituals performed by the cult, highlighted Constanzo’s upbringing to a Santería family. The *Associated Press* misrepresented Santería by presenting information about Constanzo’s mother’s affiliation with Santería. Accordingly, Constanzo’s mother, Aurora del Valle de Posada, was a “troublemaker who would leave headless chickens, geese, and goats in the doorsteps of their neighbors.”⁴¹ In proper rituals using animal sacrifice, animals-chickens, doves, goats-are sacrificed, cleaned, and consumed as a part of a religious meal.⁴² Therefore, the use of animals during ceremonies is seen by *Santeros* as something sacred and not meant to scare people, such as in the case of Constanzo’s mother.

Furthermore, this *Associated Press* article stated that the U.S. and Mexican police confirmed that suspects of the slayings described their rituals as Cuban Santería sacrifices taught to them by Constanzo. In addition to what appears to be a false claim of Constanzo coming from a Santería family background, Tom Ragan, *Brownsville Herald* reporter, writes about the inability of a family from Matamoros to afford a body bag for their fourteen year old son, José Luis García, victim of what Ragan calls, “devil-

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Gleason 1992, VHS.

worshipping drug smugglers.”⁴³ For the most part, the *Associated Press* and Ragan’s articles appeared side by side in the April 12 edition of *The Brownsville Herald* not only misrepresenting and distorting Santería, but using law enforcement as their main source.

The same type of erroneous sources were used by *The San Antonio Express News* to discuss the horrifying acts committed by the “drug cult.” Bexar County Deputy Sheriff, Cynthia Burgin, presented her views on Palo Mayombé, claiming that this religion was part of Constanzo’s beliefs and ceremonies. *The Express News* article began by stating that bizarre practices involved in Matamoros were not Santería, contrary to what law enforcement officers had mentioned before.⁴⁴ Burgin claimed that upon further examination of the discovery at Santa Elena, signs pointed to cult rituals being Palo Mayombé. This article goes on to define Palo Mayombé as an Afro-Cuban cult whose criminal followers, consisting of “Cuban criminals and drug traffickers,” call for “human and animal sacrifices.”⁴⁵ Burgin states that Palo Mayombé derived from the African Congo, where according to her, “only black magic is practiced.”⁴⁶ Without reference to scholarly knowledge or sources, Burgin portrayed to American audiences African peripheries as dark savage areas where malice is practiced. Additionally, an article, written by Jacque Crouse, *Express News* staff writer, claimed that Palo Mayombé “has no moral code or respect for law.” However, Crouse does not back this accusation made by Burgin with any analysis as to why or how this religion disrespects law. Crouse and

⁴³ “Suspected leader grew up in Santería family,” *The Brownsville Herald*, 13 April 1989, 1A.

⁴⁴ “Cult of Death,” *San Antonio Express News*, 16 April 1989, 1-N.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Burgin claim that all spells in Palo Mayombé are evil, and that use of human remains in ceremonies is Mayombe's main component.⁴⁷

Several pictures shown in this article as examples of *orishas* are misrepresented by Crouse. For example, a sub-heading under a picture of Saint Peter, or *Oggún*, accuses this *orisha* of being patron saint to criminals, something contrary to what scholars have written.⁴⁸ Under the headline "Saints of Darkness, Saints of Light", the Seven African Powers of Santería are presented. These *orishas* are considered by Crouse as being from the dark side. For example, one of the main features given to *Obatalá* is of a god that can be invoked to cause blindness, paralysis, and deformities.⁴⁹ *Oggún* is allegedly patron saint of criminals as it is invoked to help people get out of jail.⁵⁰ To portray institutionalized religions without prior knowledge or scholarly sources, enhances and perpetuates stereotypes. The April 24, 1989 edition of *Time Magazine* continued this trend. An article, written by journalist Richard Woodbury, also ties Constanzo with Santería and devil worship. While Constanzo is stated to have practiced Santería, Woodbury considers Santería part of Caribbean voodoo that caused Constanzo to lead crazed rituals that resulted in bloodletting.⁵¹ Woodbury continued to associate the "drug cult" with devil worshipers, claiming "the devil worshipers were so vicious... pathologists had a hard time identifying the mutilated bodies."⁵² Here is another example as to how Santería was distorted by a journalist with no knowledge relating to this religion.

⁴⁷ "Palo Mayombé has no Moral Code," *San Antonio Express News*, 16 April 1989, 2-N.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ "Palo Mayombé has no Moral Code," *San Antonio Express News*, 16 April 1989, 2-N.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ "Cult of the Red-Haired Devil," *Time Magazine*, 24 April 1989, 30.

⁵² *Ibid.*

A common denominator in the border region was that Santería and Mayombé were linked. And if a former satanic priest affirms it, people are going to believe. This was the case when Jerry Reider, former satanic high priest, presented a lecture at the Final Occult Workshop, held at Texas Southmost College in Brownsville, in April of 1989. The main objective of Jerry Reider's lecture was to caution and advise parents of their children's safety as Satanists were out to recruit teenagers. Reider was invited to lecture at the Brownsville college following the "Satanism scare." He claimed that parents needed to realize the dangers of living "in a sick and deprived society" after Satanism had been discovered in Matamoros.⁵³ The former satanic priest informed parents that the rituals performed by the "drug cult" were linked to satanic rituals of sacrifice and mutilation.⁵⁴ Also, Reider added that similar to satanic crimes committed, nothing is left behind for law enforcement officials to find.⁵⁵ A visual aid used by Reider during his presentation listed Santería, among other African derived traditions, as a form of Satanism. While Reider was obviously incorrect about Santería, people are going to believe information presented by a "former satanic high priest."

As developments of the killings unfolded in U.S. and Mexican media, Sara Aldrete was given the title of "*bruja*" (witch). That Aldrete was considered a "witch" confirms the cult's affiliation with satanic rituals among popular belief as well. But soon, the Witches League for Self-Awareness (WLSA), witches practicing magic for purposes of good, lamented the title of "witch" given Aldrete by the media. In an *Associated Press* article, WLSA made a strong effort to remove this title from Aldrete. According to the article, WLSA was involved in this effort for fear of receiving a bad reputation for being

⁵³ "Former satanic priest advises local parents," *The Brownsville Herald*, 28 April 1989, 1B.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

linked to Aldrete.⁵⁶ These “professional” witches claimed that they already had a difficult time confronting other stereotypes such as in movies, children’s tales, and traditional sentiments expressed towards witches.⁵⁷ According to Laurie Cabot, member of WLSA, rituals in which Aldrete was involved in allegedly consisted of evil, something they did not practice since their witchcraft “has no evil gods.”⁵⁸

CONCLUSION

Santería and Palo Mayombé certainly received a bad press for their “involvement” with cult killings. While these two diasporan religions are not common in areas where Christianity is strong, these religions were singled out for the crimes committed by Constanzo. A prime example of how religions outside of a Christian paradigm can arouse conflict and fear is the 1993 law enacted by the city council of Hialeah, Florida, banning animal use for sacrificial purposes in Santería, overturned by the United States Supreme Court because of religious discrimination.⁵⁹ Throughout history, there have been times in which Santería and other African derived religions have come under media scrutiny. According to R. Andrew Chesnut, African diasporan religions “share a history of slavery and persecution.”⁶⁰ Cuba’s War of Independence sparked a race war between white and black Cubans. During this war, Afro-Cuban religions, such as Santería and Vodou, came to be scrutinized and vilified in the Cuban media.⁶¹ In the 1960s, persecution of African-Brazilian faiths by Brazilian politicians

⁵⁶ “Witches say they’re getting bad press,” *The Brownsville Herald*, 19 April 1989, 12A.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *USA Today*, 25 May 2004, 3A.

⁶⁰ Chesnut, 103.

⁶¹ Aline Helg, *Our Rightful Share: The Afro-Cuban struggle for Equality, 1886-1912* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 1995), 177, 247.

and the Catholic Church ended after “they were removed from the jurisdiction of the municipal vice squad.”⁶² Additionally, in the 1980s, Pentecostal churches in Brazil led persecutions against African diasporan religions.⁶³ These persecutions transpired after Pentecostal churches maneuvered a campaign to attract followers of African derived religions.⁶⁴

Folk healing, or *curanderismo*, traditionally practiced among people from both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border facilitated beliefs of Santería being commonly found along the border. Since folk healing is an important part of Mexican tradition and culture, U.S. writers, not aware of this, perceived “drug cult” rituals as normal in these areas. This came about as U.S. newspapers claimed *brujería*, or witchcraft, which exists within *curanderismo*, as involved in cult rituals. Hence, popular terms such as “witch” or “black magic” were quick to appear.

There is no doubt that the Matamoros “drug cult” killings paralyzed Valley life in many ways. The impact that U.S. news media created after this event caused economic and social harm to the Valley community. Comparisons to satanic rituals shaped people’s beliefs not aware or accustomed to hearing about Santería. The use of law enforcement agents as media sources of information certainly contributed to the scrutiny of African diasporan religions. Interestingly, religious figures or followers of Santería were not consulted as media sources. Instead, law officials shared their knowledge on these religions based on their own police reports. Proving, the attractiveness of law enforcement agents as sources to media. Even though, most reports used as sources by

⁶² Chesnut, 103.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

“experts” were based on complaints made by non-Santería believers concerning animal treatment by Santería followers.

Santería, even Palo Mayombé did not warrant such a fate or such comparisons to devil worship following the cult killings. Artifacts of Santería and Palo Mayombé discovered at Santa Elena did not mean these religions were involved in the cult killings. The killings occurred in an area that is identified as a safe haven for drug activity and police corruption also facilitated beliefs that such rituals were common place. Sadly, a common belief described in U.S. newspapers was that human sacrifices involved with the Matamoros slayings were similar to human sacrifices practiced by Aztecs.⁶⁵ Common sense certainly did not reign in such reporting. “Common sense,” missing in this “satanic scare,” does a disservice to those people associated with different religious practices.

⁶⁵ Kilroy and Stewart, 114.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

“Ya con esta me despido, desde Rancho Santa Elena. Aquí encontraron al gringo, muerto con otra dozena. Para el culto satánico, negra será su sentencia.”¹

The intense search for Mark Kilroy by his family and law enforcement agents was unprecedented. While many U.S. citizens have disappeared throughout Mexico, there have never been such intense searches involving a transnational border community. Politicians involved in the search for Kilroy were interested in getting the attention needed for upcoming elections. While politicians and law enforcement agents in the United States were pressuring Mexican authorities to continue the search for Kilroy, hardly anyone was looking for the other fourteen men that perished at the hands of Constanzo. That Mark Kilroy was an “American” missing in Mexico caused U.S. political figures and law enforcement agents to pursue their massive search. An Anglo college student missing in Mexico brought forth suspicion of police corruption, as Mark’s parents and U.S. authorities suspected Mark was either in a Mexican jail, or had been beaten by a Mexican cop after refusing to pay a bribe.² Additionally, Mark Kilroy was

¹ Translation: “Now I say goodbye from here, from Rancho Santa Elena. Here they found the gringo dead with another dozen. For that satanic cult, black will be their sentence.” Los Suspiros de Salamanca. *The Tragedy of Matamoros*, Discos Rámex, May 1989.

² Jim Kilroy and Bob Stewart, *Sacrifice: A Father’s Determination to Turn Evil into Good* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1990), 31.

nephew and godson of U.S. Customs Agent Ken Kilroy, who used his law enforcement connections to search for his missing relative.³ Unfortunately, the other fourteen men were not fortunate enough to have law enforcement on their side to help their families search for them. The other fourteen victims of the “drug cult,” including a fourteen year old, found at Santa Elena were never sought after with the same intensity and energy as Kilroy. The Matamoros populace was left wondering why a massive search was conducted for a U.S. citizen when Mexican citizens were missing and no authority figure was pressuring searches for them. The fourteen men have unique stories as well—stories that have yet to be shared.

MEDIA EFFECTS

Media coverage of the Matamoros “drug cult” killings served as “agenda setting” perpetuating stereotypes of Mexican border people. Some cultures hold stereotypes of other cultures, that is no secret. However, while some stereotypes may not be harmful, culturally insensitive stereotypes can degrade or deny individuality.⁴ Agenda setting in the media occurs as its main purpose is to direct our attention towards certain aspects of covered events.⁵ In other words, through agenda setting, “the news media don’t tell us what to think, but what to think about.”⁶ Media coverage of the cult killings suggested that audiences think and reflect on distorted images media presented. Along with agenda setting, *cumulative effects* also played a role in the portrayal of Mexican border people. This model of media communication is a repetition of ideas and messages the media

³ Ibid., 26.

⁴ Enteman, Willard F, “Stereotyping, Prejudice, and Discrimination,” in Paul M. Lester ed., *Images that Injure: Pictorial Stereotypes in the Media* (Westport, CN: Praeger, 1996), 10-14.

⁵ Bernard C. Cohen, *The Press and Foreign Policy* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), 13.

⁶ Ibid.

wants audiences to focus on. The constant repetition of prejudice and stereotypic language used in media coverage of the cult killings embedded wrongful images to audience members not familiar with these geographical spaces. This can be problematic as distorted images of Mexican people being culturally backward and superstitious, Mexican culture and people being coupled with Third World images, and Santería being associated with devil worship was constantly presented. In consequence, the manner in which news is framed can shape the overall belief of people. While *news framing* affects what people think of issues and events, it is the outcome of these beliefs that can do more damage than good.⁷ There are media audiences that depend too heavily on news coverage to gather knowledge on events.

Media coverage of crises becomes the most dependant source. Since media outlets are quick and under pressure to cover events, their sources come into question. Speculation as to what occurred creates rumors and disinformation that are passed along side accurate reports.⁸ Coverage of the cult killings saw this pattern as rumors of child abductions and other “scare” occurred. Main sources for information during press conferences held after the discovery at Santa Elena consisted of law enforcement agents. Hence, false comparisons of Santería to Constanzo’s acts, as law enforcement agents were consulted rather than scholars. But, sources were consulted based on attraction, rather than credibility. According to social psychologist, Shelly Chaiken, media consults more attractive sources, as they are more persuasive.⁹ As Lieutenant Sheriff George Gavito and U.S. Customs Agent Oran Neck held press conferences, their expertise on

⁷ Perse, Elizabeth M, *Media Effects and Society* (London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2001), 105.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁹ Shelly Chaiken, “Communicator: Physical Attractiveness and Persuasion.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 37, 1387-1397.

religion and crime was taken into account. Misinformation given as this event unfolded was taken into account, thus shaping the belief of people as attractive rather than credible sources were employed.

An overview examination of this work points out the cultural impact that both border peoples can share with each other. It shares the negative views that one culture can have over another when they do not fully understand customs and traditions. In the case of the cult killings, public beliefs, not aware of the cultural impact *curanderismo* has in Mexican and Mexican American customs, made it out as a superstition. Hence, Mexicans were labeled superstitious and culturally backward for believing and practicing such customs. Opinions and attitudes that Anglo American culture had of Mexican and Mexican American border people were manipulated through media coverage of this case. Racial attitudes are similar to those expressed about *Tejanos* and *Tejanas* before the coming of the Anglo to *Tejas* to form revolution against Mexico in the mid-nineteenth century. Unfortunately, these types of perceptions have been carried into this day and age. Media coverage of the drug cult killings seemed like an excuse to convey these attitudes and beliefs to a greater American audience. A person not familiar with the border region reading about the cult killings was presented with a tainted picture of the Mexican border people, culture, and religion. Therefore, U.S. media perpetuated and enhanced racial stereotypes of Mexican people to a broader American audience.

People who did not witness or live this event first hand caused equal damage to the identity of Mexican and Mexican border people. For some, their perceptions and stereotypes held of the border community were expressed by means of U.S. media coverage of this event. Others were presented with a tainted picture of Mexican border

culture and life. Thus, Anglo reporters using terms such as “*campesinos*,” “*curanderismo*,” and “superstitious” misrepresented and wrongfully painted a negative picture in the imagination of millions of people not familiar with this geographical space. The overall selection of language used by Anglo journalists when referring to Mexicans and Mexican Americans was prejudice. The word selection used by Anglos resembled those used in the 19th and early 20th centuries after formation of the “border.” The Matamoros “drug cult” killings will forever be known for the abduction and murder of Mark Kilroy, but the negative racial attitudes expressed towards Mexican borderlands through media coverage is what this research offers and contributes to the historiography of borderland studies. While media gains nothing in portraying Mexicans negatively, that still did not stop media from describing Matamoros and other Mexican border towns as dangerous, and Mexicans and Mexican Americans as culturally backwards and superstitious.

Those who lived in the Valley and Matamoros during the discovery of the cult killings understand the impact this event made in border history. They remember their television and radio programs being interrupted so that breaking news bulletins of the discovery at Santa Elena and of child abductions could be delivered. They remember their school intercoms being used by principals and teachers warning them of the possibility of cult members kidnapping students as forms of revenge. The month of April 1989 witnessed school children being picked up by their parents or walking in groups even if their school was located several of blocks from their homes. There is no doubt that this event was a watershed in border history, forever changing the identity of the border region as portrayed by U.S. media. Although with time, this story became

forgotten, its impact will forever be remembered as a generation's life was unexpectedly interrupted. Little did the "drug cult" know that their activities would create such impact in people's everyday lives. Ironic is that while cult members felt invincible against law enforcement, surrounding communities of the U.S.-Mexico border following the discovery felt susceptible to the "drug cult."

COMPARABLE BORDER EVENTS

The phrase: "the demand for drugs in the United States causes these types of things to happen," became common in everyday conversations and in the media. In the spring of 2005, with the border violence resulting from the drug cartel wars from Matamoros to Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, the latter saying was constantly reiterated in the print media. Obviously, in 1989 this saying meant much more, as the violence that erupted resulting in the Matamoros "drug cult" killings was a severe consequence of the never ending war on drugs. The spring of 2005 also witnessed rumors similar to those created in the media following the discovery of the "drug cult" killings. Consequently, these rumors produced fear in the Lower Rio Grande Valley and Matamoros, resulting in a declining tourism. Some of the rumors created in the media in 2005 were strikingly similar than those of '89. For example, in 2005, news and rumors of Mexican police corruption and drug activity along the border became rampant as several drug lords, including Rafael Caro Quintero, were transferred to a Matamoros state penitentiary.

According to news reports from the Valley, the transferring of these powerful drug lords meant danger for U.S. citizens crossing into Mexico. Another report claimed that *Los Zetas*, former Mexican Army troops now working for *El Cartel del Golfo*, were

on the loose in Matamoros and other border towns, and that Americans crossing into Mexico should use caution. Other reports included that of a police chief in Reynosa, kidnapped and found executed. While in Matamoros, six prison guards were found executed shortly after the transfer of drug lords to the Matamoros prison. While these acts were portrayed by Valley media as warning signs for Americans crossing into Mexico, others felt otherwise. George Gavito, claimed that “crossing into Mexico is not dangerous...these people (drug dealers) are killing themselves and not targeting Americans.”¹⁰ When discussing the government warnings issued by the American consulate in Matamoros, Gavito stated that the government warnings issued by the consulate were exaggerated since U.S. citizens were not being harmed. “These warnings should have been issued in ’89 when Constanzo was on the loose,” stated Gavito, “it was then that U.S. citizens were being kidnapped and killed...not now.”¹¹ As mentioned before, with panic came rumors, and with rumors came the shaping of belief.

In 1989, apprehension of fugitive “drug cult” members ended rumors that were spread throughout society, but the identity and tourism in Matamoros ailed until its recovery in early to mid-1990s. The government warnings released in the spring of 2005, frightened American tourism coming to and from Matamoros, ruining Matamoros’ economy and identity once again. In some cases, the after effects of the government warnings were more severe than the media scare created in 1989 as many restaurants and curio shops that survive off tourism have shut down permanently.

¹⁰ George Gavito, phone interview with author, written notes, 27 January 2005.

¹¹ Ibid.

RECOMMENDATION FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

In the nineteenth century, since the coming of the Anglo American into Mexican territory, view points and perceptions of Mexicans have been recorded by way of diaries, newspapers, and political documents. Almost 100 years later, media coverage of the Matamoros “drug cult” killings followed this same pattern. However, further research on border media perceptions and the Matamoros “drug cult” killings is needed. It is understood that the perspective of U.S. media coverage of the cult killings continues racist views when describing the Lower Rio Grande border and its people. Further research on transborder media coverage at a nation wide level is needed to understand perceptions and understanding of border culture and space. Since the majority of media coverage focused on the abduction and murder of Mark Kilroy, the stories and identity of the other fourteen recovered bodies remains unheard and unknown. U.S. media contended that most of the bodies had drug ties with the cult, but their families never suspected them of any drug activities. Furthermore, research is needed on Constanzo’s practices, or “religion.” Santería and Palo Mayombé are linked to Constanzo’s rituals, but these religions of the African diaspora do not associate human sacrifice in their common practices. Transnational media perceptions of border culture and people during tragic or historical events are important aspects to understand racial attitudes and biases. Past and present cases that are seen in border history and that can be of comparative value for future scholarship are the disappearing women in Ciudad Juárez, perceptions of Mexican border crossers, and transnational comparisons of Mexican drug lords are just few examples. Media coverage of historical events that both sides of the Lower Rio Grande border share are important since both cultures have distorted views for each

other. Yet both cultures in certain ways co-exist with customs and traditions that each culture adapts from the other. After all, between the United States and Mexico “there is no border; the line is an idea.”¹²

¹² Rubén Martínez, *Crossing Over: A Mexican Family on the Migrant Trail* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001), 325.

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