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The Performance of Chicano Masculinity in Lowrider Car Culture: The Erotic Triangle,
Visual Sovereignty, and Rasquachismo

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Sociology

by

Michael Juan Chavez

March 2013

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Performance of Chicano Masculinity in Lowrider Car Culture: The Erotic Triangle,
Visual Sovereignty, and Rasquachismo

by

Michael Juan Chavez

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Sociology
University of California, Riverside, March 2013
Dr. Alfredo Mirandé, Chairperson

This project is a qualitative exploration of masculinity, race, sexuality, and identity found within the lowrider style of automobile customization. By employing the frameworks of homosociality, visual sovereignty, and rasquachismo, I map the terrain of Chicano masculinity as it is intertwined with car culture. Using an insider perspective, I find that the production of identity in this arena is far more complex and nuanced than it appears on the surface. The men discussed in this study produce their social location using mechanisms that often contradict commonly held assumptions about lowriding. They have intricate strategies to appropriate and manipulate power while at the same time constructing gender and sexual identity that is quite common to hegemonic standards of heteronormativity.

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Chapter 1- Introduction

The popularity of lowriding¹ in Southern California's cultural terrain has created both positive images and negative stereotypes for those of us who are a part of the lifestyle. From the image of the working class thug to one of a family tied together though a common love of the automobile, we embody a range of representations as broad as the range of cars that we customize. As Stone (1990) argues, "being a low rider reflects a complex emotional renegotiation of cultural identity: a reconstructed ethnic 'memory,' the melding of what it means to be young and Mexican American during the 1940s with its multiple contemporary meanings." This dissertation explores the many contemporary meanings associated with lowriding from the perspective of lowriders themselves.

As a graduate student, I was employed by the Ethnic Studies department as a Teaching Assistant for the introductory Chicano Studies class. For this class, I gave a guest lecture, "Lowriders, Airbrushes, and Performing Hypermasculinity." It focused on the employment of masculinized imagery in the airbrushed artwork on lowrider vehicles. This lecture laid the foundation for broader themes that I plan to cover in this project. Among various other topics that I covered, I explained that, despite lowriding's ethnic and regional diversity, its origins are deeply entrenched in a number of Chicano neighborhoods in Southern California.

¹ While some of the literature uses, "Low Rider," it is most commonly written in a single word- *Lowrider*- by those most familiar.

Shortly after this lecture, one interested student approached me with the question, “So what exactly makes a lowrider a lowrider?” To my own surprise, I had a great deal of difficulty arriving at a satisfactory answer to that question. As I stumbled through responses that ranged from a particular way in which a vehicle is customized to the ethnic and racial compositions of those of us involved, I had to concede that there was no definitive answer to it. As I grappled with this question for some time after, I came to the conclusion that lowriding is just as much about its form, history, and culture as it is about a politics of performance, resistance, and conformity. This dissertation seeks to further explore, through participant observation of the community and in-depth interviews with lowriders, the many meanings that insiders associate with lowriding in the contemporary U.S..

To be clear, the scope of this project is not what it often appears to be on the surface. I am inevitably confronted with the question, “so is your dissertation about the history of lowriding?” or from a sociological audience, “what does building cars have to do with sociology?” My project directly deals with the assumptions that neither assumption tends to probe. Lowriding is merely my site of investigation. In this sense, this project is not really about lowriding. Instead, it examines and is situated within this particular arena to unpack the complexities of conflict and bonding among Latino men, media representations, and the entanglement of sexuality, gender and race within the contemporary United States. In examining the experiences, insider understandings, and media representations of lowriding, I seek to better understand the intersections of

masculinity, racialization, heteronormativity, policing and power especially in American popular culture.

Why Lowriding?

As a freshman in high school, a number of my friends, both Black and Brown, introduced me to lowriding. At that age, they were planning and building lowrider bicycles and would bring in *Lowrider Magazine* to class so we could all look at the catalogues of available parts. At the age of 15 I came across a somewhat rare 24-inch Schwinn beach cruiser that I began to modify as a custom lowrider bike to compete against other young people at car shows. Before completion, my parents purchased a 1996 Ford Ranger for me. I passed the bike frame over to my younger brother as I set my sights on the truck. Today, *Mr. Big Stuff*, the lapis blue pick-up is top award winner in its class and *Payaso Loco* is my brother's tricycle that has garnered a bedroom full of trophies in my parents' house.

Data collected for this project came from over a decade and a half of my participation in lowriding. Among them are people who both own vehicles and people who are paid to customize them. For example, Frank Hernandez has been lowriding for over twenty years. He has been in three different car clubs since he was a teenager and his 1987 Mazda pick-up, *Frankie's Way*, and currently his 1951 Chevy Fleetline, *One More Shot*, have been major fixtures at local happenings. Frank and I met in 1997 when he moved into a house around the corner from my parents' house and I stopped by and introduced myself. Over the years we shared strong, personal friendship that

transcended car building. He has been the most important person in my entrance into lowriding, being the first person to help me customize my own truck for show competition. Frank introduced me to many of the more well-known lowriders in the Inland Empire, something that will be vitally important to my research. Through him I already have a very good relationship with nearly all of the car clubs that have been in the area for over two decades.

I met Julio Ortiz, a member of Uniques Car Club, in 1999 when a mutual friend who is a member of Duke's Car Club put us in touch so I could do some stereo work for him. Julio and I had known of each other before we met because he and his truck, a 1988 Mazda B2200 named *Forever Mine*, were my rivals at local shows. Over the years, Julio lined up various stereo installation jobs for me with other lowrider friends. Through these jobs, I was given the opportunity to have my custom work on display in some award-winning cars, trucks, and bicycles. Many of the vehicle owners I met through my work, including Julio, were included in this project and have provided invaluable insight as I already had a relationship with them.

Among the people I was introduced to, is Jesse Marquez. When I first entered lowriding, Jesse had one of the top award winning trucks on the lowrider circuit. Jesse's Toyota, appropriately named *Serious Threat*, was the truck to beat if you competed in his class, and the one to aspire to if you did not. Julio introduced me to Jesse in 2002 when I needed some suspension work done on my truck. Jesse is a highly popular customizer and world renown for his work. He owns a customization shop, Custom

Lowz, in the north side of Riverside, California. He and I have collaborated on a few projects and he has allowed me to have access to many of the cars he is working on before the public ever sees them. In many of the discussions that we have had, he has given me invaluable insight into the social side of lowriding. He, like me, is a people watcher; someone who likes to learn about his customers and what their motivations are rather than just treating them as mere business transactions. I have expanded on his ideas about race and class and their relationship to lowriding in my analysis.

My decision to pursue this project for my dissertation was a logical outcome of my own investment in the lowrider community. I have an organic insight that scholars up to this point have not had. I use this insider knowledge to guide my research and to provide a roadmap for the reader not familiar with lowriding. Baca Zinn (1979) argues that insider positionality in relation to the group or topic of discussion offers a number of methodological advantages. The first advantage is that insider research is less likely to be exploitive in the way that “outsider” data collection may be. Regardless of their intentions, outsider scholars often receive the only profit while giving little back to the groups that they study. This is especially problematic when the researcher has no affiliations or investment to the people who they rely on for data and thus make no commitment to their wellbeing at the conclusion of their project. Secondly, “the ‘lenses’ through which [insiders] see social reality” allow scholars to gather data that outsiders may not be able to. An insider is more likely to have a similar background and cultural capital to the subject of study potentially refining the overall quality of

understanding. Similarly, Jones (2009) points out the tendency of outsiders conducting ethnographic research to cater to an audience unfamiliar with marginalized groups and thus risk rendering social workings more indecipherable than an insider might have. Standpoint theorists (Collins 1990; Smith 1990) assert that knowledge is produced primarily through experience. We can therefore stand to learn the most from those with lived accounts of social realities, especially when focusing on marginalized people.

In contrast, although researchers may be an insider in terms of their background relationship to the groups they may study, scholars (Rios 2011; Villenas 1996) point out that the relationship between the researcher and the subject presents a dilemma in terms of power and privilege. In Rios's (2011) study of Oakland youth, his own history growing up in the same neighborhood gained him an elevated status among the boys he studied. However, being a privileged academic, he had to acknowledge that he was in a much different social location that still made him an outsider. Similarly, Villenas (1996) found that despite linguistic and ethnic parallels with the Latino communities she studies, the demands of the academic canon limit organic analysis of everyday social realities. She asserts that the process of researching threatens subjective interpretation by requiring an imperialist gaze commanded by elite universities. Researchers must remain reflexive irrespective of their assumed insider status.

Accordingly I had no intention of approaching my subject from the point of unfamiliarity but rather through a standpoint that embraces my deep history and understanding of the people and places that I discuss. While the spectacle of lowriding,

lowrider cars, and their drivers might all be points of exotic attraction to an audience, my goal here is to deconstruct behavior, interaction, and relationships from a normalizing perspective that forecloses on the discursive construction of “the other.” In other words, I have no intention of suggesting that the forms of interaction that I describe throughout this project exist only in lowriding and by its participants. Although there are some very important specificities that pertain to this “lifestyle,” I contend that many of the forms of relationships between men, negotiations of stereotypes, and oppositional identity construction exist in countless other contexts.

This topic is a particularly timely venture due to both the upsurge in the popularity of lowriding and its hypervisibility in the media, as well as the lack of sociological attention to this arena especially as conducted by insiders to the sport. Public interest was sparked in the early 1990s largely by Dr. Dre’s single “Nuthin’ but a G Thang” whose subsequent music video featured several customized early 1960s Chevrolet Impalas juxtaposed with other constructed images of “urban gangster” lifestyle including guns and alcohol consumption. In 2004, Music Television debuted “Pimp My Ride,” a reality-based television show that had a six-season run where a customization shop would take a dilapidated car and “pimp it out” with new paint and upholstery, and various customizations that served little practical function but added to the entertainment factor of the program. Aquariums with live fish, a ping pong table, and electric fireplace are among these additions. This show inspired the creation of other similar programming as well as spinoffs of the same genre. In 2008, the original

customization shop used for the show, West Coast Customs, separated and began a new program in which the shop itself and the employees were the centerpiece. “Street Customs,” later renamed “Inside West Coast Customs,” expanded the genre of customization to include high-dollar restorations and remodeling far removed from the campy format of its predecessor. The same year, “Livin’ the Low Life” premiered on the Speed Channel. Running for two seasons, the show focused specifically on lowriding and the people involved. The show was hosted by Latina model, Vida Guerra, and despite her physical attractiveness to a largely male audience, many of the men I spoke to about the show were annoyed that it was clear she knew little about the cars and the lifestyle that she presented.

A brief search on the topics of lowriders and lowriding offers very little in the way of theoretical explanations on this phenomenon. While there has been some significant research on the topic, it has tended to be more of a historical description of the development of lowriding rather than a theoretical analysis of the social processes of interaction and competition that take place in these spaces. Specifically, my research will explore the complex ways that men, subordinated as men of color, relate to other men and women in this very masculinized arena. How do they negotiate a sense of community while at the same time confront issues of criminalization and surveillance by the police? How do they simultaneously commit to and reject stereotypes which portray them as criminal, and still forge out a place for themselves in popular culture?

What is a Lowrider?

For this project, I assume no fixed or generalizable definitions of what or who a lowrider is. Although some scholars (Bright 1998), rely on static definitions or characteristics, I argue that it is a fluid and dynamic construction which relies on various factors including both environmental verification and individual labeling. In many ways, the same vehicle and its driver can fall into myriad categories with no physical, mechanical, or personal alterations. As I argue, the lowrider, both the car and the driver and not merely the “lifestyle” of lowriding, is discursively constructed in a manner that exceeds a material definition. Often it is merely the context that defines a lowrider. I am seeking to define lowriding as a series of political practices which cannot be narrowly defined by the constraints of an aesthetic. For instance, Vigil (1991) describes lowriding as follows.

Generally, the acre is lowered in the back, or all around, either permanently or temporarily if hydraulic lifts...have been installed. This low-slung vehicle can be an older 1940's or more recent 1970's model (usually a General Motors vehicle, especially a Chevrolet); it may be stock or highly “customed” (with fancy paint jobs, chrome wheels, crushed velvet upholstery, and so on). (72)

Stone (1990) has a similar depiction of what a Lowrider is. “‘Low rider’ refers to any automobile, van or pickup truck, motorcycle, or bicycle lowered to within a few inches of the road” (85). Later, Høyem (2007) and Chappell (2002) follow the same path in their descriptions: lowered, hydraulics, gleaming chrome, wire wheels, extensive paint

job, customized interior, and most likely an older model, American-made vehicle.

Although Høyem acknowledges some possible deviations from this to include foreign models and nontraditional vehicles like ice cream trucks, he still relies on fixed material factors which do not center the racialized construction of the lowrider. Chappell (2002: 1) on the other hand, recognizes that “lowriders mark the minority urban presence of the working-class Mexican American communities that innovated that style.” More significantly, he argues, “lowrider practice constitutes a kind of popular, historical knowledge of the present.”

However, we are often labeled as such merely by our own racial identities. In 2001, Frank and I drove our pick-ups to a truck competition in Perris, California. Upon entry, we were immediately placed into the lowrider category despite the fact that there were at least three other possible classes in which we could have competed. When I asked the show organizers why we were automatically grouped together, they had no immediate response other than to say, “that’s just where you guys fit in.” As we spent the day walking around the fairgrounds, it was apparent that our class designation was based on little more than the fact that we were perceived as a couple of Mexicans, considering there were a number of trucks that had numerous features and modifications similar to ours. In this case, we had deliberately chosen to distance ourselves from identifying as lowriders in order to see how well we could compete with other truck builders and yet, we were quickly made aware that our choices could be trumped by external forces.

I argue that the lowriding lifestyle is simultaneously constructed and policed through hegemonic culture. Turning a critical lens on the organizational logics of white supremacy, capitalism, patriarchy and heteronormativity, I will form an analysis which deconstructs the gendering, sexualization, and economic exploitation of racialized subjects. I contend that this occurs largely through the systemic apparatuses of policing, surveillance, and cultural appropriation as well as through the politics of performance for those invested in the lowrider community. My theoretical perspective combines insights from a queer of color critique and Chicano masculinities research which destabilize the normative white, male gaze.

Hegemonic Masculinity

Hegemonic masculinity, exemplified by the contemporary white, Western, middle-class, heterosexual male, is the most desirable and revered in the U.S. This is the standard by which other masculinities are measured. *Subordinated masculinities*, according to Connell (2001), are comprised of queer men. Men from racial and ethnic minority groups fill the *marginalized masculinities* category. This is problematic due to the fact that it disarticulates the structures of sexuality and race contrary to intersectional theory. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) add that while hegemonic masculinity is the most honored and sought after, it is also the least achieved because of its often unattainable standards and demands which few men embody.

Demetriou (2001), on the other hand, is critical of the implications in this literature. Whereas the discourse of subordination overlooks the agency of non-

hegemonic masculinities, Demetriou (2001) claims that hegemonic masculinities, in order to maintain its dominant status will appropriate other forms of masculinity. This theoretical contribution conceptualizes power as more than merely a “top-down” model. Instead, while not dismissing the subordination of queer men, men of color, and androgynous men, the relationship to hegemonic masculinity may be considered symbiotic. Another critique of Connell’s theory is that the focus on hegemonic masculinity is far too narrow. Instead, as Hearn (2004) puts it, the analytical focus should shift to hegemonic men. This perspective is an attempt to include men’s exhibitions of power within the gender order and men’s domination over women.

Racialized Masculinities

As a group, men of color have been notably marginalized in the literature and research on masculinities. One of the most outstanding critics of the canon of masculinities studies is Mirandé (1997) in his chapter entitled “And Ar’n’t I a Man” in which he challenges scholars in the field to take a step back and question their commitment to a white, middle-class norm. He asserts that the movement of gender theorists toward a feminist-informed study of men closely parallels the struggle of women of color to resist the homogenizing forces of middle-class whiteness behind early feminist movements. He further contends that it would be more appropriately termed “The new white men’s studies” as the existence of white men becomes the universal standard of manhood.

Mirandé (1997) and Gutmann (1994) take issue with both the pervasive, popular ideology and social theory's persistent reliance on the imagined *macho* icon in defining Latino men. They insist that Mexican masculinities are far too complex and multiple to be summed up in such a monolithic and static structure as in *machismo*. Baca Zinn (1982) cautions against using *machismo* as an analytic category as this framework tends to view male dominance as a logical production of a pathological Latino culture. Cantú (2000) adds that this framework runs counter to the prevailing theory which understands gender as dynamic and fluid.

Following this research as a template, a major focal point of this project will be to deconstruct the performances of gender from within the predominantly masculinized spaces of lowriding. Specifically, my analysis will focus on the relationships forged between men and women and men with other men, and how those relationships both reflect and challenge the gender order of society and the dominant discourses about gender relations.

Queer Theory

We can turn a queer lens on masculinities research, to trace the complex relationship between gender and sexuality. As Edwards (2005) points out, the idealized constructions of masculinity reject queerness. From this perspective, masculinity is constructed in a manner which rejects, often violently, non-heterosexuality as well as femininity (Connell 1992, 2000). As Connell (2000) states, "the dominance of hegemonic masculinity over other forms may be quiet and implicit, but may also be

vehement and violent, as is the case of homophobic violence” (11). In addition, “Gay negates masculine” (Edwards 2005: 51). Homophobia as a rejection of queerness (Butler 1995), is central to the hegemonic apparatus of masculinity (Kimmel 2001).

Chandan Reddy (1997) argues that racist practice is often manifested as sexual and gender regulation. For example, according to Ferguson (2004), racial segregation functions to preserve the “sexual purity of white women, and the sexual mobility of white men” (viii). Men of color become positioned as the sexual aggressors and a threat to the white dominated gender/sexual status quo. This is especially important considering the socially pathological imagery of male lowriders. We are in the impossibly difficult paradoxical space of being simultaneously feared and admired. In his article, “Queering the Homeboy Aesthetic,” Richard Rodriguez (2006) describes the homeboy aesthetic as “an assemblage of key signifiers: clothing (baggy pants and undershirts are perhaps the most significant), hair (or in the current moment of the aesthetic, lack of hair, bold stance, and distinct language (think *caló* mixed with hip-hop parlance), all combining to form a distinguishable cultural affectation hard to miss on Los Angeles city streets” (129). This representation is presumably heterosexual and thus reinforces the stereotype of the sexualized lowrider men. Eve Sedgwick’s concept of the erotic triangle provides further insight into the dynamics of conflict and bonding among male lowriders.

Sedgwick's Erotic Triangle

Eve Sedgwick's (1985) *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* highlights what she calls the "erotic triangle," a bond between heterosexual men through their possessive relationship of a woman's body common to both of them. This relationship can be in the form of a father passing ownership of his daughter to her new husband, the relationship between a father and son vis-à-vis a wife/mother, or through two men sharing sexual experiences with the same woman. In any case, a woman's body is a commodity through which men can transact, compete, transfer power, and bond. This bond between men can be even greater than the relation between either man and his lover.

This schema establishes the boundaries of sexuality and provides an apparatus by which we can understand the ways in which men can relate to one another while simultaneously affirming commitments to heteronormativity. I am going to expound this theme in understanding the nature of male bonding and the masculinist culture of lowriding. The scene of half-naked women adorning show vehicles with hoards of men and boys standing by, cameras in hand, mouths agape, and high-fiving each other is a common one. The women can either stand alone as the centerpiece of the male fantasy, or give a bisexual performance in a group to which the howls of the crowd encourage more explicit behavior. To visually highlight this phenomenon, rather than spend time as part of the crowd, I position myself on the opposite side of the group and take pictures of the men and boys as they gawk at the women. I will show how this

performance is just as much about men relating to each other as it is about them relating to the models. However, my focus is not only on the bonding among men with women's bodies as the proxy, but rather, the literal objectification of women's bodies as found in the sexualization of the vehicles that men own. With vehicle names like "Sancha," and "The Other Woman," it is clear that many men create an almost romantic relationship with their cars. For this part of the project, I will be examining lowrider artwork and the constant themes of sex and power that are ever present.

Lowriding's Cultural Significance

According to Smith (2005), "'knowledge' about someone also gives one power over that person" (97). "Knowing," in this sense, represents a type of cultural violence that exposes, through its visual representations, people in the scene to greater forms of negative racialization and sexualization, and thus policing, criminalization, and surveillance. In the case of lowriding and its members, the *knowledge* held by the dominant group helps shape racialized and sexualized stereotypes which are eventually perpetuated in the media and popular culture.

In this project, I argue that this form of cultural appropriation exists in even the most banal settings. Varying scholars promote the use of "lowrider culture" as a pedagogical tool in U.S. public schools. Here, Grady (2002) treats its use as an expression of creativity and "thinking outside the box" curriculum which challenges dominant narratives which leave Brown students disenfranchised by their own educations. "As a distinctively Latino art form in its historical roots, lowrider art had the

potential to counter the local invisibility and subordination of Latinos” (176). Moreover, it comes to symbolize “a means for putting forth a positive image of Mexican heritage and for resisting school practices which ignored or denied certain aspects of their Latino identity, such as prohibiting the use of Spanish in class” (Ibid). Cowan (2004) asserts that lowrider culture provides an apparatus by which “individuals become ‘literate’ by means of engaging in a variety of activities that are quite different from the kinds of behaviors associated with acquiring reading and writing skills in school settings” (52). In this sense, taking advantage of students’ appreciation of lowriding helps them to develop critical thinking and analytical skills. Craig and Paraiso (2008) suggest that the usage of “barrio art” in the classroom can facilitate the development of English skills for English Language Learner (ELL) students.

I am concerned with the deployment of a normative gaze which centers a white, middle class, heteronormative perspective. This literature often relies on and reifies a number of stereotypes and misconceptions about, in this case, Chicanas/os and lowriding. First, it assumes that all Brown students have an equal interest, and thus stake in, the persistence of lowrider culture. This portrayal creates a monolithic image of Latinas/os and Chicana/os in the United States devoid of economic and political diversity, and assumes that they have limited creative capacities beyond the creation and enjoyment of “barrio art.” Secondly, scholars depend on the assumption that disparities in Brown students’ academic achievement are a logical outcome of non-diverse curricula, something that can be overcome merely by getting more creative with

the forms of teaching materials used in the classroom. As a result, the underlying structural forms of political and economic inequality which determine the educational experiences of students of color effectively become rendered invisible. Thirdly, similar to Trask's (1993) notion of "cultural prostitution" whereby cultural productions of a particular group are commodified to meet the needs of the dominant outsider,² lowriding becomes romanticized in a fashion which erases the reality of policing and criminalization that lowriders endure on a regular basis. The dynamics of power are insignificant in the creation of this discourse, which I argue, is in and of itself an enforcement of that power through exploitation.

Methods

This project is the culmination of my participation in the *lowrider scene* over the past 15 years. Most of the data for this project have been collected through years of participatory observation across a number of sites. Indeed, lowriding is far more expansive than what occurs at the numerous car shows throughout the year. In my investigation, I will take advantage of the abundant networks that I have developed with lowriders over a decade.

I draw on the observations I have made as a competitor at most of the lowrider shows that I attend. My research will also examine the customization shops, garages, and backyards of the enthusiasts who keep the movement alive. I seek not to replicate

² I should make clear that Haunani Kay Trask's deployment of the phrase is intended to provide an analytic framework to articulate the colonial degradation and exploitation of indigenous Hawaiian culture to meet the desires and needs of the West. In this sense, I am merely drawing a reference to the concept and not the scale of cultural genocide.

some of the false romanticization (Sandoval 2003a, 2003b) and cultural misinterpretations (Høyem 2007) of lowriding endemic in much of the literature. Instead, I situate myself as an insider to the culture. Most of my data will come from people who are not among the “superstars” of lowriding but are part of the rank and file in Southern California.

My methodological approach will be multi-dimensional. I conducted 15 in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and conducted archival research. The bulk of my data come from the combination of observations that I conducted at many of the local shows and shops and in-depth interviews with car builders themselves. GoLo Entertainment, *Lowrider Magazine’s* car show promotions affiliate, coordinates a cross country show tour every year between the months of February and October. Over the past few show seasons GoLo has inexplicably cut their average number of shows from twelve to five with the tour culminating with the Lowrider Supershow in Las Vegas at the beginning of October. Nevertheless, my networks and personal connections allowed for access, outside of just car shows, to the people who have informed this project.

In the many discussions and conversations for this project I focused on three themes: 1) How the individual became involved in lowriding; 2) Her/his assessment of lowriding’s depiction in popular culture such as in movies, television and music videos, and the way that lowriding is heavily policed; and 3) What lowrider culture means to her/him. One of the most important things that I learned throughout this project is that

the people involved in each of the different facets of lowriding, from building the cars, to organizing car shows and cruise night, have a lot to say and they feel it is important to be heard. Since I have been a part of this community for so long, I expected that most conversations that are not focused on the actual building of a vehicle are related in some way to these three themes. This is especially true when the folks involved are eager to discuss and teach about their passion.

Conclusion

Lowriders are not always what we seem. We exist as a complex paradox in American society: we are revered in our depictions in popular culture in television shows like “Pimp My Ride” and “Living the Lowlife” while simultaneously being vilified and criminalized in everyday life through police surveillance and harassment. Although I don’t necessarily feel that this project will provide a solution to this problem, I do hope that it will help to debunk some of the pervasive stereotypes of lowriders and help us to better understand this misunderstood community and the meanings and dynamics that shape it.

Chapter 2- Vatos Rollin' Hard: Lowriders and the Erotic Triangle

In a 2008 online article, men's sex experts at savvymale.com provided the following advice about how to treat women in regard to sex:

When it comes to sex, treat women like your favorite car. You wouldn't just jump in, turn on a cold engine and peel out. If you want the car to last a long time, you warm the engine first, then you go for a ride...

You perform maintenance on your car regularly, so it will last longer. You don't require your car to say thank you.

The association between sex and the automobile is as old as possibly the car itself. The car is a status marker which symbolizes social power and class standing which popular imagination teaches us is an indicator of *sexual* power and status. From innuendo to explicit gestures of popular culture, the car as a metaphor for sex is a deeply engrained facet of Western culture.

The German automobile magazine, "Men's Car," reported in their own 2004 study that the type of car a man drives is a predictor of the average times per week that he will have sex. In their survey of 2253 men aged 20-50, they reported that BMW drivers had the most frequent sexual experiences at an average of 2.2 times per week, followed closely by Audi drivers (2.1 times per week), and drivers of Volkswagens (1.9 times per week). The bottom half of the list was comprised by Ford drivers at 1.7 times having sex per week, Mercedes Benz motorists (1.6 per week), and drivers of the notoriously expensive, small, and speedy Porsche at 1.4 times having sex per week. This

can teach us one of two things; either male Porsche drivers need to trade their rides in for a Mercedes Benz, or at the very least, men's popular fantasies of our cars are a logical extension of normalized performance of sexuality.

In this chapter, I have two important aims. First, grounding my analysis in feminist, queer, and critical race theories, I provide accounts of the masculinist culture embedded within lowriding. Secondly, I deconstruct heteronormative narratives entrenched in the lowriding's gender arrangements. For the former, the challenge is to not reproduce racist stereotypes of Chicano men as intrinsically more misogynist than other men while at the same time defining the parameters of sexism and homophobia that exist within lowriding. For the latter, I turn the normalized performance of traditional masculinity on its head; that is, I *queer* masculinity in such a way that I illuminate the complex and seemingly contradictory nature of its relation to heterosexuality.

I start by recounting an all too common scene played out on this occasion at one of the most recent lowrider shows I attended. On a summer Sunday afternoon at a lowrider car show taking place in the parking lot at a southern California high school, a group of about 18 men and boys, mostly Chicano, stand grouped together creating an almost impenetrable barrier focusing their attention on what seems to be an early 40s model Chevrolet coupe. They high-five and flash overly approving smiles at each other in between each snap of their cameras. Some of them push through to take their own pictures while others urgently hand cameras to the younger boys who are likely the

siblings or sons of the elders and push them through to the front of the crowd.

However, anyone acquainted with this familiar scene at this, or any other lowrider car show would know that the car is likely not the center of these men's attention, but instead the probable attraction is a woman who is almost certainly wearing little else than a skimpy bathing suit posing seductively for her audience.

The Homeboy

Most of the men involved embody the model of what Rodriguez (2006) labels the "homeboy aesthetic." This aesthetic is composed of an assemblage of multiple elements which together symbolize a specific association or membership to a given identity. In the case of the homeboy, it is frequently exemplified by all or a combination of the following: "clothing (baggy pants and undershirts are perhaps the most significant), hair (or, in the current moment of the aesthetic, lack of hair), bold stance, and distinct language (such as *caló* mixed with hip-hop parlance), all combining to form a distinguishable cultural affectation" (Rodriguez 2006: 127-128). The homeboy is imagined as tough, hypermasculine, likely dangerous and always racialized as Brown. "The homeboy aesthetic is at once the subject of admiration and fear. It is embraced and resisted as a mode of working-class sensibility and a marker of cultural difference" (128). Predictably, the homeboy aesthetic is the embodiment of heterosexuality.

These men and boys are participating in an archetypal scenario in a classically Chicano terrain. This depiction is common, and even expected, in nearly all lowrider arenas. Through these hypermasculinized performances and projections of male desire,

the men who partake are simultaneously reproducing their identities as men as well as Chicano. These performances are equally as much about the maintenance of masculinity shared collectively through the objectification of women's bodies as they are about the shared desire to pleasure other men in shared social interaction. By deploying exhibitions of heterosexuality, the men described are able to galvanize their social bonds in that momentary space.

The Erotic Triangle

The framework I use to describe this relationship between the men and women involved in this scenario is that which Eve Sedgwick calls the *Erotic Triangle*. The erotic triangle provides a useful analytic frame to understand male homosocial desire- "the emerging pattern of male friendship, mentorship, entitlement, rivalry, and hetero- and homosexuality..." (Sedgwick 1985: 1). Desire, in this case, represents a continuum of relations between same sex agents from homosocial to homosexual. Although somewhat paradoxically, homosociality as a regular manifestation of heterosexual men relating to other heterosexual men is often articulated as intense homophobia, and fear and hatred of homosexuality. In a patriarchal society, relationships between homosocial desire and structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power often take the form of ideological homophobia/homosexuality (Sedgwick 1985). This gender configuration highlights the homosocial desire that permeates the relationship between men while being suppressed through the mandates of homophobia. It specifically centers the relationship between men and their heterosexual/homosocial

object choices. Power becomes primarily located in the link between the male relationships such that the relationship to the women involved is circumstantial and only serves as a proxy to tie men together. Thus, according to this arrangement, the desire men express in seeking the pleasure of and approval from other men is channeled through women while the status of the women is rendered insignificant.

In "Traffic in Women," Rubin (1975) further articulates this subordinated status of women in relation to men. To paraphrase Rubin, women become exchangeable, symbolic property for the purpose of galvanizing the bonds between men. Men become the "givers" while women themselves are the "gifts." To illustrate, such would be the case as in the traditional Western marriage ceremony where a woman/bride is passed from her father/giver to her husband/receiver as an exchange of property.

Las Sanchas/Mistresses

The scene described above- the toughened male gaze ogling the female body while simultaneously seeking the approval of other men- can be reexamined through a queer lens and seen as rife with contradiction. Although I do not make the claim that this presentation of masculinity is somehow homosexual, I argue that even in this decidedly heterosexual scenario, the commitments that men make to their own heterosexuality teeters on the *queer*. I say this because arguably, this type of behavior and interaction might push the bounds of normative heterosexuality if it were in a difference context. Here I rely on Halberstam's (2005) definition of the term *queer* to refer to "nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity,

embodiment, and activity in space and time” (6). More specifically, it describes new understandings of dominant narratives through their rearticulation and disruption. In other words, it establishes a visible position against the normative. Halperin (1995) explains that *queer* in this sense is whatever is at odds with the dominant or legitimate order. The queer is not constrained by structures of normativity requiring any sort of regulative labeling and therefore is open to a range of attitudes, ideologies, and behaviors not covered by a rigid heterosexual/homosexual binary.

The homosocial interactions described disrupt rigidly defined limits of heterosexual male relations and socially determined allowances of male closeness. As Ward (2006) notes, “Like Blackness in the 19th-century, homosexuality is often implicitly subject to the one-drop rule, in which any same-sex sexual experience muddies the waters of heterosexuality at best, and marks one as either an open or prepressed homosexual, at worst” (27). However, she continues to explain that “it appears we are all invested, for different reasons, in calling as many people and behaviors ‘gay’ as possible, a practice that leaves the gay/straight binary intact” (28). In other words, by highlighting the most visible behaviors that transgress the borders of heterosexuality into the realm of collectively regulated and policed homosexual behavior, heterosexual identity is reaffirmed.

The Boundaries of Male Closeness

On a warm Sunday afternoon in early Spring, Traffic Car Club held its annual car show at the Citizens Business Bank Arena in Ontario, California. As usual, I showed up

along with some of my fellow Empire Car Club members and also met up with many friends from different local clubs. It was a well-attended show with reportedly over 400 cars registered for competition and easily 1500 people walking through the aisles of cars and venter booths. As with a lot of outdoor shows, areas near trees and buildings that offer shade to survive a long day in the sun are popular spots so it is not uncommon to be standing in a tight crowd of people; some who are friends, and many who are strangers.

Without any warning, a rough voice accompanied by the scent of Bud Light speaks right into my ear, "Damn! Check out that ass...and she's pretty too!" one man says to me as I realize how uncomfortably close this stranger is standing behind me. "That vato needs to hurry up and put his seat down so she can get in!" As he stood there among a gathering crowd with at least 30 other men, mostly Chicano, waiting for the owner of a two-tone mint green and white 1962 Chevrolet Impala station wagon to fold down his front seats so the barely clothed woman to crawl in, I could hear a roar of discussions of a highly sexual nature building. Unknowing to this man whose name I never knew, I was not standing as part of this crowd to merely gawk at this "pretty" woman, but to witness the homosocial displays of men's interactions; although, I do not really believe it mattered what I was doing there. Nothing more than my presence and being a man granted me membership to this grouping of *vatos* circling this Chevy. At one point, his hand landed and rested on my shoulder as he was trying to get as close as possible for the best view of the woman who was now inside the car posing in sexually

explicit positions while arousing her audience. It made no difference whether I was straight or gay myself as assuredly no one would even consider asking. At this moment, standing as part of the crowd, the mandates of heteronormativity were simultaneously constructed and verified by the gathering crowd. In effect, his space was produced through and by the temporary community and social process; a process that actively negotiates and constructs heterosexual identity. Male closeness coupled with the projection of sexual desire circumscribe countless moments such as this in a complex formation that illuminates the queerness of the space while affirming heteronormativity.

Lefebvre (1991) argues that the production of space is always a social process. This social process can be *read* or *decoded* to understand the processes of signification that have come to define that space. These significations, or *codes* are formed through a dialectical interaction between subjects and their surroundings. Space “serves as a tool of thought and of action; that in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power...” (26). In the case of the above scenario, this lowriding space is produced through the nexus of the men’s performance of hetero-masculinity and the women’s bodies as sexual objects. The men in these spaces rarely have any kind of direct contact or interaction with the women. Sexual arousal happens from a distance. In fact, the real interplay of sexuality primarily exists in the physical spaces (or lack thereof) between all the men involved. It is with a sense of irony that this scene of hypermasculine performativity converges with the embedded

sexualized context of interaction, but it is actually congruent with the landscape of homosociality. I heard another man remark, “her ass is swallowing up that thong!” as about five others closest to him gave an almost simultaneous “fuck yeah!” Although a few men cloaked by the anonymity of the crowd shouted a number of vulgarities directed at the woman who was at that point on her hands and knees across the rear seats of the car, it was clear that the remarks were made for the greater purpose of amusing and pleasing the all-men gathering. Shouts of “hey, what’s your number,” quickly evolved into “lay on your back and spread your legs!” as the mass grew. If anything, as each new person contributes to the foray of what amounts to verbal aggression in the form of commands to this woman and other sex talk, more men are encouraged to join in and to heighten the level of explicitness which in the end really only further arouses the group of men. Though the woman, whose name no one ever knew, may have acquiesced to some of the directives, the most significant responses came from the men in the crowd through their laughter, “high-fiving,” and escalation in the sexual graphicness of their demands. Through these displays, all of the men involved were not only amused by the participation of the other members of the group, but they most certainly became more aroused as the heterosexual fantasy was encouraged and bolstered not directly by the woman who their gaze was transfixed, but now by men.

However, if as noted by Chappell (2006), the car is “a site itself, a kind of mobile room which can be occupied by human bodies” (1), then they too become a part of the

social process defining space. The presence of the lowrider and homeboy aesthetics and performativities in defining the lowrider space implicitly outlines the parameters of heterosexuality, Chicano identity, and masculinity. In other words, the boundaries of heteronormativity are constructed by material and bodily manifestations of the space. I argue, that as such, these material and bodily manifestations are also interchangeable in this special moment. In effect, the manner in which the women in the above scenario act as the proxy in a homosocial relationship in order to defer the stigma of homosexuality, so too can the automobile as a metaphorical objectification of a woman's body.

The car itself is sexualized. In many of the ways that a woman's body is inscribed with the properties relating to sexual desire, eroticism, fantasy, power, and aesthetic appreciation, the lowrider car too becomes the focus of a masculinist gaze hoisting all of these properties onto it. A walk down any aisle at a lowrider car show and names like "The Other Woman," "The Mistress," "Sancha," "Forever Mine," "Panty Dropper," and "Freak Show" (a reference to a prototypical scene at a female strip club), mark the relationship between the car and builder with meanings of romance, fetish, and sexual power that parallel the relationship between the women modeling at the show and their audience.

Hanging out at a local, well-known customization shop in Riverside, I was speaking with one of the customers whose 1966 Chevy Impala was being assembled about two weeks before competing at a show in Las Vegas. As I stand there to admire

the craftsmanship that the team of painters, metal engravers, automobile upholsterers, and engine builders had brilliantly worked on this one car, its owner moves beside me and remarks, “sexy, huh?” I agreed as he proceeded to walk up to the car and stroke the paint on the rear quarter panel with the tips of his fingers, “so smooth.” There was an almost voyeuristic atmosphere as this Chicano with a shaved head and Raiders jersey talked to me about his car’s lines and curves.

Artwork

“Girl, I got a Chevy with hydraulics and you remindin’ me of it. Up and down, up and down. Girl, you know what’s happenin’.” T-Pain- *Booty Werk*.

While this scene is fairly common, I further argue that the homosocial erotic triangle does not always require such a directly explicit display for men’s pursuit of other men’s pleasure and approval through deployments of sexuality. Artwork in the form of airbrushed murals ranging from a subtly embedded piece to a fully muraled vehicle where the artwork comprises the majority of the paint job are often punctuated with illustrations representing various displays of masculine power and feminine sexual submission are a mainstay of lowriding.

The question is then raised, toward whom are these sexualized displays directed? As lowriding, like all American forms of automobile enthusiasm, is consumed, produced, and evaluated by a predominantly masculine circle, it makes sense then that public displays of lowriding are aimed at seeking the approval and gratification of other men. Often using porn stars, singers, actresses, fashion models, and even romantic

partners for inspiration, women in various states of disrobe adorn lowrider vehicles from the top of the roof to the undercarriage. The car itself becomes the stand-in for women's real bodies while still mediating the sexualized relationship between men and deferring the stigma of homosexuality.

Conclusion

Many lowrider car clubs proudly claim that women (often coded as "family-based") are included fully into lowriding. However, it is clear that for women to participate as fully visible as men, they must be positioned as sexualized objects displayed for the pleasure of men. A queer perspective frames this phenomenon in a manner that highlights the complexity of homosocial desire in the performance of heteromascularity. Men clearly seek the pleasure and approval of other men, yet the mandates of homophobia restrict the avenues that men can navigate in searching relationships that would result in this goal. Women's bodies, whether real or symbolic, redirect this sexual power in a way that heteronormativity is maintained while still allowing men to relate with each other through deployments of sexuality. In the case of lowriding, women positioned as models sprawled out across the hood of a car or airbrushed as a mural permit this relationship. This nexus of homosocial desire, automotive craftsmanship, and sexual aesthetics construct a complex web rich with significance within the sport of Lowriding.

Chapter 3- Looking at Ourselves: Lowriding and Visual Sovereignty

“Hey man. In your book, don’t put any of that ‘Livin the Low Life’ shit! It’s a bunch of bullshit. That ain’t what this is about.”- Jose

“Oh yeah, bro. I love that gangster shit. These people all think we’re hard and they’re afraid of us.” –Mikie

Lowriding as represented in popular media often relies upon the interplay of imagination and reality for its construction. The lowrider, usually (though not always) a Chicano male, gets portrayed in movies and television as any character ranging from the protective, yet good-hearted father with a turbulent past, to the corrupt, undercover police detective, to the cholo/gang member out selling drugs, committing acts of violence or in some way up to no good.

Lookin’ Tough

In the summer of 1997, when I joined Empire Car Club, I faced a lot of resistance on the part of my family and close friends. My mom was worried about the “type of people” with whom I might be affiliating myself. At that time I was doing well in high school, did not go out to party much, and spent a lot of time doing things with the family. Where do these people come from? What do they do? How can they afford these cars? But *you’re* not a cholo so why would you join? These were all questions that I was confronted with as I started attending bi-monthly club meetings at a local burger joint, lowered my truck, and donned a new t-shirt with an image of the club’s *placa* (plaque) screened onto the back.

In 1998, the first time a picture of me and the other members of my club appeared in *Lowrider Magazine*, I recall feeling so proud that I made a point to show that issue to as many people as would give me their attention. The picture was of myself, my brother, and seven other Chicanos standing in front of our club president's candy flake, pagan gold Mazda pickup. It was during the summer so we were all wearing baggy shorts to accompany our grey club t-shirts. The first person to whom I had showed the picture was a close cousin, whose immediate response was "My gosh, Mikie! You and your friends look so mean! You're such a sweetheart, but here you look so scary!" At that moment, the feeling of surprise with her reaction was mixed with a certain satisfaction that, for once in my life, I looked intimidating. The reaction that I was originally fishing for was one of admiration for being part of the "in-crowd" and being recognized for it in a published picture.

Even at that time, I distinctly remember being torn between the appeal of the power to intimidate, and the frustration with the reference to a tired stereotype of the lowriding thug. On the one hand, no part of my youth was especially memorable for being an intimidating character to anyone around me- I usually found myself somewhere between the "nice guy" and the one who awkwardly never really fit into any social circles in school. There was a certain appeal to being complicit in the "tough guy" trope. On the other hand, I questioned the imagined link between lowriding and conceptions of criminality and violence. Why do lowriders *necessarily* have to be

“scary?” Is it just because of the way we look? Can our presumed toughness be boiled down to the style in which we build our cars? Our brownness?

Robin Kelley (2008) describes his own experience as a “nice negro” negotiating the social spaces between being perceived as the intimidating Black man ready to thieve and act tough, and the Black man that made others feel comfortable and safe when invited to a holiday party. He explains that although “the power to scare is not real power” (371), there is a sense of delight knowing that his Blackness can be occasionally used as a weapon especially when the ability to do so is rare.

The fantasy of the bold, fierce, menacing lowrider is clearly imbued with racialized, classed, and gendered discourses. While it may at times be fun to acquiesce to these imagined simplifications, they are, after all, based on the same logics that the police use when making a decision on whether or not to harass us.

During my final two years as a college undergraduate, I worked part-time at a car stereo shop in Riverside. Although there were probably more than two dozen stereo shops in the city at that time, the shop where I worked had a reputation for two things. First, it was considered one of the “boutiques” of customization shops in southern California. We were known for our “high-end” clientele of mostly white-collar professionals, business owners, and public figures with money to burn and who knew of the quality of work and professionalism of the installation technicians that surpassed any other shop. Secondly, despite the reputation of our work and of us workers, the owner was known for being a real ass hole. He was a White man in his mid-40s with

thinning, gel-spiked hair and whose work attire consisted of a different loud, Hawaiian, short-sleeved shirt every day. On my first day of work, as he took me around the store for an orientation, he made sure to point out what he called the “afro-sensors” and “monkey bars,” referring to the security motion sensors and retractable gates that covered the windows after closing. As we moved through the shop, he continued to explain to me that one of the things that set this business apart from others was that “one, we are American owned, and two, we actually speak English,” clearly referring to the majority of Arab-owned shops that were his competition. I was overwhelmingly shocked at his candid anti-Black and anti-Arab racism and wondered why he felt so comfortable being so explicit with his opinions to me despite myself being a person of color. Deep down I knew the answer- I seemed safe and non-threatening.

One of our regular customers was an officer with the Riverside Police Department. One time he brought in his son’s Chevy pick-up for a fully custom installation including alarm security, DVD player, and audio. It was the final stage of work on the truck as it already had a custom, adjustable suspension, wheels, and paint job. Upon delivery of the vehicle to the officer, I suggested that he and his son should consider joining the club to which I belonged. His immediate response was a distrustful smirk and snort as he told me how he’d never allow his son to “get involved with those people, no offense.” He explained, “You seem ok, but I know how much drugs and crime are involved.” I knew there was no point in making any attempt to change his mind since I figured that not much good could come from arguing with a cop, and even

if I did, his initial prejudice would undoubtedly make for an unpleasant time for the rest of us.

Visual Sovereignty

Lowriders find ourselves in the complex and somewhat paradoxical position of having our identities defined through an interplay of fantasy and experience- two phenomena that are dialectically related and yet produce tension and contradiction. In her discussion of western film depictions of Native Americans, Raheja (2007) employs the concept of “visual sovereignty” to highlight the potential for a level of resistance within the acquiescence to stereotype. Visual sovereignty is “to confront the spectator with the often absurd assumptions that circulate around visual representations of Native Americans, while also flagging their involvement and, to some degree, complicity in these often disempowering structures of cinematic dominance and stereotype” (1160). Raheja describes a scene in *Nanook of the North* (1922) in which the Inuit lead actor appears to be perplexed at the technological, Western sophistication of the white trader’s gramophone and thus appears childlike in his amusement and curiosity as he smiles in awe. This smile, this playful gesture which seemingly conforms to a Western gaze on a primitive people, however can be read in an entirely different way. Instead, as Raheja suggests, this is a misrepresentation that instead can be read as a powerful display of agency and resistance by reversing the gaze back onto the audience in a deconstructive way. The actor, Allakariallak, may actually be seen as laughing at the camera.

Visual Representation and “the Gaze”

Foucault (1978, 1980) explores the institutional articulations of vision and the regulatory properties of “the gaze” as it maps imagined, or even preferred, discourses of things and spaces. Reality is thus shaped through discipline and surveillance that includes participation by the members of institutions and groups to which they belong. This interweaving of visual representation and power entrenches the uneven positioning of identity and embodiment privileging some and subjugating others. Imagined realities are filtered, charged, and organized to reinforce the dominant order’s agenda through an inspecting gaze. Feldman (2006) terms this the “actuary gaze” by which he describes “a visual organization and institutionalization of threat perception and prophylaxis, which cross cuts politics, public health, public safety, policing, urban planning and media practice” (206). He further argues that this actuary gaze distances the actor from everyday life structures which leads to a depreciation of everyday experiences. Discursive knowledge of things and experiences becomes the domain of “experts.” This is the foundation of the biopolitics that craft popular understandings of lived experiences including gender, sexuality, race, and culture.

Power is mapped through these visual representations. For this project, I conceptualize power as the ability to shape and manipulate knowledge and visual representations about bodies through discourses of gender, race, and sexuality. Hegemonic power, the power to frame knowledge and discourse of subjects, is commonly coercive and oppressive as it is shaped through inspecting and dominant

gaze. As I discuss, however, power may be appropriated and manipulated from subordinate positionalities to gain myriad rewards.

Lowriding is so deeply enmeshed within hegemonic conceptions of race, gender, and consumption that in the present moment, its existence largely relies on these discourses. We are then left with two options in dealing with the resulting stereotyping. We can spend exorbitant amounts of energy in trying to directly overturn these disempowering images, as is commonly the case with some of the older generations of lowriders, or we can “give-in” to some of these portrayals in a kind of appropriation of power that does very little to erode stereotypes, but gains some rewards in the form of power and respect in a larger context.

Most important in understanding the construction of lowriding as an entity is that as with most forms of automobile exhibition, it is constructed primarily for consumption by an audience. A major goal of mainstream lowriding is to be visible. Our cars are built to cruise the boulevards for onlookers in the streets and on the sidewalks. We enter into competitions to be judged and to win bragging rights over other car builders with similarly customized cars or trucks. Thousands of women, children, and men pay as much as fifty dollars just to pass through the entrance gates of large car shows like the Lowrider Super Show- many of whom are not car builders or customizers themselves, but have an appreciation for the style of lowrider car culture the way a non-artist may love going to a museum to admire the art. The observer need never know the months or years that went into the crafting of the car which is the canvas.

Vigil (1991) calls lowriders “car charros.” The Mexican charro is an exaggerated performance of the traditional *vaquero* or cowboy, or as he puts it, “machismo in motion” (71). I, however, feel that this description does not fully encompass the complexity of the construction of the charro. While there is clearly a particular embodiment of traditional Mexican masculinity, there is a certain queerness to it. The charro is dressed highly ornate and is skilled in the interpretive performance of the traditional cowboy. He is a highly stylized and exaggerated version of reality. The charro is a cowboy in drag. So too is the lowrider. Outsiders, or those unfamiliar with the nuances of the lowrider aesthetic often wonder how a car, often painted in spectacularly bright and glittery pinks, purples, and yellows, with a fully painted and chromed undercarriage with all of its body panels splayed out, some with fenders and hood lifted and tilted forward, doors “gull-winged” like a bird with its wings stretched out in flight, could possibly be driven on the street. They are a far cry from other forms of automobile masculinity found in cars that can boast about a 10-second quarter mile or 500 or more horse power. Years ago a close friend of mine once asked how one particular car would fare at a mall parking lot in tight quarters as it was obvious that the driver would have to raise the door to its full extension to exit. The idea that a car such as that never gets used for the same purposes of a non-customized car was a difficult concept. Especially in the case of the lowrider style of car building, the process of customization is rarely about function as much as it is about the aesthetics. It, in effect, is art.

Therein lies the paradox at the core of the tensions between the fantasy and the experience. Lowriding has always been constructed through a gaze- an inspecting focus from the outside making the lowrider vulnerable to critique, consumption, approval, and criminalization. Lowriding's existence depends on an audience. It is a particular performativity that necessarily requires a social environment to define its culture and character. Car customizers build their cars to be admired by others, whether in public while cruising the street or by a professional judge at a car show. It is the particular assemblage of customization that distinguishes a lowrider from other forms of car cultures like hot rods, import tuners, or mini-trucks. However, what each of these various forms of customization do have in common is a loosely (or rigidly) based racialization. Imports and "tuners" are commonly associated with Asians and Asian Americans as reflected in the racially derogatory term "rice rocket." Historically, hot rodding has been most closely associated with white American men. In fact, lowriding's origins can be directly traced to the social and political exclusion of young Chicanos within the white, hot rod scene. As Sandoval (2003) notes, the proliferation of Chicano families after World War II resulted in a surge in car customization and an enthusiasm in their communities. However, whereas a traditionally white hot rodding scene was marked by speed and horsepower, Chicano lowriding was distinctive for cruising low and slow.

Restrictionist sentiment was still codified as early as 1998 when a seven year ban on lowriders at the annual Route 66 Rendezvous in San Bernardino, California was lifted.

From 1993 to 2001, dozens of clubs from southern California would organize a separate show in San Bernardino on the same weekend as the Rendezvous that was open to custom cars of all types in protest of the explicit lowrider ban.

It should be no surprise that this racial demarcation would then translate into a racial performance on the part of the individuals who build and drive these cars as well. In other words, the discursive construction of the car is inseparably intertwined with the racialization of the driver. As a result, social arrangements of difference are constructed in which actors are prescribed a set of according expectations and actions. As noted by Stone (1990), lowriding can be regarded as a performance of ethnic identity that reinforces a sense of working class and ethnic collectivity. This performativity is thus situated within larger social and political parameters negotiated through the mandates of social structures. Regardless of a car builder's real socioeconomic standing, ethnic identity, or geographic location, lowriding commonly presents itself as a commodifiable image of *barrio* life, rife with all of the racialized characteristics hoisted onto it in a racially divided America.

The Consumption of Lowriding

For some, *barrio* life is made available for consumption and exploitation through media and popular culture. It is then sold to an audience as a monochromatic depiction with a strong emphasis on criminalistic tendencies, violence, and misogyny. Lowriding becomes seen as little more than the corrupt and murderous cop in *Training Day* (2001), the wise-cracking drug dealer in *Friday* (1995), or as the hypermasculine woman hater in

Dr. Dre's *Ain't Nuthin' but a G Thang* video where he proclaims "Ain't no pussy good enough to get burnt while I'm up in it" (1992).

Confronting Stereotypes

Julio, a lowrider for 19 years, when asked about his perspective on the portrayals of other lowriders in the media explained, "I hate it. I hate that we're always the gang bangers and criminals. You know that's just not how it is. We put a lot of hard work into what we do and we're always shown as nothing but thugs. You know how Latinos are, bro- for us it's all about respect, not about trying to start shit." Julio's statements reflect the side of the debate that sees these portrayals as highly inaccurate and not a true description of lowriding in real life. He adds, "There's not a lot of difference sometimes between what we do and what white people do. A lot of our cars are quality-built, but when people see a Mexican guy driving it or [wire wheels], they automatically think 'gangster' about it. We deserve the same respect."

Despite the relationship between lowriding and a "gangster" lifestyle, in popular imagination, in many ways lowriding is actually quite antithetical to criminal behavior. Vigil (1991) contends "Cholo low-riding [sic] is distinct from the flamboyant car/social club style in several ways. Cholos tend to prefer a more sober, casual affair or stock cars (because of money) which may or may not join the larger cruising forays" (76). Joe, a founding member of Duke's Car Club makes a similar distinction. "Man those guys aren't lowriders. You really think we're doing drive-bys in a car with an expensive paint job and wheels? Those guys who do that kinda stuff are riding around in primered up G-

bodies- cars they don't care about getting shot at or having bullet holes in. What about all the good stuff we do like the toys-for-kids drives and all the family stuff? We're all about our families and most of the time we bring our wives or girlfriends and our kids with us [out cruising or to car shows]." He adds that lowriding's origins are found in young Chicanos' attempts at steering away from gang life. "That's how it began. It was all these young guys here on 38th Street [in south Los Angeles] that either wanted to get out of gangs or wanted to stay away from it. We were really respected anywhere we went. We could go into [neighborhoods] that most people couldn't go into and that was because they respected our cars."

This distinction is a contentious one. Whereas Vigil frames "cholo lowriding" and "car club style lowriding" as two subgroups under one umbrella, Joe and Julio position the two as mutually exclusive of one another. One commonality that most folks involved in lowriding share is an understanding that in some form, lowriding is produced through a resistance to dominant and stereotypical ideologies. One of the most sobering acknowledgements of this came from Jason, the current president of the original chapter or Duke's Car Club. "You know, people are gonna think what they want to think. They see us and they respect us, but the cops and some others just see the bad side like those [thugs]. The only thing we can do is just keep doing what we're doing. Maybe one day people will see us for what we are and that's all we can do."

Herein lays lowriding's resistance within what outwardly may be interpreted as an acceptance, or possibly an embracing of negative stereotypes within the dominant

discourse. This “keep doing what we’re doing” tactic is inherently subversive and has become a regular tactic in the face of power.

Some scholars (Chen 1999; Kandiyoti 1988) have examined multiple strategies used by women and men of color to confront and solve problems derived from dominant, cultural notions of gender and race. Kandiyoti (1988) for example, employs a discourse of “bargaining” with the oppressive constraints of patriarchy and ethnocentrism in describing women’s engagement in asymmetrical exchanges. In this case, women may compromise, accommodate, or negotiate with patriarchal regulations of gender relations. Similarly, Chen (1999) finds that Chinese American men adopt a wide range of gender “strategies” when confronting hegemonic stereotypes. He highlights the fact that stereotypical visions of these men are constructed and reproduced in direct contrast to images of hegemonic masculinity. In both of these cases, acquiescence and accommodation to hegemonic regulations may yield benefits and rewards for maintaining the social order. A bargain is struck when men and women trade on, either actively or passively, advantages awarded from their sexual, gender, racial, or class positions in order to achieve a more dominant status in another form. In the case of the Chicano men I present in this project, the rewards gained from hegemonic bargains are produced in the forms of fear and admiration from others, sometimes simultaneously.

No Lowriders on Route 66

From 1992 to 1998, the nationally famous Route 66 Rendezvous, an annual event in San Bernardino, California which celebrates the nostalgia of American motor, held in its bylaws explicit prohibition of lowriders from participation in the car show. Although event officials maintained that the reasoning was due to “logistics” and that “the Rendezvous is a cruising event and lowered cars might scrape the streets,” (Renfro 1997), many lowrider owners felt that this claim was baseless and that the rule smacked of anti-Chicano racism. They said “it’s to protect the vehicles” with a paternalistic arrogance implying that those involved in lowriding were incapable of protecting themselves or their cars if they were allowed to cruise the parade route. Other excuses for the no-lowrider policy included restrictions on vehicles with custom hydraulic suspensions, visible car club affiliation, and wire wheels- all staples of lowrider-style customization. In contrast, vehicles driven by a mostly white patronage were permitted entrance even when they were affixed with hydraulics which were increasingly becoming popular with hot rodders as they allowed the car to sit low while parked yet could be adjusted for cruising, wire wheels that were often a stock option on older vehicles and are now considered vintage, and prominently displayed their club affiliations like “The Old Farts,” and “The Over the Hill Gang.”

In protest, lowrider car clubs organized the annual “Salute to the Route” car show that was scheduled on the same weekend as the other, larger event but that allowed vehicles of all makes and models and their builders from all walks of life. The

Salute, unlike the Rendezvous was far from commercial as it was largely supported by local sponsors and by entry fees and, though primarily organized by lowrider clubs, supported a much more widely diverse audience. When the lowrider ban was finally dropped, the sting of the policy remained as many participants felt that “no lowriders” was a proxy for “no Mexicans.” The show continued for several years afterward out of tradition and grew in popularity. In fact, the Salute became so popular that it began attracting cars and drivers that would have been allowed to enter the Rendezvous.

Conclusion

Lowriding is an interplay of fantasy and reality. It is difficult to say which has a greater effect on shaping the other. From the outside, lowriding exists in popular culture largely as an aspect of gang life with the vehicles serving a dual purpose as aesthetic markers of criminal behavior and the machine with which to carry it out. From within, those involved are faced with the choice of either rejecting these images out of frustration for being pigeonholed into a monolithic stereotype, or choosing to not directly confront this fiction as to do so would only further legitimize this dominant gaze. In this, they may opt to embrace the stereotypes and find pleasure in the form of power that it may bring, or they may elect to not be swayed negative typecasts and keep doing their thing regardless of how outsiders see them. In that there is power. In effect, no matter what other may think, they can continue with their passion for car building and just smile.

Chapter 4- Rasquachismo, Difference, Lowriding, and the Body

If there is anything certain about the origins and the history of lowriding, it is that very little is actually certain. While most lowrider experts agree that the style of car customization was borne of either the streets of Los Angeles or San Jose, its heart exists somewhere between the material and the fantasy constructions of Chicano communities and identity. In other words, the lowrider lifestyle and lowrider car customization exist not only as they manifest in the form of automobile personalization and modification, but also in the collective imagination of popular culture. While most people may be able to identify a lowrider when they see one, it can be difficult to establish what actually defines the tangible construction of it. It is perhaps in this ambiguity that the essence of lowrider car culture exists. While other forms of automobile customization have their signature elements that are mostly required to fit the genre, for instance, big and powerful American engines for hot rodding, or stickers and trunk-mounted wings for imports, the only notable mainstay that can be firmly attached to lowriding is its handcrafted modifications. While today these modifications may be performed through more professional means, they originated through a “making do with whatever you have” tradition; or as it is often called in Chicano communities- *Rasquachismo*.

In this chapter, I argue that the form and function of lowrider car customization parallels the social construction of bodies and identity. I begin by briefly discussing the literature exploring *rasquachismo* and the myriad ways it is defined and understood.

Secondly, I employ Bourdieuan and social constructionist approaches to highlight the parallel relationship between the car and the body.

Rasquachismo

Rasquachismo is a somewhat difficult concept to define. Perhaps it has no concrete or fixed translation into English which may be one reason why scholars describe rather than provide a definition. If anything, this logical ambiguity underscores the nature of the *rasquache*.

Ybarra-Frausto (1987) describes *rasquache* as the everyday practice and production of aesthetics by making do with whatever may be at hand. He explains, “Very generally, *rasquachismo* is an underdog perspective- *los de abajo*. ...it presupposes a world view of the have not, but it is a quality exemplified in objects and places and social comportment...it has evolved as a bicultural sensibility.” In this sense, the *rasquache* exists in between cultural spaces by making use of two or more of these spaces while never fitting evenly into any.

Carrillo (2009) links the concept of *rasquachismo* with the vulgarities, inappropriateness, and tackiness of explicit language and embodiments and its association with being “lower class.” Such is the case for lowriding. The veterans of the sport tell endless tales of its working-class beginnings. They often reminisce about painting their first car under a tree in a front yard rather than in a paint booth, or completely removing the coil springs from their car’s suspension to lower it instead of

replacing them with specially fabricated springs available in any customization shop today.

Alternatively, Esquibel (2005) equates the *rasquache* to kitsch. She explains, “Although often interpreted simply as ‘Mexican kitsch,’ to be *rasquache* means, in a sense, to revel in those aspects of working-class Mexican-American culture that are most devalued by the bourgeois aesthetics of American hegemonic culture. *Rasquachismo* delights in its own excessive hybridity. It is the sombrero embroidered in sequins, it is the lowrider car with air-brushed detailing, it is the purple house, the Chihuahua, and the black velvet painting.” (201)

However, I argue that *rasquache* is not kitsch in form. Neither is Lowriding.

Whereas kitsch is to appropriate forms of traditional or mainstream art projects and then reconstruct their form in an almost mocking version in defiance of the rules of taste established by dominant groups, I argue that *rasquachismo* and the *rasquache* of lowriding is to assert a social and aesthetic space that need not exist as a referent to dominant discourse. While lowriding certainly began dialectically tied to other styles of automobile customization in its form and shape, to label it “kitsch” would assume that a constant goal is to eschew hegemonic practices of customization rather than to maintain its own traditions and standards. In other words, lowriding does not need to exist merely as an ideological referent to more dominant types of automotive enthusiasm but instead, as I mention in the previous chapter, “as its own thing.”

Arguably the artist Mesa-Bains (1999) provides the most relevant framing of *rasquachismo*.

“In *rasquachismo*, the irreverent and spontaneous are employed to make the most from the least. In *rasquachismo*, one has a stance that is both defiant and inventive. Aesthetic expression comes from discards, fragments, even recycled everyday materials such as tires, broken plates, plastic containers, which are recombined with elaborate and bold display in yard shrines (*capillas*) domestic decore (*altares*), and even embellishment of the car. In its broadest sense it is a combination of resistant and resilient attitudes devised to allow the Chicano to survive and persevere with a sense of dignity. The capacity to hold life together with bits of string, old coffee cans, and broken mirrors in a dazzling gesture of aesthetic bravado is at the heart of *rasquachismo*.” (158)

As I noted in the previous chapter, lowriding’s origins are not only geographic but also social and political. As young Chicanos found their participation in more mainstream venues for automotive enthusiasm prohibitive because of the color of their skin and the sheer cost of car modification, they scrambled to find creative ways of customization that did not rely on acceptance of the white-dominated hot rod scene and that fit their mostly working-class budgets. While other forms of customization were frequently concerned with adding horsepower to engines, larger wheels and tires for greater traction, and stripping non-essential body and interior parts to reduce weight, lowriders were living life *bajito y suavecito* (low and slow).

My maternal grandfather, *Papa*, once owned a jet black 1950 Chevrolet DeLuxe. Although he passed away when I was only four years old, my grandmother and other family members like my mom and aunts and uncles would tell stories about Papa and his cars. Even though he was by no means a wealthy man and supported my grandmother and their five children on his concrete-layer wages alone, he proudly purchased a new car straight from the dealership every few years.

He always kept them clean and shiny. Unlike other car lovers who keep a separate car just to chop, lower, shave, race, or cruise down the boulevard on a Sunday night, people from the working class usually had a single car that was simultaneously the family-outing vehicle, the means to get to work, and when not tied up with other obligations, to take out cruising at night. To this day, my uncles tell stories of competing with each other about who was going to get the car on evenings during the weekend and who was going to be left out. My oldest uncle, Chris, was usually the winner to the dismay of his brothers, Alfonso and Bobby.

One night during a recent family gathering at my parents' house, Alfonso started recalling some of his more amusing *travesuras* (mischievous acts) growing up. "Your uncle Chris used to love taking that car out on Friday nights to go cruising. All the Mexican guys would want a lower car so they'd put rocks or sandbags or something else in the trunk to weigh it down. Chris and I found this huge rock one time out in the field and he'd have me help him put it in the back on the nights he'd go out. But my dad would have to go to work early in the morning the next day and sometimes Chris would

forget to take the rock out when he got home the night before so my dad would get mad that he'd have to do it before he could leave. This one time he asked me to help him hide the rock so Chris couldn't put it back in the car." When my mom asked if he ever found it again, he replied, "Yeah, I showed him where it was!"

This amusing anecdote is emblematic of the lowriding's spirit of *rasquachismo*. This "making do with what you have" perspective has largely been the guiding impetus that has driven lowriding into a mainstay of Chicano communities for over 60 years. Although today's top competitors in the world of lowriding can spend upwards of \$100,000 in striving for domination of the field over several years, the spirit of *rasquachismo* largely undergirds the majority of lowrider building, setting it apart in unique ways from other forms of automobile customizing.

The automobile is an empty signifier which customizers can form in various assemblages and styles influenced greatly ethnic performativities, class, and masculinity. In this sense, we can understand car customization through the lens of Bourdieu and a framework of bodily social reproduction.

Physical Capital and Social Reproduction

Indeed, there are a wide range of similarities between bodies and cars. Both are materialized as signifiers of physical social capital marking social location and both are central in the acquisition of status and distinction. According to Bourdieu (1984) physical capital is represented through the social values rendered onto bodies via appearance, shape, and size which are linked to their commodification. The body bears

value in modern society in both its ability to sell labor power and in the reproduction of inequalities. The body is a central element in defining the boundaries of distinction and status. Through forms of style, fashion, verbal communication, and grooming, people's bodies are tailored into social objects reflecting a person's "social location." Bourdieu's work expresses a primary concern for the unfinished nature of the body. He argued that bodies require intensive labor power to maintain their sociality and symbolic value and that the forms of labor change over time according to class-based material circumstances in people's daily lives. Secondly, bodies are constructed through the development of "taste." Taste is a term that refers to an individual's appropriation and adaptation of lifestyle preferences that, similar to social location, are also constrained by material circumstances. This includes the types of food consumed and psychological preferences. Lastly, "habitus" is a major contributing factor to the formation of bodies. Bourdieu describes habitus as a mechanism of reproducing social inequalities that afford individuals psychological and material methods for categorizing differences in social realities in ways that make them more familiar and amenable. This is expressed often in the most mundane and banal of gestures such as "walking or blowing one's nose, ways of eating or talking," (1984: 466).

These three factors comprise "physical capital." Physical capital, like other forms of capital, entails power and the ability to reproduce social inequalities and difference through its development. More specifically, the term refers to the body's exchange value; its ability to negotiate space and convert its participation in society into other

resources and forms of capital. Bourdieu (1986) argues that the value of capital is primarily established by dominant classes which results in lower values assigned to the forms of capital held by other classes. For example, through participation in labor the working class individual earns a level of wages (economic capital) which reproduces that worker's social location. However, if the same worker were to take on an occupation in which her body was a commodity more highly valued by dominant society, like an athlete, she may amass a greater wealth thus possibly altering her social location.

Doing Difference

West and Fenstermaker (1995) outline a complex, ethnomethodological approach to understanding the network of interactional "accomplishments" that construct "difference" along gender, racial, and class lines. In this sense, social inequalities are produced and exploited through ongoing relationships and management of behavior in relation to established normative categories of conduct. In the case of gender (West and Zimmerman 1987), it is not merely a single or number of individual attributes or behaviors alone that produce masculinity and femininity but rather a series of behavioral and interactional accomplishments over time and through repetition relating to the established social order that determines this category. This framework is useful in our understanding of the complex interweaving of social locations by disrupting the common sense idea that identity is something that we "are," and reconfigures the discussion to focus on identity as something that we "do." Therefore

identity construction is an amalgamation of social situations and circumstances that produce social arrangements that justify inequalities and uneven distributions of power.

Chicana/o identity construction is central to the historical foundation and ongoing formations of lowriding. A key theme that is visually produced is the imagery of *Aztlán*, the mythic, ancestral homeland from where modern day Chicanas/os derive. Through intricately designed murals along the bodies of the car in the form of Aztec hieroglyphs and men and women adorned in various Mesoamerican garments. As Pérez-Torres (1997) notes, *Aztlán* represents a cultural locus of unity across “political, social, and economic relationships between people and place” (15). Moreover, it is an empty signifier; a metaphor that has no necessarily fixed meaning and thus open for a wide range of political implications. So too is the case within lowriding. The symbolism of *Aztlán* in the case of lowriding represents unifying significations of Chicano culture. Its depictions punctuate a stylized difference between lowrider car culture and other forms of car customization by representing something that harkens back specifically to Chicano culture.

Ramirez (2002) highlights the politics of style in the reproduction of difference within Pachuca/o culture. She states, “By style, I refer to a signifying practice (in this case, the display of the zoot subculture’s codes via clothing, hair, and makeup). By style politics, I refer to an expression of difference via style. This expression of difference often relies upon and derives from conspicuous consumption” (3). However, she adds that the markers of style, in this case coats, slacks, makeup and hair are not consumed

and assembled in a manner closely resembling that of the traditional fashion. They may, in fact, be used in subversive ways that undermine hegemonic formations.

The Body

Another way that we can understand the importance of social reproduction in lowriding is to link the process of customization and performance of identity and place through the discourse of the body. Indeed, in many ways cars are like human bodies- inscribed with knowledge, modified to alter meaning and aesthetic, and located politically, ethnically, and economically in a given context. Foucault (1977) asserts, "The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated Self (adopting the illusion of substantial unity) and a volume in disintegration" (148). Bodies are discursive. They are shaped by and through discourses- regular and repeatable signs which assign meaning to objects, symbols, relationships, and subjects. In other words, discourses are institutionalized patterns of knowledge and ways of thinking about all things (Foucault 1995). Discourse cannot be escaped, always situated around power, and thus, regulative. In the case of the body, sociopolitical arrangements of gender, race, sexuality, and class are imbued onto bodies ultimately configuring social location.

Santos (2009) emphasizes this through his focus on Chicana tattoo culture. In this case, the tattoo represents an aesthetic symbol of social identity. However, Chicanas who get tattoos find themselves engaged with the complex intersections of racism and patriarchy. Where tattooing may be perceived as a marker of criminality and

delinquency for Chicano men, it is at least more accepted as a male domain. Chicana women find that they are stigmatized not only by dominant standards or race, but face the challenge of negotiating the politics of masculinist gender norms that threaten these women with the labels of “*puta* (whore), *manflora* (lesbian), *jota* (queer), and *machonoo* (masculinist)” (103). Santos explains that tattooed Chicanas are actively reclaiming their own bodies and that the ink comes to represent a self-affirmation against the boundaries of gender, sexuality, race, and class.

The Rasquachismo of Lowriding

Lowriding’s origins, and largely its ongoing culture, epitomize the spirit of rasquachismo. Lowriding, even in its most commercially sponsored form, still rests on this “do-with-what-you-have” method of customization. A hallmark of the lowrider form is the adjustable suspension allowing the car to be posed in various combinations of positions. The car may be “raked up” in the front (the front end is raised with the rear end lowered), “stink bugged” (the rear end is raised and the front is lowered), “pancaked” (completely lowered), or “3-wheeled” (one of the rear corners lowered with the opposite corner wheel lifted off the ground). This may be done using a number of mechanisms including replacing the coil springs with air bags that are filled with compressed air from tanks mounted underneath the vehicle at the push of a button. The most traditional method, however, is by using a system of high-torque motors which force fluid into expandable cylinders affixed to each wheel causing the car to raise and lower on command. Most commonly known simply as “hydraulics,” other than

being modernized by adding cosmetic enhancements like polished chrome and engraving, the system remains relatively unchanged since its inception.

In the late 1950's a young customizer by the name of Ron Aguirre using supplies at hand and a great deal of ingenuity conceived an idea to avoid penalties levied through Vehicle Code 24008 which prohibited a vehicle lowered beyond the lowermost part of the wheel rim from being operated on roads and highways. The law was seen by many as unfairly targeting the activities of lowriders and gave police officers legal permission to harass and single out most specifically young Chicanos out cruising.

Aguirre's innovation came from a simple need; the ability to drive his car legally while showing it while parked at the low stance that was so popular. Using what was available in his garage, he and his father devised a system using old hydraulic pumps and valves salvaged from a World War 2 B52 bomber. With some welding and metal craftsmanship, Aguirre's Chevy Corvette was able to slowly lift and lower with the simple push of a switch.

With the exception of some cosmetic changes like chroming, polishing, and painting the equipment and adding a series of car batteries to make the system faster and more powerful, the basic system configuration has remained basically the same for the last six decades. As WWII aircraft parts became more scarce, lowrider builders quickly discovered that delivery trucks with lift-gate ramps were equipped with all the necessary gear to accomplish the same goal as the B52 parts. These parts became so popular and in demand that delivery truck owners had to begin welding and chaining

the parts down to prevent them from being stolen by car builders. Today, the market has caught up to meet this demand and hydraulic lift equipment is commercially available, but even still, the pumps are often called “gates” in reference to their lift-gate origins. In fact, restored, vintage 1940s aircraft parts still remain some of the most revered gear in lowriding.

Mario DeAlba Sr. is one of lowriding’s most well respected and talented customizers. Although today he owns one of the most sought after customizing shops, Mario’s Auto Works in Montclair, California, his beginnings were much more humble. Born and raised in Tijuana, Mario grew up with less than working class means. When I asked him how he began customizing, he explained,

“the first thing I customized was a bike. We didn’t have money to buy one so I put one together from parts from a lot of different bikes. Man, it turned out to be a real nice bike even though it was from a bunch of different bikes. I even painted it myself with a flea pump. Do you know what that is? A flea pump? Yeah it’s one of those canisters that looks like a tube that you used to use to spray bugs.”

I immediately remembered cartoons from my youth where one of the characters would try to sabotage his or her enemy by using a crude-looking device made from two metal cylinders and a pump handle that would atomize some form of poison into a green cloud of smoke. Mario laughed as he continued,

“yeah it turned out to be a really nice bike! It was so nice that one of the kids I grew up with, who’s dad was a principle at a school- so they had money- asked to buy it from me, but I didn’t want to sell it because it was so nice. But his parents didn’t approve of him having that car because he wasn’t old enough to drive. He kept asking and asking but I didn’t want to get rid of it. Eventually, he traded me a car for it and a little transistor radio that I bought by saving my nickels and pennies. It was a ’39 Pontiac. And I even painted that car myself; this time with a brush and red house paint!”

A far cry from these humble beginnings, in 2011 Mario Sr.’s 1936 Chevrolet Master Deluxe named *El Padrote* (roughly “Big Daddy”) was crowned by “Bomb of the Year” by Lowrider Magazine. The title which is awarded to the top competing pre-1960s American car also was held by Mario Sr. from 1993 to 1995 with his 1951 Chevy Fleetline called *Poco Loco* (“A Little Crazy”).

Clearly, the defining characteristics of lowriding are contested (Chappell 2002; Høyem 2007; Stone 1990; Vigil 1991). When I asked co-owner of Mario’s Auto Works, Mario DeAlba Jr., his take on what it is that makes a car a lowrider, his response was “It’s gotta have wire wheels. And it’s also the paint job. A lowrider paint job is different from other kinds of cars.” Although lowriding may embrace a specific style of wheels and paint that other genres of customization do not, there are broad gray areas where multiple styles overlap. My own experiences during car show competitions as well as past major events suggest to me that lowriding is just as much about the color of the

driver as it is about the way the car is assembled. Antique American cars restored to their original condition are still likely to be labeled a lowrider depending on who is driving it and in what neighborhood. Jason Ruelas, the president of Duke's Car Club's mother chapter drives an all original 1938 Buick that was originally restored by his father in 1976. Jason, a rather large man standing around 5 feet 8 inches, usually dressed in baggy shorts and a tank top exposing both arms covered in tattoo ink, shaved head, with a mustache and goatee, is likely to evoke a thug or gangster discourse when driving his car rather than leading bystanders to appreciate the quality of craftsmanship at first glance if it was driven by a man who appeared to be middle-class and white.

Conclusion

Lowrider cars are constructed through social and political discourse much in the same way that are bodies. The rules of race, sexuality, gender, and class are enforced juridically and through the lens of popular culture. Both bodies and cars become inevitable sites of social contradiction and struggle as they reflect markers of social status and place.

Most of our vehicles could compete within other categories of customization. Even the most famous lowrider cars are admired and well respected across all different styles of car building, but will nevertheless continue to be called a lowrider. Whether it is the specific assemblage of paint, wheels, or suspension, the discursive construction of

the category in which a car is placed is inseparably linked to gender and racialization of the person behind the wheel.

Chapter 5- Conclusion

The lowrider style of automobile customization has made its way into the mainstream, reaching a wide audience through its visibility in media and in the streets. I argue that it has had an important cultural impact in that it has influenced a broad range of outlets from music videos to fashion. Using this context, this project sought to explore identity and social behavior through three distinct yet intertwined lenses: homosociality, visual sovereignty, and rasquachismo. Using these frameworks, I sought to answer two general questions. First, how do men, in this case Chicano men, relate to and bond with each other through the deployment of heterosexuality? Secondly, how is identity construction an interplay of performance and structural hegemony?

This project is the tip of the proverbial iceberg derived from a decade and a half of dedication to lowriding. The overall goal was to map different types of behavior and interaction while making use of a popular and interesting context that I have unique access to as a researcher. Being an insider allowed me to accomplish two important objectives. First, I am able to resist the temptation to approach the people involved as some sort of exotic other necessitating foreign inspection that an outsider might be guilty of doing. Since I am already an insider, and a relatively well known customizer, the men involved are able and more willing to interact with me in a more familiar way. The sensitivity in dealing with a newcomer was present at no time which I feel allowed for more relaxed and open exchanges between my participants and me. I was seen as “just one of the guys.” Secondly, as I was an insider, I was better able to explore other

avenues rather than merely tracing the history of lowriding. Lowriding's history has been chronicled a number of times and any new attempt on my part would likely repeat what has already been done. As a sociologist, I am much more interested in unpacking the meanings of interaction that were more complex and nuanced.

Meeting each of these objectives was important to me not only because it seemed like a more interesting project, but I also had somewhat of a political agenda behind it. In many ways, I really hoped to highlight how normal and common those involved in lowriding's multiple facets really are. In this sense my work in this area treats lowriding as an apparatus for deconstructing social behavior rather than as a focus of examination. I'm highly critical of some of the issues that arose over the course of this project including expressions of racism, misogyny, and homophobia. However, while there are undoubtedly some details that are specific to lowriding, I refuse to treat any of these issues as problems that arise from or are somehow worse in this venue. It might be tempting to conclude that lowriding spaces encourage exhibitions of sexism and degradation of women's bodies, but labeling it "a lowrider thing" risks rendering invisible sexism in other settings by different men and is also somewhat racist as it entangles sexism within a highly racialized context. Sexism should be addressed as a larger structural problem that is embedded across multiple social settings.

I begin this discussion by deploying the frame of the erotic triangle. It became clear how important homosocial bonding is to the achievement of standards of masculinity. My intent for this part of the project was to use a queer theory perspective

to deconstruct masculinity and heteronormativity. Interestingly, this presented a methodological challenge as the vernacular of this type of deconstruction does not resonate with my participants. I feared that using words like homosocial, queer, heteronormative, and erotic put my study at risk if it made uncomfortable the men who I interviewed. Moreover, I did not want to find myself in a situation where I may have to defend homophobia and sexism in order to prove that my study is not trying to inaccurately frame lowriding in a way that they may feel is undesirable. Many years ago as a budding sociologist, I posed a question on a popular lowrider website forum that yielded unanticipated responses. I had asked members of the online community to discuss the inherent sexism in the airbrushed naked women's bodies popular on lowrider cars. What resulted was an onslaught of heated responses disagreeing with my characterization of this artwork. Of the dozens of responses, every one explained that painting naked women is not sexism, and in fact is an expression of adoration and respect for women. Although I do not want to dismiss this as important data, it taught me an important lesson about research and how to more efficiently make use of my insider perspective.

Chapter three was concerned with stereotyping of lowrider culture in media and strategies employed to confront them. My respondents expressed three widely different strategies, each imbued with an explicit political agenda. As the reader might expect, many men rejected and tried to distance themselves from the negative generalizations of themselves in movies and on television. They are keenly aware that

these single-focus visualizations have a larger cultural impact and influence, for instance, the way that police hyper criminalize Chicano men and anyone else associated with lowriding. In contrast, a common strategy that emerged was to actually embrace the stereotype even when it is not accepted as a reality. Several men found a sense of empowerment by doing so. Though each of the men who used this strategy acknowledged the falseness of the stereotype of the lowrider gangbanger, they recognized that trying to convince outsiders otherwise is futile and in many ways disempowering as they would have to essentially plead their case to an audience that has little investment in abandoning these typecasts. A third strategy that emerged was possibly the most interesting. Several respondents expressed little concern for engaging with negative stereotypes at either end of this spectrum. Indeed, in both rejecting as well as embracing the negative imagery employed in the media, there is still a level of deference that is required. Trying to convince an audience that the images that are so familiar are actually false is exhausting in both time and energy. As well, acquiescing to these portrayals for whatever the reason does nothing to alleviate the consequences like police harassment. By choosing not to play into either side, these men gained a sense of autonomy. They all recognized the persistence of stereotypes but implied that dealing with them in any way was a waste of energy.

Finally, I chose to unify the frames of Bourdieuan physical capital with the Chicano sensibility of *rasquachismo* in deconstructing the performance of lowrider identity. Here I highlight the interwoven nature of the structures of class, masculinity,

and race. Although I try to make the case that many other features of social behavior and interaction in lowriding are not unique and are found across multiple venues, this is the one case that I hold as a component specific to lowrider culture. In no other form of automobile customization is the spirit of rasquachismo as central to identity construction as it is found in lowriding. Rasquachismo entails a form and aesthetic that can only be found deriving from a position of the oppressed. The lowrider was born out of California's working class barrios what had fewer resources than middle class white communities. Car customization was a luxury that many Chicanos simply could not afford. With a touch of ingenuity and creativity, young Chicanos nevertheless found ways to modify their vehicles and in the process crafted a new style. This "making do with what you have" character came to be recognized as a racialized expression of the communities from which it arose. Remarkably, this character persists across class backgrounds today. Even when builders have invested tens of thousands of dollars into their cars one of the features that marks it as distinctly rasquache is its hand-crafted modification. When I asked my participants to specify some of the characteristics that allow a vehicle to be categorized as a lowrider, they commonly had a response no more specific than "well, you know one when you see it." This is the true embodiment of rasquachismo. There is little if anything that is common to the rasquache form. In fact, the word itself has no clear or agreed upon English translation- you just know it when you see it.

Future Research

The future of this research offers many rich possibilities to explore. I feel that the most important of these is a sociological exploration that maps the experiences of women in all arenas of lowriding. Countless times over the course of this project, I was asked if I was going to talk about women car builders and women's car clubs. Originally, my intention was to devote a substantial part of this project which centered the narrative experiences of women. However, I quickly came to realize this aspiration was far too ambitious. The complexity of women's participation, I feel, far exceeds that of their male counterparts mainly due to the fact that women's participation is not only visible and overt similar to men, but there is a hidden and invisible involvement that needs to be unpacked. We know what men do. We only need to turn watch a music video or attend a car show to see the level of engagement and physical effort that goes into crafting a lowrider and all the hard work that goes into competitions. Women do all of these things as well, but women also play a role in lowriding that men do not- a role that for now I call *the old lady*. The old ladies are the partners, wives, and girlfriends of car builders and who serve in many of the service positions in lowriding. It is not an uncommon sight to see women stationed at car show ticket booths collecting money, or walking around in the heat of a long summer day at a car show selling raffle tickets.

2013 will see the launch of "Unique Ladies," a documentary that claims to "flip the script" on the male-dominated narratives of lowriding by recentering the focus

through the eyes of one all-women lowrider car club in San Diego, California. According to the documentary's producer, a main goal of this project is to show women as "true players in the competitive lowrider scene." Although the film has not yet debuted for a public audience, the trailers give an extended preview into some important differences when women occupy the spaces normally open only to men.

While most certainly an important contribution to the study of lowrider culture, I am left wondering how much, if any attention will be paid to the complex ways that gender structures lowriding in its entirety. Most analyses of lowriding frame only its competitive facets. Without a doubt, mapping the distinctions between arenas in which men are encouraged and supported as visible competitors and those less common instances where women compete undoubtedly necessitates a more complex analysis than one that simply superimposes women in men's roles. I highly suspect that even when women enter the spaces in lowriding that are expectedly occupied by men, especially via car ownership and competition, their experiences are far more distinct. I would assume that women are likely to face varying levels of stigma not only from these visible spaces but from many of the "unseen" areas of lowriding. For example, in my years competing, I have never had to pay full price for any customization service, from upholstery work to hydraulic installation, nor have I ever charged another lowrider car builder the price that someone might pay in a shop for custom stereo work done out of my garage. I call this "the homie hook-up." This is a transaction that takes place between two parties that tends to be on a more informal and familiar basis, and may

involve exchange in the form of trade and bartering- my homie has some wheels and tires that I want for my vehicle, and he needs a stereo installation done on his. The homie hookup requires social capital that is likely denied to many women and I surmise impacts the longevity of women's participation.

Lowriding's popularity and visibility is undeniable. However, what the public audience can readily observe is only surface deep. Despite my long history in lowriding, taking on this project was no easy task. Learning to balance my insider status with a sociological perspective that did not automatically presume all the answers to the questions I address was a challenge, but a welcome one.

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