

LIFE IN DEATH: MEXICAN AMERICAN GRAVE DECORATING AND  
FUNERARY RITUALS

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LIFE IN DEATH: MEXICAN AMERICAN GRAVE DECORATING AND  
FUNERARY RITUALS

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Approaching San Fernando Cemetery II on San Antonio, Texas' west side, I immediately take note of the many flower shops specializing in gravesite decoration arrangements. Having grown up in this community, I have had the privilege of participating in death custom traditions over the years. This participation has given me the advantage of observing the continuity of ideas and the change of materials and imagery in grave decorations. My father, Antonio I. Salazar Jr., spent almost his entire life living on San Antonio's south side, minutes from many of these vibrant and colorful flower shops. He defines the west side of San Antonio as "starting at Guadalupe Street, just north of U.S. 90, and continuing south until Commerce or Culebra. The south side picks up from there, and heads southeast until Roosevelt St., just east of I-H 35, where Mission San Jose is located" (conversation with author, April 9, 2009).

Gravesite decorating is a tradition long observed within these Mexican and Mexican American communities of the south and west sides in San Antonio. In order to understand this practice, one must also understand how pre-Hispanic civilizations in Mexico conceived the concept of time. "Time was a never-ending succession of cycles...death precedes life, which in turn must again be succeeded by death in a never-ending stream" (Fernandez Kelly 1974: 517-518). It is through this perception of time, and how it relates to life and death, that pre-Hispanic cultures and their descendants,

believe in the interaction of the living and the dead. “The finding of offerings... seems to support the belief in the continuation of the daily needs of man [sic] even after his death” (Kelly 1974: 518). Today, these offerings have come to include food, toys, newspapers, and various types of floral decorations.

The offerings I have observed mainly come in the form of grave decorations, purchased at local flower shops. Grave decorating is “a highly symbolic visual process though [sic] which families continue to experience a sense of ongoing relationship[s] with departed relatives” (Gosnell and Gott 1989: 217). San Antonio has a strong Mexican American community, especially on its west and south sides near San Fernando Cemetery II, and the tradition of grave decorating is one cultural concept that retains a deep emotional intensity for its residents. This tradition creates a respect and reverence for the dead, allowing the living to interact with the deceased.

Though maintenance of customary concepts occurred, modern practices of these concepts have greatly changed. Jasper and Turner, in discussing Dia de los Muertos rituals in San Antonio, noted that the rituals they saw were “markedly [different] from those encountered in Mexican celebrations” (Jasper and Turner 1994: 133). This noticeable difference is also observable through the act of grave decoration practiced by Mexican Americans at San Fernando Cemetery II. The shift from customary Mexican grave decorations to Mexican American grave decoration styles during the last century is due in large part to societal influences and restrictive cemetery policies.

Often, cultural shifts associated with death rituals have not received much attention because of what Renato Rosaldo refers to as ‘primitivism.’ Primitivism is the consideration of “culture as if it were an inert heirloom handed down whole cloth from



time immortal” instead of being seen in a “manner that highlights innovation and change” (Rosaldo 1988: 44). Cultures everywhere are always evolving, making them “dynamic changing constellations and not...static entities” (Rosaldo 1988: 44). I demonstrate that while outside influences and pressures have done much to change customary Mexican American death customs and gender roles, these new cultural phenomenon’s still uphold long-established traditions, expressing them in innovative and unique ways.

### Organization of the Research

In my thesis, I use political, historical, anthropological, sociological, race, gender and Chicano theorists to help explain the changing death customs of Mexican Americans. Chapters address the cultural effects of ethnic relations, the transculturation of grave decoration through its images and materials, and the changing gender attitudes and roles as expressed through death rituals.

In chapter four, I focus on the ethnic relations between Anglos and Mexicans throughout Texas and the southwestern United States. These ethnic relations include such policies as segregation, and I discuss the effects that policy has had on cultural practices, drawing parallels between many of the experiences and effects felt by the African American community (Paredes 1958, Rosaldo 1988, Richardson 1999, Rosales 2000, Carrol 2003). I show how segregation has perpetuated cultural practices and ideals, while simultaneously permitting them to change and thrive through years of cultural interaction. I use political, economic and race theorists from many different disciplines including sociology, political science, history, and anthropology to explain the many effects segregation has had on the cultural, economic, and political lives of Mexican Americans. My focus will be on literature dealing with Mexicans and Mexican

Americans in the southwestern United States, and specifically south and central Texas (Paredes 1958, Feagin and Feagin 1993, Limón 1994, Montejano 1994, Menchaca 1995, Rosales 2000, Villa 2000, Carroll 2003, Scupin 2003, DeLone et al. 2004, Olivas 2006).

The discussion of ethnic relations and especially of segregation usually centers on its negative social, economic, and cultural implications. However, while segregation has had a predominantly negative effect, it has also created several positive byproducts. For example, it has helped to perpetuate and sustain the culture of many minority groups.

The “geographical identity” brought about by segregation “manifests itself in the unique conjunctural forms of its residents’ cultural practices and consciousness,” allowing for “survival against the pressures of a dominant social formation” (Villa 2005: 5).

Simultaneously, segregation allowed culture to transform and thrive in a churning social and political maelstrom. Many U.S. citizens do not understand that cultural pride is not necessarily a shunning of another culture (mainly that of the dominant group, American), but is often a result of many years of purposeful isolation of the ‘others.’ This chapter sets the foundation for the rest of the chapters in this thesis by introducing the concept of transculturation. Examples of transculturation follow in chapters five and six.

In chapter five, I focus on the act of ancestor worship, under which such death customs as the wake, funeral, and grave decorating all fall. The chapter begins with a discussion of ancient Mesoamerican death customs as reported in archaeological and anthropological texts (Fernandez Kelly 1974, Storey 1992, Coggins 1994, Garciagodoy 1998, Braswell 2003). I suggest that many of the same items used by ancient Mesoamericans are still prevalent in modern Mexican American grave decorations and death rituals. However, today these items perform different functions and have different

uses than in the past. Commonalities lie in the continued use of such objects in relation to the dead, and the importance of such objects and images to Mesoamericans and their descendants throughout the centuries.

I incorporate auto-ethnography, participant observation, and ethnographic interviews conducted with men and women throughout south and central Texas. I also utilize literature focusing on the death customs of ancient Mesoamericans and modern Mexican Americans in south Texas that discusses the act of grave decorating (Fernandez Kelly 1974, Gosnell & Gott 1989, Meyer 1989, Jasper & Turner 1994, Brandes 1998).

Most importantly, I show that culture change is not the same as assimilation. Presenting a counter-assimilationist view, I show that modern Mexican American decorations at San Fernando Cemetery II represent continued cultural imagery and pride (Rosaldo 1988, Limon 1990, Favrot Peterson 1992, Garciagodoy 1998, Fracchia & Lewontin 1999). This chapter introduces specific aspects of Mexican American death customs like grave decorating, which I analyze further in terms of gender in chapter six.

Many factors within the United States in general and Texas in particular, have contributed to the maintenance and modification of death customs and gender roles in death rituals. Among them are the societal and economic changes brought about by such factors as conquest and segregation, religious persecution, the commercialization of the death industry, and exposure to the dominant U.S. culture. In chapter six, I illuminate the historical and contemporary gender roles of Mexican and Mexican American women and men as they pertain to death customs. Death customs include, but are not limited to, wakes, funerals, and grave decoration. I utilize the works of gender, Chicana, and political theorists to interpret my findings (Anzaldua 1987, Bourdieu 1989, Stoler 1997,

Sandoval 1998, Johnson Black & Mascia-Lees 2000, Inda & Rosaldo 2002, Krishnaswamy 2002).

I rely heavily on ethnographic interviews with both Mexican and Mexican American women and men throughout south and central Texas. With my informants, I discuss their death customs as they have experienced them. These interviews encompass a period of over fifty years. I also incorporate literature, specifically literary sources that discuss the role of women in death customs outside of Mexican American culture. Broyles-Gonzalez (2002), Jacobs (1996), Scheper-Hughes (1992), Stoler (1997), and Williams (1990) have all suggested that women in post-colonial times have become the main sources for cultural perpetuation. Cross-culturally, women, often relegated to the domestic realm, became the bearers of culture, especially those dealing with death customs and funerary rituals. These practices include, but are not limited to the act of grave decorating. For example, women in Crypto-Jewish culture became the carriers of religious and cultural practices after forced conversion to Christianity in Spain (Leibman Jacobs 1996: 97).

In conjunction with female roles, and because gender roles are inherently relational, I discuss male roles in funerary and death customs. Most of the information for male gender roles emerged from interviews with my informants. However, I utilize some literary sources with their discussions of the Mexican American family as a whole (Williams 1990). Since the co-option of some death customs and rituals by the death business, the roles of Mexican American women and men in funerary rituals have changed. For example, the death business displaced men, while simultaneously allowing women to parlay their roles into thriving businesses. Using both literature and semi-

structured interviews, I shed light on how these changes have affected contemporary death customs and gender roles at San Fernando Cemetery II and other surrounding south Texas cemeteries like San Pedro Cemetery in San Marcos, Texas.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **HISTORY OF PREVIOUS RESEARCH**

In addition to the use of ethnographic research, I utilized the published works of many political, historical, sociological, gender, and anthropological theorists. These theorists focus on Mexican and Mexican American culture. In conducting this literature review, I uncovered many patterns in the study of segregation as well as death rituals and customs, that are important to my thesis in particular and Mexican American studies in general.

In chapter four, I deal heavily with ethnicity. Part of my focus was the role that segregation, or forced ethnic separation, had on culture. The scope of the literature tends to focus on such topics as political, economic, and some cultural effects of segregation. Leading scholars such as Menchaca (1995), Carroll (2003), and Montejano (1987) focus on a more general historical study of Mexicans and Mexican Americans in California and Texas.

Menchaca, for example, focused on studying how discrimination and segregation affected her home community of Santa Paula, California. She provided a comprehensive history of segregation and discrimination in her community, focusing specifically on its political, educational, and ethnic relational byproducts. Similarly, Montejano and Carroll discussed the history of segregation and discrimination for Mexican Americans in Texas. Montejano wrote a meticulous history of Mexicans and Mexican Americans throughout

Texas, while Carroll focused more closely on south Texas, and in particular the Nueces Strip. The Nueces Strip starts at the Nueces River and continues south to the Rio Grande. Their analyses reveal the political, social, economic, and educational effects of discrimination and segregation on Tejanos. Rosales (2000) also discussed the effects of segregation; however, he described it along strictly political lines within the city of San Antonio. While many researchers have done work that focuses on the changing culture of various cultural customs like music, quinceañeras, and art, none of them have acknowledged the cultural effects of segregation on death rituals. Because of this, my research presented in chapter four fills a void in the literature, discussing the effects that segregation has on cultural practices, specifically those involving death and funerary rituals.

In chapter five, I discuss images and items used in modern day Mexican American grave decorating in south Texas, and their possible origins. Most of the literature I found pertaining to the origin of Mexican American death customs and imagery focused on the Mexican-Catholic holiday, Dia de los Muertos. Very little of the literature I reviewed focuses on the connections between ancient Mesoamerican death rituals and the death rituals of their descendents outside of this holiday. Authors such as Brandes (2006, 1998, and 1997), Turner and Jasper (1994), and Fernandez Kelly (1974) are superb examples of authors who strictly focus on Dia de los Muertos. Each of these authors offers insights into death imagery and customs associated with this holiday, but spend little time focusing on grave decorating or imagery used throughout the rest of the calendar year. While my research does discuss this significant holiday, I also focus on

grave decorating as it occurs year-round, drawing connections to everyday images and items to ancient traditions and customs.

Similarly, within the literature pertaining to cemeteries, little work has been done specifically on Texas. The one exception is the scholarly work of Terry Jordan (1982). Most of the literature is centered around east coast colonial cemeteries found in states such as Massachusetts, South Carolina, and Georgia, and has focused on the topic of headstone iconography and its patterns (Dethlefsen & Deetz 1966 and Gorman & DiBlasi 1981). Little of what was found in those articles could be used in my research, as it deals almost exclusively with peoples of northern European descent, offering little or no insights into the iconographic patterns of peoples of Mexican descent. In the future, I hope to expand my research in this area, helping to fill the above noted void by examining, in greater detail, Texas Mexican and Mexican American headstone iconography.

Finally, chapter six focuses on the topic of gender as it pertains to death rituals and customs within Mexican American culture. Gender in Mexican American culture has been discussed by many authors like Gaspar de Alba (2003), Davalos (2003), Juárez and Kerl (2003), Williams (1990), Cantú and Nájera-Ramírez (2002), Herrera-Sobek (2002), Broyles-González (2002), and Vidaurri (2002). While each of these authors have done extensive work on the role of gender in Mexican American culture, most of them have not analyzed the effect of gender in death rituals and customs. The authors listed above have concentrated their gender studies on the roles and places of women. However, I believe that in order to properly analyze gender within the Mexican American



community, an equal representation of the roles of men and women in death rituals is necessary.

A notable exception to the female gender focus is the work of Norma Williams (1990), who expanded her gender research to also include male roles and their function in Mexican American cultural customs in general, and death rituals in particular.

Expanding on the work of these scholars, I will focus on an in depth examination of gender in death customs. In particular, my aim in this research is to offer an innovative look not only at ethnicity, but gender roles in death customs. Therefore, I will explore new avenues of research in an effort to fill a prominent gap in the academic literature.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODS**

In addition to a literature survey and personal interviews, I have spent a great deal of time on visually recording the iconography of contemporary Mexican American grave decorations. I interpret and analyze digital images recorded in cemeteries throughout the calendar year. These images consist of grave decorations used between 2005 and 2008. Jeremy White, a San Marcos/Austin photographer, my brother Antonio I. Salazar III, and I took pictures of grave decorations placed on the graves of individuals with Spanish surnames at San Fernando II, in San Antonio. I have also taken pictures of grave decorations in Matamoros, Mexico, as an added source of comparison for materials and images used in this study. I will compare and contrast these photographs to historical and contemporary photographs in the literature. I am specifically interested in artistic structures such as images, words, and motifs that are incorporated on cemetery decorations. My interest also includes the materials with which these decorations are constructed, such as real flowers, silk, paper, and other artificial materials. As stated earlier, pictures were taken throughout the calendar year, and in some cases these pictures coincided with major American and Mexican-Catholic holidays. These holidays included Christmas, Dia de los Muertos, Halloween, Thanksgiving, Fathers/Mothers Day, Memorial Day, and Valentine's Day.

My interviews were exclusively with Mexicans and Mexican Americans throughout south and central Texas, as well as Rosenberg, a small Texas community approximately 35 miles west of Houston. These interviews included eight men, and seven women, aged from their early twenties to late sixties. These individuals actively participate in grave decorating. Also included were three “family interviews” conducted at Dia de los Muertos celebrations at San Fernando II in 2008. The families interviewed contained both men and women who actively contributed answers to my questions. I sought insights into why they practice the art of grave decorating and to the reasons they continue this practice to this day. To gain historical depth, I asked those interviewed to discuss what their grave decorating practices are and I was particularly interested in how these practices have changed over time.

I interviewed members of my family and friends of my family. These interviews are referred to as convenience interviews in the literature because they involve those who are easily accessible and readily available (Bernard 2006: 191-192). In order to have a more thorough corpus of interview material I also had my key interviewees refer me to others who they thought would be helpful to my research. This data collection method is often referred to as the snowball method (Bernard 2006: 192-193). I interviewed San Antonio west side funerary business owners (florist, headstone maker, etc.), a west side Catholic Priest, and several persons recommended to me by Dr. Ana Juarez. Many of my participants were San Antonio residents who live on the west or south sides. These individuals provided an oral history of the community surrounding San Fernando II. A few of my immediate family members and friends provided insights into how their grave decorating customs changed when they migrated from Mexico to Texas. Rather than the

cultural changes within Mexico, my research focuses on Mexican American cemeteries in Texas. I studied the similarities and differences between Mexican American death custom participants in rural versus urban settings.

My interviews were conducted with the aid of a digital tape recorder. I provided each person interviewed with an informational sheet detailing my intentions for the interview, either in Spanish or in English depending on their preference. This information sheet explains my project, provides contact information, and includes my IRB approval number (2008-59183). The interviews were informal and semi-structured. For interviews conducted in Spanish, Maria Salazar, my mother, accompanied me. She also aided me in the translation and summary index/transcription process for Spanish interviews.

Participant observation at San Fernando II and other south Texas cemeteries was another major part of my methods for obtaining both visual and ethnographic research. I utilized grounded theory for analyzing interviews, and created a detailed summary index or full transcription of each interview. I identified categories and concepts that emerged from the transcriptions and my analyzing of the digital images. I then linked that knowledge into formal theories about death customs and gender roles as per my training in Dr. Ana Juarez's Research and Field Methods in Cultural Anthropology course, taken in the spring of 2008 at Texas State University in San Marcos.

## CHAPTER IV

### ETHNICITY: THE CULTURAL IMPACT OF ANGLO/MEXICAN RELATIONS

#### Introduction

Legal segregation in the early to mid- twentieth century in the United States was a policy that separated people based on their race, class, or ethnic group within schools, housing, and public or commercial facilities. Segregation essentially created entire sectors of cities in which only those of a particular ethnic group could live and interact. Within this thesis, I demonstrate that segregationist policies had many far-reaching cultural, social and economic effects on those who were subject to its practice.

In this chapter, I detail the history of Mexican Americans throughout the southwest, often paralleling their plight with that of African Americans. Because legal policies aimed at African Americans had no direct equivalencies in regards to Mexican Americans, *de facto* policies became the term used to describe discriminatory practices against Mexican Americans (Montejano 1994).

Ultimately, while I feel that segregation was detrimental for ethnic groups and ethnic relations in the United States, I will argue that segregation had some positive effects. For example, one of its major positive attributes is that it has helped to perpetuate and sustain the culture of minority groups. However, these cultures are not static and have changed over many generations in the United States due to societal pressures and exposure to other cultures. Many mainstream white Americans do not understand that cultural pride is not a shunning of another culture, but is the result of

many years of purposeful isolation and discrimination as the ‘other.’ Pride and continuation of culture are some of the positive results of the abhorred institution of segregation. Today many Mexican Americans live in the same neighborhoods in which their parents and grandparents lived for reasons of social segregation. Cultural pride is visible in the many traditions and practices that have survived within these communities.

### Mexican American History in Texas and the Southwest

“Texas independence and annexation acquire special significance as the events that laid the initial ground for invidious distinction and inequality between Anglos and Mexicans” (Montejano 1994: 5). Before Texas’ independence from Mexico, “relationships between the two groups [Anglos and Spanish-Mexicans] were relatively egalitarian,” and it was only after independence that “the relative power statuses of the two settler populations began to reverse” (Carroll 2003: 16). This was due in large part to the fact that Anglos were encouraged to immigrate into Texas and soon began to hold political and economic positions that allowed them to supplant native Mexicans, relegating them to a lesser role in society.

“During and after the independence movement Anglo discourse about persons of Mexican descent became ever more racist” (Carroll 2003: 17). These tensions heightened after the United States annexed Texas in 1844. Anglos immigrating into Texas brought with them a blueprint on how to deal with groups belonging to the “other.” Long practiced and institutionalized dealings with both Native Americans and African Americans helped to guide Anglos in their dealings with Mexicans in Texas and throughout the Southwest.

After the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, tensions continued to escalate between Anglos and Mexicans. Cattle barons built up their fortunes at the expense of border Mexicans, and soon conflicts arose with the *rinche* or Texas Rangers who were robbing, cheating and killing the Mexican population of Texas (Paredes 1958). The “U.S. victory in the Mexican-American war had relegated Tejanos to the rank of second-class citizenship” and Anglos began to “regard them as aliens from 1848 onward” (Carroll 2003: 18).

Anglos claiming land that once belonged to generations of Mexicans relegated their former owners almost exclusively into the hard labor market. “Since the farmers were Anglo and the laborers were Mexican, the construction of the farm society essentially proceeded on the basis of simple racial exclusions” (Montejano 1994: 163). This, in combination with the previously stated notions of how to deal with “others” by Anglos, was the basis for Anglo/Mexican interactions from then on.

As revolution broke out on the Mexican side of the border, many Mexicans immigrated into Texas, increasing the Mexican population in South Texas. Later, “nearly a million Mexicans migrated to the U.S. Southwest between 1942 and 1948, with Southern California and Texas absorbing most of the inflow” (Carroll 2003: 22). Carroll notes that in the eyes of Anglos, Mexicans and Mexican Americans began to blur. Newcomers from Mexico typically settled in Mexican American neighborhoods where “they were often welcomed as grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, and nephews because many of the new arrivals came from the same towns and villages to which Tejanos traced their family origins” (Carroll 2003: 22).

This new influx brought with it a large and unskilled labor market, helping to perpetuate the stereotype of the Mexican manual labor worker. “Anglos easily transferred these discriminatory attitudes from Mexican nationals to Mexican Americans.... [handicapping] both groups in their quest for upward economic mobility” (Carroll 2003: 25). The effects of this discrimination are still being felt today by Mexican and Mexican Americans alike.

### Segregated Education Systems

Within the Nueces Strip, the status of education was no different than it was for other minority groups in the United States. Rosales notes that “through local initiative, school districts in Bexar County, where San Antonio is found, segregated Blacks and Chicanos from Anglos in schools of obvious inferior quality” (Rosales 2000: 5). For example, along the Nueces Strip in the town of Sandia, most of the school budget went to support the small Anglo student body instead of the larger Mexican population; this led to many of the “differences in the physical plants and personnel of the two [school] systems” (Carroll 2003: 46). Carroll goes on to describe some of the specifics of the varied conditions of the two schools. For instance, the insufficient construction of the Sandia Latin American School meant that it could not house the student body. Menchaca points out this inconsistency with two schools in California, Canyon (the Mexican school) and Isbell (the Anglo school). Canyon school had 950 Mexican students, eight classrooms, two bathrooms, and an office, while Isbell had 667 Anglo students, 21 classrooms, a cafeteria, a training shop, and administrative offices (Menchaca 1995: 70, 72). Carroll further points out that the Sandia Latin American school had no bathroom facilities, and that one could visibly notice the bugs and rodents that hung out around



open-pit privies the children were supposed to use. Sadly, the worst part of Carroll's description was that the Mexican American School was right across the street from the Anglo school, pouring salt into the wound of the students forced to go to school in such horrible conditions.

### Segregated Prisons and Cemeteries

Also segregated in the South were correctional facilities. Rabinowitz mentions that during the antebellum period, “as a result of the influx of black prisoners, racial contact became as much of a problem within the correctional institutions as in the outside world,” and “segregation was seen as the ideal solution for regulating contact between the races” (Rabinowitz 1976: 339). In order to prevent the mixture of the races, black prisoners were often ‘leased out,’ which provided many benefits to both individual contractors and to the state government (Rabinowitz 1976: 339).

Cemeteries, Rabinowitz argues, also failed to escape the practice of segregation. Using New Orleans as an example, he describes how cemeteries excluded blacks, but laws enforced black people's right of burial in public cemeteries (Rabinowitz 1976: 327-328). New Orleans public cemeteries then designated sections that were specifically for African American burials. Similarly, Jordan discusses how “Mexican and German dead also frequently [had] separate quarters within the same grounds....in Comal County, two rows of rough wooden crosses [marked] the Mexican burials [occupying] one corner of the sanctified enclosure” (Jordan 2002: 69).

While working for the Texas Historical Commission over the summer of 2008, I discovered similar treatment of Mexican Americans in cemeteries throughout the state of Texas. While studying under Dr. Ana Juarez at Texas State University in San Marcos, I

learned of an example close to home. San Marcos has two separate Mexican cemeteries in addition to the city cemetery. The city cemetery segregated Mexican American dead until the mid twentieth century. This segregationist policy in the city cemetery is visually noticeable today. In particular, this is visible in the layout of the cemetery (<http://www.txstate.edu/anthropology/centers/Cemetery/City-Cemetery.html>). Found bordering the cemetery, Mexican American burials reveal their later addition to the cemetery landscape.

### Segregated Living Conditions

Texas, southern California, and other predominantly Mexican American states throughout the southwest could not escape the racism and segregation experienced by other minority groups. Carroll describes the Nueces Strip, as I have previously described, as divided into two communities: Mexican and American. Settlements were “physically divided into two communities, American Town and Mexican Town,” each with its own school systems, labor markets, and languages (Carroll 2003: 32). “Segregated residential sections had been planned by ranchers and town developers and maintained through sales policies” throughout Texas (Montejano 1994: 167). “Mexican Americans and Mexican nationals remained virtually ghettoized within the region.... set apart from Anglo society in rural labor camps and urban *barrios*, [where] they lost their basic human rights” (Carroll 2003: 25). Mexican labor camps were substandard and living conditions were worse in some cases than those afforded animals on the ranches and farms (Montejano 1994, Carroll 2003). Living facilities were subpar at best, and often were clumsily erected shacks that did not have any electricity or running water.

### Eliminating Segregation

In response to the separate but not equal lives of Mexicans and Mexican Americans, many groups attempted to gain the rights guaranteed to those living within the United States. Along the Nueces Strip in April 1948, Dr. Héctor Pérez García, founder of the GI Forum, “led a fact-finding committee to investigate allegations of inhumane living and working conditions, as well as uneven educational opportunities in a number of towns to the west of Corpus Christi” (Carroll 2003: 35). The fact finding committee assigned to investigate Dr. García’s complaint discovered and noted all of the above mentioned atrocities listed by Carroll. The committee stated that the “Sandia Latin American School's health hazards far outweighed its limited educational benefits” (Carroll 2003: 46).

Unfortunately, after all the fact collection, the situation in the Nueces Strip continued because of the self-perceived legality of the different school districts actions and those who were in charge. “Anglo officials ignored the documents and committee's threats;” their “silence on the investigative committee's reports seemed to imply either no fault or Mexican American's fault” (Carroll 2003:52). Anglo officials even went so far as to suggest that those who did not like the labor camp conditions should move, and children should stop dropping out of school if they wanted a high school education, virtually removing all blame from themselves and the school district. Either way, the notion of separate but equal went unrecognized within the Mexican American community, especially because of its legal ambiguity, a situation that mirrored the conditions within the African American community.

Other groups attempted to draw attention to the unequal treatment of Mexicans and Mexican Americans. Montejano notes that “‘Jim Crow’ may appear to be an odd description of the situation of Mexicans in Texas,” because there was “no constitutionally sanctioned ‘separate but equal’ provision for Mexicans as there was for blacks” (Montejano 1994: 262). Technically, the classification of Mexicans was Caucasian. My father, born in Laredo, Texas, in 1950, often speaks of this fact: on several occasions, he noted to me that his birth certificate identifies him as Caucasian. “But in political and sociological terms, blacks and Mexicans were basically seen as different aspects of the same race problem” (Montejano 1994: 262).

Montejano goes on to note that even as late as World War II, “social conflict and national crisis provided the necessary impulse for the decline of old race arrangements” (Montejano 1994: 264). Interestingly, my grandparents moved into the southwest side of San Antonio into a non-segregated neighborhood. My grandfather fought in World War II, and upon returning got a job with Kelly Air Force Base as an airplane electrician. My grandmother, Gloria Salazar, recalled that the neighborhood “was mixed...there were the Smith’s, the Griffin’s. There were white people” (Interview with author, February 23, 2008). She continued by stating that no black or Asian people lived in the neighborhood. Eventually the white people moved out, leaving the neighborhood as it is today, predominantly Mexican American.

The fight for Mexican American civil rights most often came in the form of labor movements and legislation. For instance, “the weakening of labor barriers was due to direct federal intervention in the form of the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC)” (Montejano 1994: 269). This committee “was charged with the task of seeing

that no federal agency or company doing business with the government discriminated against any person because of race, color, creed, or national origin” (Montejano 1994: 269). Unfortunately, this agency withdrew during the peacetime following World War II, and discrimination continued as before.

In both African American and Mexican American communities, activist groups organized in order to aid in the legal quest for civil rights. For instance, in 1910 the NAACP formed. The NAACP helped fight many civil rights cases, often influencing the overthrow of some Jim Crow laws.

Mexican American groups like the League of Latin American Citizens (LULAC) and the G.I. Forum made great strides towards helping Mexicans and Mexican Americans. Montejano notes that “the G.I. Forum had gained national recognition with its protest against a Three Rivers (Texas) funeral home that had refused to handle the body of a decorated Mexican American soldier” (Montejano 1994: 279). The soldier Montejano spoke of was Felix Longoria. The incident occurred when Longoria’s widow wished to use the chapel of the local funeral home for the wake of her recently deceased husband. Upon hearing her request, the funeral home owner told her “they could not offer her the use of the chapel because ‘the whites would not like it’” (Carroll 2003: 56). With the aid of Dr. García and the G.I. Forum, Lyndon Baines Johnson, and LULAC, Longoria eventually secured burial at Arlington National Cemetery. Other groups, like the Political Association of Spanish-Speaking Organizations (PASSO) and the National Farm Workers Association, continued to make strides towards gaining rights in the areas of labor, education, and social equality for Mexicans and Mexican Americans throughout the United States.

### Continued Segregation and “Self-Segregation”

The legal struggle to end segregation had made great strides during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, residential segregation continues well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

“Restrictive covenants in house mortgages isolated Chicanos from most sectors of San Antonio, except the west side” (Rosales 2000: 5). Roof et al. suggest that “residential segregation in the Southern cities has long been recognized as distinctly different,” levels of segregation in the South tend to be higher, and for several decades, namely the 1940’s and 1950’s, these cities have seen an increase in residential segregation (Roof et al. 1976: 59). Segregationist policies of the past have established residential and educational patterns for many groups that continue into present day American cities.

This country’s tendency toward racist inequality is alive and thriving. Clear examples of this ethnic inequality are visible in various institutions, including but not limited to, nationwide school systems. David M. Newman points out that fifty years later, the outcome of *Brown vs. Board of Education* is murky at best (Newman 2007: 140). He provides several statistics that attest to this theory. Sixty-six percent of all African American students and 70 percent of Latino students attend schools that are predominantly minority in population, and a third of black students attend schools in which at least 90 percent of the student population is non-white (Newman 2007: 140). In contrast, most white public school students go to schools that are composed of a mostly white population (Newman 2007: 140). Newman talked to some African American parents about this lack of integration. Some felt that integration was useless at this point. If they chose to integrate, their children would be behind the rest of the white

population because of their previous education in less than adequate schools. They would just be set up for failure in the better schools of the white community.

Attending segregated schools affects student's potentials for success. For example, in terms of discovering the advantages of such beneficial laws such as the top ten percent law in Texas, "college-oriented, high-achieving Hispanic students who attend predominantly minority high schools are particularly disadvantaged" (Castillo et al. 2008: 843). The top ten percent law "guarantees automatic admission to any public Texas university to students who graduate in the top 10 percent of their high school class" (Castillo et al. 2008: 831). Students in predominately minority schools do not have the knowledge base that white students in predominately white schools have. The parents of these children have not heard and do not understand the top ten percent rule, and therefore do not reap the benefits of its existence.

In contrast to the negative effects listed above, one of the positive effects of segregation, and now self-segregation, is an increased pride and practice of one's culture, aiding in social and cultural reproduction. To avoid prejudice and discrimination, some Mexicans Americans self-segregate within *barrios* and other strictly Mexican American communities. For example, Tina Morales recounts the heavy persecution she and her family received when they moved to Detroit into an Anglo community when she was a child. Life became so unbearable that she begged her parents to take her back to Mexico, but they moved to the Valley of south Texas instead. After this move, Tina believed that her living experiences improved because the people of the Valley were "mostly Hispanic" (Richardson 1999: 153).

More than half of the Hispanic population (51%) live in just two states, Texas and California, and about eighty-three percent of these are Mexican Americans (DeLone et al. 2004: 15). Many Mexican Americans are living in major cities in the aforementioned *barrios*. According to Villa, this “geographical identity” manifests itself “in the unique conjunctural forms of its residents' cultural practices and consciousness,” and “has been a vital mode of urban Chicano community survival against the pressures of a dominant social formation” (Villa 2000: 5). In fact, the barrios represent “a place of familial warmth and brotherhood” (Villa 2000: 5). Rather than reproducing negative ideals, *barrios* have also “tended toward positive articulations of community consciousness,” which contributes “to a psychologically and materially sustaining sense of ‘home’ location” (Villa 2005: 5). Villa is among a small number of scholars who have studied segregation as it pertains to Mexican Americans, and has concluded that it had some positive cultural results. Many Mexican Americans choose to stay in these neighborhoods for several reasons. Some choose to stay because of housing affordability available in *barrios*, especially after “white flight” into surrounding suburbs. In addition, these neighborhoods represent certain types of familial communities rarely found anywhere else. *Barrios* are a quintessential representation of Mexican Americans, their culture, and that which this entails.

However, even within these Mexican American communities, which to an outsider may seem inhabited with one type of ethnic group, there is a great deal of internal tension and conflict, especially between Mexicans and Mexican Americans. For example, the aforementioned Tina Morales says that her parents “couldn’t stand the way Mexican Americans here [in the Valley] had changed their language and their culture to



be more like Anglos” (Richardson 1999: 153). This did not bother Morales however, because she “felt [they] were all just trying to fit in” (Richardson 1999: 153). This is a common feeling among many Mexican immigrants. “Some Mexican immigrants lament the loss of traditional Mexican ways they see among Mexican Americans” (Richardson 1999: 165). However, maintaining traditions in a new place poses a challenge, not just for Mexican immigrants, but immigrants in general. The most frequent sources of conflict between Mexicans and Mexican Americans are “language differences, class-related differences, divided national loyalties, citizenship status, and other cultural disparities” (Richardson 1999: 173).

### Cultural Expressions in the Face of Oppression

Despite the massive obstacles enforced by their own government, both African Americans and Mexican Americans have contributed greatly to the vast and varied cultural quilt of America. In fact, sometimes oppression and discrimination leads to the elaboration of new cultural forms.

In the African American community for instance, one of the greatest of these cultural expressions is Blues music. Blues is said to have emerged sometime between 1900 and 1910. “For decades, practically every big circus on the road had a black band and minstrel company attached to its sideshow, performing on the streets and inside the sideshow tent before people of all races....During the 1910’s, these companies constituted a significant pathway for the dissemination of ragtime, blues, and jazz” (Abbott and Seroff 2007: 158).

In 1917, the Harlem Renaissance began. The Harlem Renaissance is arguably one of the most important cultural contributions of the African American community. Harlem

was and still is one of the *barrios* of New York City, and has remained predominantly black since the turn of the century. The Harlem Renaissance was a cultural, social, and artistic movement that focused on the African American community. Many well-known African American artists, writers, and musicians were shining pillars for cultural expressions. “The climate of life in Harlem at the time contributed greatly to the Harlem Renaissance, which was based on equality, pride within a race, and recognition for Blacks in the United States” (Rodgers 1998: xv). The Harlem Renaissance marks a time frame in which African Americans were able to project their culture in a positive way, a perspective rarely seen before.

The same process occurs in Mexican American communities. Mexican Americans, like African Americans, contribute greatly to the rich cultural landscape of the United States. *Rasquachismo* characterizes large portions of Mexican American art and social movements. Specifically, *rasquachismo* is “a uniquely working-class aesthetic of Mexican origin- resourceful, excessive, ironic, and in its transformation of utilitarian articles into sacred or aesthetic objects, highly metaphoric” (Gaspar de Alba 1998: 13). This manifests with the use of bright colors, patterns, ornamentation and elaboration. Zoot suiters, low-riders, the Chicano Art Movement, and ultimately the focus of my thesis Mexican American cemeteries and grave decorations exemplify the concept of *rasquachismo*.

Negative connotations associated with zoot suiters and low-riders identify participants as members of a subculture. Gaspar de Alba disagrees, instead she argues that “Chicano/a culture is not a subculture but rather an *alter-Native* culture, an Other American culture indigenous to the land base now known as the West and Southwest of

the United States” (Gaspar de Alba 2003: xxi). Fitting into this conception of Chicano/a culture are zoot suiters. Goldman, in discussing current barrio art t-shirt styles, mentions that “zoot suiters experienced cultural and economic isolation in the 1940’s, and rebelled against that isolation through their clothing,” much as those she studied do with their barrio art t-shirts today (Goldman 1997: 132).

Chicano low-riding culture also contains many aspects of *rasquachismo*. Low-rider cars are often characterized by their vibrant colors, ornate fixtures, and in many cases, imagery. Low-riding can be seen as “Hispanos” customizing “a mass-produced commodity into an ethnic cultural form and subsequently [creating] the car as a form of local culture” (Bright 1998: 584-5). The same situation occurs in the Chicano Rock music scene. Often major Chicano groups have taken established musical styles from other subordinated groups, like blues and jazz, and combined it with Latin beats and sounds creating a music that is uniquely representative of Chicanos. Some examples of this are the swing music of Andy Russell, the Rock n’ Roll of Los Lobos, and the style of jazz labeled “Latin Jazz” often seen as “progressive” (Loza 1993: 85). Like low-rider and Chicano Rock culture, Mexican Americans took the act of grave decorating with its mass-produced commodities, and made it their own.

A major exhibit dealing with the Chicano Art Movement, *Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation, 1965-1985 (CARA)*, dealt with the topic of *rasquachismo* as seen in cultural expressions. *CARA* represented the history and material products produced by Chicano/as in response to the environments in which they lived. *CARA* included materials from the Chicano Art Movement like building murals, *ofrendas* or altars, photography, as well as paintings and ceramics. Characterized by *rasquachismo*,

each aspect of the exhibit often involved politically charged images and topics. This type of *rasquachismo* is more than evident in the bright colors and images often characteristic of grave decorations found on San Antonio's Mexican American dominated west side.

### Conclusion

There are many far-reaching effects of segregation on Mexican Americans within the southwestern United States. Specifically, segregation has allowed for the perpetuation of Mexican American culture within these communities, while also allowing it to change and take on an identity of its own. Exclusion was historically common for both African Americans and Mexican Americans in many facets of society in this country. Exclusion continued for African Americans even after their legal freedom from slavery. Segregation soon became the norm with the aid of such legislation as Jim Crow laws until the mid 1960's. Similarly, although not necessarily sanctioned through legal avenues, Mexican Americans faced many of the same segregationist structures and policies as African Americans.

Mexican Americans in Texas soon began to face exclusion themselves. Eventually segregated, like African Americans, Mexican Americans had their own schools, housing, transportation, cemeteries, and businesses. Their populations grew larger as immigrants from Mexico poured in during the Mexican Revolution, or whenever recruited as labor. Once in America, Mexican immigrants moved into Mexican American communities. They would often reunite with relatives who were on the U.S. side of the border.

As Mexican American communities expanded, they suffered a fate similar to African American neighborhoods; they became the ghettos, barrios, and neighborhoods

of contemporary cities in the United States. Many Supreme Court sanctions such as *Plessy vs. Ferguson* (1896) and *Williams vs. Mississippi* (1898), continued to hammer the nail in the coffin of rights for both African Americans and Mexican Americans, making equality seem as though it might never occur.

However, through it all, Mexican Americans managed to uphold their culture and contribute their heritage in many ways to the rest of the United States, including major art and music movements. In 1947, President Truman finally recognized the plight of oppressed minority groups. He presented a civil rights platform that passed in 1948, paving the way for further civil rights legislation. The next major step came in 1954, with the ruling in *Brown vs. Board of Education*, which officially ended segregation in schools. Lyndon B. Johnson led the movement, which passed the Civil Rights Act in 1964. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was the most far-reaching piece of legislation at that point in history. In 1965, following the Civil Rights Act, was the passage of the Voting Rights Act. Presidents enforced these policies with much more gusto than had been previously applied.

Restrictions regarding segregated neighborhoods housing African Americans and Mexican Americans are comparable to a double-edged sword. Remaining in them meant that, more than likely, residents would receive a substandard education, and would remain in lower socioeconomic status. However, while the *barrios* may be negative in one respect, they are positive in another. They offer a place where one's culture is respected and practiced on a daily basis. They offer a sense of community, home, and acceptance that is often unavailable in mainstream society. Many who do leave the

*barrio* realize that they are facing a world that, half a century after the Civil Rights Act, is still not accepting of them or their culture.

While these neighborhoods offer a place for culture to thrive, they also offer a place for culture to change. In some cases, it is in the process of transformation that tensions arise between practitioners of older and newer cultural acts. Many Mexican Americans do not recognize change as a balancing act between love for old ways, and exposure and incorporation of new practices. Change does not necessarily mean a loss of something old, but can also mean a gain of something new. It is through change that minorities, particularly Mexican Americans, take control of their own lives and regulate what they will and will not accept. It is a statement of who we are: Mexican and American.

While the influence of segregation has had a major impact on the perpetuation of culture and cultural practices, even within these segregated communities, culture always evolves. This is evident within the Mexican American community in San Antonio and their practices of grave decorating. Gravesite decorating is a tradition long observed within Mexican culture. This fact is more than obvious on San Antonio's west and south sides. However, as Turner and Jasper have noted, these traditions are similar yet noticeably different from those found in Mexico today. These decorations are both "traditional" and innovative, as the following chapters will show.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **TRANSCULTURATION: SYMBOLS**

#### Introduction

Multitudes of cultural practices have been utilized throughout anthropological studies as a lens to better understand individual societies. Nowhere has this inter-cultural understanding been better exemplified than through the works of such anthropologists like Clifford Geertz (2008), Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992), Renato Rosaldo (1993), and Mary Douglas (2008). Each of these authors analyzed basic, fundamental, and often public cultural expressions, in order to illuminate the cultural belief systems of different societies. For example, Douglas analyzed the physical body and made connections between taboos associated with it, and the larger political body into which society is organized (Douglas 2008: 493). My lens of understanding the belief systems of contemporary Mexican Americans on San Antonio's west and south sides is current death customs. In line with the authors previously mentioned, I will be utilizing a symbolic and interpretive anthropological approach towards the understanding of deeper social meanings behind the cultural acts of grave decorations.

To study the act of grave decorating and other death rituals, it is first necessary to discuss the concept of ancestor worship. Ancestor worship establishes a continual relationship with deceased relatives and friends. It is exemplified through the use of

offerings, including grave goods, celebrations, and rituals. In many instances, offerings were provided in order to ease the transition of the dead from the world of the living to that of the realm of the dead. Both historically and in modern times, examples of these customs can be observed on the worldwide stage of funeral rites. In my first year of graduate school at the University of Texas in San Antonio, I befriended a graduate student from the sociology department. She was an exchange student from Korea. After having a discussion one day about the focus of my thesis, she shared with me a story about Korean and Chinese death customs. Both cultures ritually burn “hell” money, which is a type of colorfully printed ‘play’ money. When burned it is said to pass over the realm of the dead, and can be used by those who have passed away to pay their way through the different levels of the spirit/other world. In turn, the family, who has burnt the hell money, is rewarded with good fortune. This was also the case in Spain where relatives offered not only food offerings of bread and wine to priests, but also masses and prayers for their deceased relatives, in order to help them reach heaven (Lomnitz 2005: 104-105). My family frequently prays on behalf of those who have passed away like our Spanish ancestors, in the hopes that our prayers will ultimately intercede on their behalf, and perhaps limit the amount of time they will spend in purgatory.

My analysis of death customs, within Mexican American culture, yields three major points of discussion. In this chapter I discuss two of those points. First, I discuss how the concept of familism is represented through the act of grave decorating and death rituals. Secondly, I discuss how the symbols on grave decorations contain deep cultural meanings within the Mexican American community. Specifically, I argue that the images found on grave decorations serve as symbols for a thriving Mexican *and* American



cultural heritage. This cultural manifestation results in decorations that are representative of its Mexican American origins. Finally, in the following chapter, I discuss how established ideas of gender are not only exemplified and solidified in some instances, but also challenged and rearranged throughout modern history (early/mid 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries), including the wake, the funeral, the burial, and finally grave decorating customs.

### Familism

When I took Dr. Juarez' Mexican American Cultures course in the spring of 2005, I studied the concept of familism. Familism is characterized by the belief in which the family is seen as the focal point of society. Thus the family is situated at the center of all social structures and belief systems. Norma Williams mentions, in reference to Mexican Americans, that the family is a central aspect of the culture, and not only includes blood relatives, but also fictive kin (Williams 1990: 10). This concept can be seen, like Geertz suggests in his famous work on Balinese cockfights, as not only an example of culture, but literally culture itself (Geertz 2008: 527). Familism is such a significant part of social interactions that it cannot exist apart from those participating in it. However, several theorists have criticized romanticized notions of familism, showing that the family can have several negative effects on individual family members. For instance, Rodríguez points out that the family "can itself be oppressive" (Rodríguez 2003:75). However, I show that ritual acts of grave decorating practices at cemeteries allow for a positive representation of families. These actions and those sites are places where familism can be ideally articulated.

Familism can be observed in outings to the cemetery for grave decorating. These outings often involve the entire family. This is especially true on occasions like Dia de los Muertos, Christmas, and the birthdays of deceased family members. Many of the people I interviewed remarked that on these special occasions it was not only an obligation, but a necessary part of life to continue to interact with those who have passed. This can be seen in Figures one and two. These pictures were taken on Dia de los Muertos at San Fernando II in 2006 and 2008 respectively. Families go to cemeteries in order to remember and commemorate the lives of loved ones who have passed. Often these celebrations last for a large portion of the day, and involve the consuming of food, listening to music, and the exchanging of stories and memories of those who have assumed the cultural role of the dearly departed. In Figure one, a family sits around the grave of a departed relative, and listens as another member of the family plays guitar. In Figure two, a massive migration of families after the Dia de los Muertos mass at San Fernando II, sheds light onto the importance of the holiday, and the centrality of the family in its commemoration. Throughout the cemetery I saw groups of families walking, talking, and visiting together at the gravesites of loved ones.

Perhaps my favorite example of familism found within the act of grave decorating is seen through the image in Figure three taken in 2005. A quinceañera is an important rite of passage in a young Mexican American girl's life (Davalos 2003, Cantu 2002). When I was conducting research at San Fernando II, I had a brief conversation with one of the cemetery secretaries. In this discussion, she mentioned the grave of the young girl seen in Figure three. On the fifteenth birthday of this departed family member, her living family gathered together at her grave, and ritually celebrated her quinceañera. They had

a barbeque, ate, danced, and celebrated her birthday. This act exemplifies familism by showing the importance of celebrating milestones as a family, even in death.

### Symbols of Mexican American Culture: Continuity and Change

As seen above, grave decorations contain symbolic representations. In order to fully understand these continued representations as ritual acts of ancestor worship, I will describe Aztec, Teotihuacan, and briefly Maya and Mixtec cultures to show the continuing legacy of ancient Mesoamerican ancestor worship. I identify how these incidences of ancient Mesoamerican ancestor worship have continued in their basic articulations, yet drastically changed in their modern practices.

#### Teotihuacan Ancestor Worship

At the ancient city of Teotihuacan, Storey (1992) observed a variety of grave goods. These grave goods included: ceramics, obsidian blades and tools, worked faunal bones, *incensarios*, mica, bone needles, and slate artifacts (Storey 1992: 82). While many of the grave goods offered at Teotihuacan are not seen in modern grave offerings some, like ceramics, continue to be seen. Specifically, in figures four and five, the use of ceramic vessels as grave offerings is evident. Figure four is a picture of Burial 25 in the Tlajinga apartment compound. Along with greenstone beads, a shell disk, and a mano and metate, there are several examples of ceramics. Similarly, in Figure five, at the center of a Dia de los Muertos altar, ceramic vessels are displayed. Interestingly, some similar in shape to those found in Burial 25 are on the altar.

Another type of grave offering found at Teotihuacan were numerous *incensarios*. *Incensarios* were used to hold incense which was burned as offerings to the dead. Today, as noted by many of those interviewed, as well as practiced within my own family, home

and public altars burn incense. Figure six was taken at a Dia de los Muertos altar located inside a museum in Matamoros, Mexico. On this particular altar, incense is dramatically used as one of the main focal points. The incense, powdery white substance in the shape of a cross, filled the room with its strong aroma. In figure seven, I show a close up of the altar in figure six, which highlights the use of another ceramic bowl in a modern commemoration of the dead. While it may not be understood how ancient Mesoamericans used ceramics in their ancestor worship, the continued use of ceramics in modern day ancestor worship points to the notion of continuity and change as it relates to materials used in this practice of ancestor worship.

#### Maya and Mixtec Grave Goods and Imagery

A comprehensive comparison between the two ancient cities of Teotihuacan and Kaminaljuyu, a Maya site, was presented by Braswell (2003). Shells were found “in all of the tombs” of Mounds A and B at Kaminaljuyu (Braswell 2003: 126). Shell is a common feature of Mexican American gravesites throughout south Texas. While today shells are often not left in burials, they are utilized as trinkets at both gravesites and altars for the dead. Jordan comments that the possible origin of the use of shells in Texas is quite confusing. Some sources suggest a Mexican origin, while others suggest Spanish and even African slaves originated the concept. As is the case with many customs, the origins are infinite. Spaniards used shells as a tribute to St. Joseph and the Virgin Mary (Jordan 1982: 84).

In a conversation with Dr. F. Kent Reilly in the Spring of 2009, he told me of another important Spanish saint who is associated with the image of shells, St. James or Santiago de Matamoros. Interestingly, Clark, who Jordan identifies as the “leading

expert on the subject” of shells, noted that Mexicans rarely use shells in commemoration of the dead, except for in border cities like Matamoros and Nuevo Laredo, two Mexican cities associated with St. James (Jordan 1982: 85). Figures eight and nine were taken at San Pedro cemetery in San Marcos, Texas, and showcase the use of shells on curbs, which mark individual and/or family plots. Maximo, my 66-year-old paternal grandmother’s cousin, described the process of making curbs.

“I participated in making a curb for some of my relatives. We, my godfather and I, made some for my grandparents too. It was a job for one day, but it was a good feeling after you got through with the whole thing. You start off by measuring the whole thing....you need a pickup truck to carry the lumber...the cement, and the sand, and the wheelbarrow, the shovels, and all the tools that are needed to mix the cement and measure the whole thing right, so that you can do it right....It lines the whole area where they are buried” (Interview with author, March 11, 2008).

After the wooden barriers are set up and the cement poured in, shells are placed on top as decorations. As time goes by, some shells break apart or are stolen, leaving behind the imprinted pattern of the shell.

The Mixtec goddess, Lady 9 Grass, seen in figure ten, also shows continuity of imagery used to commemorate the dead. The image of Lady 9 Grass is associated with “the Mixtec’s ‘Place of the Skull (or of the Dead),’ (Coggins 1994: 154). Her image very closely resembles modern Calaveras used throughout Mexican and Mexican American Dia de los Muertos celebrations. However, I would like to emphasize here that it is not my intention to support the “stereotype of the death-obsessed Mexican” through my discussion of skeletal imagery in grave and altar decorations, I simply aim to understand the possible origins, connections, and transformations of such images (Brandes 2006: 66). Later, I provide images of Calaveras seen today, and their likeness to other ancient skeletal goddess images.

### Mesoamerican Grave Goods

Finally, I will discuss the more generalized category of Mesoamerican customs. For instance, the belief in the watery-underworld is a pan-Mesoamerican and Native American belief. For ancient Mesoamericans, caves were seen as a site which gave access to the under/ other world. In order to open that door, offerings were often made inside the caves. Today, Mexican Americans throughout south Texas have utilized the imagery of a cave on graves markers and headstones (Figure 11). During a Fellowship in the summer of 2008 with the Texas Historical Commission, I had the privilege to travel to several Mexican American cemeteries throughout south Texas, and I found the use of cave imagery to be widespread. I contend that these niches, as they are often referenced today, can be seen literally as caves. Niche use contemporarily, includes incense, figurines (usually saints) and candles.

### Dias de los Muertos

Finally I will discuss the Mexican-Catholic holiday of Dia de los Muertos and the images and goods used during this holiday. I believe these items correspond to ancient Mesoamerican images and goods. Garcíagodoy (1998), discusses the possible origins of Dia de los Muertos, and relies heavily on descriptions by Spanish Franciscan friar, Bernardino de Sahagún on the people of Anáhuac, in the Valley of Mexico, and their practices for commemorating the dead.

Sahagún observed that there was not one day, or group of days within each month, in which the dead were commemorated, but several throughout the course of the year. Each commemoration marked the life of individuals who had died in certain ways. For instance, there were days of remembrance for those who died at war, those who

drowned, and those who died during childbirth. Each of these observations brought with it specific items, customs, and rituals.

For example, for ten days during the month of Quecholli which lasted between October 24 and November 20, there was a celebration and fiesta to the war god Mixcoatl, during which those who died at war were commemorated (Garcíagodoy 1998: 111). During this time, offerings of tamales and personal items, like shields and blankets, were presented at gravesites. Also noted by Sahagún was the fact that “the celebrants sat by the graveside all day and all night” (Garcíagodoy 1998: 112).

Today, tamales and various kinds of personal items are some of the most common objects offered to deceased relatives at gravesites. On Dia de los Muertos families often spend the entire day and night at gravesites. For Dia de los Muertos 2007, my father, maternal grandmother, her cousin Lupita and I celebrated in Matamoros, Mexico. We started the day at what my Abuelita refers to as “El Panteon del Centro,” where her parents and one of her children are buried. After visiting that cemetery, we moved to “El Panteon de Afuera,” where many of Lupita’s immediate family were buried. It was at El Panteon de Afuera that I encountered the family in Figure 12. At first, I did not want to go speak with the matriarch of the family, reluctant to embarrass myself with my broken Spanish in the city of my maternal family’s origin. However, my father would not let me pass up the opportunity to interview this seemingly perfect participant on Dia de los Muertos traditions. After I expressed my hesitation, he told me to get over it, and walked right up to her himself, striking up a conversation. The woman in the picture, whose name escapes me to this day (I am sure because of my shock of being thrown into what I perceived as a very uncomfortable situation), told us that she had been in the cemetery

since early that morning, and would not be leaving until the next day; it was what her father would have wanted. She also mentioned that her father saw Dia de los Muertos as an opportunity for the entire family to come together. He insisted that they commemorate the holiday as insurance that they would unite at least one time a year, solidifying family ties and connections.

The month of Miccailhuitontli began on August 5, and commemorated the “little dead, those who had died as children” (Garcíagodoy 1998: 112). Offerings of vegetables were made during this time. Figure 13, taken on Dia de los Muertos 2006 at San Fernando II, is an example of modern offerings of not only vegetables, but also fruit and other food items. While the gravesite was not that of a child, the fact that such items are still used today points to a continuation in types of offerings. Offerings to deceased children today often include foodstuffs and toys (Figure 14).

Finally, the month of Tititl, celebrated December 19 through January 27, commemorated women who died during their first childbirth. At this time, sour bread was eaten. Figure 15, taken in Matamoros for Dia de los Muertos in 2007, shows the prevalence of pan de muerto today. Pan de muerto was eaten by those visiting, as well as offered at the gravesites of deceased relatives and friends.

Offerings to the goddesses Cihuapipiltin and Cihuateteo were also made at this time. Modern day images of Calaveras, very closely mirror the image of Cihuateteo, yet often come in the form of sugar skulls for consumption (Figures 16 and 17). Brandes suggests that modern day images of Calaveras have many historical influences including native Mexican, and Spanish customs. Brandes notes that there is “no special Mexican view of death, no uniquely morbid Mexican national character [that] has produced this



mortuary art. Rather, specific demographic and political circumstances originally gave rise to this custom and commercial interests have allowed it to flourish in the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (Brandes 2006: 66).

### Imagery

The use of imagery in grave decorations is a common cultural characteristic of Mexican American death customs throughout south Texas. Customarily, fresh or paper flowers are utilized in grave decorating; however, the norm throughout south Texas today is to use silk flowers. In fact, San Antonio's use of silk flower arrangements is very widespread and these types of arrangements can be seen throughout south and central Texas, especially at San Fernando II. These silk flower wreaths, or *coronas*, are often very colorful and bright, following the art style of *rasquachismo* proposed by Ybarra-Frausto discussed in the previous chapter. “The use of vivid colors extends into the profusion of flowers that are the hallmark of Mexican-American cemeteries. Flowers, both artificial and natural, are found on practically every grave, and even some neglected graves sites proudly display some form of floral arrangement” (Vidaurre 1991: 226).

Traditional decorations are changing however, due in large part to restrictive cemetery policies and the influence of American culture. These hindrances are serving to aid in the innovation of new types of decorations, particularly those that are strictly and uniquely Mexican American. Restrictive cemetery policies that force change among the Mexican American community can also be seen at San Fernando II. San Fernando II forbids certain types of planting, the erecting of fences around graves, trenching, adding grass or sod, foodstuffs, and the use of decorations which do not “reflect the spiritual nature of Christian death,” all of which are typically done or used at Mexican gravesites

(San Fernando Cemetery Policy Flyer: 2005). However, as one cemetery staff secretary told me in a brief conversation when I was visiting my maternal grandfather's grave one day, the cemetery cannot truly enforce these rules, and often look the other way as family and friends blatantly ignore these policies.

Throughout San Fernando cemetery, this deliberate defiance of restrictive cemetery policy in an attempt to continue to uphold their traditions is widely seen. For example, San Fernando does not allow the use of fences or trenching to mark graves, a traditional way of adorning graves in Texas (Vidaurre 1991: 226). However, the policy against borders and fences is not necessarily obeyed, as seen in figure 18 where a fence is clearly erected. San Fernando also limits the use of planting. Yet again, families are often undeterred in their devotion to grave decorating, and find ways to circumvent the policies. In several instances, grave decorators utilized silk flowers to create the illusion of real flowers on their loved one's final resting place (Figures 19 and 20). These restrictive policies have forced Mexican Americans to adapt their decorations and find a balance between their cultural heritage and institutionally implemented limitations.

Another force - American popular culture – has likewise had an effect on customary ways of decorating. An increase in the use of mainstream American iconography on grave decorations can be widely observed. For instance, the use of American commercial holiday icons is overpowering throughout the year especially during Easter, Halloween, Christmas, and even Valentine's Day (Figures 21-24). The more people I interviewed, the more I realized that the incorporation of these American commercial holiday icons was not assimilation, but in fact culture change and transformation. None of the people I interviewed ever suggested that they had

“forgotten” or felt less connected to their Mexican cultural heritage. I suppose they felt as I do; the use of these images *is* my culture.

The last types of imagery utilized are my personal favorites: sports themed. I believe I find these types of decorations most appealing because I can see the personal connections involved in using these decorations. I know that within my own family, sports have been one of the major bonding points between parents and children, brothers and sisters. The use of these types of decorations implies a great knowledge of the deceased, and what they enjoyed in life. These images range from local high school sports mascots and colors, to college and professional basketball and football teams. While images associated with teams like the University of Texas Longhorns and the Dallas Cowboys are used in San Fernando II (Figure 25), as well as other cemeteries, the most frequent sports decorations come from a local team: the San Antonio Spurs (Figures 26 and 27). Figure 26 was taken in 2005, at the beginning of my research into grave decorating. I was told by the flower shop owner, that it was made especially for an older woman who loved the Spurs, as a *corona* for her funeral. At the time, that was the only Spurs decoration I had seen, and I was very excited by it. Flash forward two years to 2007, and gravesites similar in appearance to the one in Figure 27 can be seen widely during basketball season. The use of American sports logos, especially the Spurs, exemplifies not only American culture, but regional culture as well.

Similarly, other aspects of local San Antonio culture have also been observed on grave decorations. I conducted visual research at San Fernando II in 2005 during Fiesta Week, a local tradition celebrating Texas' independence from Mexico. While at San Fernando II, I came across a grave decorated with a *corona*, plates, and cups that read,

“Fiesta 2005” (Figure 28). Lynn Gosnell and Suzanne Gott, while doing their research in 1987, were present during Fiesta Week and observed a few graves with, *cascarones*, or confetti eggs, on gravesites (Gosnell and Gott 1989: 230). *Cascarones* are a common item used during the Fiesta Week celebration.

In 2007, when I travelled to Matamoros, Mexico, for Dia de los Muertos with my family, one of the key differences I noticed in styles of decorating was the lack of imagery found on grave decorations, specifically the *coronas*, and an abundance of fresh flowers (Figure 29). While fresh flowers were utilized more in Matamoros, there were some silk flower *coronas*, all of which did not contain writing or images. However, the very next day, when my family and I made the trek back to San Antonio to visit relatives buried at San Fernando II, we were bombarded with images on grave decorations (Figure 30). Interestingly, even though fresh *cempasuchil*, or marigolds, is the staple flower of Dia de los Muertos, at San Fernando II silk, and thus artificial *cempasuchil* are used, showing continuity (Figure 31).

What is most interesting however, in terms of the imagery, is that they thoroughly represent both Mexican and American culture. La Virgen de Guadalupe is a perfect example of this, since she is a highly symbolic image of nationalism and cultural pride for Mexicans and Mexican Americans. The legend of La Virgen de Guadalupe is generally told as follows: Guadalupe first miraculously appeared to a supposedly humble Indian, Juan Diego, on the hill of Tepeyac. She asked that a church be erected in her honor, but Juan Diego had trouble convincing the Archbishop of his encounter and her request. He succeeded on his last attempt when roses tumbled out of his cloak, revealing a life-sized image of the Virgin painted within (Peterson 1992: 39).

For instance, the image of La Virgen de Guadalupe, is utilized in *coronas* at San Fernando (Figures 32 and 33). Peterson contends that her image is deeply embedded in the ethnic identity of peoples of Mexican descent, and has been integrated into the larger Chicano cultural space (Peterson 1992:46-47). As Johnson mentions (Rodriguez 1996) Our Lady of Guadalupe has been seen as a compassionate figure that “we need not be afraid to approach. She is brimming over with gentleness, loving kindness, and forgiveness” (Rodriguez 1996: 29). Felipe Ehrenberg notes that “faith in the Virgin helps solve everything from the deepest spiritual unrest to the most minuscule daily problems” (Ehrenberg 1996: 172). Viewed in this light, La Virgen de Guadalupe can be seen as a spiritual being to turn to at extreme emotional times of trouble like that at the death of a relative or close friend. This may help to explain why her image is used so prolifically throughout grave decorations.

However, her image could be used for other reasons as well. For instance, because La Virgen’s image is frequently used on graves and in grave decorating throughout south Texas, and I have yet to observe this in Mexican graves and grave decorations. I associate the use of her image with an assertion of Mexican cultural heritage and pride. Those who live in Mexico do not need to use her image on grave decorations as a commemoration of Mexican heritage, but those who are distanced from their native Mexico, like those living in Texas for instance, use her image in just that way. She serves as a reminder of the continued longevity of the Mexican culture.

### Conclusion

As Gosnell and Gott noted, grave decorations and offerings can be seen as a “highly symbolic visual process” (Gosnell and Gott 1989: 217). Much of the traditions

and customs associated with grave decorating and public and private altars are remnants of a rich cultural history situated within a world that is constantly changing. Modern Mexican and Mexican American families offer many of the same objects and items utilized by their ancient Mesoamerican counterparts to commemorate the dead, but they are likely used and displayed differently. Father Tino, a local west side San Antonio priest, could only recall one instance in which an individual was buried with a grave good outside the current norm of jewelry and religious items like rosaries. The individual, a Hispanic male, was buried with a “beer in hand” (Interview with author, October 18, 2008). I suspect that many of the objects previously placed *in* burials are now being placed on them. Many of the objects being offered to the deceased remained the same, while the materials used and presentation changed. What has remained consistent are some of the types of items used as offerings and the continued practice of ancestor worship and commemoration.

Geertz contends that culture is a shared code of meaning which is often, if not always, acted out publically (Geertz 2008: 518). Mexican American grave decorations and death rituals can be seen as the site at which these shared codes of meaning are acted out publically. Grave decorating reflects familism both on special occasions (Día de los Muertos, Christmas, Easter) and throughout the rest of the year. It is a time at which to celebrate the importance of family, both living and dead. Grave decorating brings relatives together and strengthens the already established close bond characteristic of Mexican Americans and their families. Finally, Mexican, American, and ultimately Mexican American culture is symbolized through images utilized on artificial floral arrangements. These images range from American commercial icons to religious-cultural

icons. Ultimately, death customs, including the act of grave decorating, are public rituals which represent Mexican American cultural belief systems.

These examples point to both a continuation and a change from customary ways of decorating. These new and unique examples should be recognized for what they are—a new type of traditional grave decoration, one that is both Mexican and American, and the product of the culmination of years of exposure to both traditional and new influences. These new cultural phenomenon still uphold long-established traditions, expressing them in innovative and unique ways. Thus showing that culture does change and adapt to the various stimuli that it encounters, which includes environment, people, society, and other cultural beliefs. These decorations are not the bastardization of two cultures, but are what Richardson theorizes about the language of Tex-Mex, a form of cultural identity for those who see themselves as both Mexican and American (Richardson 1999: 173).

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **GENDER: 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY TRANSFORMATION OF DEATH CUSTOMS**

#### Introduction

The mechanisms by which Mexican Americans communicate their worldviews is evident in the tasks that men and women perform in death customs, specifically wakes, funerals, and grave decorating. The focus of this chapter is the exemplification, solidification, challenging, and rearranging of established practices and ideas of gender through the cultural acts involved in death customs. Although both men and women readily practice grave decorating and other death customs, my research illustrates that women and men in many instances perform these customs in alignment with established gender ideology. However, through the rise of the death industry and political/economic changes, these roles have altered and changed, redefining and rearranging previously established roles and tasks.

#### Gender in Anthropological Research

Historically, the anthropological realm has commonly excluded women as a subject of study. In response to this great oversight within the field of anthropology, feminist anthropology arose. Through feminist anthropology, “many women anthropologists set out to rectify this lack of interest in women’s lives” (Black and Mascia-Lees 2000: 26.) The work conducted by feminist anthropologists was extremely eye opening:



“by focusing in their ethnographic work on what women do, on how gender roles and behaviors differ across societies, and on the significance of women’s work in many societies, they called into question the androcentric biases that plagued early anthropological accounts.” [Black and Mascia-Lees 2000: 26]

Also important in the diversification of the anthropological literature was including not only feminist voices, but also Chicana voices. Gloria Anzaldúa and Chela Sandoval are among several Chicana feminists who utilize *mestizaje* theory, by including ethnicity in their work (Moraga & Anzaldúa 2002). This is particularly relevant to my research as I, a Mexican American woman; illuminate the role my fellow Mexican American women play in culture. Anzaldúa describes how mestiza’s have a “plural personality” operating in a “pluralistic mode,” in which they must learn to “juggle cultures” (Anzaldúa 1987:79). Several authors, in addition to discussing Mexican women, have also discussed Mexican “machismo”, challenging this stereotype of Mexican men (Montoya, Frazier, & Hurtig 2002, Guttman 2003, Juarez & Kerl 2003, González-López 2005).

This chapter is broken down into two major sections: Patriarchal Family Patterns in the early to mid twentieth century, and Gender and the Commercialization of Funerals and Cemeteries. Established and changing gender roles of women and men are discussed in depth in each section.

#### Early-mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century Gender in Death Customs

First, during the early to mid twentieth century, according to those I interviewed, men and women were performing death rituals along relatively strict gender lines. Family members often performed death customs themselves during the early to mid twentieth century in south Texas. Participants noted that both men and women share many tasks while others remained deeply gendered. These mortuary practices included

the preparation of bodies, burial of the dead and subsequent visits to the grave. Many of my informants recalled these practices as they experienced them in their younger years. For instance, in my family, grave decorating is undertaken by all in the family, however, the specific tasks that men and women do during grave decorating excursions differ according to gender. A discussion of these occurs later in this chapter. Death customs mirrored the gender ideologies and practices of the day: men were more involved in outdoor, physical work, and women were more involved in decorative, teaching roles. Death custom tasks are a way to understand and view what gender relations were like on a larger social scale. Authors like Williams suggest that the spatial segregation of women and men at wakes, during the early-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century for instance, mirrored their differing domains in other aspects of life (Williams 1990: 36).

In terms of specific roles performed by women and men, my research shows that women were more involved in body preparation, cooking, and emotional work, whereas men were more involved in making grave markers, and doing the heavy work of cemetery and gravesite maintenance. The main commonality for both involved cemetery visits, although women clearly took the lead in visiting and grave decorating.

#### Women's Work in Death Customs

An activity that emphasizes and expresses human feelings and sentiments, especially as related to social relationships, is emotional work. Crying and grieving are the most important emotional work related to death, and "bereavement customs worldwide commonly assign women to prolonged and ritualized grieving, both during the funeral services and long after they are over" (Scheper-Hughes 1992: 428).

In an interview with my 84-year-old maternal grandmother, Maria Rosa, we discussed what funerals were like for her growing up in Matamoros, Mexico. She noted that the women in her family were so emotional at the funerals of close friends or relatives that they did not go to the actual burial. “Por lo general nosotras [las mujeres de la familia] no íbamos al entierro de papa y mama, nada más los mas acercados o hombres, porque era muy difícil verlos ser sepultados” (interview with author, March 21, 2008).<sup>1</sup> This is a similar pattern seen in other cultures. For example, in rural Greece women lead funeral laments, but:

“wives, daughters, mothers, and sisters of the deceased... do not usually lead the singing of laments, because they are too overcome by grief.... The singing is led by women who are less directly touched by the death, more distant relatives of the deceased, or women who are not related to him.” [Danforth 2004: 157]

Maria Jovita, my 59-year-old mother, recalled a custom from her childhood that many adults performed, including her mother, Maria Rosa, called *luto*.

“Back then you dressed black from top to bottom. For a whole year or more....Actually *guelita* (grandmother) wasn't able to complete the year [for her mother's funeral, Mama Chaly, in 1963] and what they call *medio luto*, which was that you could wear white with it. *Luto* is completely black, *medio luto* is black and white and she had to do that because it started to affect her health....because that is a reminder I mean, you look at yourself in the mirror and you see yourself dressed in black and you keep reliving that moment...and she was starting to become very depressed....She would wear white blouses and black skirts and she had to do that because the doctor told her: ‘Well, one of two things is gonna happen. Either you work with your mind and you say ‘I can do this, I can overcome this,’ or I have to give you some sort of narcotic or sleeping pill or something for your state of mind and then you'll end up in the loony house!’ But of course he said in the *manicomio*, which is the mental health hospital. He said you have those two choices, what do you want to do? And she said ‘I'm gonna get better,’ but *guelita* is a very strong woman, very strong.” [Interview with author, February 24, 2008]

Preparation of the body was another gendered death custom. Even though funeral homes serving the Mexican American community in Central Texas existed at least by the

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<sup>1</sup> “Generally, we [the women of the family] did not go to the funerals of our parents, our fathers and mothers, only the immediate family or the men [would go], because it was very hard to see them being buried.”

early 1900s, most did not start using them until mid-century (Williams 1990, Davis 2000). Instead, the family was in charge of most preparations, including the preparation of the body. Since embalming the corpse was not a part of the home, it was vital to prepare the body, notify the neighbors, and prepare for the all night wake. Although most scholars (e.g. Castañeda 2005) and participants agreed, “traditionally [in the early twentieth century]... the women prepared the body for viewing in the home” (Williams 1990: 35), Maria Rosa suggested that one’s sex determined which body you prepared. “Para las mujeres las vestían las mujeres, y para los hombres los hombres” (interview with author, March 21, 2008).<sup>2</sup>

Maria Rosa’s description of Mama Chaly’s wake in Matamoros, Mexico, paralleled that of most participants.

“Cuando la gente se moría, en sus casas los arreglaban. Hay mismo los vestían, no las ensalmaban....Y se velaban en la casa por veinticuatro hora, día y noche...Estaba la gente ahí, velando y rezando para el eterno descanso del alma....Y se los ponía cuatro velas en las cuatro esquinas del cajón.” [Interview with author, March 21, 2008]<sup>3</sup>

Williams describes a similar scene to the one above, noting one major difference: the placement of the candles was in the form of a cross (Williams 1990: 35). While my mother, Maria Jovita, helped me translate the above quote from my *guelita*, she recalled a story of another tradition she remembered from Mama Chaly’s wake.

“When driving towards the house we [her brothers and sisters] could see the white curtains blowing in the wind that were hung in the doorway. Above them on the door was a black blow, indicating a death in the family occurred.” [Conversation with author, March 22, 2009]

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<sup>2</sup> “Deceased women were dressed by other women, and men by men.”

<sup>3</sup> “When the people died, they would fix and dress them in their homes, and they did not embalm them. And they would have the wake in the house for twenty-four hours, day and night. The people would be there to pray and watch/pay respects [to the deceased] for the eternal repose of the dead. And we would put four candles on the four corners of the casket.”

Food provided at wakes was also a site that exemplified beliefs about gender roles within Mexican American culture. My participants overwhelmingly stated that women were in charge of preparing food for the vigil, post-burial gathering, and the nine-day period of evening prayers, or *novenario*. Although attended by women and men, women were usually responsible for providing food and leading the prayers at the *novenario*. The *novenario* usually lasted for nine days after the burial, but a few participants reported that it lasted nine weeks. As noted by Williams, “women of the family took care of the children and served the food that friends and relatives had prepared for the mourners....the men were usually outside the house visiting with one another” (Williams 1990: 35). Maximo emphasized that female neighbor’s prepared food for the family; “They would provide chocolate or coffee throughout the night” (interview with author March 11, 2008).

#### Men’s Work in Death Customs

Many of the parts men played in death customs and rituals involved physical, hands on work. My maternal great grandfather, Papa Tavito, was well known throughout the family during the 1950’s and 60’s as a headstone maker for family and friends. Like many other men in the early to mid twentieth century, he performed tasks that centered on maintenance of graves and required work that is more physical. According to my father, my paternal grandfather would pack tools to clean and maintain the graves during visits to the family cemetery in Hebbronville, Texas. “He would take a rake and a hoe, gloves to pick weeds with, and a shovel. The cemeteries then didn’t have maintenance, so cleaning was the responsibility of the family,” and specifically men (interview with author, February 22, 2008).

What I have observed, I would argue, is very similar to what Mary Douglas observed with her study of taboos and pollution. She concluded that rules associated with rituals and pollution help to maintain society (McGee & Warms 2008: 493). In a similar light, I suggest that the tasks men and women perform during mourning rituals help to maintain the social order and shed light onto the social interactions of men and women.

### Grave Decorating

Visiting cemeteries has been an important ritualized activity for Mexican American families throughout the twentieth century. Both women and men share this activity, commonly visiting after church on Sundays, on birthdays, anniversaries, and other holidays. Typically, visitors will communicate with and pray to and for the deceased, and sometimes they will simply converse with their loved ones. Families keep the gravesite decorated, and in the past, this usually meant taking fresh flowers. Even though both women and men visit, usually as a family, women are clearly the leaders of this practice, especially when it comes to decorating.

Several participants emphasized that women in their family have been integral in grave decorating, in both the past and today. Most often, women initiated grave decorating outings. Rosie, a young mother who was born and raised in San Marcos, frequently visits the cemetery and is an active participant in grave decorating. She recalled that her mom served as the “driving force” within the family as far as grave decorating was concerned (interview with author, February 15, 2008).

Most of the participants recalled going to the cemetery with their family regularly, but noted that children would sometimes go with their mothers and aunts or other female

relatives. On important holidays like *Dias de los Muertos*, men tended to visit briefly, while women and children stayed most of the day. Some participants attributed this, at least in part, to job or work-related responsibilities. “It was usually my mom carting us around taking us everywhere and my dad would just kind of stay home,” Rosie noted (interview with author, February 15, 2008).

Men participated in visiting, but it has most often been women, especially mothers, who took the responsibility of taking the family to cemeteries. Because of family dynamics, women experienced some constraints on their practices. For example, Maria Jovita, remembers having to stay home as the family grew.

“I remember *guelita*, my mom going, and you have to remember that I was number four out of ten kids. So [we couldn’t go], we pretty much stayed back and helped take care of the little ones and she would go. Sometimes she would take maybe one of the younger ones or the older ones.” [Interview with author, February 24, 2008]

Like Maria Jovita, Rosie, who was a child in the 1970s, recalls that it became harder for her mom to take the children as the family grew, but also because her father participated less. “It did seem to be harder because there were more children and it wasn’t so much a family effort” (interview with author, February 15, 2008). While the constraints due to increased numbers of children are clear, further research is necessary to determine how male participation has varied over the twentieth century as well as how it varies within the life cycle of a family.

My research illustrates that during the early to mid twentieth century, women and men commonly performed certain tasks, most of which followed suit with other established gender roles within a patriarchal family model. Women were more likely to do the emotional work, including more extensive *luto*, preparation of the body, and preparation of food. Men tended to perform tasks geared toward manual labor such as

grave digging, headstone production, and heavy cemetery and gravesite maintenance.

While both women and men share cemetery visits, women visit more frequently or for longer periods, are more active in organizing and managing the visits, and take most of the responsibility for decorating the graves. The following section will show how the increasing commercialization of society has influenced the gendered nature of mortuary practices among Mexican Americans.

#### Mid-latter 20<sup>th</sup> and Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century Gender in Death Customs

During the mid to latter twentieth century, as the political economy globalized and the death business developed, many gendered tasks changed for the Mexican American family. Men's roles, as described earlier, often involved more manual labor. However, as mortuary practices were commercialized and institutionalized in cemeteries and funeral homes, masculine tasks were taken over by businesses and removed from the family. It was no longer necessary for male family members to dig graves, lower and bury coffins, weed cemeteries and gravesites, or make and clean headstones for their loved ones. Men still did this type of work, but they did it within the space of commercial enterprises, not within the family.

Similarly, women's roles also changed as funeral homes removed the vigil from the home, took over the embalming and preparation of the body, and take-out foods became more widely available. Women continue to do more emotional work than men do, but funerary institutions have established policies that conceal some of the most emotional aspects of funerals. Ironically, many funeral homes and cemeteries now forbid mourners from watching the lowering of coffins into the ground, an act previously believed to be too painful for the female relatives of the deceased.



Drawing on their previous leadership in the area of grave decorating, women have come to dominate the flower shop businesses surrounding many cemeteries. Ironically, many of these businesses are physically located within houses, and make use of family and children's labor. Interestingly, women continue to be central to cemetery visits and grave decorating, but men appear to be increasing their roles in this area. The transformation of family and gender roles, the institutionalization and restrictions imposed by the funerary business, and the changes in socio-economic practices such as the increase in wage labor and loss of the family wage have all likely influenced the transformation of mortuary practices.

#### The Institutionalization of Male Roles

Mortuary businesses such as funeral homes, cemeteries, and gravestone marker companies have displaced many of men's funerary practices, but these jobs continue to use mostly male labor. Maximo described that when men were responsible for digging graves and burying bodies, it would take almost an entire day. He remembers that:

"...it used to be by hand – I've seen five or six men digging a grave – nowadays you send a tractor out there. I mean, in one hour, it's done. Where it used to take a whole day sometimes, or a day and a half to dig a grave with five or six men, I mean, it's completely different." [Interview with author, March 11, 2008]

Similarly, the production of grave markers changed from families to businesses. In the past, individuals like Papa Tavito and other part-time specialists used to make or carve headstones for their relatives. Today, most cemeteries restrict the type of headstones allowed, and include them in packages along with burial plots. Nonetheless, the headstone making business is still very much alive, and still employs mostly male labor. The few small, locally owned businesses, typically male owned, such as the one owned by friends of my family, mostly hire male workers. Today, the only women you

see working at the shops are secretaries, and I suspect this is the case for most of the industry. The ownership and employment of the business has remained in the domain of men since its inception.

#### Male Displacement and New Paternal Protection

The displacement of men's funerary labor within the Mexican American family is due in large part to newly instituted cemetery policies, including employed staff in charge of burials and maintenance. Interestingly though, some of the men I interviewed that had relatives buried at more rural cemeteries state that they still participate in maintenance/grounds keeping. For instance, Oscar Hernandez, a San Marcos, Texas, resident, has relatives buried at one of the city's two Mexican American cemeteries, San Pedro. Oscar discussed how he remembers families, and in particular, men, taking care of the grounds keeping at San Pedro Cemetery. When I asked him if this still occurred today, or if they have hired staff to do it now, he replied, "Well, as far as I know, at San Pedro, the families still take care of it....If you have a city-owned cemetery, like here at the City Cemetery on Ranch Road 12, the city takes care of it." I responded by asking, "But that's not the case for San Pedro?" Danny simply said, "Yea" [interview with author, October 9, 2008]. San Pedro, because it is a privately owned cemetery in a rural location, and because of an agreement made with Hays County, allows for the continuation of grounds keeping by Mexican American men within families. San Fernando Cemetery II, located in the heart of bustling city, owned and operated as a business, takes away the ability of male family members to perform such grounds keeping tasks, due to their hired personnel.

Another death custom taken from the hands of the family is their viewing of the lowering of the coffin into the grave. Funeral homes and cemeteries now censor this part of the funeral, fearing it is too painful to observe. However, some men, drawing on their previous roles as paternalistic protectors, have constructed new roles for themselves. For example to ensure the proper execution of the final step of burial, Maximo asks special permission to be the family's witness:

"If you speak to the funeral director they let you stay right there...you can watch them bury the whole thing. I have stood on my close relative's gravesite, an uncle or an aunt, and I have asked to be there. I want to be there. Even for my mother-in-law and father-in-law I asked, I wanted to be there and I made sure they were covered before I left. It made me happy. It made the rest of the family happy, I mean, by being there." [Interview with author, March 11, 2008]

Men like Maximo are still taking on the duty of the protective paternal figure, but in a much different light.

#### Increased Incorporation of Men into Visiting and Decorating

The roles of men are changing in other ways. When questioned about gender, Suzy, a flower shop owner near San Fernando Cemetery II, said that the gender of customers at her flower shop was "split down the middle" (interview with author, April 26, 2008). Personal observations in several cemeteries indicate that men may be both increasing and changing their cemetery visiting and grave decorating practices.

On May 3, 2008, I counted the types of people visiting San Fernando Cemetery II, including their gender. Within a 15-minute period, I observed twelve women and eight men, or two-thirds female and one-third male. Four of the twelve women, or one-third of all women, were unaccompanied by men, but only one man was not accompanied by a woman. He appeared to be a twenty-something father with a five to seven year old son. Because they were visiting a grave that had happy birthday decorations all over it, I

speculate that they were visiting the grave of their departed partner or mother.

Accordingly, all but one man I interviewed discussed decorating graves only when women were also involved. Thus, women are more likely to go to the cemetery alone or in same-sex groups, and even as men become more involved in these activities, women continue to lead in the area of visits and decorating.

In my experience, my father has happily taken on the role of chauffeur for grave decorating shopping stints with women in the family. He regularly provides the transportation for such occasions, especially for his mother, while she picks out the decorations. He often arranges the decorations on the grave, with the help of a woman's careful eye, ensuring they stay in place by strategically placing sticks and stones to ensure the decorations do not fly away or fall over. While the grave markers are usually durable granite slabs, which do not require maintenance, he still cleans them off, but in a much different way than his own father. Simply using his hands, he brushes off the dust and looks for small sticks to scrape dirt from inside the lettering on the headstones. Like his father before him, he weeds the gravesite, but due to the cemetery's paid male gardeners, he is able to forego gloves and use his bare hands to provide more meticulous attention to the gravesite. In fact, even with the cemetery's paid gardening staff, men often bring tools such as hoes and weed-eaters. When couples visit together, men are more likely to carry the grave decorations to the gravesites, especially as the decorations become larger, and they are more likely to do the "dirty work" and carry trash. For example, a man might be down on his hands and knees working with the grass and soil, whereas a woman might water.

### Commercializing Decorations: Women's Empowerment

Prior to the early 1970s, male flower shop owners in San Antonio had been responsible for picking flowers from area farms and selling them on the streets bordering San Fernando II. During the early 1970s, however, women began entering the flower and decorating business, creating a gendered niche market. Facilitating the transformation are two factors: 1) it is an extension of women's customary work in the sense that it is still about decorating, and 2) it initially developed, and is still located, in what once were homes fronting the large cemetery, thus drawing on previous gender domains.

During these early years of commercialization within the death industry, Suzy described that men within the family, mainly her uncles, went out to surrounding farms to handpick flowers for sale in the family's flower shop. The practice of individually handpicking and cleaning flowers is no longer utilized because it is not cost effective. Instead, flower shop owners choose to buy flowers pre-cut and washed from a vendor. About this same time, artificial flower arrangements became the main seller at the flower shops, paving the way for women's institutionalized roles within the death business. As men's customary roles changed and took on new guises, women's practices also changed.

Women took advantage of their expertise in grave decorating, drawing on the work they performed customarily, and creating a niche industry within the death business. Based on observations, directed conversations, and some interviews in both Laredo and San Antonio, women, and often their children and families, manage the flower shops. According to Suzy "more women than men" have owned the family-based flower shops (interview with author, April 26, 2008). Her mother originally owned the business, but her mother and grandparents owned the home and lot. At some point, with

the death of her mother and grandmother, the business solely belonged to her grandfather; upon his death, it transferred to her sister and Suzy received it when her sister died. As previously mentioned, the majority of flower shops bordering San Fernando II cemetery are based out of buildings that used to be homes. The home-based business space, which allowed women to remain in the home domain, may have facilitated women's entry into the business. By having their business run literally out of their residences, linking them to home jobs, women did not overtly threaten the power dynamics between men and women.

Female flower shop owners continue to direct and manage family within the home. Noting "mainly women," but also "all family" members make the decorations; Suzy mentioned, "once in a while [my husband] will put his hands in there" (interview with author, April 26, 2008). In fact, he utilizes art classes he took in High School to add a little flare with spray paint to the decorations. She also emphasized how this business is one that you learn to do as a child through observation, and continue to hone through the years with experience. She brings her three-year-old daughter to work with her, who helps any way she can. Suzy started that same way with her own mother.

"I was just like right there next to her. We started like sweeping, you know just a few things here and there, cute little things that kids can do; bring out the cans, stuff like that. And then it just progresses, as you get older you can do more." [Interview with author, April 26, 2008]

### Conclusion

This chapter has focused specifically on gender ideologies and practices in the transformation and preservation of culture, especially cultural expressions surrounding funerary practices and grave decorating. As society commercialized, both women and

men have developed new mortuary practices that in certain ways continue and in other ways transform their previous roles. Women's private "home" work commercialized in some aspects, and many of men's roles within the family have become paid jobs. Women seem to be converting their new roles into a source of power for both the public and the private sphere. Men seem to be converting their displacement from "manual labor" into greater involvement in cemetery visits and grave decorating within the family. More research is needed on this particular topic, but if found to be consistent with the work we have already conducted, this would suggest that there is increased gender integration in this aspect of mortuary rituals.

## CHAPTER VII

### CONCLUSION

Culture is defined in many ways. Inda and Rosaldo say the term refers to the “sphere of existence in which people make their lives, individually and collectively meaningful; and it encompasses both the practices through which meaning is generated and the material forms- popular culture, film, art, literature, and so forth- in which it is embodied” (Inda and Rosaldo 2002:10). Viewed in this light culture can be seen in everything we do.

Growing up, I never had the inclination that I was different. I assumed everybody was just like me. San Antonio always felt like home to me, even though I myself only lived there for about one year. I looked forward to every holiday, family event, or random reason that brought my family and me back to San Antonio. San Antonio was where all of my *tía*’s, *tío*’s, and cousins lived. I always felt a sense of ‘home,’ of belonging in that city. After some racist encounters in my teenage years in the town my parents moved us to after living in San Antonio, and after my exposure to different kinds of people in college, I realized that I *was* different. One of the main aspects of this difference was my family’s grave decorating practices. I remember having a conversation with a friend one semester about our plans for winter break. I told her that I would be in San Antonio for the holidays, and my family and I would go out the cemeteries to visit deceased relatives, bringing them grave decorations, saying prayers



and reminiscing. She seemed awed and stunned by the conversation, coming from a family who never did that sort of thing.

When I was given the chance to research grave decorating by Dr. Ana Juarez in her *Mexican American Cultures* class in the spring of 2005, I jumped at the opportunity. I needed this research as much as I felt it needed to be done. Through studying and writing about the act of grave decorating and all its intricacies, I could help those who are not familiar with this cultural act understand it. I could also, in turn, glean a better understanding of Mexican American culture in general.

Through my research into grave decorating and other death customs, I learned a great deal about Mexican American culture, and about myself. Initially, my research began as a way to explore the act of grave decorating which has been so visually and physically present in my life. Through my anthropological studies, I read the works of such authors as Rosaldo, Scheper-Hughes, Williams, and many others who sought to explain all types of cultural acts. I began to wonder if the same could be done by me for the customs and rituals surrounding death in Mexican American culture.

Throughout my adolescence and adult life, my father told me stories of how he fought for Mexican American civil rights in San Antonio when he was young. I wondered, having only experienced the south side of San Antonio, how this was necessary. I thought all of San Antonio was like the south and west sides. However, as I grew older and explored other areas of the city, I realized this was not the reality of San Antonio's residential patterns. It was quite obvious to me that certain types of people were relegated to specific sides of the city. Early segregationist patterns regulating ethnic interactions allowed for the west and south sides of San Antonio to be predominately

Mexican American. Segregation has affected culture for not only Mexican Americans, but also other minority groups. Having grown up on San Antonio's south side, minutes from San Fernando II, my father experienced a lot of change within his neighborhood. He told me of times when his neighborhood was integrated, *and* segregated. Segregation of Mexican Americans in San Antonio supported the continued practice of long established death customs, while simultaneously allowing those customs to alter and change.

Cultural acts such as grave decorating, essentially modern day ancestor worship, have continued from ancient Spanish/European and Mesoamerican times throughout the generations into the present. However culture is always evolving and the ancestor worship of the past is not the same as the ancestor worship of the present. What is fascinating, however, is that many of the same items and images used by ancient Mesoamericans at times of death are still being used contemporarily by their Mexican and Mexican American descendents.

While many objects used in the commemoration of dead may have ancient Mesoamerican or even Spanish origins, they have transformed and changed. Traditions are passed down through the generations, but they are also altered to accommodate new innovations within environments. These forces for change include restrictive cemetery policies, immigrations, globalization, and so on. For example, gender roles that women and men participated in at times of death have significantly changed from the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. What remains are aspects of previously practiced customs. What are created are new customs and traditions, that within a matter of one generation, can and have changed. Male cemetery goers at San Fernando II noted several

changes in their tasks and traditional roles. After the death industry overtook burial, headstone making, and gravesite maintenance, many men were displaced. While men still perform these tasks within the death industry, they are not being performed by men within the family of the deceased. Where is it they now turn? Some interviewed suggested that they decorate now more than they use to, and some insist on staying at the gravesite until bodies are buried, even though they themselves are not burying them. More research is needed in this respect, in order to fully understand what men are doing contemporarily. Many of the roles associated with women in the past have also been co-opted by the death industry. These tasks include preparing food for wakes, “hosting” wakes, and the preparation of the deceased. However, women’s customary roles as the primary grave decorators has been parlayed into successful and, in the case of several west side florists, fruitful businesses.

In the spring of 2009, I had the privilege of speaking at the NACCS Tejas FOCO Regional Conference held at the University of Texas in San Antonio. During the question and answer phase of the panel, I was asked something that I had never been asked before: “Why is this important, what does this mean?” At first I was shocked by the question, instantly thinking it was silly. Then, I realized that it was quite the polar opposite of my initial reaction. It was simple, yes, but in answering this question, I better understood why I chose to study this particular aspect of Mexican American culture. To put it simply, I undertook this research topic as a way in which to better understand myself and my culture and to share those realizations with others. I felt as though I have grown up with countless reminders of how I am not “American” or “Mexican” enough. I spent most of my adolescent and adult life letting this bother me, constantly feeling

inadequate in some way. This research allowed me to come to terms with who I am, and ultimately understand those who are like me are. I am a Mexican American. And, in understanding myself and my culture better, I can also share it with others in terms that are easy and clear to comprehend. This, as a cultural anthropologist, is one of, if not my most important goal.

## APPENDIX



Figure 1 (M. Salazar 2006)



Figure 2 (A. Salazar 2008)



Figure 3 (M. Salazar 2005)



Figure 4 (Storey 1992: 89)





Figure 5 (Garciaodoy 1998: Panel 9)



Figure 6 (M. Salazar 2007)



Figure 7 (M. Salazar 2007)



Figure 8 (Juarez 2005)



Figure 9 (Juarez 2005)





Figure 10 (Coggins et al. 1994: 154)



Figure 11 (Juarez 2005)



Figure 12 (M. Salazar 2007)



Figure 13 (M. Salazar 2006)



Figure 14 (White 2008)



Figure 15 (M. Salazar 2007)





Figure 16: Cihuateteo ([http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/images/h2/h2\\_00.5.30.jpg](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/images/h2/h2_00.5.30.jpg))



Figure 17: Sugar Skulls (<http://www.highhopesgardens.com/Blogphotos/2007/sugarskulls.jpg>)



Figure 18 (White 2008)



Figure 19 (White 2008)





Figure 20 (M. Salazar 2005)



Figure 21 (M. Salazar 2005)



Figure 22 (White 2008)



Figure 23 (M. Salazar 2005)





Figure 24 (M. Salazar 2005)



Figure 25 (White 2008)





Figure 26 (M. Salazar 2005)



Figure 27 (M. Salazar 2007)



Figure 28 (M. Salazar 2005)



Figure 29 (M. Salazar 2007)



Figure 30 (M. Salazar 2007)

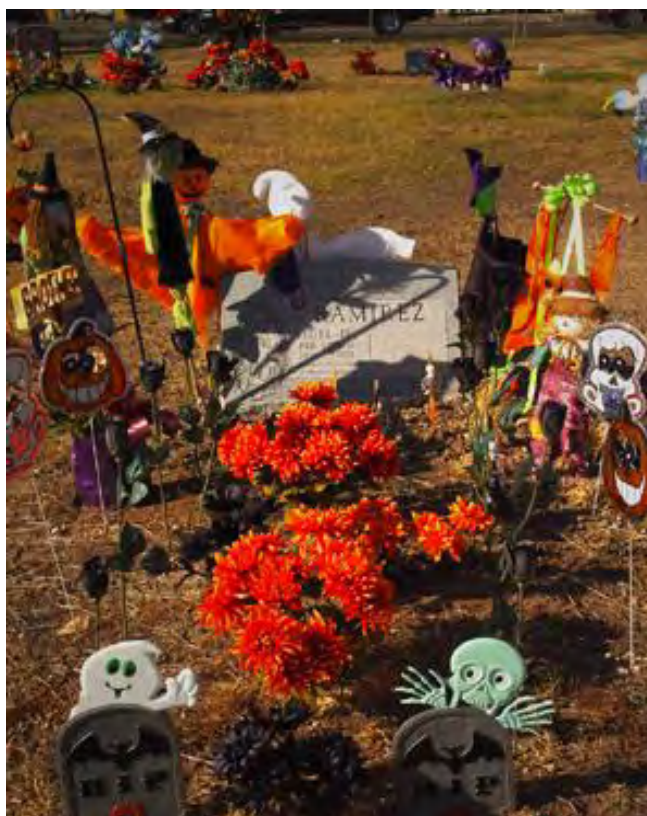


Figure 31 (White 2008)





Figure 32 (M. Salazar 2005)



Figure 33 (White 2008)

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2/20/2009

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