

## **Moral Panics in Suburban Texas**

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### **Abstract**

This paper details portions of an ethnographic study of a moral panic that surrounded the heroin overdose deaths of several teenagers in the American suburb of Plano, Texas. Media ethnography engages numerous individuals who represent different institutions who participated in various discussions and the creation of strategies that emerged throughout the tenure of the moral panic in the suburb. These forces acting in an interdependent fashion assisted in the creation of a new social subject, the suburban teenage heroin addict. Both the residents of Plano, Texas and the media that helped establish the moral panic relied on a representational history of the American suburb that conflates and entangles notions of race, class and space and demarcates this social space as white. I discuss the practice of media ethnography through a comprehensive content analysis of several forms of media, and the ethnographic reception and conveyance of that media among individuals within the context of fieldwork.

### **Foreword**

This working paper is excerpted from a full-length monograph entitled *Suburban Moral Panic* forthcoming on Duke University Press. My hope is that the comments from the MediaAnthro e-seminar will assist me as I put the finishing touches on this monograph in the next couple of months. While the initial fieldwork for this project started in 1997 when I was in graduate school at Temple University, and primary fieldwork was conducted from 1998 through 2001, I have returned to the fieldsite several times since then, most recently in December of 2006/January 2007. The book includes a significant set of new research conducted since the time of the moral panic and places it within a revised and expanded theoretical structure that seeks to place the study in the context of international research on gated communities (Caldeira 1996, Low 2001, 2003), suburban/urban spaces (Kenny 2000; Hartigan 1999), media (Askew and Wilk 2002, Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod and Larkin 2002; Lull 2000, Spitulnik 1993) and critical

evaluations of moral panics (McRobbie and Thornton 1995; Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994). By combining these approaches I provide a synthesis of literature and research methods that attempt to apprehend the relationship between media and culture in an ethnographic fashion focused on issues of race and space in the contemporary suburban United States in the context of globalization (Giddens 1990, Harvey 1989).

This extended fieldwork has also resulted in an interesting component to the study as I have been able to trace the lives of my informants since the initial moral panic engulfed their lives then, and continues to impact them almost 10 years later. It is this latter component of the study that I believe is unique and demonstrates one contribution that an ethnographic approach based in long-term participant observation can add to moral panic analysis. Essentially, grounding this media based experience in the lives of individuals not only during the panic itself, but revisiting it and showing how it creates meaning in people's lives over time.

Thank you for your time and interest and I look forward to your responses.

## **Introduction**

On Sunday, October 5, 1997 a full-page article appeared in the *Dallas Morning News*, the predominant local newspaper serving Dallas, Texas and its surrounding suburbs, entitled *The Faces of Heroin*. This article served as the flashpoint for a moral panic that occurred in the suburb of Plano, Texas over the following two and a half years. On the full-page spread were pictures of nine, mostly white, male teenagers and one adult from the Dallas suburb with accompanying biographical data and descriptions of how they had died of heroin overdoses. The content of the single paragraph that served as the masthead of the article speaks to the developmental history of the North American suburban environment and a racial imagination that still governs perceptions of these social spaces.

“For more than a decade, Plano recorded no heroin deaths. Then drug dealers, in search of a new market for a purer and highly addictive heroin, began moving into the suburbs. There, they found naïve young adults with money. Since 1996, at least 10 people with a Plano connection have died of heroin-related deaths. All but two were young white males. Their stories contradict the stereotype of heroin as a problem of the inner-city poor. Thousands of people are moving to Plano

each year, enticed by its low crime rate, excellent schools and new housing developments. The attractions of the affluent suburban community of 200,000 gave some parents a false sense of security. Never would they have expected to find heroin here” (Ball 1997).

The dichotomous, and often antagonistic, relationship in the United States and elsewhere between the city and the suburb that exists in both popular culture and academic research is nothing new. In the United States in particular, the city is often depicted as a dangerous ethnic space while the suburb is predominantly conceptualized as a safe, white cultural bastion. Different elements emerge from a content analysis of the preceding paragraph that reinforce this legacy and plot a roadmap for ethnographic fieldwork and critical media analysis. Both Plano and the teenagers who initially died of heroin overdoses are immediately established as innocent victims of forces from outside of the safe confines of the suburb. Plano, Texas is also described as an idyllic suburban space predominantly made up of white males with good schools and other trappings of American success attractive to potential residents. And, perhaps most importantly, the shock that something like a teenager heroin overdose problem could even exist in a suburb like Plano is revealed. It is perhaps this shock that speaks most poignantly to the symbolic and developmental history of the North American suburb. This evidences a belief that a social problem like teenage heroin overdoses is antithetical to the suburban environment, and perhaps belongs somewhere outside of this social space.

During research in the suburb and surrounding locations over a period of almost ten years beginning in the fall of 1997, and concentrated during fieldwork from 1998-2001, I attempted to understand who produced the media products that dealt with the heroin crisis in Plano, study the actual content of these media products, and analyze the consumption and utilization of messages within this media by individuals in the suburb.

In this sense, I was attempting to fulfill what could be deemed an anthropological approach to media and culture. The ethnographic research has been an attempt to create a synthesis of research methodologies in cultural anthropology and different forms of visual analysis, including but not limited to, moral panic analysis (Cohen 1972, Thompson 1998). I utilize traditional ethnographic methods in fieldwork with the primary focus of obtaining general perceptions of race and evidence of a developing moral panic in the suburb. I also focus on how these methods and findings can benefit from being situated in a ‘critical visual methodology’ (Pink 2001) that goes beyond content analysis in the study of media to establish how visual culture is embedded in processes of identity formation and larger social practices. In doing so, I emphasize the place of media in ordering a set of daily practices and perceptions among suburban inhabitants and the various “quotidian universes” (Ginsburg et al. 2002:4) in which these processes occur. Thus, my principal concern during fieldwork has been to ground visual analysis in the everyday lives of individuals.

As detailed in the newspaper excerpt quoted above, starting in the fall of 1997, a cluster of predominantly white upper middle class teenagers died of heroin overdoses in rapid succession in the affluent Dallas suburb of Plano, Texas (Ball 1997). This phenomenon gained national media attention and Plano was subsequently labeled as the ‘suburban heroin capital of the United States’ (ABC News 1998). This was concurrent with the observed formation during fieldwork of a new social subject known as the ‘suburban teenage heroin addict’ in both common parlance in the suburb and media accounts (Colloff 1999) that depicted heroin overdose deaths and the community responses to them. Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted among individuals

undergoing heroin addiction and recovery, parents whose teenagers died, and individuals who worked in various institutions including the media, law enforcement, education and politics. In addition, participant observation in a variety of medical facilities such as counseling centers and methadone clinics followed a critical medical anthropology approach (Singer 2006) to examine differential levels of power in society and how they relate to substance abuse. Research among these individuals and within these institutional settings sought to ascertain how various social forces acting in an interdependent fashion (Foucault 1978) assisted in the creation of a moral panic during the event in the suburb that acted upon this newly created social subject.

While conducting participant observation among individuals representing these institutions, the principal question I heard consistently was “How could this happen here?” This question not only set the stage for how blame was projected away from the suburb in a racialized fashion during the moral panic, but also demonstrated that the very notion of white, teenage heroin deaths is antithetical to the “imagineered” (Rutheiser 1996) space of suburbia in the first place. If white upper middle class teenagers could not be safe in one of the safest suburbs in America, even within a gated community (Blakely and Snyder 1997) within that safe suburb, then how could the suburb be said to exist at all? What does this say about race (Gregory 1998), class (Dobriner 1963), notions of security (Davis 1992) and suburban space in the United States? And, what is the place of the suburb now subjected to the same sociopolitical and economic forces that shape global cities in the new millennium (Sassen 1996)? My principal theoretical claim, supported by ethnographic fieldwork, is that the moral panic that took place in Plano,

Texas brings into question the moral (Baumgartner 1991), racial (Loring 2005; Brodtkin 1988), and socioeconomic foundations of the American suburb (Jackson 1985).

The primary focus in moral panic analysis is the fashion in which sensationalist media depictions of a newly defined threat to the individual and social body create an escalation of public fear and subsequent reactions, with implications for the creation and implementation of social policy (Cohen 1972). While recognizing that anthropological fieldwork drives the theory and methods that we utilize, the social phenomenon in Plano, Texas fit the criteria of moral panic analysis quite successfully. Thus, upon discovering this analytical tool I committed myself to adapting it to incorporate ethnographic research methods to demonstrate a possible framework to discuss anthropological approaches to media and culture in a North American setting. The use of long-term participant observation was intended to fill a conceptual gap in moral panic studies that have lacked this approach historically (Fordham 2001).

The sensationalist media coverage of the teenagers who were addicted to heroin and dying from it in Plano, Texas created the climate for the rise of a control culture (Thompson 1998) to effectively “police the crisis” (Hall et al. 1978). This control culture was made up of concerned parents quickly made into instant experts alongside a group of experienced practitioners who were veterans of the medical and law enforcement fields, along with other individuals representing different institutions within the suburban community that had a stake in the outcome of the moral panic. While new actions, policies and laws were enacted in response to the overdose incidents, the misdirection of these laws in the perceived solution to the problem revealed the racial divisions that insulate the suburb and its inhabitants from the social spaces of socially defined others.

And, as an analysis of the way in which blame for the problem was directed and the resulting misappropriation of social policies revealed (Douglas 2002), the entire moral panic was evidence of a larger social anxiety which was principally concerned with how teenagers would replicate their parents' narratives of class success within the suburban environment (Newman 1999).

### **Moral Panics**

The idea of the moral panic originated in Britain in the early 1970s when sociologist Jock Young coined the term to discuss rising drug abuse among teenagers (Young 1971). Shortly thereafter, the publication of Stanley Cohen's *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*, established a new direction in the analysis of youth subcultures and moral panics (Cohen 1972). This study forever bonded the majority of declared moral panics to dilemmas surrounding youth. Cohen sought to place teenagers and their supposed deviant activities within a larger cultural context that included how the general public perceived youth subcultures based on media representations, the consequent actions of a control culture influenced by these media depictions, and the creation of a variety of social policies in response. The moral panic concept has been utilized by researchers in several analytical fields and has focused on a variety of subjects since Cohen's original study. The most comprehensive media analysis that has used the concept is *Policing the Crisis* (Hall et. al 1978). This landmark study analyzed depictions of mugging in England to demonstrate how a moral panic dependent on ideas of race developed through media depictions of deviance and was related to other structural tendencies of the state to police individuals. In this study, Stuart Hall and

others developed the theoretical tools of the “signification spiral” and “discourse convergence” to explain what occurs when social actors come together and enact a moral panic. It is in these spaces of convergence where the possibility of engaging moral panics ethnographically is realized.

While there are a multitude of problematic references to moral panics in print journalism, contemporary moral panic studies in academia have utilized the concept to look at subjects in different countries ranging from youth crime and deviance in India (Saldanha 2000) and Canada (Schissel 1997), AIDS in Sweden (Gould 1994) and crime in Australia (Lumby 1999). The majority of moral panic studies deal with youth, crime and deviancy in a variety of settings (Aitken 2001; Springhall 1998; Tomsen 1997). Others have attempted to utilize the concept to look at subjects in a historical context such as the role of black women during the great migration (Carby 1992), media depictions of pregnancy and alcoholism in 1970s television (Golden 2000) and media depictions of homosexuality in 1950s Miami (Fejes 2000). Contemporary studies of child molestation (Jenkins 1998), the internet and cyber porn (Potter and Potter 2001) and child abuse (Victor 1998) have also utilized the concept. These are just a few of the dozens of studies that an exhaustive literature can detail. Other theorists have demonstrated how the concept of moral panics can be extended to deal with several social issues at one time. Simultaneously, there has been a call for a needed revision of the term to deal with expansive conceptions of media and changing notions of deviancy that have developed since Cohen’s original analysis (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994; McRobbie and Thornton 1995; Thompson 1998; Ungar 2001).

One of the major criticisms of the moral panic model is the labeling of certain events as moral panics although they may be momentary concerns or long lasting conditions. One way to interrupt this trend is to infuse the moral panic model with ethnographic methodology to not only ground media analysis and determine the impact of media on the everyday lives of individuals in a succinct temporal fashion, but to also determine the validity of asking whether a certain phenomenon should be described as a moral panic at all.<sup>1</sup> The stages in the development of a moral panic can be ascertained from a reading of Cohen's original analysis as provide by Thompson (1998):

- 1) Something or someone is defined as a threat to values or interests
- 2) This threat is depicted in an easily recognizable form by the media
- 3) There is a rapid build-up of public concern
- 4) There is a response from authorities or opinion-makers, and
- 5) The panic recedes or results in social change.

A new social subject was created during the moral panic in Plano, Texas identified as the suburban teenage heroin addict. While many teenagers tend to identify with any cultural image that contradicts their suburban environment, this was something more than the usual nervousness induced by white teenagers listening to hip-hop music and wearing baggy clothing. This new subject was defined as a threat to the values and interests of the suburb by a variety of media depictions (Stage 1). Alongside this subject were a pantheon of racialized invading forces that assisted in the creation of the suburban teenage heroin addict by targeting them and the space in which they lived. These newly defined threats were seized upon by the media in a sensationalist fashion and presented in an easily recognizable form (Stage 2) that was accompanied by an outpouring of public concern (Stage 3) culminating in a series of meetings and events and the eventual

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the most problematic usage of the moral panic concept is by individuals who fail to address the fact that in order for a phenomenon to be deemed a moral panic it must have closure in order to evaluate whether 'social change' has occurred.

implementation of biased social policy (Stage 4). Eventually, the moral panic in Plano subsided when it was believed that the heroin problem was over when a number of teenagers were prosecuted alongside several Mexican Nationals for drug trafficking and murder (Stage 5). This is despite the fact that there were subsequent deaths after the so-called end of the crisis and heroin continued to have a presence among the pantheon of other drugs available to teenagers in the suburb.

In order to map out a contemporary moral panic over teenage heroin overdose deaths I conducted interviews and participant observation with police officers, parents, teenagers, drug counselors, doctors, politicians and a number of other individuals in and around the suburb of Plano. In addition, I spent countless hours with reporters in print, television and the burgeoning web news medium to ascertain how they researched, developed and reported stories concerning the events unfolding. During fieldwork several things began to appear. In addition to representing individual responses to the crisis that was occurring, each of the individuals I spoke to was “towing a party line” or representing an institution such as politics, law enforcement or the medical community and fighting for the stake each institution had in the crisis. The police wanted to look tough and proactive. The medical community wanted to appear as though they were on top of the situation. Parents needed to be absolved of blame, and politicians wanted to demonstrate how they were acting in the benefit of the community.

Blame for the heroin crisis in Plano was being directed toward external racial and national sources including Mexican Nationals through the North American Free Trade Agreement, often referred to as the North American Free Trafficking Agreement within Plano, and mysterious inner-city drug dealers (coded as Black) who were ‘jumping the

tracks' to the suburb both in media depictions and in the conversations and policy initiatives of individuals representing the control culture in the suburb. Many of these events were occurring prior to the Y2K conversion deadline so fluid discussions at various community meetings about 'putting walls up around the suburb' easily included the rationalization to keep heroin dealers out as well as looters from the 'bad part of town' who would supposedly invade at midnight on December 31, 1999 when all of the computers would go down. Each element of the moral panic disrupted the predominant media image of Plano, Texas as safe from crime and an ideal place to raise children and teenagers. And, when the link between dead teenagers and property values was made, different perceptions of what it means to be a suburban resident in a socioeconomic sense appeared rapidly. It is in the linkage of the crisis to the economic well being of the suburb and its residents where the moral panic is evidenced with the most clarity.

### **The Suburban Fieldsite: Plano, Texas**

Perhaps the best way to introduce the suburb of Plano, Texas is to rely upon just one of the multitude of branding and marketing strategies meant to entice families and businesses to move there. The following introduction to the 1999 Chamber of Commerce brochure for Plano presents a picture of the suburban community reinforcing many of the descriptive elements found within the *Faces of Heroin* article.

Dear Newcomer,

Thank you for your interest in Plano, Texas – one of the few U.S. cities to earn “All America City” status, the fifth-fastest growing city in our population category in the nation, the eighth safest city in the U.S. and the fourth most “Kid Friendly City” in the country! If these rankings aren't convincing enough, you will soon see that our community has even more to offer, whether you are looking for a place for your family to call home or a new location for your business to open its doors” (Wentworth 1999).

Little more than a bedroom community in the middle of a cow pasture three decades ago, with a population of 20,000 in 1980, at the time of my initial research Plano was the fifth fastest growing city in the United States and now boasts a population over 222,000 and the designation of an “All-America City” (City of Plano Website 2000). The population is split almost evenly between male and female and the median age in the community is 34 years old. Residents are predominantly white (78%), while the Hispanic population makes up (10%) of the community and (5%) are African American. Sixty nine percent of homes are owned, while (31%) are renter occupied (United States Census Data Website 2000). For all intensive purposes, Plano is considered a modern suburban success story. Its population and socioeconomic standing have steadily increased over the past thirty years matching a national trend in the United States that has witnessed industry expand outside of American cities to outlying suburbs. Whereas up until the 1970s suburbs were functionally dependent on the central city and strengthened its economic base, many suburbs have now become independent financial commercial and social centers (Jackson 1985). The journey to work no longer dictates a drive from the suburb to the city as most commuters completely avoid downtown areas to work, shop, play and live. Conceptually, one can live in Dallas, but never actually be in Dallas. Thus, a different type of suburb has come into being that is only called a suburb because of its spatial relationship to the city.

The simple dichotomous juxtaposition of the suburban to the urban (Park and Burgess 1974) has never been adequate and while many academics, and those within media and popular culture, treat suburban culture there is often a lack of understanding about the actual ‘culture’ of suburban inhabitants. As documented by a number of

studies, the post World War II North American suburban environment was developed with the assistance of biased government policies that resulted in the creation of a social space based on new conceptualizations of both racial and class status in the United States (Brodkin 1988; Smith 1996). Plano has benefited directly from the 'white flight' (Hartigan 2000) that personifies this historical trend and fits the contemporary descriptive criteria of 'technoburb' (Fishman 1987), 'vulgaria' (Knox 2005), 'edge city' (Garreau 1991) or any other demographic or social classification term invented to apprehend the contemporary suburban environment in the United States.

In particular, Plano fits the criteria of the modern 'edge city' quite successfully. According to Garreau, the edge city must have five components that separate it from previous types of suburban development. It must have at least five million square feet of office space, 600,000 square feet of leased retail space (which is basically the size of a large shopping mall), more jobs than bedrooms, (meaning that people must journey to the edge city for work), include many lifestyle components and it should have been nothing like a city as recently as thirty years ago (Garreau 1991). Some of the elements of an edge city include tall buildings that resemble the skyscrapers of a downtown area or clustered business parks, bright lights, white collar jobs, hotels, hospitals, corporate headquarters and a variety of popular restaurant and retail sites.

Although on the surface Plano is considered a successful American suburb by any socio-economic standard, once one pulls back the lacquer it is also an unstable class environment. The ever-expanding technology market has enabled Plano to stay well below state and national unemployment trends, but the job market has suffered with the crash in Internet companies in the first several years of the new century. Many of the

residents who live in Plano are corporate transplants that do not necessarily imagine staying in Plano after a few years. They buy houses that they can turnover quickly with no problem. The reason that so many live in Plano is that it is considered to be a great place to raise a family and get a high paying tech job. These jobs, the individuals who hold them and the mortgages they possess are under constant threat of outsourcing, downsizing and company relocation providing a level of insecurity in a now globalized suburban ethnoscape (Appadurai 1995) that supposedly once emulated social stability as a destination point for American success.

### **A Brief Glimpse into the Media Inventory**

An overall goal of the study is to demonstrate how one would theorize and conduct a media ethnography (Ginsburg et al. 2002). This approach to media through anthropology concentrates on the cultural context of media events analyzed through long-term participant observation among cultural producers (Mahon 2000) and audiences (Crawford and Hafsteinson 1996) among a variety of other factors. This counteracts treatments of media in the larger field of anthropology that are often anecdotal or treated as tangential to larger and more substantive issues of interest. This project places media as primary in the ethnographic project by focusing on the production, content, reception and utilization (Pink 2001, Ruby 2000) of various media by suburban inhabitants either actively participating, or caught up, in the processes of a moral panic. It should also be emphasized that the definition of media in this study is wide in its scope and includes film, television, print, web and advertising on a suburban, city and national level (Dickey 1997).

One example of print media, the *Faces of Heroin* article, served to galvanize community action and instigated the moral panic in Plano, Texas. Content analysis of this print media established research questions that informed ethnographic methods to investigate the generative and receptive elements of this media event. The article became an indispensable research tool for elicitation and analysis. By October 5, 1997 when the *Faces of Heroin* article appeared in the *Dallas Morning News* and served as the flashpoint for the moral panic that took place in Plano, thirteen people had died of heroin overdoses in the immediate surrounding area beginning in 1996. Eleven of those were from Plano and nine of the eleven were under the age of 21. By the time the heroin problem was supposedly solved, the number of dead teenagers by heroin overdose in Plano would total 18 although this number has been contested by various sources as the deaths were not institutionally tracked. As research continued, the number of heroin overdoses continued to increase combined with a rising number of overdose deaths from crystal methamphetamine.

Whereas Plano had been represented in various media by signs of progress and industry up to the coverage of the heroin overdose deaths, a new iconography of drugs and troubled teens placed Plano as the touchstone for any discussion of teenagers, suburbs and heroin in the American media. This coverage was overwhelming during the crisis and has continued to appear on a regular basis since that time. All media coverage of Plano and its problems in the media was first grounded in the apparent ironic contradiction of the suburbs affluence, and the presence of a drug that is supposedly antithetical to that environment. Along with images of syringes, a variety of drugs and

lost teenagers, images of dystopic gated communities and mansions interspersed with drug paraphernalia, became the new icons of Plano.

In addition to the *Faces of Heroin* article, these subsequent images from national media sources became a rich source for soliciting a number of responses from suburban inhabitants. One of the most productive spaces to witness this in action was at a variety of Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings and other community action group events where different people came together to give their opinions on what was occurring and attempt to formulate strategies to deal with it. These meetings provided a space where different discourses and perspectives on how to deal with the crisis would converge, sometimes in a cataclysmic fashion. What occurred at points of discourse convergence was an amplification of the problem (Hall et. al 1978). Parents would blame the schools, who would blame the police, who would then identify a “serious lack of parental involvement at the home level” which would incite the parents even more. Once finger pointing was conducted for who was to blame among the different groups represented, strategies and different means of addressing the problem were put forward. These strategies were often based on misperceptions and preferred meanings that emerged out of media accounts individuals were obtaining and utilizing as reference materials in these meetings. Thus, when strategies meant to solve the problem were put forward, it was often based on false information or sensationalized stereotype and caricature from media examples, fueled by individual political agendas. When individuals within these public settings put these agendas forth, the *Faces of Heroin* article was often in their hands as a visual example. The proclamations followed the narrative of the article, i.e. something had to be done about an invading problem that was disrupting suburban life where the

problem was not supposed to occur. Quite often, this entailed the expression “those damn Mexicans”.

The publication of the *Faces of Heroin* article had a direct correlation to the subsequent creation of town hall meetings, drug summits and the formation of community organizations. In this sense, the article was responsible for direct community action, or at least was believed to be. As Linda Ball, the reporter who wrote the *Faces of Heroin* article stated:

*“I would like to think that the story did wake people up because a month later 5,000 people (actually approx. 1,800) jammed the Plano Centre and I feel like that was a direct result of the story” (Interview 1999).*

Thus, the *Faces of Heroin* article defined the moral panic in Plano. Among individuals, it established a set of issues that would be used to discuss the problem and formulate strategies on how to deal with it. Those details then established the agendas for events organized to respond to the presence of heroin in Plano. The article then became the *raison d’etre* for new community groups created in the wake of the problem. In addition, it seemed as if every single national news media outlet that came to Plano to report on the crisis read the article, even showing the image of the article as a photographic still in several exposes. The visual impact of the *Faces of Heroin* article was what made its effect so profound. While the narrative of the newspaper report detailed different aspects of how heroin came to Plano and provided biographies on each of the individuals who died, it was the faces attached to those biographies that created such a profound effect on people. As one parent stated:

*“When I saw that article I couldn’t believe it...heroin in Plano? I’m sitting around on Sunday morning reading the paper and I see this? These kids looked just like my girls and their friends. I asked the girls about it and they said that it had been going on for a while and I was completely shocked. I cut it out and put*

*it on the refrigerator as a constant reminder for all of us...after that we started to talk to the girls about drugs and now I feel like we know more but you're never 100 percent sure..." (Interview, 1999)*

While many felt that the article was beneficial, others thought it was attempting to blow the problem out of proportion or sensationalize the deaths of the teenagers. The presence of heroin in the suburb seemed to contradict any conventional understanding of what the suburb was about. It was as if people could not imagine that a drug like heroin could be present in Plano. This belief added to the impact of the article and was strategic in its publication:

*Linda: "From a journalist's standpoint it is news because it is new...kids have been doing coke and drinking in the burbs forever, but the difference was that this was heroin and is new to the suburb and that the suburb was specifically targeted because the kids have a lot of disposable income and they were not exposed to it before with no memory of it."*

*MD: "So the fact that it was new to the suburb made the story more appealing or sensational?"*

*Linda: "It was contradictory to the idea of the suburb and that was the idea for the story. It wasn't like these were sweet innocent kids that had never taken a drug before in their life, it was just a new drug to these kids that has been around for a long time and is usually associated with other people." (Interview 1999)*

A number of national news magazine shows came to Plano in the following months to report on the events, or they flew guests from Plano to their studios in New York and Los Angeles for interviews. Some of these shows and networks included Extra, Hard Copy, 20/20, Nightline, Good Morning America, The Today Show, CNN, 48 Hours, MTV, MSNBC and Dateline NBC. If these shows did not have an "on-the-spot reporter" standing in front of a graveyard, an affluent tract mansion or Plano Senior High School telling the story of suburban teenage tragedy; different members of the suburban control culture made up of parents, teachers, politicians, law enforcement officers or

doctors appeared as talking heads in boxes on their shows with the words “son lost life to heroin” or “overdose expert” underneath. The narratives of these reports emulated the *Faces of Heroin* article by detailing the sensationalist problem, but also began a narrative trend of assigning blame for the problem outside of the suburban space.

### **The Moral Panic Resolved**

In the late spring of 1998 at the midpoint of the crisis with 14 teenagers dead from heroin overdoses at that point, almost two-dozen people were arrested at the two senior high schools that serve Plano in a drug sweep known as “Operation Rockfest.” Included in the indictments of several Plano teenagers were 7 Mexican Nationals (a number that would eventually number 11) who were labeled as “kingpins” of drug trafficking in the suburb. The local and national media coverage of this event was intensive as images of parents in shock were transformed into images of Plano being tough and ground zero for the American suburban drug war. In the next several months the majority of the teenagers brought under charges were able to plead down to probation or lesser sentences by giving information to prosecuting attorneys. Eventually, when the federal trial started in late 1999, only 11 defendants of the original 29 that were indicted were left to stand trial in a venue that had to be moved twice because of publicity attached to the case. What is especially troubling about the 11 defendants that were left was that they were all Mexican Nationals whereas 18 teenage co-defendants from Plano had now become federal witnesses against them.

Eventually, out of the Mexican National defendants, 2 were given life sentences under a rarely used federal enhancement statute reintroduced after a number of years specifically for this trial. There was a concomitant effort by parents, and legislators

attempting to appease them, to bring the death penalty as a possible sentence as well, but prosecutors were content with the inflation of sentences from an average of 20-years to life sentences. The closest sentence for one of the Plano teenagers indicted was 48 months. While I do not argue with the necessity to punish drug dealers, the disparity between the Mexican Nationals convicted and the Plano teenagers that assisted them was telling and speaks to the final stage in the evolution of the moral panic that occurred within the suburb. First, for many the heroin problem was “solved” when the sentences were handed out. The literal removal of brown bodies from the suburb became the crux for a belief that a heroin overdose problem was now solved. Throughout my fieldwork I had often heard various individuals use the phrase “deport Mexicans” and “get rid of drugs” in the same sentence. Media depictions reinforced this notion. The media barrage was halted for a time after this moment even though the heroin problem was still there. Essentially, the conclusion of the moral panic necessitated the end to media coverage even though another star football player from Plano would succumb to a heroin overdose only 9 months later.

The disparity in sentencing also speaks to a suburban imagination that rests on a historical racial dichotomy between the supposedly white American suburb and the rest of society. The North American suburb has been defined historically as a white social space in terms of historical development (Jackson 1985), demographics (Lang et al. 2006), media representations (Dyer 1998) and culture (Brodkin 1998). In Plano, the same logic that supported where blame was allocated for the presence of heroin within the suburb on the inner city and Mexican Nationals via NAFTA to protect the image of the suburb, now shaped the perception of social justice within the community.

Essentially, a “politics of substitution” (Hall et. al 1978) had occurred where critiques of NAFTA and racial bias revealed in the anxiety of individuals had been appeased through Operation Rockfest, the federal trial and eventual sentencing. By retaining an image of the suburb as clean of heroin, the suburb remained white. Thus, the perceived and historically supported belief in the “whiteness” of the suburb is affirmed not only by where the blame for heroin was directed throughout the moral panic that enveloped Plano, but also in the perceived solution to the problem that occurred. Although the need to literally protect suburban life seemed to be the predominant melodrama being portrayed through media coverage and in the responses of informants in Plano, the battle to preserve the “idea” of the suburb and the “ideal” suburban teenager were actually being waged. When problems that have plagued other social spaces occur in pristine communities like Plano, the question continues to be “...how could this happen here...” and the answer and blame for suburban anxiety consistently lies outside of its safe and imagined confines.

## **Conclusion**

The speed at which notions of race became entangled with other cultural ideas operating in the suburban community was almost as fast as the media coverage that initiated the moral panic in Plano. Subsequently, ideas about race began to compound a series of rationalizations by individuals reducing the explanation of heroin in the suburb to a supply-side argument with blame placed upon racialized sources outside of the suburb through stereotypical identities expanded to encompass global processes such as NAFTA (Kingsolver 2001) for facilitating suburban teenage heroin addiction and

overdose deaths. Ethnographic research leads to the conclusion that the reason the moral panic over teenage heroin use in Plano was so intensive was because the phenomenon posed a threat to the very concept of suburban living itself that was embodied in the idealized teenagers of the perfect suburb. Thompson states, “Implicit in the use of the two words moral panic is the suggestion that the threat is to something held sacred by or fundamental to the society...a threat to the social order itself or an idealized conception of some part of it” (Thompson 1998: 8). As stated previously, if white upper middle class teenagers could not be safe in one of the safest suburbs in America, even within a gated community within that safe suburb, then how could the suburb be said to exist at all? What made the suburb different from the supposedly dangerous urban environment these parents had avoided in the first place?

Once blame is placed on outside racial sources, one can show how “devious” forces targeted the suburb and the innocent teenagers living there. The moral panic gains even more momentum when these forces from outside of the suburban environment are given a racial identity that is seen as historically antithetical to the suburban environment itself. As this letter published in the local newspaper by one mother of a recovering addict, initially inspired by the *Faces of Heroin* article and who evolved from an instant expert on heroin to a dedicated advocate of drug prevention and rehabilitation in Plano, attests:

In order to understand the new face of heroin, it is imperative that we understand the new face of the international drug cartel. It was no accident that this business found its way to Collin County. With a carefully designed marketing plan, **they** targeted our cities. **They** know our children, **they** know our life-styles, **they** know our weaknesses. The days of building secure, safe neighborhoods are over. The problems of the inner-city, which we have chosen to ignore, are now the problems of the suburbs (Nelson 1999) (Bold-type emphasis mine).

The key phrase in this statement beside the constant references to a “they” who live outside of the suburb, but nonetheless “knows” of the suburb is the notion that the suburb was purposefully targeted. Overwhelmingly, in interviews and conversations with informants and community members, it was this notion that the suburb had been “targeted” that was the most constant theme. By utilizing this language, the suburb is positioned as a space where the potentiality for this problem was supposedly non-existent. Thus, the suburb maintains its status as a “clean” space that will reclaim its glory once the problem is eliminated. The process and belief systems that led to the perceived culmination of the moral panic in Plano rest upon a developmental and representational legacy of the American suburb that is dependent upon culturally ingrained ideas of race in North America.

The *Faces of Heroin* article was only one piece of print media out of a plethora studied, but it was the beginning of a deluge that encompassed the suburb and its residents for the next two years and continues to play into perceptions of the community studied since that time. While all suburban residents are not automatons controlled by the media that they receive, individuals are embedded in ‘media worlds’ (Ginsburg et.al 2002) that attempt to produce appealing media that sensationalize their suburban lives. When one reviews the media produced before and after the moral panic in Plano, it is easy to see how it utilizes the stereotypical notions of suburban residents for sensationalist news coverage. Media outlets could have easily chosen a number of other places in the United States to depict where there were just as many if not more deaths from heroin overdoses, but Plano, because of its media history and trappings of contemporary socioeconomic success, appealed to the sensibilities of media coverage and

the ongoing dichotomous positioning of city and suburb/racialized and white that plague the United States.

The moral panic that occurred in Plano, Texas also reinforced the anxiety that supports suburban identity and the boundaries that maintain it (Giroux 1998). The resulting deaths and controversy surrounding them demonstrated the consequences if those boundaries were crossed. The suburban teenagers who died from heroin overdoses became martyrs, the ones who literally shed blood to maintain the boundaries of acceptable suburban behavior. The suburban teenagers who were salvageable were placed in rehabilitation where they were supposedly cleansed of their non-suburban attributes, i.e. heroin addiction. And, the unsalvageable, a group of Mexican Nationals that had recently arrived to the suburb through processes of immigration and globalization, coincidentally identified by race and class, were literally exiled from the suburb through a series of trials to jail cells far across the boundary of the suburban environment. Thus, the operation and conclusion of the moral panic became a means of policing the suburban boundary both spatially and culturally in terms of exclusion.

Suburban moral panics are necessary phenomena because through the process of identifying social ills, labeling threats and supposedly eradicating them, they essentially cleanse and allow suburban residents to redefine themselves and their environments. They are revanchist processes (Smith 1996) of suburban existence. Although they are short-lived, they will inevitably reappear on the social landscape in various violent forms overtime whether they involve teenage drug overdose deaths or suburban school shootings. Thus, the suburban environment is in a state of constant anxiety fueled by socioeconomic conditions and uncertain cultural identity. Moral panics based on racial

constructs emphasize this reality of the suburb as a nervous (Taussig 1991) racial space as well. With anthropological analysis we can detail how this particular moral panic was about class, race, issues of diversification and other concerns that are not necessarily processes of making the American suburb more inclusive but, rather, more exclusive.

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