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The Rhetoric of Lowriding: A Misunderstood Cultural Movement in the Public Realm

A Master's Thesis by Francisco Adrian Ortega for the Department of Literature & Writing Studies

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Preface

I'd like to begin by stating that this thesis is my effort as a scholar to positively contribute to the lowrider community, one which is widely misunderstood. In lowrider culture, it is important for unfamiliar audiences to understand the concept of lowriders as vehicles *and individuals* who embody the cultural values. The limits of this thesis allow for exploration of the lowrider in its very specific ethnic context from which it originated, and the arguments I build within rely on a carefully grounded essentialist approach. I have attempted to offer a nuanced perspective based not only on research, but personal experience, which may not be shared or recognized by all lowriders. It is thus I offer this special message to my audiences, in particular to those who are involved with the culture: some of the ideas expressed throughout this thesis may contradict testimonies of other lowrider individuals, and I am well aware. I have utilized sources as necessary to build my argument, and mean no disrespect towards *any* individual. Once reading the following section, it is my hope that I come clear to my audience as a supporter of creating unity and community, much like any lowrider with similar values should be. I am on the side of the lowrider, and encourage further scholarly (and informal) discussion of this rich culture. We all deserve our own voice to tell our narratives—the key is to do so in a respectable manner, so as to be heard. There is a widely shared belief that individuals such as myself—who have, or are beginning a desk-based career—are oblivious to real world phenomenon such as the cultural activities of the common people. Such isn't the case in this thesis; if I weren't personally involved with this rich culture from a young age, it would not be of my greatest interests to address the stereotypical rhetoric of lowriding. My intention of writing this thesis is to take advantage of the fortunate circumstances I've been blessed with—to afford an education and be able to write for the academic university—and simultaneously give a service back to my culture, all from a very particular experience. Thus, I thank *all* of my audiences in advance, for hearing me out, for I believe in any scenario—and between any people—listening is the first step to creating a sense of understanding and peace among us. This thesis is dedicated to the lowriders who continue to make history out on the calles. *¡Orale!*

Table of Contents

Table of Figures

Chapter 1:

The Complications of "Mexican" and "American" Identity:

The Lowrider as an Artistic Symbol of Solidarity

What is "American," one may ask. Labeling something "American" proves to be ethnically and culturally broad in the twenty-first century. Still prevalent in contemporary times is that the term "American" carries a connotation of non-inclusiveness. Although the United States is inhabited by immigrants of various nationalities, it seems those of "Anglo," "Caucasian," or European descent are the most acceptable types. As a member of an ethnic minority group, I've come to recognize dominant rhetoric in American culture as that which reflects the political and ideological values of Anglo-Americans, which still rejects cultures of difference.

With this thought in mind, I write this cultural studies-based thesis in the context of, and with the experience of living a borderland lifestyle. I, myself, am a first generation Mexican-American, and I pick and choose what I learn from having experienced two different lifestyles and cultures on each side of the Mexico-United States border. My research has been executed with intentions of exploring interdisciplinary phenomena which interest me: rhetoric and the manifestations of hegemonic stereotypical discourse, all within a very rich, yet misunderstood borderland subculture which is known today as *lowriding*. Lowrider car and social culture is an originally Mexican style of building cars and living, which evolved into a culture which welcomes Mexican descendants who choose to embrace and celebrate positive aspects of the Mexican barrio lifestyle and identity. Lowriding isn't a criminal activity, as public dominant rhetoric often asserts. It may surprise the forces of dominant culture to find out that it is quite the opposite, and that lowriding builds and invites community. Lowrider culture reflects Mexican,

Mexican-American, and Chicano history—in the United States' particular context, it reflects the history of systematic oppression toward Mexican descendants, and the history of Mexican descendants *overcoming the struggle* against dominant forces through tradition, unity, solidarity, and organization. The idea of lowriding, therefore, is to form a Mexican-based culture for Mexican descendants from various neighborhoods throughout the borderlands, and undermine stereotypes. Lowriding is therefore much more than a car culture. As Jesse Costancio of Barrio Logan Heights' Chicano Park Steering Committee says, "Lowrider is a [Mexican's] way of saying, 'you know what, *sabes que,* this is me, *y que,* and what?" (qtd in Pulido, 2014, 3:53).

The Lowrider & The Lifestyle:

In its simplest sense as known in the public realm, a lowrider is an old lowered car which might even bounce, and is driven by someone who has brown skin. I argue, however, that the lowrider is much more than that: it extends a car; it extends a person; it extends a crowd of vicious gang-banging hoodlum Mexicans. Lowriding is a cultural movement. Why do I find this topic rich and worth scholarly attention, one may ask? The answer is simple for me, but perhaps complex for others to understand: I am a Mexican-American who self identifies as *Chicano*, which to me means that I take pride in my Mexican roots—even more so than my "American" identity. Part of my upbringing has been my participation in this rich, unique culture known as lowriding. Simultaneously, I've come to assimilate to certain American ideas, practices, and institutions—most importantly, I've come to recognize how rhetoric and discourse can be used to manipulate minds and ultimately affect real people. The dominant American culture and the media, its main perpetuating source, have sent distorted rhetorical messages regarding the cultural practice of lowriding as gang affiliated—but such claims are inaccurate. This rhetorical

message, and others with similar implications, follow patterns of rhetoric against Mexican descendants, which will be discussed in Chapter 2.

Essential for my audience's knowledge is that lowriding doesn't just involve the driving of a particular style of car, but rather it involves a particular lifestyle. This particular lifestyle has its roots in the borderland cities—and although there is debate as to where it began, Francisco "Pancho" Gonzalez documents the historical Dukes Car Club as having started in the year 1956, in the border city of Tijuana, Baja California (qtd. in Pulido, 2014, 26:25). Aside from personal knowledge and experience, this date precedes all documented lowrider car clubs, and thus this research gives credit to Mexico as being the founding land of the lowrider. Hence, I refer to lowrider cars, individuals, and the overall culture to be Mexican-style, or Mexican-influenced.

As someone who grew up in Southern California and Tijuana, I can say that lowriding culture is something positive which helps build identity, although the rhetoric of dominant American culture tends to focus solely on negative things associated with lowriding culture, which results in consequences for the lowrider. In *Locating Visual-Material Rhetorics*, Amy Propen argues, "our perceptions of visual and material artifacts and the interpretations that such artifacts help foster can have varied consequences not only on our understandings of history but also on our individual, lived experiences and for broader societal issues such as legislation and policy-making" (Propen xv). This proves true when the discourse regarding lowriding results in traffic laws designed to target them, stereotyping, and ultimately, suspicion of the *lowrider individuals* driving the lowriders.

My goal, then, is to compare negative rhetoric about lowriding to what lowriding actually *is*—which is a very complex tradition of building community through various art forms and

solidarity, historically amongst underprivileged individuals of Mexican descent. The culture begins with expression through one's customized vehicle, although lowriding's legacy has instilled its spirit into individuals who (no longer) own cars, and keep the lowrider culture alive through the forms to be discussed. As a historically Mexican-created tradition, lowriding's forms appropriately reflect aspects of Mexican culture, and in some cases, the hybrid experience for Chicanos in the borderlands. My intention of discussing Americanness, therefore, is to exemplify how dominant American culture has rejected Mexican descendants and their lowrider culture, yet, lowrider culture finds its way to write back through its politics of difference. In Bakhtinian terms, it can be seen as a *grotesque* (Bakhtin 29) art form which, to its artists, are beautiful for that very reason. Thus, I assert that lowriding isn't American nor does it intend to be; its origins are Mexican, and it comes from the Mexican people. In America's specific context, lowriding has become a hybrid cultural practice to celebrate one's Mexican identity and connection to the grassland roots.

The Ambiguity of "American" Ideology and Recognizing the Dominant vs. Subordinate:

In his theoretical text, *Beyond Ethnicity*, Werner Sollors explores the ambiguity of ethnicity in the United States in terms of consent and descent, which, as he argues, are "self-made and ancestral," respectively (Sollors 6). He asks very applicable questions to what is investigated here: "How can consent (and consensus) be achieved in a country whose citizens are of such heterogeneous descent? And how can descent be articulated without falling back on myths of descent?" (Sollors 6). Consent, he therefore argues, is a social construct which allows (or not) something to be considered American by the dominant in-group inhabiting the United States. Constructs of consent even override arguments of "pure" descent, mainly because, in his own words, "Those that seem most ancient, meaningful, and indigenous may be of relatively

recent fabrication and may have been adopted simply for reasons of contrast" (Sollors 238). Sollors argues that the defining of an "American" form, for example, "can be accomplished by a defying of something that is perceived as its antithesis, as un-American" (Sollors 238). It is following this train of thought that I situate lowrider and hot rod car culture in a dichotomous "Mexican" versus "American" relationship. In order to understand the significance of, and need for scholarly research on lowriding, one must understand its history and spatial identification politics involved, which require this inevitable essentialist approach.

The dominant in-group this research regards begins with, but isn't limited to, white hegemonic idealist Anglo-Americans who subordinate minority groups based on their race, such as they have in Mexican(-American) history. I understand that not all white Anglos participate in this discriminatory action, and not all perpetuators of dominant hegemony are white Anglo-Americans. Particular historical events such as the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943 have explicitly—and undeniably—shown white dominant Anglo-Americans systematically targeting Mexican(-Americans), however. With this said, I proceed carefully to refer to certain events in time as action on behalf of the general forces of the dominant in-group, or dominant Anglo-Americans particularly. While this argument is based on the stand point that hegemony in this context was created by white supremacy, I am aware that not all whites are white supremacists—and not all perpetuators of white supremacist values are white. The legacy of white supremacy and its ideological hegemony, however, created the very dominant influential culture which is reflected in American rhetorical media and discourse in the United States.

It is my observation that perpetuators of dominant American culture create their own set of values, ideals, and cultural practices according to ideology. The ideological, which Louis Althusser defines as "a representation of the Imaginary relationship of individuals to their real

conditions of existence" (Althusser 1350), provides members of the dominant in-group with an ethnocentric agenda. Using both Althusser's and Sollors' terms, hegemonic ideology in American dominant culture provides members of the in-group an imaginary 'self-made' (Sollors 6) consensual sense of Americanness and superior self. This dominant culture has become an idealist culture, and leaves minimal to no room for other values; in fact, this dominant culture is one of exclusion, and it subordinates cultures of ethnic and national difference. History shows that this ideological hegemony created by Anglo-Americans is *unwilling* to understand cultures of difference and thus systematically oppresses them, out of a fear that their own dominant ideology and perpetuators will become subordinated in society. In terms of Sollers' concepts of "American," "un-American," and "antithesis," Lowrider culture, is the antithetical *tradition* to dominant Anglo-American style Hot Rodding. Lowriding is a culture which, as a result of dominant American cultural *ideology,* has negative rhetoric written and spoken of it. As a result, people grow suspicious rather than truly educated about the culture.

When it comes to asserting one's dominance—and defining the subordinate—some individuals use generational seniority of inhabitance in the United States as a justification. Though this phenomenon may begin with discriminatory hegemonic idealist Anglo-Americans, the dominant in-group can include anyone who shares and perpetuates these ideological values. Despite opposing arguments, it is my view that hegemony and ethnocentrism cannot be justified, even based on ideological seniority and superiority, which prove to be paradoxical. Caroline Ware, for example, approaches the interpretation of America in such a way which supports my argument. In *The Cultural Approach to History* (1940), she asserts, "Immigrants and the children of immigrants are the American people. Their culture is American culture, not merely a contributor to American culture" (Ware 87). If this isn't enough, many American borderland

cities in which lowriding has rich history are (not at all ironically) named "San Diego," "Los Angeles," and "El Paso," and, I add—were inhabited by Mexicans before the arrival of Anglo settlers. Yet nationality and generation of living in the United States somehow complicates formation of identity. Sollors undermines the concept of reinstating one's American identity based on generation:

> The metaphoric interpretation of all Americans as members of numbered generations subjugates powerful and potentially divisive myths of descent to the democratic rhetoric of consent. Generational language has served founding fathers and revolutionaries as a community-building device, whereas it helps contemporary Americans wrap a cloak of ancestral and communal legitimacy around their individuality. At the same time it perpetuates one cultural moment, freezes the historical process into ahistorical conceptions and into metaphors of timeless identity as sameness. It is when Americans speak of generations, numbered or unnumbered, that they easily leave history and enter 'the myth of America'. Apparently talking about lineage, they are actually inventing not only a sense of communal descendants—the coming generation so much worried about—but also a metaphoric ancestry in order to authenticate their own identity. Even supposedly pure descent definitions are far from natural, being largely based on a consent construction. (Sollors 234)

In light of Sollors' argument, discussion of generation should not be considered a valid argument for one's superiority and ethnocentric attitude and actions. There are certainly other ways of distinguishing and *negotiating* one's identity and culture. Different ways of expression are often even (subliminally) intentional to identify one's self as part of the dominant in-group or not. Some of these methods of expression include the clothing one wears, the dialect one speaks, the music one listens to, the car one drives; the list goes on. The evolution of these habits and choices have caused a sense of cultural shock as new, popular hybrid cultures have become more normalized in the United States. With this phenomenon, it is also difficult to define a strictly "American" culture: what may have once been this idealist American culture is shifting as a result of resistance by minority groups.

Because of influences of other cultures, the once idealist culture of hegemony is facing change, and its perpetuators find this to be a problem. I bring popular culture into the discussion because lowrider culture is an art form which can be considered something which came about from popular culture and, specifically, as a form of resistance. John Fiske argues, popular culture "always is part of power relations; it always bears traces of the constant struggle between domination and subordination, between power and various forms of resistance to it or evasions of it" (Fiske 17). In this sense, I appropriately argue that cultures of difference such as Chicano and lowrider culture are ones which are formed on a basis of difference, and whose forms are intentionally shaped with an objective of resistance to Anglo-American dominant culture.

There are different ways to refer to subordinated Mexican descendants involved in lowrider culture. In the context of the United States, for example, some Mexican-Americans choose to self-identify as "Chicanos" as a way of actively acknowledging their Mexican heritage and presence while living in a United States where the forces of dominant idealist Anglo-American culture are heavily pushed against them. Chicanos are one exemplary population of individuals who celebrate their culture of difference as they make their place in America, including—the struggles for place. space, and identity of their own. Despite the systematic oppression Mexican descendants face—today's political climate and rhetoric of wall-building to avoid "alien" immigration as an example—,fortunately there is a space in a sub-realm they can call their own: lowriding.

Borderland Terminology: From *Paisa* to *Pocho*:

In order to understand lowriding, one must understand the borderland terms and identity politics from which it evolved. As discussed above, it is very much interlinked with, and intersects with, Mexican, Mexican-American, and Chicano culture. I start with the term

borderland to refer to the cities and people residing amongst the United States-Mexico border. Moving on, in this borderland context, the question must be re-emphasized: *What is "American?*" This poses the next question—*What is Mexican*? Some individuals choose to address these questions based on their own terms and definitions, and there are many factors involved. These factors include nationality, heritage, skin color, experience, and more. The factors are endless and can be easily overseen, especially by non-minority groups in the context of American culture. Pride certainly has a great deal to do with accepting, rejecting, and negotiating one's identity. Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, and Chicanos, which I shall proceed to define, are exemplary individuals whom prove this fact.

In the context of this research, I shall use the following terms very particularly: *Mexican, Mexican-American, Chicano, Anglo-American, and Mexican(-American)*. When I say Mexican, I am referring to something or someone born and living in Mexico; Mexican-Americans are those who are undeniably of Mexican ethnicity, but have gained citizenship in the United States (regardless of generation); Chicano identity is one which I shall explain is somewhere in the middle as a result of the political and activist movement during the Cesar Chavez era.

While I am aware there are many other terms—"Latinx" and "Hispanic" for example—the limits of this research, personal insight, and experience combined allows me to speak to the "Mexican" descendant in the context of lowriding. It is also appropriate to limit the usage of ethnic terms within the Mexican context because this essay explores lowrider culture in its historical context—which is originally Mexican-based—and because of the significance the culture has played within the culture of Mexican descendants. Throughout this essay, I shall very specifically and strategically use the most encompassing term, *Mexican(-American)*, as a way of referring to anyone who can fit under any of the preceding Mexican-based identification

terms, particularly because this research regards lowriding and its participants living on both sides of the United States-Mexico border.

Beside facing systematic discrimination, I've observed that Mexican(-Americans) face a self-struggle to negotiate their identity within what I call an *identity spectrum.* There exist two radical sides of this spectrum when it comes to identifying one's self: one is to identify as "Mexican" as one wishes to be, and the other side wishes to be as 'American' or Anglicized as one can be. To use harsher terms more commonly used on the street, the struggle of Mexican-Americans living among this spectrum is choosing whether one prefers to be *Paisa* or *Pocho*—both terms carry derogatory connotations. While both terms are slang, they're used on a daily basis for Mexican(-Americans). The *Paisa* is on the furthest edge of the "Mexican" side of the spectrum, while the *Pocho* is at the very edge of the Anglicized Mexican who identifies his or herself as primarily "American" and sacrifices their "Mexican" identity. Important to keep in mind is that with these identity terms, of course, comes identity *performance*.

Paisa is a complex term, in that it can be celebratory amongst Mexicans, but derogatory amongst Mexican-Americans and Chicanos. For our sake, I focus on its derogatory connotation in the United States. In its simplest form, individuals who strongly show and practice aspects of their traditional Mexican culture openly are those who receive the label. Stereotypically, one who wears cowboy boots, tucked in long sleeves, blue jeans, a sombrero hat, and listens to original (Spanish-spoken) Mexican music can be labeled as "Paisa" by other Mexican-Americans in the United States. The mere practice of speaking Spanish in the United States can result in being labeled "Paisa" as well. This example confuses many individuals—Mexican-Americans, members of the dominant in-group, and other people who don't identify strongly as "Mexican" at heart, all fall into this category. Some people aren't bothered by receiving labels

of "so Mexican" or "Paisa," because their identity performance—including speaking Spanish (although they likely also speak English)—is intentional and celebratory of their identity. I can speak to this example—my English is just as weak as my Spanish—yes, weak—yet I prefer to speak Spanish when given any opportunity, for it reminds me of my connection to my roots and keeps that part of my spirit alive. This attitude—this resistance—however, does not seem to excite certain individuals of the dominant American in-group. In a certain ironic sense, amongst these individuals are also non-Spanish speaking Mexican(-Americans) who perpetuate the values of dominant in-group, yet may not necessarily be accepted by the dominant in-group.

There comes a point for some Mexican-Americans, that they feel pressure from the dominant in-group, and choose to give up their Mexican identity partially or entirely. These are the individuals who want to be Anglicized, and don't mind being "White-washed" or labeled "American.". This is the Mexican who "sells out" and whose "Mexican" identity suffers erasure as a result of puissant American assimilation. This is also a reason to be put down, especially by other Mexicans. The derogatory term Mexicans used to describe these individuals is *Pocho*. A classic example of an individual labeled *Pocho* is an Anglicized Mexican(-American) who visits Mexico or is spoken to in Spanish and cannot speak Spanish. From the perspective and experience of an individual who identifies more with their "Mexican" identity, this is a tough moment, primarily because of the lack of connection through an assumed shared cultural practice. The complexity of a moment like this is even deeper, however: The "Pocho," who claims to not speak Spanish either because he or she can't—or perhaps because the individual prefers not to—resists their Mexican culture, and sides toward the English language, which is a dominant Anglo American value.

The perpetuation of dominant cultural practices and ideals such as speaking English rather than Spanish "because we're in America" doesn't guarantee the Pocho will be accepted by the dominant in-group, however. The moment is therefore devastating for a Mexican(-American) when the individual rejects their Mexican culture, and comes to find *they are rejected* by the dominant, whose values they've actively attempted to embrace. This is a result of marginalization and assimilation gone wrong. Some Mexican-Americans have no problem with this, however, and still prefer to be labeled American. Jacob Dominguez, a lowrider individual from the Dukes Car Club, expresses his frustration, and simultaneously, his struggle grasping his identity:

> I remember when I was a kid, they used to tell me all the time, 'why don't you go back to Mexico?' What do you mean, why don't I go back to Mexico? Why would I go back—why would I go to Mexico when I was born and raised here? What do I have business over there for? But yet I would get that all the time—'why don't you go back to Mexico; what are you doing here?' What do you mean what am I doing here—I'm an American! . . . Just cause you're Mexican doesn't mean you're from Mexico—doesn't mean that! We're American! I'm like 4th-5th generation! How many generations do we need to be here before we be considered American—how many? (qtd. in "What is American" 0:25-1:18)

This is his exact answer to the question posed at the beginning of this chapter, "What is American?" Based on Dominguez's dialogue and tone in which he expresses it, it seems as though he struggles and desires to erase parts of his Mexican culture and embrace the fact that he and his family have earned citizenship and equal status in the United States. I recognize that this is troubling too, however, because his dialogue is prone to harsh criticism by other Mexicans. It wouldn't surprise me to hear a Mexican(-American) respond, "*se cree bien Americano*," or *"se cree bien Gabacho,*" which is a way to say "wow, this person thinks/swears he's so American" or so "white." Such a response isn't evoked by jealousy or hate, but by *fear*—fear that the dominant American culture is to blame for certain Mexican-American's desire to erase their

Mexican identities. This is the same type of fear which the dominant in-group experiences when faced with, and up against "popular pleasures" such as lowriding, for these pleasures are "recognized to lie outside social control and thus to threaten it" (Fiske 61). When there is an unequal power distribution amongst people, especially of cultural difference, a fear must exist on one side if not both. Though this fear therefore exists both for the in-group and out-group, it is more difficult to deal with for the out-group. Dominguez's struggle exemplifies how his fear of not being accepted by the in-group has resulted in a stronger assertion for American rather than Mexican identity.

As a self-claimed 4th or 5th generation inhabitant, Dominguez serves as an example of someone who sees it as negative to be labeled with the "Mexican" part of his Mexican-American identity. Not only does he mistakenly enter the generational complex and 'myth of America' outlined by Sollors, but it is clear that his assimilation process did not satisfy his marginal position in the United States. It seems that he fails to recognize the power dynamic between the dominant and the subordinate: The dominant can willingly, if they choose to, participate in popular culture and pleasures of the subordinate (lowriding as an example); however, the reverse cannot be done until the dominant is willing to give up their power to minority, subordinated groups—an unlikely instance. The problem here, it seems, is that Dominguez's conscious separation from his Mexican roots didn't make Anglo-Americans of the dominant hegemonic culture accept him any more. Hence, I remind audiences of the fact that something or someone originally (and genetically) *Mexican* will always be Mexican undoubtedly; it is up to each individual whether he or she would like to accept it or not. The same goes for lowriding, which fortunately offers the common ground for Mexican(-American) individuals on either side of the identity spectrum.

There is hope, however, to strongly preserve parts of the Mexican culture in the United States, and this is where I believe *Chicanos/as* individuals fit. Chicanos/as stand in the middle of the Mexican-American identity spectrum; we are neither purely Mexican nor purely American. Chicanos pick and choose from the Mexican, Mexican-American, and American cultures, to negotiate identity. Rigo Reyes, a co-founder of Amigos car club in San Diego, shares his significant story of hybridity and marginalization, which serves as an example of where a Chicano stands—the Chicano isn't so radically eager to identify as "Mexican" or "American." The Chicano/a must negotiate. Reyes started lowriding as a member of the Casinos Car Club of San Ysidro in 1975, but recounts his reason for leaving:

> Prior to the Casinos, I had a reputation of being from Tijuana—and my trip was to be here with the neighborhoods from this side of the border. So, for that reason, when I joined the Casinos, I made it a point to try to change that image—but yet, many of the clubs of that era still saw us as a *Tijuana car club*—so in 1977, we decided to quit the Casinos, and we started the Amigos—and we've been here ever since. (qtd. in Pulido, 2014, 32:07-32:32)

Notice that Reyes's position is slightly different than Dominguez's, yet both individuals are lowriders. Although Reyes wished to be recognized from San Diego rather than Tijuana, he didn't necessarily assert himself as 'American' like Dominguez—and one cannot miss the important detail: the Spanish-written name of his San Diego-based car club, *Amigos*, which means "friends." For Reyes, the self-proclaimed Chicano, negotiation is therefore an essential element to his story as a lowrider as it is for many—and again, personal experience and upbringing have a great deal to do with negotiation and one's place on the identity spectrum. The following which he states supports my argument, that lowriding is an art which helps Mexican(-Americans) express themselves positively and their identity in the borderlands:

> "[My car] reflects my experience over the years, and I said that I consider myself Chicano—but when we're trying to find out that identity, grasping the reality of who we are, we can't deny the fact that we are Mexican also" (qtd. in Pulido, 2014, 32:52-33:05).

Reyes here acknowledges and accepts that his identity cannot be complete without the Mexican part of it. At a first glance, based on his choice of words which say "we cannot deny," it seems to evoke a similar message as Dominguez when he insists on being called American, although such isn't the case. While I am not completely in agreement or fond of Reyes's explicit claim to want to be known as being from San Diego rather than Tijuana, I understand where he is coming from and what he wants. What Reyes is trying to do is *pick and choose* aspects of both cultures he experienced on each side of the border. On a side note, despite the fact that he wishes to be identified with San Diego, as he began lowriding, Reyes also participated in Mexican-American activism in the barrios of San Diego during the Chicano Movement. Reyes is an exemplary lowrider and Chicano activist figure—and I find it important to note that the two go hand in hand, for lowriders had a lot to do with the Chicano Movement as it has for other positive things. The relationship between lowriders, Mexican, Mexican-American, and Chicano culture is certainly a close one which shows in the lowrider realm.

Beyond "American" and "Mexican:" Hope for one's Space Through Lowriding:

To sum this all up, I argue that in the context of the borderlands, Mexican descendants fall into one or more categories, and it all depends on their attitude and desire of identity performance: If one is a U.S. citizen but is a Mexican descendant, he or she is undeniably a Mexican-American. Some prefer to not be called such and preferred to be recognized simply as "American," much like Jacob Dominguez. While I can recognize that perhaps his frustration comes as a reaction to Anglo-Americans not accepting him as an American himself because he's brown, through his dialogue we can see how marginalization has pushed Dominguez away from his desire to be recognized as Mexican. This is part of the process of searching for place to fit in.

If the Mexican "Paisa" is on one side of the spectrum, and the Anglicized Mexican-American (aka "Pocho") sits on the other far side of the identity spectrum, "Chicano" is the middle ground. Something relatable which happens on a daily basis for Mexican(-Americans) is shifting right or left based on the moment and context. Finally, *raza* is the term which literally means "race," but is used in a celebratory manner to refer to the Mexican people—our raza.

I speak on my own behalf and others like myself, when I say that coming from a bicultural background, we must decide what to pick and choose from each side—even on a moment-by-moment basis. For instance, we can choose to speak Spanish when we have no other way to express ourselves, or when we'd like to emphasize a particular feeling to another Mexican brother or sister. On a similar note, we are faced with dilemmas every day, even in informal cases—a classic example being whether we write "haha" or "jaja" on social media, depending on which culture we choose to identify with, and the way we'd like to perform in that particular moment. As Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, and Chicanos, we are thus faced with the ultimate challenges of hybridity and marginalization, where we often find that we aren't "Mexican enough" or "American" enough. As for Mexican-Americans, living in the United States causes an almost inevitable loss of connection with Mexican roots. Preservation of the culture—Spanish language as a popular example—becomes more difficult to do. Mexican(-Americans) run the risk of becoming the sell-out Mexican *pochos* or *pochas*, for something as innocent as choosing to speak English rather than Spanish.

This thesis allows me to combine personal experiences of Mexican(-American) marginalization, complex identity formation, and research to inform the cultural practice of lowriding which plays a great role in my life. Split identities aren't uncommon, for as I suggested earlier, the American nation is one made of second-generation ethnic immigrants.

Regardless of one's nationality, we all have visions—sometimes disillusionments, often caused by false hopes of understanding amongst people. Looking for a space and place of one's own is not negative. As for many Mexican(-Americans), we search for that space of our own, a place for us, a place and space to belong to—where we are free to express ourselves for who we are. I encourage individuals of bicultural backgrounds—who struggle with spatial and identity negotiation—to peacefully stand up to the forces of the dominant through traditions to find agency. There are ways, though it takes understanding and assessment of both cultures as well as writing back rather than accepting dominant rhetoric and narratives, which can prove to be inaccurate and unfair.

In his text, *Barrio Logos*, Raul Villa labels the cultural understanding of working-class struggles and cultural movements in the Chicano context as *barriology.* He explores barriology and the significance of barrio life to space and place. While he writes the following in a particular Chicano context, the ideas of needed "alternative" interests, "community," and the overall concept of his theory can be applied to the general working class and subordinated ethnic peoples of which it is composed:

> Manifesting alternative needs and interests from those of the dominant public sphere, the expressive practices of barrio social and cultural reproduction—from the mundane exercises of daily-round and leisure activities to the formal articulation of community defensive goals in in organizational forums and discursive media—reveal multiple possibilities for re-creating and re-imagining dominant urban space as community-enabling space. (Villa 6)

While I cannot speak to everyone's experience, I share this spatial theory to exemplify that there is a way to overcome bicultural struggles. The alternative for myself and other Mexican descendants is the lowriding tradition, which offers a unique space. What lowrider culture therefore *offers* is the ultimate common ground where it is acceptable to shift and negotiate

identity. It is, after all, a way of self-expression; it is art. Nevertheless, the Mexican-style lowrider fits anywhere within the Mexican(-American) identity spectrum. Based on individual experiences, some people don't like to think of it this way and still assert it to be an American tradition, as if it were baseball. Such isn't the case. Lowriding is a historically Mexican, barrio-influenced culture and is respectively explored as such.

The celebratory aspect of lowrider culture as resistive to dominant American culture is one which will be frequently revisited following chapters through different elements which compose lowrider culture: its history, the style of the car, the style of person, the dialect spoken in the culture, the clothing worn, the music, and more. Though it may be more obvious to some participants more than others, lowrider culture, the originally Mexican style of building cars and living, welcomes Mexican descendants who choose to embrace and celebrate positive aspects of the Mexican barrio lifestyle and identity. The culture reflects Mexican(-American) history and has suffered similar patterns of stereotypical rhetoric and systematic discrimination, yet it offers a solidary ground to unite, resist, and overcome stereotypes. Lowriding is a tradition which actively writes back to the former issues, along with struggles for space, place, and identity through its artistry and positive community formation. There are no limits to community building amongst lowriders, as this thesis shall show.

Chapter 2: From Mexican Braceros to their Mexican(-American) Lowrider Descendants: Patterns of Disillusion and Systematic Discrimination

Lowriding isn't the first *barrio* tradition to be misunderstood by dominant American culture. As aforementioned, the first major documented *lowrider* club was the Dukes Car Club of Tijuana in 1956. There began patterns which would have a great deal of influence on lowrider culture. On the same note, patterns of stereotypes and criminalization leading up to the lowrider individual would follow.

In his essay, "Narrative, Ideology, and the Reconstruction of American Literary History," Ramón Saldívar revisits ideology, which he views as that which creates the very concepts of ethnicity, Americanness, and inclusiveness explored by Werner Sollors. Saldívar notes that while Sollors' attempt to look at American culture as a "culture of cultures" in terms of 'consent' and 'descent' sounds "wonderful," such terms refer to themselves, members of the ruling—or as I refer to it as, *dominant* group. For Saldívar, Sollors' use of the terms reinstates "their legitimacy to the state apparatus . . . That is, consensus and dissensus do not apply to those outside the ruling group or the state apparatus: working-class people, people of color, women" (Saldívar 19). Individuals of the Mexican(-American) descent undoubtedly fall into the noted groups, which makes it necessary for them to form their own state apparatus, to write their own narratives, and act freely against the forces of domination.

Because Mexican-Americans descended from Mexico, it makes sense that lowriding is something they brought from the mother land. In this sense, it is something borrowed from the Mexican culture, and intentionally adapted as something intentionally non-dominant Anglo American. As earlier stated, lowriding in the United States would eventually become a way of expressing one's self, of expressing one's unique, marginalized, partly, yet partly-not assimilated

cultural identity. Lowriding is thus a practice which preserves the *Mexican* aspect of *Mexican*-American identity. In this sense, the practice of lowriding allows Mexican-Americans and Chicanos to reclaim something that is stripped from us as we make our way into dominant American society. The elements of difference and resistance to idealist American values in lowriding presents itself as an opportunity to be rhetorically addressed as gang activity by the dominant in-group. Indeed, gang life can be part of a Mexican(-American's) upbringing, although it doesn't define our culture. While there are similarities between gang life and lowrider culture because they both come from the same people and the same place—the streets—both are barrio traditions that involve space, place, and self-worth. It is necessary to investigate how misperceptions and stereotypes are formed by investigating the patterns of stereotypes and discrimination lowriders' predecessors faced.

If we'd like to speak of inclusiveness—or non-inclusiveness, rather, it is no wonder that in the United States' context, such a longing for purpose and agency became a necessity amongst minorities. In his essay, "Chicano Border Narratives as Cultural Critique," Jose Saldívar views this phenomenon as a result of dominant culture and rhetoric: "By the end of the nineteenth century the ideological rhetoric of white supremacy dominated southwestern politics and eventually became institutionalized in state discourses, laws, and narratives regulating relations by whites and nonwhites, especially African-Americans and Chicanos" (Saldívar 168). Hence, the different barrio traditions came along, as did rhetoric of them; the forces of dominant rhetoric against the subordinated Mexican descendants led to patterns of criminalization, stereotypes, and systematic oppression.

To simplify, lowriding's foundational history, existed in the barrios, among the pachucos, and so-called delinquents. Next came the social clubs, followed by car clubs. The lack of

privilege for Mexican descendants, the predecessors to lowriders, led to a lack of agency in the borderlands. Thus borderland barrio traditions, such as gang involvement and lowriding, were attempts for Mexican descendants to achieve a sense of belonging and purpose. When looking at these traditions—as part of Mexican, Mexican-American, and Chicano history, we can think of these traditions as an attempt to write our own discourse, to write our own narratives, and not accept the dominant forces against us. Indeed, therefore Ramón Saldívar's argument in "Narrative, Ideology, and the Reconstruction of American Literary History proves true: "Chicano narrative carries out a counterhegemonic resistance to the dominant ideology at the level of various symbolic languages" (Saldívar 17). Such symbolic languages building up to the lowrider were pachuco culture and social club culture, and their communicative resistive symbols were the zoot suit and club jacket, respectively. Lowriding would follow, and the lowrider car became its most popular symbol. Each car is art, and symbolizes something different for each individual—but primarily, *resistance*. By the time lowriding began, however, the dominant American in-group was quick to throw the blanket label of criminalization onto the culture, just as they did for pachuco and social club culture. The mere fact that lowriding is Mexican-influenced borderland barrio tradition became a justification for the dominant to create false correlations between it and criminality. As a result, lowrider culture would be treated accordingly—lowriders would be systematically targeted—just as pachuco and social club members were years before.

The Mexican's Place in the Borderlands:

Mexican(-American) history—the good, the bad, and the ugly—in the context of lowriding—all came from the barrio. *Barrio* is the term for "neighborhood" amongst Spanish-speaking individuals—it is often lower class, and thus the term carries a connotation of 'ghetto'

as we know it in America. The formation of the barrios in the borderlands was caused by settling couples looking to establish structure for their growing families. The boundaries of these barrios were pre-drawn, and designed to segregate Mexicans from primarily Anglo neighborhoods. In the documentary *Zoot Suit Riots*, Eduardo Pagan, a historian of Chicano history, comments on Mexican-American barrios, particularly during the WWII era. He makes the claim that "many of the Mexican American kids of this period came to terms with segregation by seeing their neighborhoods as *their* neighborhoods (qtd. in Tovares, 2002, 14:02). Pagan of course speaks in the context of the United States, although the same principle applies in barrios throughout Mexico as well—only if we replace the word 'segregation' with 'poverty' or even 'the underprivileged circumstances against them.' What Pagan hints at the same ideas I've outlined thus far: space, place, belonging, and purpose. In other words, if circumstances situated Mexican(-Americans) in low socioeconomic class barrios, Mexican youth felt the urge to feel a reason for their presence. This is where the different formations of identity, cultural expressions, and traditions within the borderlands began.

The 1930s gave birth to individuals who would establish the reputation barrios have to this day. It wasn't uncommon for Mexican(-American) families to have over five children. Meanwhile, both parents would work to provide for their families; their children grew up into the 1940's—an era of the bracero program, the *pachucos*, and the zoot suit riots—all of which played significant roles in the struggle of the Chicano and the popularity of the lowrider. This era is also when systematic oppression against these individuals became more evident in dominant Anglo-American culture.

In her essay "Citizen Chicano," Chon Noriega breaks down the Mexican's place in the 1940s, which can be identified as the unexpected and unwelcomed preface to the Zoot Suit Riots:

> In 1942, the U.S. entry into World War II, repatriation contributed to a labor shortage. In addition to the 400,000 "Mexicans" deported, upward of 500,000 Mexican-American men had enlisted or been drafted into service, while 120,000 Japanese-Americans had been interned as "security risks." As a result, the Bracero Program was negotiated with Mexico, which agreed to provide the United States with unskilled laborers on a short-term basis in order to harvest its labor-intensive crops. In what would become a 'ratchet effect,' the increased migration under the Bracero Program gave rise to a neonativism, so that Operation Wetback was implemented in order to locate and deport 'illegal aliens' or 'wetbacks.' (Noriega 86)

It is not only interesting and disturbing, but ironic that despite the fact that the Japanese-American minority group was suspected to threaten national security, the same dominant Anglo-American population—whose ideology and rhetoric are formed based on myths of "independence" and idealist purity—required another subordinated minority group to take care of essential work other than their supposed superior selves. In this case, Mexicans were not only the rebound choice, but still unappreciated and systematically discriminated against, despite their service (civilian and military) for the United States.

The superficial rhetoric behind the Bracero program suggested that it was opportunity for Mexicans. This "opportunity" introduced a turning point for many Mexican citizens, however. My *abuelito* (grandfather), Humberto Ortega, who participated in this program is a first hand example. I recall him telling me that he didn't like the United States—thus when his contract ended, he returned to Tijuana, where the rest of our family would be raised. Such wasn't the case for all bracero workers or Mexicans aiming to find opportunity in America. Some stayed, and others like my abuelito saw only opportunity for financial growth, but not for self worth; something was missing: opportunity for their own space. Return to the homeland was the answer. Those who stayed would encounter their own struggles, which played a great part in lowriding on the U.S. side of the border.

Pachucos and their Zoot Suit: Popular Symbols Misunderstood

Historically, Mexican(-American) *Pachucos* and *Pachucas* were individuals in the borderlands with a subculture of their own, much like the lowrider individuals they would later influence. Important to note early on is that Pachucos/as were from the streets; they were from the barrios, and they would eventually gain a criminal reputation much like gang members. Having emerged in the late 1930s and early 1940s, pachucos consisted mostly of upcoming Braceros and their children. Pachucos/as were known, foremost, to be of Mexican descent. Much like lowrider cars and individuals, what was very noticeable about them is their distinctive *style*; the signature behind the Pachuco/a style is the zoot suit and Imperial style shoes. The Mexican pachuco style appeared on both sides of the border during these early times, and like lowriding, likely originated along the Mexican side of the border, which is significant in its own sense. Arturo Reyes, of Oldies Car Club Tijuana chapter, still recalls traditional pachucos up until 1960s roaming the streets of his barrio, known as *La Esperanza,* in La Colonia Libertad. Through my dialogues with both lowrider individuals and *raza* from the barrio, I've found that most support the theory that the term "pachuco" in the context of the individuals here being referred to came from Mexican immigrants in El Paso. This theory refers to the Mexican immigrants who commuted back and forth from Los Angeles to El Paso, which is known by many Chicanos as "El Chuco" or "Chuco Town." Featured in an *Only El Paso* episode, "Pachucos: A Culture of Unity," is Susie Melindez, a Chicana activist and daughter of original Pachucos. Melindez confirms the theory, stating that these immigrants would often be asked where they were going, and would respond "Pa Chuco," which means "to Chuco." Melindez adds that these individuals who originally came from Juarez, Chihuahua, were here to build the railroad in El Paso (qtd. in Villa, 2018, 0:35-0:53).

The iconic zoot suit—which immigrant laborers brought from Mexico, was therefore a fashion of their own—and it stood out to many people. This was the very point of the pachucos wearing the zoot suit: the attire they wore acted as a symbol of their rebellion against the dominant culture; the action of wearing pachuco attire was a celebration of their identities as something other than Anglo-American. This fashion would fall under John Fiske's categorization of popular culture outlined in chapter 1. I argue that much like lowriders, in the United States' context, Pachucos/as formed these popular interests and forms as necessary "resistive measure[s] against Anglo-American economic domination and ideological hegemony" (Calderón and Saldívar 4). Not only did their Mexican descent therefore unite them, but so did the zoot suit—the zoot suit became a symbol of solidarity and unity amongst themselves. Thus, it is safe to say that pachuco culture and zoot suit fashion had different significance on each side of the border—while on both sides of the border the individuals had similar reputations. Pachucos in the United States played a huge historic role in the Chicano struggle.

In the United States, Pachucos/as were known to the public to not only be delinquent, but rebellious. Their participation in night life—including dancing in Jazz clubs—was seen as negative. Pachucos are historically known for dancing swing style to Jazz music, which is interesting in its own sense: Jazz is often associated with African-American culture, and can be read as a resistive art form to dominant Anglo music in its own sense. Despite its resistive nature, Jazz has been historically accepted in mainstream dominant culture, which shows with the emergence of Jazz clubs. The adaptation of Jazz culture not only proves Sollors' concept of Americanness as a culture of cultures, but explains why dominant Anglo-America wasn't eager to see Mexican(-Americans) fill Jazz club during the 1940s. This marks the golden era of the Pachuco/a style. The dominant in-group was unwilling to accept the idea of Pachucos/as dancing

swing in American night clubs, although from the Mexican perspective, the act of dancing jazz was part of an attempt to build a hybrid, assimilated culture. Jazz music became accepted as American, and Mexican descendants wanted to be part of it—thus, the theory holds a credible argument.

The entire act of being a Pachuco/a and adapting the zoot suit style in public during the WWII era was seen to be anti-patriotic and anti-nationalistic in the United States—despite the half million Mexican-Americans in the service during 1942 (Noriega 86). It can be argued that the symbolic zoot suit was seen as anti-patriotic because of its bold difference to Anglo style of dress: patterned coats were longer than typical, pants were worn extremely baggy and above the waist; and a chain hung from a pachuco's side. Pachucos either wore fedora style hats or combed their hair to look tall, volumized, and shiny. All of this gave pachucos what they believed to be a sharp style of their own; the style intentionally reflected their own and not that of the dominant Anglo individual. The pachuco style was a form of popular culture amongst Mexican(-Americans), and worked in opposition to dominant culture, much like the lowrider style works in opposition to dominant style car customization. During the WWII era, the dominant in-group's tolerance of resistant subcultures such as pachuco culture proved to be very low. This would result in an inevitable clash between the dominant Anglo-Americans and subordinated Mexican(-American) zoot suit wearing Pachucos. It may come with little surprise that by the end of this history, the golden eras for Pachucos and lowriders do not have very positive endings, for the hegemonic dominant culture succeeds. Indeed, the aftermath of the Sleepy Lagoon trial and zoot suit riots would preface the uncertain future for lowriders, the successors to Pachucos.

The Sleepy Lagoon Trial and its Aftermath: The Racialized Zoot Suit Riots:

The Sleepy Lagoon murder trial, which remains officially unsolved, resulted in the conviction and sentencing of 17 pachucos, including Hank Leyvas, to prison for the murder of Jose Diaz. This case would only build more racial tension between Mexican-Americans and Anglo-Americans, between the subordinated and the dominant. According to Edward Escobar, concern regarding Mexican crime began to grow during the Summer of 1942, and the breakout of the Sleepy Lagoon case "came at exactly the right moment for the hysteria to erupt" (qtd. in Tovares, 2002, 2:30). This echoes the Anglo-American wartime paranoia and eagerness to engage in war. Much like they wanted an "excuse" to join the worldwide war, members of the dominant in-group wanted an "excuse" to engage in a war with subordinates—the people they viewed as delinquents. This war I refer to would become a racialized one between Anglos and Mexicans, to see who could create social order. The dynamic between Henry Leyvas—the main murder suspect—and the police was therefore an interesting one. Foremost, the murder case labeled Leyvas as the leader of the 38th street neighborhood, which was also labeled 'gang' by the city. Eduardo Pagan shares historical commentary on the dynamic:

> From the perspective of the L.A.P.D, Henry was a delinquent with a chip on his shoulder, largely because he was the kind of kid who would stand up for his rights; he would protest assaults upon him; he would protest if he was arrested, for example. He would challenge them. (qtd. in Tovares, 2002, 7:05-7:15)

Of the 17 men convicted, Leyvas seemed to be the one who saw the significance of the situation; he was not only the most interesting suspect, but also the most despised by the police. The mere fact that Leyvas would stand up for himself posed a challenge to the forces of dominant Anglo-America. Therefore it was essential for the police department to win this case, in order to make a point and instill fear into Pachucos and Mexican youth with deviant subcultures. The arrest and trial of Leyvas and the young men from the 38th street neighborhood in its own sense raised

"fears that Mexican youth were out of control" (Tovares, 2002, 2:59). Therefore, this was a race to see who could control social order, and the dominant forces of Anglo-American culture would do whatever was necessary to assert their dominance over the Mexican youth and their zoot suits, which the dominant recognized as a "symbol of rebellion" (Tovares, 2002, 41:18).

From the perspective of Chicanos, the group of young Mexican-Americans from 38th street in Los Angeles faced an unfair trial and served two years in San Quentin in vain: Upon arrest, not only were the young men beaten by law enforcement with hopes of their confession, but they were not allowed to cut their hair, "clean up," or even change their clothes prior to the trial, as the court ruled that their appearance was "relevant" to the case, according to Joseph Tovares in his documentary *Zoot Suit Riots* (Tovares, 2002, 20:35). This set up the so-called delinquents to portray an image to the jury which the American law wanted to show; it provided a visual rhetorical image for the public to see the Mexican-Americans as dirty and completely changed people—quite the opposite from the clean cut image Pachucos aimed for by dressing in sharp zoot suits. A committee was formed to bring an appeal to the court's ruling, which finally succeeded two years later when the men from 38th street were released from prison (without an apology). Meanwhile, however, the news articles and media were actively perpetuating the idea that the convicted men from 38th street were examples of how Mexican-American pachucos were violent gang members who needed to be brought under control. Inarguably, the Sleepy Lagoon trial was a case of Chicanos versus the dominant class—white Anglo-America, the law makers and executers. The outcome of the trial painted a criminal, "out of control" image for not only pachucos—but for Mexican(-Americans) generally speaking, who inhabited the borderland barrios.

As the pachucos from 38th street served their time, tension heated between Anglos and Mexican-Americans. Mexican-Americans in the Los Angeles area felt "their" barrios were intruded upon by Anglo-American sailors who would walk through the neighborhoods. Meanwhile, sailors frowned upon the zoot suit wearing Mexican(-Americans) whose clothing reflected their anti-patriotic affiliation to the country and war effort. George Sanchez, a historian in *Zoot Suit Riots* assesses the relationship between Mexican-Americans and servicemen during this era. He comments:

> A lot of the servicemen were coming from other parts of the United States, they were not familiar with Mexican-Americans, and they really were not accustomed to not only the diversity of Los Angeles, but the kind of interaction one would see on the city streets. (qtd. in Tovares, 2002, 13:33)

This unfamiliarity is much like that which Anglo-Americans after the war would be with social clubs and car clubs. Nonetheless, June 3rd of 1943, would be the beginning of the end for Pachucos, resulting in a need for new alternatives for Mexican youth to express themselves and reject dominant culture. That night, a naval sailor and pachuco got into a fight, resulting in an unconscious sailor with a broken jaw. This fight was *the* fight which led a group of sailors to a theatre in downtown Los Angeles, strictly to *target* and beat Mexicans. Among the beaten individuals were minors, ages 12 and 13 (Tovares, 2002, 33:33). They were beaten strictly because of the clothes they were wearing. The zoot suit became not only stereotyped, but a way of racial profiling in this sense. Mexican-American youth congregated back in their barrios, and quickly *organized* themselves to fight back in response (Tovares, 2002, 35:20). The concept of uniting and organizing is essential to not only this point in Mexican-American history, but also that of lowriding because it proves to be the only hope to fight and write back, metaphorically speaking.

Reflecting on this history, a Chicano's perspective of this battle against the sailors is that it was one destined to be lost. Despite the fact that sailors and Chicanos both suffered physical injuries during the riots, Chicanos were arrested whereas sailors would be told to return to their ship or station, according to one sailor named George Bray. He claims that whereas pachucos were "thrown in the jeep" to be taken to jail if caught after the heat of a riot, he and other sailors were also "put in the jeep, take[n] a couple blocks away," where they would be told to return to their ship or station (qtd. in Tovares, 2002, 39:50). After beating Mexicans and leaving their zoot suits to burn on the sidewalks of Los Angeles, sailors were taken back to duty, whereas the victims, the Mexicans—mostly stripped of their clothes—were taken to jail. If this isn't privilege, it is difficult to argue what is.

This was a win for the sailors, the far from metaphoric, but *actual* perpetuators, and symbolic figures of dominant Anglo-American culture. As a result of these riots, the Los Angeles city council banned the wearing of zoot suits in public, and threatened a 30 day jail time sentence to violators. The sailors and city council were one, in my view. George Sanchez makes an important analytical point which applies not only to Pachucos of the 1940's, but to the Mexican-American generations to come:

> Mexican-American youth, I think, were taught in World War II that they could not simply choose, by themselves, the way that they would express themselves. They simply couldn't choose what they could wear; they simply couldn't choose who they could be . . . [they learned] that this was not a society that allowed for that kind of freedom of expression—for these particular youth—and that's a very painful lesson. It's a very painful lesson when one hears the rhetoric of 'Americans all,' the rhetoric of American promise open to all sorts of immigrants, open to all sorts of people. (qtd. in Tovares, 2002, 41:20-42:00).

Indeed, this was a lesson taught for future generations of Mexican youth: Dominant Anglo-American culture had control over them and subordinated groups, generally speaking. Chicanos

were woken by a rude sense of disillusionment after this, and resentment would grow on both ends. The legislation ruled over zoot suits/zoot suiters made it clear that discourse of the dominant Anglos was a powerful one: stereotypes, profiling, and discriminatory headlines against these zoot suit wearing Chicanos resulted in physical and legal manifestations. This racialized war would go on unofficially—it was one of hate, discrimination, and oppression. Officially, however, the perpetuators of the dominant asserted no wrong on their end and slid the entire drama under the carpet: Whereas the citizens' committee months after the riots determined the central cause to be race, the mayor of Los Angeles denied race to be a factor and asserted that "juvenile delinquents" were the central cause (Tovares, 2002, 49:05). This example shows how the dominant attempted to write and portray their history as this oppression continued—that is, for any wrongdoing by the dominant not only threatens their credibility, but their ability to continue being the force of control. This is a pattern, indeed, which would follow into the 1950s and beyond, when the borderlands began to see the formation of *social club*s and *car clubs*. While it would become more difficult to explicitly and physically engage in violence against Mexican(-Americans), the dominant in-group would find ways to continue stereotypical rhetoric and systematically oppress the subordinated Mexicans.

Barrio Life in the 1950's: Recognizing Faults and Overcoming them:

With a growing sense of resentment towards the dominant hegemonic Anglo-American culture due to their systematic segregation and discrimination against them, Mexicans found that after WWII, another alternative was necessary. It was necessary to establish another tradition or subculture to act against the powerful press and perpetuators of dominant culture whom allowed discriminatory rhetoric and law to be normalized. In lowriding's history, this is when the opportunity to form Mexican(-American) social clubs presented itself. It took some self-

assessment of realities on behalf of Mexican(-Americans), however, for this new way of organization to become possible.

On both sides of the border, socio-economic status remained similar for Mexican families. The *barrios* Mexican youth lived in were the only neighborhoods society left them with; they had no where else to go or no choice. With this being said, the sense of pride continued to exist within Mexican youth who claimed their barrios as their own—here again we see the idea of place and space. Rather than being ashamed of their ghetto surrounding, many Mexicans and Chicanos not only claimed their barrios as their own, but they protected them. Many times defending the barrio meant verbal and physical altercations with people who didn't live in the coinciding barrio, much like the pachucos and sailors fought when pachucos felt sailors were intruding. Thus, Mexican-on-Mexican and Chicano-on-Chicano fighting continued through the 1950s, which wasn't as great of a concern to dominant Anglos, as was the violence between their sailors and Mexicans during the 1940s. This meant Mexican(-Americans) had to fix this manner for themselves, and change images which, admittedly, some Mexicans were at fault for creating *themselves* by engaging in violence. This was the very image dominant Anglo-American rhetoric painted of Mexicans, and it is unfortunate that some young Mexican(-Americans) were guilty of falling right into the stereotype. Again, even the brown-on-brown fighting, however, was part of the struggle for place and belonging—the struggle to claim something (the barrio) as their own.

Social Clubs: A New Way for Mexican(-Americans) to "Survive" and Overcome the Stereotype

Mexican youth recognized the profiling and stereotypes of them as gang members, and many wished to change that image. While they continued to inhabit the borderland barrios, after World War II many found solace by grouping together in *social clubs*. The idea of these clubs was to join Mexican youth together and do something positive, quite the opposite of the "gang life" in which dominant Anglo-American society stereotyped them. Allow me to set one record straight: Gangs, social clubs, and car clubs are all different. Some people confuse the three because they all come from the street, and all three come from the barrio. Such was the case for the social clubs of the 1950s. Salvador Roberto Torres, an artist known as "Queso" in the Logan Heights community of San Diego, recalls a struggle and unfair portrayal of his youth by the dominant in the 1950s. Much like the pachucos, Torres was one of many Chicanos looking for a place and space. In Alberto Pulido's documentary, *Everything Comes from the Streets*, Torres recalls experiences of marginalization and discrimination from perpetuators of dominant American culture, which much reflects. Growing up in the Mexican-American Logan Heights community, he recollects his position in between borderland cities:

> We really loved [Tijuana] Mexico . . . but we were put down because a lot of us couldn't speak correct Spanish. We were made fun of, so, we were not really accepted in Mexico during the 50s—and we were also not accepted in the United States—so, we had our own way of trying to survive. We decided that we wanted to develop a club. (qtd. in Pulido, 2014, 11:10-11:37)

These effects of marginalization weren't uncommon for Chicanos, as discussed in Chapter 1. Having been through these experiences led them to create their hybrid Chicano identities and cultural practices. The effects of marginalization led to the formation of one of the first social clubs in San Diego of which he was a part of, Los Gallos.

Los Gallos was one of many *social clubs* which became popular in the 1950s. These social clubs also came to be known as *jacket clubs*, because members would have matching jackets which identified them as belonging to the particular club. The jacket was also a symbol of resistance much like the zoot suit of the 1940s. The goal of these jacket/social clubs was to unite Chicanos from the barrios, and keep away from the 'trouble' aspect of the streets. Some social club members even had cars and would customize them by lowering them and adding lowrider-style accessories. In this sense, social club culture was not only the transition into lowrider car club culture, but the social clubs themselves had members who could be considered early lowriders. Because social clubs came from the streets much like lowrider clubs did, one cannot deny the fact that the streets was still an aspect of the club dynamic. The intentions were positive, however: Torres remembers Los Gallos attending dances, beach parties, and picnics, much like lowriders do to this day. This was all made possible by the clubs *organizing themselves*, which has been a key aspect for Chicanos to overcome the negative things they are stereotyped of, such as violence and drug use. Torres's recollection provides an early example of how lack of organization leads to those negative things. For instance, Torres claims there was competition for event dates and occasional fights going on at dances. To address issues like these, Torres and members of Los Gallos jacket club helped create the Southeast youth council in San Diego.

This council was essential not only for social clubs of the 1950s, but for the lowrider realm. The council would influence, and set an example for, lowrider councils such as the San Diego lowrider council, which was founded in 1979. The idea of the Southeast youth council of the 1950s was to unite the various social clubs, end disputes, and address fighting going on. Above all, the benefit was that at the end of the day all could be on the same page to support each other,

rather than compete with each other. Rather than fighting with each other, the *raza* was here beginning to understand the concept that through solidarity and unity, they were stronger. The social club culture, much like car club/lowrider cultures, indefinitely became one of unity. This became a model for lowrider clubs—no one wants to purposely "step on the other's toes" by double-scheduling events on the same date or something of that nature. Social clubs of the 1950s showed by example to lowriders, the idea of "come to our event, and we'll be at yours." Much like the pachucos organized themselves in the barrios in the 1940s to fight back at sailors, Chicano youth of the 1950s organized themselves—but the social clubs aimed to *stop violence*, and settle matters peacefully. Through unity and a common solidary ground, this subordinated population of Mexican(-Americans) stood a fighting chance against dominant rhetoric and the systematic discrimination they faced. Social club culture is the early predecessor to lowrider culture which gave Mexican descendants opportunity for agency, self-worth, and dignity. Dominant Anglo-American culture at the time, however, didn't come around to recognize this concept—or didn't *want to.*

Officially, clubs like Los Gallos did positive things to help their image, and help their communities. For instance, Los Gallos participated in the Governor's Conference on California's Children and Youth in Sacramento in 1956. Despite the fact that the club attempted to promote a positive image as social club members, newspaper headlines labeled them otherwise. One of the articles Torres saved was titled: "Jacket Club Reports on 'Good' Gang Life." The article begins: "SACRAMENTO — San Diego's main contribution to the Governor's youth conference which closed yesterday may have been its delegation of several members of a *so-called* jacket club and its auxiliary" (qtd. in Pulido, 2002, 13:55). The italics are my own as I'd like to emphasize the power of this written discourse: If the headline didn't say enough, the

term “so-called” carries a strong connotation of mockery and accusation of something illegitimate. This became a pattern for car clubs that would follow a very similar structure as that created by social clubs. The car clubs would do their best to promote unity amongst Mexican(-Americans) and participation in their communities, but they’d suffer the same type of profiling.

Conclusion: From Pachucos to the Lowriders

The culture of Pachucos, social club members, and Mexican(-Americans) in the borderlands all share something in common with lowrider culture: The barrio inhabitants of the same descent struggled with issues of poverty, discrimination, systematic oppression, and a sense of emptiness—a lack of self-worth. These alternatives, like lowriding, all share in common that they are popular forms of resistance to the demeaning and subordinating forces of dominant American culture and its “repressive patterns of social control” (Chappell 25). Pachuco culture was systematically outlawed; with legislation passed and threats of jail time, Mexican youth refrained from wearing the zoot suit that defined pachuco culture in the United States and the subculture eventually perished.

As time transitioned to the 1950s, social clubs developed and the presence of car customizing lowrider individuals began to be found in the social clubs which became popular forms of resistance. The next decade, these social clubs which had members with cars would soon be labeled as “lowriders,” like we know them today. The car building wasn’t the end to these people’s narratives, however: The 1960s, The Cesar Chavez era, in the context of Chicano history, made way for Chicano lowriders to participate in social activism. Many certainly went this route, and their lowriders were the very symbolic artefacts of resistance.

To preface the following chapter, the 1970s would be the decade when lowriding developed to its fullest. This would be the era when Chicanos began to fabricate aircraft landing gear to hydraulically lift and lower a vehicle at the hit of a switch. This is also when wire wheels, candy and patterned paint jobs, murals on the body panels, cruising and scraping the rear bumper across the boulevard became popular. This is the image lowriders like to think of when reflecting on the golden age of lowriding. This isn't, however, what rhetoric—visual, verbal, and written—has misled the public to believe. Cruising and images of the lowrider cruisers shown in, and spoken of in the media and dominant Anglo-American cultural rhetoric would result in law enforcement coming down hard on the lowriders, much like they did the zoot suiters. The ultimate message was the continued fear and suspicion by the dominant culture of Mexican(-Americans). Lowriders would become a target to profile "gang-banging" Mexicans, and legislation was passed to ban cruising on popular streets, much like wearing a zoot suit was banned. This seems all too familiar, based on the legislation which banned the wearing of the zoot suit in the 1940s. Based on a lack of knowledge about the subordinated Mexican people inhabiting the barrios, dominant Anglo-American society would try to kill what they feared at its root. Nonetheless, one cannot simply kill a culture—and the power of lowriding comes to show that over the years.

Chapter 3: (Aesthetics) at Work: The Strategically (Im-)Practical Mexican-Style Lowrider

Inanimate objects—commodities—are all cultural artefacts, on conscious and subconscious levels. The commodity, as John Fiske argues, "can be used by the [individual] to construct meanings of self, of social identity and social relations" (Fiske 9). Automobiles reflect culture, and have the ability to create subcultures, as we see with hot-rod car and lowrider cultures. These artistic, cultural forms have stemmed from the *customization* of the cars themselves.

In terms of automotive history and customization, the act of customizing a car itself became more popular as they became more readily available and affordable to people. The public began to notice that just about *anything* can be done to an automobile, according to one's creative mind and skill. Customization of various degrees and *styles* began as early as the 1930s, where style reflects one's culture, experience, socioeconomic, and ethnic background. Lowriding is a popular cultural art form which *raza* use to express themselves; lowriders are a reflection of the individual who drives the car. The ideology behind lowriders—both the people and car—is not aesthetically in keeping with the dominant. Thus, lowriding, through its politics of difference, celebrates itself as a barrio tradition which rejects dominant Anglo-American culture and its traditions—traditions of hegemony, discrimination, and "proper" aesthetic forms.

The pleasures *lowriders* experience from their culture are *popular pleasures.* John Fiske's definition of popular pleasures is in defense of this argument:

> Popular pleasures must be those of the oppressed, they must contain elements of the oppositional, the evasive, the scandalous, the offensive, the vulgar, the resistant. The pleasures offered by ideological conformity are muted and are hegemonic; they are not popular pleasures and work in opposition to them. (Fiske 101)

Lowrider-style customization, therefore, works in opposition to dominant Anglo-American style customization. Just as pachuco and social club culture were rejected, lowriding has been

historically rejected as well because, like its precedent Mexican(-American) subcultures, it has posed a threat to social order.

Every minute detail in customization makes a difference and can make a vehicle reflect one cultural style or another; the customization of cars has no limit or parameters—it can be something as simple as modifying a vehicle by adding or deleting accessories or changing the tires. Taken to extreme measures, it can include setting a body on another car or truck's frame, chopping a car's roof, or adapting a whole different drivetrain. Wheels and tires, suspension and steering, drivetrain, body and paint, interior upholstery, and accessories all make a difference on a custom car.

Important to note is that not only modification, but addition or deletion/removal of any of a vehicle's parts is to be considered customization. The possibilities of what can be done to a car or truck to accomplish a different look are just about endless. This is one of the main ideas behind creative customization, *to be different.* Robert Martinez, a veteran San Diego car painter, explains that *style* is achieved by customizing a car to not look anything like "a million other cars sitting on the road," (qtd. in Pulido, 2014, 16:49). The interesting aspect to car customization is, despite the fact that a vehicle is ultimately a machine with metal parts, the style to which this machine is finished reflects one's cultural values and experiences. Situated in this context, 'Lowrider' vehicles reflect Mexican culture and style, whereas 'Hot Rod' vehicles reflect the dominant Anglo-American culture. Adapting Fiske's language, Hot Rods and Lowriders (on both sides of the border) begin with American produced "commodities," that is, American cars. These commodities can be used to participate and step outside of the boundaries of American values. I find it interesting, then, that car customization becomes political and carries the potential of causing social disorder to dominant white Anglo America. On a similar note,

although both types of custom vehicle defy the originality of any produced vehicle, I've found that *Hot Rods* are socially acceptable, namely because the builders are most often White Anglo-Americans. *Lowriders*, on the other hand, are seen as impractical and even as a waste of a car. The same historical patterns of negative discourse which deem Mexican(-American) pachucos and social club members have followed lowriders, the vehicles and drivers. For perpetuators of the dominant culture, lowriders are symbolic of the stereotypical Mexican violent criminal. Just that easily, the lowrider car became an object of fear, and thus a target for racial profiling in the streets. Finally, this section attempts to set the record straight as to what lowriding culture is, and why the public negative perceptions are mistaken.

At a Glance: Lowriders vs. Hot Rods (Icon for Icon)

I'd like to take this opportunity to remind my audience that while I understand (and am proud to recognize) that lowriding would eventually play significant roles in other ethnic cultures, the limits of this thesis allow me to only address and narrow the focus down to lowrider culture in its original context. This research therefore defines and addresses lowriders in a cultural-studies context, as the Mexican-style vehicles *and* individuals who faced oppression as they were simultaneously profiled by dominant Anglo-society based on their distinctive style cars which have the *low n' slow* Mexican lowrider appearance. In *Lowrider Space*, Ben Chappell observes that "[the] negotiation of lowrider aesthetics [runs] parallel with a negotiation of identity" (Chappell 18). Chappell's claim is in support of what has thus far been discussed, yet I add: While traditional Mexican(-American) lowriders share in common connection to a Mexican-*meztizo*—or indigenous heritage (Calderón and Saldívar 4), there are lowriders who through their art express their more personal interests. For instance, particular *car clubs* make space for interests which transcend endless boundaries—which include race, gender, and

ethnicity. Though they will be discussed in Chapter 5, some examples of lowrider clubs which mix cultural and social interests are Christian-based lowrider clubs and women's car clubs.

The lowrider vehicles and individuals have been historically viewed as impractical by dominant Anglo-American culture, and as a direct result became targeted by the law when seen cruising. Systematic oppression aside, the Mexican(-Americans) building these cars saw the "impractical" nature of their vehicles to be very practical, however, and I'll explain how, beginning with the car and its own politics of difference.

In order to understand what distinguishes a lowrider, it is essential to juxtapose it (in Saussaurian terms) with its binary opposition—the hot rod. While lowriders differ from many standard or otherwise custom cars, the comparisons are numerous, and I find this one to have most purchase. I situate lowriders right up against hot rods because not only in the car realm, but culturally speaking, the two are very distinct. I'd like to remind my audience of the significant fact that although lowriders are today driven by people of diverse ethnic backgrounds, historically they've had Mexican cultural influence and thus reflect this style.

The "hot rod," is first of all *aesthetically* pleasing within dominant Anglo-American culture and thus falls within dominant "aesthetic standards" for a car. It has a very noticeable style: Often times the car is painted a single bright color, and has minimal exterior enhancers, such as accessories or chrome trim. It is aptly called *fast n' loud.* The idea behind this is that the heart of the hot rod is the running gear—from the built-to-perform engine to the racing wheels and tires. This *fast n' loud* style and the nostalgic longing for this style can be seen in films such

as *Grease* and *American Graffiti*, which also seem to be a nostalgic longing for the hegemony which was even stronger in the time periods the films take place in.

Figure 3.1 *American Graffiti Film Cover*

The Ford Roadster, which is featured in the film *American Graffiti* (1973) immediately comes to mind as a symbolic icon of an Anglo-American style hot rod. Start off with an early 1930's Ford body and make it into a (dominantly defined) cool, fast and loud car. Such was accomplished by chopping the top, either to shorten the roof or give the car the appearance of a convertible. Stock rims were removed and replaced with aluminum wheels with large tires. Often times, the tire sizes were staggered, meaning the tires were large and fat in the back, and thin and short in the front. The hot rod's ride height followed this pattern—high in the back, and low in the front. As far as a hot rod's running gear, it was not uncommon for a hot rodder to remove the original 6 cylinder engines and replace with a performance V-8 engine. This was

done with the intention of a hot rod being *fast n' loud*, like the slogan often associated with hot rods. These hot rods are often finished with bright colored paint jobs, and sometimes have flames to give a sporty look to the car. Drivers were known to remove chrome from their hot rods to enhance the shiny paint, wheels, and *engine*, which I should add, was often exposed.

The vehicle in the film's poster embodies many of the discussed common traits of an Anglo-style custom hot rod. The '32 Roadster on this poster was featured in the film and has become legendary in its own sense. The film, which portrays teenage life in dominant American culture in 1962, focuses on car customization and racing. The viewer will notice, however, that it only focuses on dominant-style hot rods, despite the historic presence of lowriders at the time and place the film is set (Modesto, California). Thus, the film could be read as a call for nostalgia for what "once was" a great era of living and car building. Such a production lacked Mexican-style custom cars, however. It comes with no surprise, then, that the film has no lowriders nor a diverse cast—although Mexican(-Americans) were certainly around the imaginary setting.

By contrast, based on a long history, lowriders require a precise definition. As a reminder, the term *lowrider* refers to two bodies: a vehicle and an individual. The manifestations of the lowrider can be seen in almost every aspect of a lowrider individual's lifestyle, which I shall later explain. The lowrider car is one of the most influential popular Mexican-based symbol of resistance to dominant America culture. While in lowriding there is controversy as to what defines the traditional "lowrider" car— its essence nonetheless lies in its "ability to oppose, resist, evade, or offend [the] forces" of dominant culture (Fiske 106). This is a phenomenon which had been with pachuco culture and styled vehicles, and by Mexican(-American) social club members of the 1950s who lowered their cars. The term lowrider however implies the lowrider vehicle as known in the style car which embodies particular attributes which evolved in

the late 1960s and 1970s. In his text, *Lowriders in Chicano* Culture, Charles Tatum offers a comprehensive way of distinguishing lowrider vehicles:

> Today, lowrider vehicles are customized cars, bicycles, tricycles, motorcycles, trucks, and vans that have been altered in the following style, which may include the following elements: the lowering of the vehicle; the addition of accessories; the use of hydraulics and plush interior for cars, trucks and vans; elaborately painted vehicles; the refurbishing of a vehicle's interior including its upholstery, and the addition of decorative art on the exterior of the vehicles. (Tatum 13)

Each of these elements indeed give a lowriders their signature *gangster* look—in an aesthetic sense. The lowrider style can however be traced to pachuco-style cars which can be seen in the late 1930s and 1940s. During this time, Anglo-Americans built their cars for speed and performance, while Mexican car builders fixed cars for class, style, and a touch of originality. In order to do so, Mexican youth would start with *pachuco style cars* and *bombs*—as they were affordable. The first *bomb* which comes to mind when thinking of a pachuco-style O.G. (original or original gangster) bomb is the 1948 Chevrolet Fleetline.

Figure 3.2 Bueno, Stephanie and Jae. *1948 Chevrolet Fleetline - The Town I Live in.*

The above 1948 Chevy Fleetline Aerosedan was a popular pachuco-style car and, as an ancestor to the lowrider, is still is a very desirable car to fix as a lowrider or original classic today. While the above '48 is close to original, it has a lowrider touch. The visual provides a great example of an O.G. lowrider-style bomb. It has many of the traits inherited from Mexican car customizers in the early 1940s and beyond: While this Fleetline has an original style paint job and original exterior parts, it is loaded with accessories. This is one of the traits that makes a lowrider-style car: Typically, lowrider individuals shoot to accessorize their car with as much chrome and additional manufacturer options as possible, to give the car a clean, classy look. For instance, this car has original license plates, hubcaps, spotlights, fog lights, bumper and grill guards, bumper wrap arounds (also known as wing-tips), an antenna, fender skirts, and an exterior sunvisor. Quite interestingly, many times the accessories found on lowriders are often removed from Anglo-American car builders and with luck, found by *raza* building their cars.

Figure 3.3 McGaffin, Robert. *Multicultural: George Pavell's 1948 Chevy Fleetline*

An example of this type of scenario would be the above dominant hot rod style 1948 Chevy Fleetline compared to the former O.G. lowrider bomb style Fleetline pictured. I purposely utilize these two images to accomplish the visual projection of aesthetic differences between the essentially same model—although the first reflects the subordinate Mexican lowrider style, whereas the latter resembles the dominant Anglo hot rod style. Side by side, the differences are difficult to miss: As a first point of analysis, the hot rod has an overall much plainer look, which has a lot to do with the absence of chrome and accessories. The hot rod doesn't have a fraction of the original accessories the lowrider style Fleetline does—as an immediate example, the hot rod has no visor. It isn't unusual for an exterior sunvisor to be removed from a hot rod and sold for a cheap price to a lowrider, who values it much more.

Further differences between the pictured lowrider and hot rod-style Fleetlines include the paint, wheels, tires, interior, running gear, and ride height. Whereas the lowrider-style Fleetline has a classic color, artillery wheels, gangster whitewalls, original-style cloth interior, an original "straight six" engine, and is low all around, the hot rod-style Fleetline has a metallic paint job which is non-concurrent with its era; it has large staggered aftermarket wheels and tires, its interior has newer-style bucket seats and is finished with white leather upholstery; the car has a v8 engine and drivetrain built for performance, and finally, the car stands high in the rear and low in the front. Overall, the car's style is much more modern, which in itself hints at the difference in cultural and commodity values within an individual. With stereotypes in mind and respect to each owner, it so happens that the first lowrider-style Fleetline is owned by a Mexican-American, whereas the hot rod pictured is owned by an Anglo-American. I mention this to defend my point that each style of customization reflects the experience and background of the owner. One last detail important to note before proceeding is the general nature of each photo:

The photos of each car express "low and slow," and "fast and loud," respectively. The first strikes a low pose, close to the ground, and appears to have no rush to get anywhere, other than in style. The second, however, burns out as the photo is taken, and there are tire marks in front of the vehicle, as though the car had been doing burnouts. One final thought—this detail reflects the values of speed and racing within dominant American culture—which are socially acceptable and even praised—yet the value of cruising slowly, in style, has historically been rejected.

Aesthetically speaking, the hot rod and lowrider version of the same vehicle are worlds apart. If we're all car lovers, however, the why should hot rodders look down on lowriders? In other words, why should the historically dominant Anglo-American culture, preach negative rhetoric regarding Mexicans(-Americans) and their lowriders, implying that "all lowriders are gangbangers?" (Chappell 21). Hot rods are practical and acceptable, while lowriders are socially unacceptable.

Choices of Culturally Different Cars: What they are and why

Because when dealing with lowriders, we're talking about a very particular population which tended to be of a lower social class, used cars tended to be the preference. While Mopar and Ford models were available, the *raza* preference for lowrider builds are vehicles made by General Motors, especially Chevrolets, also known as "Chevys." These used cars were practical in that they were affordable and there were and are a lot of parts readily available. In blatant words, a young Mexican(-American) could mess one of these old Chevys up and "go get another one," as Ernie Ruelas from the Dukes Car Club stated when interviewed in Dr. Denise Sandoval's "The Politics of Low and Slow/*Bajito y Suavecito*" (Sandoval 195).

The Fleetline earlier shown and discussed is an example of an "O.G." pachuco-style car. The acronym has two meanings: "original gangster," and it can also be simplified as "original."

Any lowrider can be fixed O.G. style, with a flavor of lowrider, as the first 1948 Fleetline pictured exemplifies. Nonetheless pachuco style cars, which would have an influence on lowriders as we know them today, have very particular style which gave a "gangster look:" These cars were lowered, had sleek body lines, often fast backs, and had accessories such as whitewall tires and fender skirts which made the cars look lower. This was the first instance of Mexican-style car customization. Before 1940s models such as the Fleetline Aerosedans, even older popular cars for achieving the *gangster* look were Chevys of the mid-1930's—both 2 door coupes and 4 door models which came with factory suicide doors. The style of cars, then, resembled those vehicles of Al Capone's era. It can thus be argued that even the choice of vehicle Chicanos began with were strategically chosen, for they already had an image of being used by rebels of society. This isn't to say Mexican(-Americans) used their vehicles for gang activity, however. The choice came from a few factors: practicality, accessibility, and most importantly, *freedom of expression*.

The 1950s was an astounding era for the car customizing realm, both in the United States and in Mexico. I'd like to point to the fact, however, that while Mexican youth in the borderlands were still driving and customizing pachuco-style cars which would later be recognized as lowriders, many dominant Anglo-American individuals invested their interest and efforts in building vehicles for performance. Quite the contrary of the Mexican preferred manufacturer, hot rods were mainly built from Ford-produced vehicles, although like lowriders and as shown earlier, can be made from just about any car. Most popular models however included Ford Roadsters, coupes, and cars by Mercury (also made by Ford). The 1932 Ford Roadster (as featured in *American Graffiti*) is one of the most popular vehicles amongst hot rods, much like the 1948 Fleetline and 1964 Chevrolet Impala are popular amongst lowriders.

One interesting thing is that Anglo-American hot rodders adapt Chevy engines in Fords, yet Mexican-style Chevrolets used for lowriders are viewed as impractical—which is ironic in its own sense. On one last side note, there are certain Chevys that weren't so often used as lowriders; the tri-five models (1955 through 1957) are exemplary cars which weren't as popular because they were more expensive. They are very nice, desirable cars, although more often Anglo-Americans build these 1955 through 1957 Chevys into hot rods and muscle cars. These cars absolutely make great candidates for beautiful lowriders, too, but aren't as practical because of their cost. This brings up an important point: Just about any vintage vehicle can start off as original, yet it can become a hot rod or lowrider. This, of course, depends on the owner and taste, which usually comes from his or her socioeconomic and cultural background, which we here begin to explore.

With time, the influence of lowriding would inspire owners of all sorts of vehicles, including export cars and trucks. For the most part, however, a 2 door Chevy was an ideal candidate for a lowrider. Popular models built to lowrider style include *bombs, Impalas, G-Bodies,* mid-70s cars, and more. *Bombs* are considered vehicles which were manufactured between 1934 and 1954. *Impalas* are the step-up model from the Chevrolet Bel-Air, which started being manufactured in 1958 up until this day. In particular, 1962 through 1964 Impalas are very iconic for the lowrider image. Despite this, however, models up through the 1970s and Caprice models are popular for customizing lowrider-style. A *G-Body* is a General Motors-made vehicle made between 1978 and 1988. These vehicles are square shaped and much shorter than early and mid-1970s vehicles, which are often very long like *lanchas*, or boats. *G-Bodies* include the Monte Carlo, Grand Prix, Cutlass, Regal, and similar short body-style Cadillacs.

Something about these cars simply have a gangster, barrio look. Having spoken to other lowriders, there isn't one particular trait about the above GM cars which accomplishes this look—they simply make great candidates and look more "gangster" than Ford-made vehicles. While the 1930s bombs originally have suicide doors, which gives the gangster look, Chevrolets and GM cars in the later years are simply desirable cars for lowriders because they are. One theory which makes sense is that the reason for this is that the cars *aren't Fords*, which goes in hand with my argument that the popular cultural art form of lowriding is intentionally shaped in opposition to the forces and values of the dominant.

Especially from the perspective of lowriders, Fords are Anglo-American style cars; they are made for the hot rodder. Fords are the acceptable cars by the standards of the dominant culture, and thus GM cars and Chevy's intentionally distinguish themselves as something "other" than that; the car choice is the first element of embracement and celebration of difference. Nonetheless, regardless of the idea that lowrider vehicle choice combines deliberate selectivity along with other factors, "Lowrider style [does not] define a consensual set of criteria or a static list of visual or mechanical devices so much as it constitute[s] a space of aesthetic experimentation, evaluation, and debate . . . What matter[s] [is] that someone had intervened in the car's aesthetics, leaving a [particularly cultural] mark of innovation" (Chappell 18).

Figure 3.4 Felix the Cat Visual Rhetoric (personally gifted homemade t-shirt, owned by author)

I conclude this section by offering an analysis of this rhetorical image made by a Mexican-American lowrider from Los Angeles. Every detail of this image says something about the Mexican(-American) style lowrider and culture. The choice and style of car is one major element—it is a Pachuco-style 1939 Chevy. It is low to the ground, the front end is accessorized with factory guards and fog lights, and the windshield has an exterior Fulton-style sunvisor. The license plate's text is significant in its own sense because of the weight the term "boulevard" carries for the lowrider. Felix the Cat signifies the historic Los Angeles Chevrolet dealership; Los Angeles (the city) is in the background. The 39 Chevy is outlined by both a gold-plated lowrider chain type steering wheel, and surrounding that are feathers. These feathers resemble the Aztec culture, which is close to both Mexican and lowrider culture. While the text contains vulgar language, it is very realistic in that it is a direct commentary which takes pride in the impractical lowrider Chevrolet. Thus I featured this shirt's image, because it speaks back to the dominant Hot Rod style Ford. Finally, the helicopter overlooks all of this: the helicopter

searches through the ghetto Los Angeles barrios to target the stereotyped lowriders—but the lowrider peacefully and proudly cruises. This is why the joyful Felix the Cat is an appropriate addition to the visual piece of art.

Low and Slow **Lowrider Car Resistance:**

The lowrider must live up to its name and is by nature is low. There are many references in lowrider culture as thus far discussed which refer to the lowrider as "low n' slow." The first element to this slogan is ride height, while the latter is cruising as a slow speed. This section provides an overview of what different lowrider elements allow this to be achieved, and how its final product works in opposition to "fast and loud" vehicles.

i. **Ride Height: Low**

Riding low is the first rejection to standard cars. Lowriders traditionally did a variety of things to achieve a low ride height—and cost is a major factor for Mexican car customizers—who as I've mentioned, tended to be of lower socioeconomic class. This meant being creative: To lower a car, a lowrider individual could do something as simple and inexpensive as purchasing sand or concrete bags to carry inside their trunks and weigh the rear down and low. Doing so would make a lowrider low in the back and high in the front, which is an oppositional ride stance to the antithetical hot rod, which sits vice versa as seen in the earlier examples.

Other methods of lowering lowriders still utilize today include removing leaf springs in the rear, cutting or heating coil springs in the front, adding lowering blocks between leaf springs and the rear axle; there are many ways to lower a car inexpensively. The issue is *getting the car up.* Air shocks are an affordable option, but require an individual to manually add air much like adding an air to a tire. These methods are impractical in that the factory suspension must be

sacrificed, but prove to be practical for lowriders because they are affordable methods which give results lowrider individuals desire—the "low" look.

ii. <u>Wheels & Tires:</u>

Wheels and tires contribute to the "low" aspect of Mexican-style lowriders. Typically, the unwritten rule for these lowriders is that the car should have, at the largest, factory sized wheels and tires which were originally installed on a given model. Many lowriders however tend to run smaller tire sizes—one can still utilize original rims and hubcaps/wheel covers, but run a smaller than factory tire. The lowrider-style 1948 Fleetline shown earlier is an example of this: the wheels and tires had an original appearance and style, but the tires were the size of tires used on a Volkswagen Beetle (5.60-15), a popular lowrider gangster white wall size. Other lowriders preferred to utilize aftermarket wheels—this became very popular in the 1970s and 1980s, and again, these wheel/tire outfits would be short in size. There's something about tire and wheel size that speaks to the lowrider individual's sense of class. Smaller rim and tire combinations tend to be preferred not only to lower the overall ride height of the lowrider, but again speaking to style and class, "Other cars—they love that style of a hot rod, bigger tires, burning rubber; with me, it was to the ground. It's just us," as Toby Martinez from the Amigos car club states (qtd. in Pulido, 2014, 34:35-34:45).

Spoke wire wheels of various brands which became popular amongst lowriders include Dayton, Zenith, and Tru-Spoke wheels. Of the wheels most interestingly found both on lowriders and hot rods were Cragars and Supremes. There are two ways to tell how the wheel is being used and for what look to achieve, however: One way to tell is by evaluating the context—meaning the rest of the car's composition, and another is by noting rim and tire size. The same principle applies to lowriders who run aftermarket and original wheels: Typically, lowriders

don't ever go larger—only the same or smaller. Especially when utilizing aftermarket custom wheels, then, they'd be accompanied by small *bias ply* whitewall tires. As far as these aftermarket custom wheels such as Cragars, Supremes, and popular wire wheels, 13 and 14 inch are most often used on lowrider vehicles. The bias ply tire finished the wheel/tire outfit. Traditionally, the 5.20 bias ply tire was used, and the significance of this is that bias ply tires are no longer in use. New passenger cars—and typically, hot rods—utilize *radial tires*, the standard tire in the automotive industry today. Radial tires have been accepted by the automotive industry as the replacement to bias ply tires both because their design proves to be safer, more economy efficient, and they simply perform better on today's advanced roads and increased highway speed limits. It makes sense that based on these advantages—and availability in large sizes—radial tires are preferred by hot rodders. Performance, speed, and fuel efficiency aren't so much a concern for lowriders, however, as the idea is to arrive in style, not fast. Thus, to this day, many lowriders continue to run bias ply tires, which are even more difficult to find. We can therefore say that lowriders go out of their way today—just as they did then—to be stylistically different.

iii. <u>Slow as Resistance:</u>

Drivetrains—which include the vehicle's engine, transmission, and drive axle—can either be modified to be ready for slow cruising, or for racing and performance. Whereas lowrider cruisers are built to *cruise*, hot rods are often built to be loud and fast. Lowrider cruisers tend to not be interested racing and speed, signature dominant Anglo values. Charles Tatum frames this concept:

> The hot rod was designed primarily for speed and racing, but the [lowrider] custom car was modified primarily to achieve a specific style, with the goal of showing off the vehicle by traveling slowly down city streets. The customized car were commonly

> described as 'low and slow,' the very look that would later be associated with the vehicles that, beginning in the 1950s, would be referred to as "lowrider" cars, and whose owners . . . were not at all interested in powerful motors and speed. (Tatum 4)

As can be seen in hot rod car culture, and as reflected in films including *American Graffiti* and *Grease*, the hot rodder's way of achieving the "fast n' loud" style is by adding a beefy engine and drivetrain. One of the main foci of a hot rod's custom finish is thus having a modifying or updated replacement engine for performance. The noise of a loud hot rod is incomparable to a loud lowrider—for better or for worse, depending how one sees it. Many things contribute to a hot rod's sound, but most obvious are the engine's overall composition, and the exhaust. Typically, hot rods utilize aftermarket headers and/or noticeably large exhaust pipes, which are thicker in diameter than original pipes. The hot rod sounds like an Anglo-style drag race car; the influence of hot rodding can be seen in the popular NASCAR sport, which held its first public race in 1948. In concurrence with the argument thus presented, the first car to win a NASCAR race was an early Ford model. In sum, the term "fast n' loud" suits the hot rod well because of its noticeable performance and sound, and its influence can be seen still in Anglo-American culture.

The "slow" aspect to lowrider culture is a direct form resistance and response to dominant hot rods which were made for performance, speed, and racing. This began with the drivetrains of lowriders. Unlike typical hot rods, lowrider cars embrace their original running gear. This means keeping the straight 6 engines in bombs, or *factory* v8s in newer models. Traditionally, lowriders would fix what the car came with—fix "what they have." Reasons for this include the following: 1) It was more economic and parts were readily available; 2) The original drivetrains may make for a fast car, but speed isn't a common lowrider interest, and 3) Replacement with modern running gear takes away from the vehicle's class and originality.

Finally, an implicit concept behind these three reasons is that modernization of an old car takes away the craft and pleasure of the building process. Craft, after all, plays a large role in being a creative lowrider. Further, one rhetorical question a lowrider may ask a hot rod is, "If one is going to fix a classic car to be modern, why not just buy a new car and leave the classic close to original?" Again, this points to the overarching idea of different values between the dominant and subordinate.

iv. Cruising: A Lowrider's Canvas for Low n' Slow Artistic Expression of Difference & its Manifestations

Not to be confused with showing off, cruising is the lowrider's way of presenting one's artistic style and hard work. Finally, cruising is done "low n' slow." Cruising is the antithesis of Anglo-American hot rod's "fast n' loud" racing. Cruising must take place on busy streets, so as to be able to make one's art expose itself. Cruising gives the lowrider artist the opportunity to show his or her craftsmanship and hard work. When cruising, there is no rush to get to a destination. It is, as a saying goes, not to make good time, but to have a good time. Cruising provides the opportunity for lowriders to "bump," or play their favorite music—often oldies. Cruising provides the opportunity to express one's *extent* of connection with their culture and identity; for example, the louder the music, or if playing Mexican music, the more pride is being expressed in the moment. Cruising is a time to be one's self, and can be done either alone or with others, although I'd say the latter is more pleasurable. Cruising, Rigo Reyes contends, is the "essence of being a lowrider" (qtd. in Pulido, 2014, 44:15).

Original lowriders recognize the fact that cruising (as done at the peak of lowriding's history) comes from the streets and is originally done in the streets, not organized events. Because, like pachuco, social club, and Mexican(-American) barrio culture, lowriding has its roots *in the streets*, the streets was the ultimate venue to show one's lowrider, to show one's

pride. "The streets" is a character in lowriding's narrative; it is the birthplace of lowriding. Prior to major shops dedicated to lowrider customs, everything came from the streets, much like the name of Alberto Pulido's documentary, which is an essential source to this research. Because cruising is one of the strongest ways of asserting one's lowrider style and multicultural pride, it was once very popular. This brought attention to the wrong people, once again, however. Once again, the forces of dominant Anglo-American hegemonic culture came down on lowrider culture. Recognizing cruising as something essential to lowriders just as the zoot suit was essential to the pachuco/a individual, law enforcement did what they could to kill lowrider culture at its heart. This brings us to one of the most "impractical" signature elements of lowriders which came about as a necessity: hydraulics.

v. Hydraulics as Resistance:

As discussed, some cars are modified to sit high in the rear, and low in the front, while others stand vice versa or simply low in a parallel fashion. These different ride heights and stances reflect the style of car. Today some cars can be raised or dropped at the hit of a switch with the installation of hydraulics or airbags. While today this is a luxury and fashion for cars, if you will, historically, there was a very specific purpose and need for switches. Lowriders founded the concept of switches to raise and lower ride height on custom cars; their trademark is *hydraulics*, which came as a result of resistance to racial profiling.

While car lowering dates back to the 1930s and 1940s as earlier discussed, there became an essential need for an alternative way to change the ride height of vehicles due to police harassment. In this sense, Mexican-style car lowering began as resistance to standard vehicle ride height, but car "lifting" came as a resistance to profiling Mexican(-Americans) received for

driving low and slow. Charles Tatum documents the systematic targeting of lowriders in the Los Angeles area:

> It was not until the late 1950s that the low and slow cruisers began to be systematically harassed by law enforcement officials, especially traffic policemen . . . This behavior was a continuation of decades of animosity between Mexican American communities and the media, public officials, and law enforcement that had peaked during World War II. The pretext for stopping a cruiser was that it was too low and causing damage by scraping the paved or cemented surface of a city street. There was growing public concern and media coverage of the long lines of Mexican American-owned vehicles cruising slowly up and down Whittier Boulevard in Los Angeles and the main streets of other cities such as San Diego and Long Beach. Media coverage suggested that cruisers were gangs of roving criminals threatening white residents. Although it is probably true that there were some gang members among the lowriders, the media coverage was grossly exaggerated to the point of causing a public outcry. Pressure on politicians resulted in the California legislature passing a law in 1959 prohibiting the use of any vehicle with any part of it below the rim base. (Tatum 11).

Often associated with the traditional lowrider, therefore, are hydraulics. Traditionally, a hydraulic system on an automobile was added to lower and raise the vehicle at the driver's discretion. Tensions were building between law enforcement and lowrider cruisers, and lowrider individuals found themselves becoming targeted. Eventually, lowrider-style vehicles were becoming built and purchased from non-Mexican or Chicano individuals. Nonetheless, a lowrider became a way to racially profile the driver within.

A hydraulic system begins with a motorized pump, most often found in the trunk of a lowrider. The pump pushes fluid through pressure hoses, ultimately to make way to the *hydraulic cylinders*, which are located at each wheel of a lowrider to support each corner. When pressure is applied, the cylinders extend and raise the vehicle. Hydraulic systems on lowriders must therefore also utilize *dumps*, which allow pressure to be released from the cylinders, making them decompress and bring the vehicle down. All of this is made possible by the power of multiple car batteries, solenoids, and switches. While one battery can work, typical lowriders

use at least two or more separate car batteries (from its original battery to power the vehicle's engine) to give the system sufficient strength and speed. The more batteries one utilizes, the faster a hydraulic pump will send pressure through the system, resulting in a faster lift. The only components which make their way inside the lowrider are the *switches*, which signal the entire system. These switches activate the solenoids to engage either the pump or dump, ultimately resulting in the car's ride height going up or down.

While hydraulics are one of the most exciting features of a lowrider, they weren't always the way they are today: "There was no manual that a [person] could go to," as Henry Rodriguez, a veteran member from the Brown Image Car Club states (qtd. in Pulido, 2014, 35:25). On the same note, one couldn't buy vehicle-specific components to build a system. The earliest of hydraulics on lowriders were systems made of surplus aircraft materials. In particular, the landing gear was what lowrider used. Eddie "Swoopy" Martinez recalls going to an army surplus store called Palley's Supply in Los Angeles, and purchasing parts from the flying fortress bombers, which were used during World War II. These once symbolically patriotic tools—commodities—for the patriotic war effort were being used for Mexican-style lowriders. These American parts were used to the advantage of stereotyped Mexican(-Americans) who didn't wish to be targeted by dominant Anglo-Americans, those in power. In this sense, these American-made parts—these commodities—which were used to support American values, the war effort, were strategically used by Mexican(-American) lowriders. This would fit John Fiske's statement that not only is every American commodity cultural, but that they have underestimated "semiotic richness," and in the context of a popular culture form such as lowriding, the potential to "signify both a sense of American values and a degree of resistance to them" (Fiske 4).

This ‘impractical’ way of raising a vehicle proved itself to be very practical for the Mexican(-American) to avoid being stopped by law enforcement. Indeed, other traits gave a lowrider its appearance, but the addition of hydraulics was one way to avoid being profiled and targeted. For instance, if a lowrider individual saw a police car from a distance, he or she would lift the vehicle. With a little luck, the lowrider wouldn’t have a reason to be harassed—that is, if the police officer didn’t find another excuse to pull the lowrider over. Nonetheless, hydraulics became a central element to lowrider cars, and while the dominant didn’t understand the concept behind the systems, they knew hydraulics and lowriders went together. In this sense, hydraulics on a car became much like a zoot suit on a Mexican-American: it was a reason to profile and suspect the individual behind the commodity.

On a side note—I remember vividly one particular time I drove my 1954 Chevy Bel Air to a local 7-11, where I was greeted by an elderly Caucasian male. My car, which appears in the following sections, looks original—from the baby blue paint to the tires. The most significant modification I have, however, is hydraulics. It doesn’t show if driving with the car raised up, which is how I had driven up. My Chevy got the man’s attention; he was quick to compliment me, and I could tell he was eager to make small talk as he went on to tell me how my car reminds him of his own youth.

As I thanked the man for his compliment, he asked me whether I have air bags to lower my car—which became popular some time after hydraulics and were seen as safer, more ideal and practical. With this said, even some hot rodders have come around to accept air bags to the point where they have them installed on their cars. I still haven’t seen this happen with hydraulics—in fact, my understanding is that the installation of hydraulics is a selling or breaking point when it comes to selling one’s vehicle—let’s just say I’ve never known any of my lowrider friends in the

community to sell one of their hydraulically equipped cars to an Anglo hot rodder. I can't say I was surprised with how this conversation quickly changed.

I responded, "No, I have hydraulics, actually." The man's facial expression told me everything. As his face became rather serious, and he was quick to say only the word "oh." I figured that was the end of the conversation—which it was, so I wished him a nice rest of his day and he turned and left as I went on into the store. The significance of sharing this memory is that I felt something triggered the man; there must've been some kind of historical burden and or individual experience he felt, and like that, our short moment of connection through admiration for automobiles was over. Perhaps he was hoping I was a more assimilated version of myself, but my hydraulics—the historical signature of a lowrider—told him otherwise.

Lowrider Artistic Resistance:

In terms of the popular and John Fiske's interpretation of dominant aesthetics, we cannot discuss lowriders as aesthetically pleasing, so much as *artistically* pleasing:

> Aesthetics refuses to recognize that people position themselves variously in the social structure and that social differences must produce cultural differences. Aesthetics requires the critic-priest to control the meaning and responses to the texts, and thus requires formal educational process by which people are taught how to appreciate 'great' art . . . Aesthetics is naked cultural hegemony, and popular discrimination [and art forms] properly rejects it. (Fiske 103)

The 'impractical' lowrider vehicle is a piece of cultural art in its entirety. The vehicle is ultimately a tool of self-expression for Mexican descendants. From the choice of car to the way it looks, drives, and sounds, its entire composition is art. When one puts everything into context, it makes sense that lowriders came to be out of practicality, accessibility, and the creative minds of Mexican(-American) individuals. The "impracticality" which the dominant culture sees is the very exciting part about lowriding. The "impractical" represents the intransigent, oppositional,

scandalous set of forces" which John Fiske recognizes to be the popular aspect of the subordinate—in this case—the Mexican(-American) lowriders (Fiske 140). Elements of oppositionality and impracticality give lowriders a self-sense of class and pride in their distinctive overall *style.* There are more artistic elements not explicitly encapsulated by the "low and slow" slogan associated with lowrider vehicles, which I will here try to show my audience.

i. Artistic Chrome, Body & Paint:

Body and paint are arguably some of the most distinguishable artistic features of a custom car. While it can consist of simply repainting a car or changing its color, it can be as crazy as changing the vehicle's bumpers, grill, headlights, tail lights, chopping the roof, modifying the doors and/or deleting the handles, creating or deleting body curves; the list goes on. To add to the style of a lowrider, individuals who build them are very conscious and selective when it comes to doing *body and paint* work. Regardless of the car's final finish, the goal is for body work to be done as straight as possible, and paint as shiny as possible, to give a glass-mirror like image, much like *chrome*.

Chrome, body, and paint go hand in hand with each other, because they complement each other on a lowrider. Although it proves to be hard work, some people prefer to disassemble the entire car rather than masking off parts, so they can achieve the best paint job possible. This means exterior chrome and stainless trim such as bumpers, the front grill, exterior moldings (side trim), window trim, mirrors, emblems, lights, bezels and more are removed at this point. This makes a good time to get chrome re-plated and/or polished. One of the distinctive features of the lowrider is to have more chrome than less, which hints at the difference in level of accessorization for lowriders and hot rods. Whereas Anglo-style hot rods often remove chrome such as the vehicle's original side trim, Mexican-style lowriders tend to add as much chrome as

they can, where appropriate of course. Body, paint, and chrome all pay a key contribution in forming the artistic composition, class, and standard of the lowrider.

Two popular ways of finishing custom lowrider cars are either with a single original color, or by painting the vehicle a candy (or otherwise custom) color. On either style paint job, there are additional details used in lowrider composition, which include: pinstriping, murals, and representational figures—these features carry the potential to create abstract and Bahktian *grotesque* artistic combinations I suggest in Chapter 1. This all has to do with the lowrider car's politics of difference. Charles Tatum explains that in lowrider art, many "representational figures need not be literal representations of objects," and that such figures "may symbolize or suggest ideas and concepts such as cultural pride, religious beliefs, death, and evil (Tatum 94).

Murals are another culturally significant, fine artistic addition to lowrider cars. While the history behind mural artistry requires a lengthy research section of its own, murals are historically known to be painted by Chicana/o artists to give "artistic expression to their political and ideological beliefs" (Tatum 96). The history of the mural therefore shares many themes of rejection in common with the Mexican(-American) symbolic languages thus far discussed. Charles Tatum claims that Chicana/o artists used the mural with the counter hegemonic objective of "bypass[ing] the mainstream cultural 'gatekeepers' who dictated what aesthetic and artistic currents and themes were acceptable for consideration to be included in gallery and museum exhibits and collections" (Tatum 97). As I explain in Chapter 1, the term Chicano is celebratory amongst Mexican(-Americans) who identify with the first part of their hybrid identity. Tatum explains the Chicano movement—which murals depict and play a part in—was an effort to recuperate history and culture, which had been lost as a result of Mexico forfeiting Southwestern states after losing the Mexican-American war in 1848 (Tatum 99). This speaks to the topics of

Mexican assimilation into mainstream Anglo-American society outlined in Chapter 1. Thus, I bring up murals in lowrider art to argue its significant active role as an effort to recuperate and reclaim Mexican culture through the vehicles.

ii. Accessorization: a Reflection of Cultural and Material Value

A vehicle can be either very plain—and more exterior parts and accessories would be removed/deleted to accomplish this 'clean' look, or the vehicle can be very accessorized with lots of 'extras' including factory options available for the year of the vehicle. Like anything, how much an individual chooses to accessorize his or her car is an individual choice. As we've also discussed, there seem to be correlations between the individual's cultural style and level of accessorization, however.

While Anglo-American style hot rods tend to remove accessories from their vehicles—which by the way—makes the accessories available to lowrider individuals at swap meets, estate sales, flea markets, things of that nature—for lowriders, accessories are valued and very sought after. It is as if there are two different markets when buying the same accessories: the Anglo-style hot rodder's market, and the Mexican-style lowrider's market. The latter has much higher prices for the same items, namely because as thus far discussed, chrome parts and original accessories are highly valued. Just to exemplify, the chances are that if someone is looking for something as simple as an original ashtray for a 1954 Chevy, the person will pay little to nothing when purchasing from a hot rodder (who likely removed it from their car for 'cleanliness.' Should that person buy it from another lowrider, who likely "knows what he or she is selling," that person will likely pay significantly more.

I can personally speak to the difference in market values between the in-group and subordinated group, which also reflects cultural values: As a seventeen year old, I worked at a

Discount Tire. A 1954 Chevy—a 2 door Sport Coupe just like mine—showed up for service. It was of the hot rod style, however. I noticed he didn't have a single trim on the car, and asked him whether he was struggling to find it (which isn't uncommon). He responded that he intentionally removed *all of it*, and asked whether I wanted it. I asked how much I could buy the set of trim for, and he responded that he wanted nothing. He told me to go over to his house to pick up the complete set, or he would be throwing them in the garbage soon. He wasn't kidding. Upon picking up the stainless chrome, I asked again how much he wanted, and he said, "seriously, nothing. I don't want it. Take it free or I'll throw it away." I didn't hesitate after hearing how serious he was, so I took it and thanked him. To this day, I tell this story to my lowrider friends, who hardly believe me that I was given a set of chrome which, in our culture, is valued at over five hundred dollars—*if* you can be lucky enough to find it. While we may not see eye to eye as far as style, or may not speak the same car, or even cultural language, there is one common language which gives space for the two culturally distinct individuals to get along: the language of courtesy and kindness.

iii. **Ingenuity & Creativity**

In lowrider culture, everyone wants to have the best. It's part of our pride. Genuine lowriders take pride in their piece of art and aim to have the cleanest ride they can build. Of course, there's a limit which speaks to the idea of build what you can with what you have! What counts is creativity, effort, and *spirit.* Creativity and ingenuity are what fed to the creation of some of the best things that come with the lowrider, the early hydraulics adapted from aircraft as an example. Thus, an important concept in lowrider culture is that creativity can go a long way—in some cases, even further than large amounts of money invested in a lowrider. It is possible for an individual with creativity and ingenuity to build a much nicer car on a budget, at

a fraction of the cost someone spends who doesn't use their creative mind. It isn't uncommon—and it's okay—for an individual to not have their car at a stage they want it to be, which happens because of life priorities. Determination and spirit therefore count above all, and supporting one another. With these traits, a person can artistically accomplish what they desire with their lowrider.

Resistance through Self-expression: The Lowrider Individual

One cannot discuss lowrider culture without discussing the lowrider car *and* individual. With this said, along with style—and perhaps even more so—I re-emphasize a widely shared opinion, that what counts to be a lowrider individual is one's *spirit.* This is an idea I shall here discuss here and revisit in Chapter 5.

As a reminder, some qualities of lowriding apply to the vehicle just as much as they apply to the individual. I'd like to preface the discussion of the lowrider individual with what Alberto Pulido and Rigoberto Reyes label as the "eight qualities of lowriding" in their text, *San Diego Lowriders: A History of Cars and cruising*. They identify them as the following:

1) a creative spirit, 2) an independent spirit, 3), cultural pride with historic moments of cultural renaissance, 4)activism in keeping Chicano lowrider culture alive and vibrant, 5) community service, 6) collectivism, 7) mindful of traditions and rituals, and 8) cultural continuity. (Pulido and Reyes 2017, 15)

One can begin to recognize how some of these standards regard the lowrider in the form of the vehicle, car builder, figure who keeps the culture alive. Pulido and Reyes list these qualities from the Chicano experience, and in that particular context. Some of these qualities have been touched on through discussion of the vehicle, and below will be discussed in regards to the

individual. Ideas formed in this section shall be built upon even further in Chapter 5's discussion of lowrider spirit.

i. Style:

As far as style—a broad term in lowrider culture—Mexican(-American) lowriders generally express their identity through what is now popularly known as the Chicano style. Chicanos also made the *cholo* style popular. This is the very style of wearing Pendleton wool shirts, baggy pants, slicked back or bald hair, and shiny imperial style shoes. Many lowrider individuals have adapted this style of dress, and it can be for a combination of reasons. Again, I acknowledge the reality that *cholos* and *cholas* are a real thing; these males and females from the barrios are those which have engraved a tough image of Chicanos as gang members. Charles Tatum explains that while the term's meaning and way it is used has changed over the years, *cholo/a* have always been something negative. Today, however, many Chicanos who may adapt the style of dress—lowriders included—are stereotyped as violent gang members ready to fight. Tatum explains this phenomenon:

> Just as pacuhcas/os and zoot suiters in the past have sometimes been associated with gang-related violence, cholas/os are sometimes linked negatively to Chicana/o street gangs. Although it is true that the adolescents and young adults who adopt the street style of dress, speech, tattoos, and graffiti are sometimes members of gangs who engage in violent behavior, others prefer to copy the style without joining a gang. (Tatum 50)

Tatum nails the part about some people who adapt the style, although I will admit he seems a bit too forgiving here. Real cholos and cholas *are* gang members who give lowriders and Chicanos a bad name. What once started as defending the barrio became a matter of violence—often time Chicanos on Chicanos from different street gangs. I mentioned that lowriding was made in the streets, in the barrios—and it was, just as cholos and other barrio inhabitants were. Some Mexican-Americans only lived in the barrios, however. Certainly, influence was inevitable—the

music, the style of dressing, and distinct dialect all grow on Mexican youth from the barrios. This means listening to Mexican music and oldies, dressing in dickies pants and plain shirts, and speaking slang—often times *calo*, which was spoken by the pachucos and pachucas.

The many of these practices and stylistic forms are what form the Mexican or Chicano image, yet this image continues to be a greatly misunderstood one, much like the image of "criminal" pachucos and "good gang life" social club members. My point is that some Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, and Chicanos lived in the barrio, thus they were *exposed* and *influenced* by the barrio lifestyle, and thus they have a Chicano look, but that's where their relationship to "the streets" ends. Not all Mexicans or Chicanos/as are rebellious violent people. The innocent suffer the same consequences of the stereotype formed of them, however.

ii. Music:

Music is one of the elements to lowriding which *continues* to play a significant role for Mexican(-Americans) and keeping positive aspects of their lowrider culture alive. While there is no rule as to what type of music a lowrider can listen to—or the type of music which should be played in lowriders—I've found there are a few genres which are favorites in the lowrider community. With this said, anything and everything can be played or listened to by lowrider individuals, but I am here speaking from experience and what I've found to be generally most popular. I'd like to focus mostly on the genres which distinguish lowrider audiences from non Mexican(-American) lowrider audiences—Anglo-American audiences, for instance.

Oldies is unquestionably a favorite genre for Mexican(-American) lowriders. By oldies I do not refer so much to rock bands such as the Beatles or the Beach Boys, which I've found to be more popular amongst individuals of the dominant Anglo-American culture through common conversation with them. When lowriders refer to oldies, they are referring to the oldies played in

the barrios and at lowrider dances. These are *firme* oldies. *Firme* is a word which came from the Mexican(-American) barrios and is part of the *calo* dialect used by Pachucos/as. Although the term translates to "firm," it carries a connotation of being sharp, on point, and 'okay,' as in exceptional. In any case, the term is one of solidarity used by Mexican(-Americans) to describe something positively, including music

In the context of lowrider culture's music, *firme* oldies include many of the doo wops, blues, body/soul, and love songs of the 1950s and 1960s. Many of these songs were so popular that they were recorded by multiple artists, only to their own style. Other times, small bands formed by Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, and Chicanos in the borderlands played covers of these oldies. Much like there can't ever be enough lowriders, there can never be enough Mexican-style oldies bands. Not only do they serve the purpose of practicing the art of music for themselves and the lowrider community, but the very action of playing music is itself an alternative to negative street life. Like lowriding, music for Mexican(-American) lowriders is something which comes from the streets, but a positive cultural amenity.

Popular oldies which are covered by Mexican-style oldies bands and played in lowrider cars can be found in popular compilation albums, which each have multiple albums. To name a few, some of these classic compilations popular amongst lowriders are *East Side Story, Barrio Music Oldies, Oldies But Goodies, Latin Oldies,* and *Lowrider Oldies*, which takes its name from the same company which also created *Lowrider Magazine.* Significantly, these oldies popular amongst lowriders are typically composed by ethnic minorities. For instance, "Motor Town," Detroit played a historical role in releasing many records by African-American groups and artists such as Smokey Robinson, Mary Wells, Marvin Gaye, the Jacksons, The Supremes, The Temptations, Four Tops and more. The influence of Motown can be heard in similar style oldies

which are popular amongst lowriders, which I add again, are often composed by African-American individuals. There is something to be said about this, that minorities support minorities, even when it comes to preference in music.

Although I didn't personally grow up through the era when these oldies were made, I've lived to experience its influence and legacy. As I discuss minority music amongst Mexican(-American) individuals, I recall an experience in a record store in Encinitas, California circa 2013. I purchased a record by the African American Rock n' Roll artist, Little Richard. This record included the song "Tutti Frutti." An elder Caucasian shopper saw I had picked up the record and it got his attention. He proceeded to tell me that growing up during the 1950s, *he* secretly liked Little Richard's music, but his parents didn't. One of his favorites was "Tutti Frutti," which was also composed by an Anglo-American artist by the name of Pat Boone. The man who told me this said that as a child he had to buy both records, and slip Little Richard's into Pat Boone's sleeve. He said he threw away Pat Boone's record because the song "had no kind of rhythm or taste compared to Little Richard's." This goes to show how even some Anglo-Americans resist their own historically conservative dominant hegemonic culture, which was resistant to change. This individual's parents, however—in their attempt to assert their superiority—wanted to teach him "good vs. bad" music based on a racist discourse. This echoes the rejection of Mexican-style car customizing—lowriding.

Reception and Systematic Action against the Lowrider Movement:

The racial profiling and systematic discrimination against lowriders echoed that of the pachucos and zoot suit riots against pachucos. George Sanchez, a historian in Zoot Suit Riots views the targeting of pachucos by sailors a "search and destroy" military-type technique (qtd. in Tovares, 2002, 34:14). History repeats itself through lowriding; this strategy which Sanchez labels goes beyond the metaphor; it proves to be utilized once again by the forces of dominant Anglo-American hegemonic culture against lowriders. In the case of lowriding, it would be the dominant public who would frown upon and resent the presence of lowriders. Law enforcement, however, would put the hegemony to effect and do their best to outlaw the unwanted culture. The lowrider became a tool to racially profile, much like the zoot suit was for Mexican pachucos/as. Thus, much like sailors would 'search and destroy' zoot suiters, the same attempt would be taken towards lowrider vehicles and individuals.

Lowriding has thus far been discussed as a popular cultural art form and tradition. It takes car customization into an aesthetic which simply isn't accepted as aesthetically pleasing to the dominant hegemonic Anglo-American culture, which much prefers the hot rod. It combines car culture with aspects from barrio culture, to unite people with similar popular interest which defy the rules of dominant art and culture. With this said, the resistive lowrider movement falls under what John Fiske below outlines:

> [These] resistances are those of evasion, of getting around social control, of dodging the discipline over self and others that those with power attempt so insistently to exert. Anything out of control is always a potential threat, and always calls up moral, legal, and aesthetic powers to discipline it. The signs of the subordinate out of control terrify the forces of order (whether moral, legal, or aesthetic), for they constitute a constant reminder of both how fragile social control is and how it is resented; they demonstrate how escaping social control, even momentarily, produces a sense of freedom. (Fiske 56)

This culture of resistance, which has historically allowed self-expression for subordinated Mexican descendants, frightens the dominant culture for, as Fiske argues, their sense of stability and dominance is at stake. Not only does the antithetical hot rod *car* culture—a subculture from dominant Anglo-American culture—respond to lowrider culture 'aesthetically' speaking, but the perpetuators of its rhetoric, law enforcement, have also responded by putting the rhetoric to work and designing laws to attempt to stop the lowriding movement.

One example of negative rhetoric against lowriders is featured in Alberto Pulido's documentary, *Everything Comes from the Streets.* Featured on the documentary is a segment from "10 News," assumingly in the late 1970s, which reports on lowriders. Interestingly, an apparently Mexican(-American) by the name of Leonard Villareal begins his news story by stating: "We've looked at the fun and the spirit of the lowrider, but there's also a serious side to the attention these cars and drivers receive. It seems for many lowrider trouble of various degrees seems to follow" (qtd in Pulido, 2014, 45:25). Not only is this yet another "sell-out" disappointing moment for other Chicano viewers, but this is the type of news media coverage which fed the public negative discourse about lowriding. It is evident that this example shows how a Mexican(-American) can assimilate and become influenced by dominant Anglo-American values, and particularly how media coverage of this type influenced the public perception about lowriders.

Mentioned earlier is the "essence" of cruising within lowrider culture suggested by Rigo Reyes. This tradition, which became very popular in the 1970s, brought the most attention and awareness of what would prove to be a misunderstood culture—positive and negative. The positive attention and awareness obviously got more people involved, and led to this 'golden era' of lowriding—an era when lowriders filled busy streets and boulevards in cities such as San

Diego and Los Angeles. It simultaneously raised attention of people who, as Eddie "Swoopy" Galindo says, "weren't understanding the culture," (qtd. in Pulido, 2014, 47:25) which led to the targeting and harassment of lowriding. Raymond Allen, a white Anglo retired police officer from the National City Police Department, recalls Highland Avenue in 1980. Highland was the Whittier Boulevard of San Diego; it was cruising central, for people from Chula Vista could cruise it to get down to Southeast San Diego, and vice versa. Allen recalls bumper to bumper traffic from 4th street all the way up to 30th street in San Diego at times, filled with lowriders cruising and playing loud music. This created issues for the businesses on Highland Avenue, he explained, because traffic would be stopped and people would be getting out of their cars to talk to each other. In Albert Pulido's *Everything Comes from the Streets*, he explicitly reveals, however:

> One of the sergeants and lieutenants did some research and came up with a bunch of different vehicle-code sections that no one really knew about—and we would write tickets for the batteries, the hydraulics, the modified frames, the tires, and things like that. I would probably write between ten and twelve tickets to lowriders, and maybe impound one or two cars. That would be a typical night. Back then, the police department had a reputation of being very hard-nosed. (qtd in Pulido, 2014, 46:03-46:37).

This statement exemplifies how those not involved in lowrider culture and cruising—including business owners and the police department—were not understanding nor interested in understanding the culture, much like Galindo states. This intentional method of police targeting lowriders by ticketing them for lowrider-specific infractions is much like the 'search and destroy' method utilized by sailors during the Los Angeles zoot suit riots. Seeing that the golden era of lowriding was close to 40 years later, targeting lowriders with tickets was a way to slow the culture in a much more subtle, socially acceptable way. It makes sense that perpetuators of the dominant culture wouldn't want to do anything too explicitly discriminatory, because it would make them the outcasts and subordinated if exposed for their wrongdoing.

It wasn't uncommon for other lowriders in the borderland cities to experience the same type of harassment. It makes much sense that since lowriding plays a big part of Mexican(-American) cultures, it would be rejected by the dominant just as the people were. If the people were misunderstood and weren't accepted, it wouldn't make sense for their culture and traditions to be either. These patterns of hegemony and subordination all start from the bottom, as I've tried to emphasize throughout this essay. The foundation of many borderland cities accustomed and privileged the dominant since the time they've settled, which is why they feared resistant popular cultures such as lowriding. Michael Ornelas, a professor of Chicano history, explains San Diego's original Anglo-American population and their image, which differed from that of the Mexicans who had either already been here, or would someday find their way here:

> The original Anglo settlers that came to San Diego county were mid-westerners; they tended to be conservative; they tended to be white, patriotic—and they built the city according to that particular image—but the Mexican presence in San Diego dates all the way to the first colonizers. (qtd. in Pulido, 2014, 4:12 - 4:34)

One can draw a parallel between the different symbolic figures of dominant Anglo-American culture thus far discussed, therefore. First came the Anglo settlers, followed by generations of military personnel. The symbolic figures—the executors of dominant Anglo-American culture in the 1940s—were the naval sailors who beat and stripped Mexicans of their clothing throughout the zoot suit riots. Decades later, Eddie "Swoopy" Galindo of Regents Car Club recognizes the connection between military and police officers, the strongest perpetuators of dominant Anglo culture during the 1970s and 1980s. He remarks, "San Diego—it's a military town, so a lot of the officers were not used to seeing Mexicans" (qtd. in Pulido. 2014, 47:20). This echoes the misunderstanding between sailors and Mexicans in the 1940s.

It is lowrider's point of view that dominant culture has systematically tried to put us down. The street cruising aspect of lowrider culture does not have the most pleasant ending. Despite being cited and impounded, there are multiple testimonies of explicit dehumanization—of being told to get off Highland Avenue in San Diego, and to not come back (Pulido, 2014). This is only in San Diego's context, similar experiences would occur in cities all throughout the borderlands. Thus, during the late 1970s and 1980s, individual Chicano activists, organizations, and car clubs stood up for their rights against the systematic discrimination towards lowriders. The Committee on Chicano Rights in San Diego, for example, stood up to the National City Council and Police Department. Herman Baca, a member on the Committee, explains their defense for lowriders against law enforcement:

> Our position was that you couldn't break the law to enforce the law—and the National City Council and the police were breaking the law, because of the violation of constitutional rights—the right to assembly, the right to travel, [and] equal protection of the law. (qtd. in Pulido, 2014, 50:36-50:52)

Despite the efforts of Chicanos, after years of systematic discrimination and rejection, National City finally passed an ordinance which would outlaw cruising in 1992 (qtd. in Pulido, 2014, 52:09). This echoes the outlawing of the zoot suit in the 1940s; once again, the dominant won. Indeed, lowriding carries a story of writing back and acting back, of resisting dominant rhetoric against their subordinated people. Thus the story doesn't end here. At this point in time, however, this systematic discrimination was once again justified by the dominant public. Raymond Allen—the retired police officer earlier quoted—doesn't acknowledge race as a factor despite the truth he admits about the National City being 'hard' on lowriders. This echoes the mayor of Los Angeles, who in 1943 claimed juvenile delinquency was the cause of rioting against Mexicans. Rather, Officer Allen specifically points to film as his 'understanding' for the cause of negative rhetoric and action toward lowriders. He claims, "There [were] a couple

movies out in the 70s that portrayed car club people as gang members, and *that* set the public perception" (qtd. in Pulido, 2014, 47:33-47:44).

I doubt that Officer Allen, nor other officers or perpetuators of dominant Anglo-American hegemonic culture would imagine that lowriding would endure and survive through the hardships they were faced with. Despite the efforts to kill the culture—including the banning of cruising on busy boulevards and avenues throughout the borderlands—lowriding would make an incredible come back, which shows to this day and shall be discussed in the final chapter. Before proceeding to exploring the future of lowriding beyond its history of discrimination, however, I shall offer a close reading and analysis of Michael Pressman's *Boulevard Nights*, a film which presents cholo *and* lowrider culture, and is also the very film which Officer Allen refers to—hence, it is appropriate to see how this all works together in context to understand how a dominant perspective is mistakenly formed.

Chapter 4: Rhetoric and Reality of Michael Pressman's *Boulevard Nights*: a Misunderstood Portrayal of Lowrider and Chicano Culture

To this point I've used the terms Chicano, Mexican, Mexican-American, and American very cautiously—especially because self-identification by an individual as one term or the other carries implications. "Chicano" and "lowrider" prove to be controversial in the sense that some people—even Mexican(-Americans), define the two loosely, until their experiences form a more clear understanding. The terms at times intersect because they carry a "street" connotation, but are *not* the same. It seems that the public perception understands "cholo" and "gang" culture to be a part of "Chicano" and "lowrider" culture; this rhetoric leads to a misunderstanding amongst the subordinated Mexican(-Americans) themselves. In this sense, their narratives have been written through dominant rhetoric, and it is up to Mexican(-Americans) to actively resist or (subconsciously) *perpetuate* that very stereotype.

Because some individuals—especially members from the dominant Anglo-American hegemonic ingroup—claim that the public perception of lowriders and their culture is something the *lowriders* create for themselves, or resort to other forms of rhetoric such as film as the cause, it is appropriate to analyze the content within film which is understood to portray "Chicano" and 'lowrider' culture. There are filmic texts which are about—directly or indirectly, lowriding. Just because the element of lowriding is present in some films, however, it isn't to say the film is directly making a correlation between lowriding and something else, or a statement regarding lowriding. Sometimes lowriders are simply present to create an "authentic barrio feeling" (Tatum 55). Some of these films have been misinterpreted and used to reinforce the negative discourse of lowriding, which is the issue at hand. As mentioned earlier, one of the most referenced films when discussing lowrider and Chicano culture is Michael Pressman's *Boulevard Nights* (1979).

The film has been addressed as "one of the first movies that visualizes lowrider culture in East Los Angeles by connecting it not only to the culture of 'gangs,' or *la vida loca*, but also to Chicano culture by capturing the lingo, music, art, and cruising of Chicano lowriders in the 1970s" by Dr. Denise Sandoval (Sandoval 189). Chon Noriega, however, labels the film as a "gang exploitation film" to be "'about' Mexican Americans [and] Chicanos" (Noriega 85). I believe a that only a superficial reading can support either of these claims, for they both carry partial truths. To offer a different perspective from the two statements, I argue that at first glance, *Boulevard Nights* appears to promote lowrider culture as something intertwined with gang culture, yet a deeper analysis demonstrates that the film embraces and celebrates the lowriding tradition as a culture with potential of saving individuals from the harms of street gang life.

I agree that the film exploits gang culture, and *attempts* to promote lowrider culture, although evidently the public majority understood it as "gang life" and lowriders as one. What *Boulevard Nights* inarguably does, as Noriega states, is "address the issue of the 'place' of the Mexican-American in the United States" (Noriega 85). There are two places—two main realms, for the two main characters in the film. The characters must figure out, through experience, whether their best place is in a gang or in lowrider culture. In his essay, "Stereotyping in Films in General and of the Hispanic in Particular," Charles Berg poses the complex question: "Do these [Chicano] films manage to break with dominant Hollywood stereotypes or do they perpetuate them?" (Berg 117). It is this very phenomenon I aim to explore through an analysis of Pressman's film—and I argue that the film in fact *challenges* the pre-established dominant formed stereotypes more than it does perpetuate them. Dominant influential rhetoric instilled in the minds of the public audiences distorts the ability to recognize that Chuco and Raymond—the

main characters to be discussed—represent the negatives *and* positives to barrio life in the streets of Los Angeles. Any inaccurate formed conclusions formed about the film's message, however, would be applied to the rhetorical image of borderland cities and barrios.

Context:

As thus far discussed, lowriding and owning a lowrider is a way of expressing one's identity. The few misconceptions of owning a lowrider held by Mexican(-Americans) themselves tend to be amongst the younger individuals who believe lowriders toughen one's gangster/cholo image. While many Mexican(-Americans) are generally fond of lowriders, once an individual actually gets to own a lowrider, he or she realizes dreams of gang life and of driving a unique style car don't combine. The lowrider community does not condone or support gang-related or criminal activity. Quite the contrary: in lowrider culture, the same individuals from the barrios are involved, but live much different lifestyles. Thus lowriding offers a transition from one lifestyle to the other. Once becoming involved, it isn't difficult for Mexican(-Americans)—or any lowrider whom participates in the culture—to learn that the lifestyle in no way should involve gang or criminal activity. This is one of the main ideas *Boulevard Nights* explores: lowriding is an alternative to the latter.

People who aren't involved, or don't choose to learn about this culture, won't ever get to know that their understanding and stereotypes of the culture have been confused all along. This particularly applies to dominant Anglo-Americans who, by their cultural hegemonic nature, bias against lowriders and towards hot rods. Their rhetoric is the most influential and thus proves a difficult one to challenge and disprove, especially when pointing to superficially misleading sources of visual rhetoric such as Pressman's film—which in fact unpacks many of the themes in barrio and lowrider culture thus far discussed.

Sypnosis & Character Dynamics of *Boulevard Nights*:

As a point of beginning, necessary for audiences unfamiliar with Pressman's Boulevard Nights is a brief synopsis of the film. It is best to understand that the film tells the story of two brothers, Raymond and his younger brother, Chuco. Chuco is troubled between the constant decision to live the life of crime or a better alternative. Chuco thus must constantly make the decision to follow one of two figures: his gang leader or his brother Raymond, who is the *former* leader of the same gang, but has moved on to the positive lowriding lifestyle.

Big Happy is the gang's current leader and constantly shows Chuco the lifestyle of trouble and *la vida loca* (crazy life), although in reality Big Happy proves in many instances that he is not as tough as he acts. His influence on Chuco forms Chuco into a tough cholo—one who is "down"—a little too down for anything. Big Happy's influence however opposes the positive values Raymond tries to instill in Chuco. In multiple instances, Raymond tries to keep his younger brother away from Big Happy and his homeboys, and even avoids confrontation, although at times it is inevitable. A detrimental element to a better understanding of the film is therefore the dynamic between Big Happy, Raymond and Chuco. A critical analysis of the film reads it as a bildungsroman, with Chuco as the troubled protagonist searching for place, space, and purpose. Raymond, his older brother, is the hero who is faced with the demons of his background despite his effort to move Chuco's and his own life forward. Big Happy, the current leader of the gang, is the unsuspected villain who misleads and corrupts Chuco, ruining his potential for a positive future. For every positive step Raymond assists Chuco to take forward, Big Happy leads Chuco three steps back.

One night on the boulevard leads to a fight, and ultimately, a gang war between VGV (Chuco's gang) and their rivals, 11th street. The conflict happens while lowriders cruise the

boulevard, including Raymond and his fiancé, Shady. Although Raymond, Shady, and Chuco arrive to the boulevard night together, Chuco sees Big Happy in his beat up "gang-bang" 52 Chevy, which doesn't embody traditional lowrider pride or beauty. The car is simply a cholo car, and its ruggedness reflects the poor character of Big Happy and the rest of the gang's values.

Important to note is the detail that both the VGV and 11th Street gangs are cruising in individual "gang-bang" bombs, not 'nice' lowriders. A "gang-bang" car may be lowered and reflect the barrio style, although it isn't typically as nice as the 'low n' slow' cruisers in popular traditional lowriding. These cars are the ones which have the look as though they are made to search for trouble: Particularly in this film, the paints on both gang-bang cars are faded and don't shine; they have primer spots, and dull chrome—all of which signify the lack of pride and effort and disprove the claim that these gang members are positive lowriders I've thus far discussed. For the cholos in this film, their 'gang-bang' bombs therefore only serve that very purpose—transportation to cruise the homies and get gang-related *jales* (jobs) done. Raymond's lowrider—the 1972 Monte Carlo—on the other hand, has a beautiful metallic blue paint job with a mural on the back, spoke rims, and hydraulics added to the suspension. All of these traits not only show his pride but embrace the true traditional lowrider style. Therefore, the juxtaposed characteristics of the cars symbolize the different attitudes and level of maturity and values amongst the *lowriders* and *cholos.* This supports the aspect of this section's thesis, to clarify hat lowrider and gang culture are two completely separate cultures in the film.

Raymond tries to tell Chuco to stay with him and his fiancé, but Chuco clearly sides with his gang over family. Chuco gets out of the Monte Carlo and into the front seat of Big Happy's gang-bang bomb. Before long, the 11th street and VGV gang cause a destructive scene on the boulevard, and out of self-defense, Chuco stabs a rival gang member to death. Raymond fears

11th street is plotting a revenge on Chuco, and more than ever, Raymond tries to keep him away from the gang. Despite Raymond's and the mother's efforts to reach out to Chuco, Chuco rejects them and prefers being with the homeboys, who he finds comfort and a sense of belonging with until the climax of the movie. The week of Raymond's wedding, Chuco is not seen for a few days—not by his family or his fellow gang members. His isolation from everyone has given him time to reflect on the values his brother and gang members have taught him, and evidently it seems Raymond's influence is starting to get to him. His next appearance is towards the end of Raymond's wedding, which he was supposed to be a part of but missed the ceremony. At this moment, Chuco and Raymond have a meaningful dialogue, revealing that Chuco feels lost. This scene is the first we witness Chuco truly connect with Raymond and his mother. He accepts Raymond's invitation to enter the party, and even dances with his mother.

As the two smile and happily dance, Chuco's display of emotion demonstrates his enlightened mentality. Another challenge is thrown at both brothers, however, when an unwelcome 11th street gang member shoots through the window—the bullet misses Chuco and hits his mother instead. She dies, and Raymond is faced with the decision to plot a revenge.

Film Analysis:

The fact that Raymond avoids confrontation, violence, and gang involvement is seen as weakness by Big Happy and the VGV gang members. A confused Chuco prefers to be with his homeboys rather than listening to his brother, who teaches him very different values. Big Happy influences him to do things such as fight, gang-bang, get high, hunt the enemy, use weapons, get his *street tattoo*, and stand watch to defend the barrio. On the other hand, Raymond attempts to influence Chuco by teaching Chuco about cars; he gets Chuco a job at a car shop, constantly pulls him away from the homeboys to get him to work, and teach him the importance of family.

Despite the fact that Chuco constantly rejects Raymond's kindness to follow the no-good Big Happy and the homeboys which gets him into trouble, Raymond—unlike Big Happy—is the only one who is truly there to protect and try to save him at Chuco's worst moments. Raymond most persistently tries to teach Chuco what he has learned from lowrider car culture; evidently, Raymond has found that lowriding saved him, and he does get the message through to Chuco—but by the time Chuco understands, too much damage has been done. Neither Chuco nor Raymond desire to perpetuate violent criminal stereotypes of their Mexican-American background; when their mother is killed, the matter is *not* gang-related, but family-related.

Big Happy challenges Raymond and his authority as Chuco's *real* brother—not gang brother—on multiple instances. In the middle of the film, Big Happy tries to put Raymond down for not defending the barrio, and calls him out. Raymond calls Big Happy's bluff, which is clearly nothing more than an act in front of the other VGV gang members. Not knowing what to do or say because he knows what Raymond is capable of, he asks an important question:

> All I know is when a dude gets hit up and he doesn't do nothing about it, he's ranking on his own barrio man. *What the hell have we got*? He's ranking on his barrio and his homeboys. (Pressman, 1979, 57:09-57:20)

This question will be answered through Raymond's actions and explicit dialogue. As Raymond and Chuco plan their revenge for their mother's murder, the two obtain firearms through their connection to Big Happy and the VGV gang. The gang members—Big Happy in particular—are proud as they feel Raymond and Chuco are standing up for the neighborhood. Raymond sets the record straight, and perhaps this is the part which is either missed or ignored by the dominant public audience. Big Happy finally challenges Raymond once more as him and his brother start to leave with the guns. The following dialogue happens between Chuco's two most influential figures, which is their ultimate push for authority and reason.

Big Happy: 'Hey, *what are you doing*?'

Raymond: 'This ain't barrio against barrio, man. *This is familia, understand*?'

Big Happy: 'That's bullshit. Its *us* against 11th street.'

Raymond: *Sit down*, Big Happy.

(Pressman, 1979, 1:19:57-1:20:17)

This is Raymond's answer to Big Happy's question about place and belonging in the middle of the film. Of course, Big Happy—the not-so tough cholo who has corrupted Chuco, sits down when told by Raymond. His logic makes no sense and has steered the entire gang into trouble. It is during this challenge that Chuco's behavior changes. Whereas in earlier parts of the film, he looks at Big Happy like a father and turns on Raymond to follow him, in this scene we witness the opposite. He is on his way to carry out a planned revenge, but not to impress Big Happy or his gang. He follows his brother because he believes in *familia* (family), and has begun to see that his 'gang brothers' don't hold much for him.

This scene demonstrates that Raymond—the lowrider—doesn't believe in gang life, nor does he desire to fall into the stereotype. Throughout the entire film until this point, he had not engaged in senseless violence. Had it not been for the death of his mother, he'd have no business committing a violent act against another person—whether he be a gang member or not. This business does not involve gangs, car clubs, or lowriders; it is a personal, *family* affair. It is thus I label Raymond the hero. It is through the lowrider and family values—which are closely tied—that he shows Chuco, which carry the capability of saving Chuco's soul.

On the other hand, Big Happy is mistaken to believe their desire for revenge is gang-related, and I believe this is one of the biggest misunderstandings people take from the film, besides the boulevard scene and revenge itself. As we approach the last scenes of the film, we learn that Big Happy is the unsuspected villain, for his influence on Chuco puts him in an

irreversible position which will make him pay the price of the gang war. Raymond, on the other hand, is the hero who demonstrates there is hope for an alternative lifestyle. Chuco proves to be a character who grows to learn about himself and his place of belonging, and while he is too deeply invested with the gang activity which haunts him, he wizens up enough to make a decision which will save Raymond from the cycle of violence.

The Ending: Stereotypes of Senseless Violent Mexican Youth Disproved

One of the key details to this planned revenge is what Raymond tells Chuco," You got to keep control—just the dudes who did it" (Pressman, 2014, 1:22:05). Chuco acts accordingly, which is an important element to the narrative. Although the plan was for both brothers to retaliate as a team, Chuco takes matters into his own hands. Thus it is easy for people to understand this as a result of his out-of-control anger and criminal mentality. Such isn't the case: Chuco's revenge—though it is murder of the 11th street cholo who shot his mother—proves his status not as a vicious Mexican-American gang member, but as someone who has learned the value of family. The depth of his involvement with the whole situation however makes it too late for his new learned value to save him. All Chuco can do at this point is save his brother from falling into the gang involvement he has so intentionally avoided.

Raymond and his wife Shady lie in bed as Chuco waits in the other room for the night to become pitch dark, as he and his brother had agreed would be the time to take off for their revenge. An anxious Chuco quietly sneaks out, hops in his own beat 'gang-bang' 1959 Impala and speeds off to head to a house in the 11th street barrio. He arrives and intrudes on an 11th street party, silently capturing one cholo in the bushes to hold hostage. As Chuco approaches the house, another 11th street cholo comes out to find Chuco pointing a gun to his gang member's head. Still holding the cholo hostage, Chuco asks where the killer lives. An 11th street member

exclaims, “You’re from Grande Vista!” and Chuco responds “I ain’t from no barrio. It’s just me” (Pressman, 2014, 1:28:45). This is one of the most undervalued quotes, though it reveals so much: Chuco, for once, keeps his control—keeps his focus—and doesn’t at all involve gang identification; all he cares about is justice for his mother. In that moment, he has the opportunity to kill every rival gang member at the party, yet he disproves the viscous, senseless Mexican killer stereotype in this moment. Rather, 11th street provides him with information on their cholo they claim to have done it, and Chuco leaves without shooting anyone.

Chuco arrives to his final scene at the proclaimed killer’s house. He breaks into the house with a shotgun, and the 11th street cholo escapes through the backdoor. Chuco chases him outside to find the rest of the 11th street gang has also arrived. He is shot once in the shoulder and injured, yet manages to shoot the shell of revenge into the proclaimed killer’s back, fulfilling the revenge for his family. The look on his face as he sees his victim go down shows he isn’t as heartless as the stereotype of him claims for him to be. Chuco shows an expression of terror and grief for the 11th street cholo as he watches the rival fall to his death, despite the harm the individual has done to Chuco and his family. Raymond finally finds Chuco and pulls up in his lowrider as the 11th street cholo falls to the ground.

Raymond demonstrates professional street-level combat in this scene; he parks in the middle of the shootout and safely gets an injured Chuco into his Monte Carlo. Despite Raymond’s ‘get-away’ driving tactic, an 11th street cholo manages to shoot through the back window and hit Chuco in the neck. As Raymond speeds Chuco over to the emergency room, he realizes how serious the wound is. He asks Chuco in a sad, solemn voice: “Why’d you do it Chuco,” and Chuco responds, “*For you*,” as he struggles to keep himself alive (Pressman, 1979, 1:33:40-1:33:50). Raymond pulls over to wrap Chuco’s neck with his clothing, and although he

doesn't know it yet, Chuco speaks his last words and won't make it through the hospital treatment. Significantly, he tells his brother, "I ain't so dumb, man," and Raymond says "I know." Despite him dying as he speaks, Chuco makes the point to repeat, "I just ain't that dumb" (Pressman, 1979, 1:34:25-1:34:37). I point to this final dialogue between the two brothers because it reveals Chuco's accomplishment of having transcended the senseless violent Mexican-American criminal stereotype. He finally understands the significance of family and what it means to his brother. Based on the evidence Chuco displays, it shows that his brother Raymond—the positive lowrider figure—finally got through to Chuco. Because Chuco claims to have done it for Raymond, we can infer that he snuck away from Raymond so he wouldn't have to get sucked back into the gang life. In Chuco's mind, he'd sacrifice himself for the family, so that the only one to be involved with the never ending war would be him. I argue this is the case; Chuco wanted his brother to be problem free and live a happy life with his new wife.

Theatrical poster:

I am convinced that the theatrical poster composed for *Boulevard Nights* in itself offers a distorted message at first glance. Visual texts demonstrate the potential to allow interpretations based on one's preexisting stereotypes and common rhetoric. The below picture is the one which is most popular and familiar to audiences who have "experienced" Pressman's *Boulevard Nights* (see fig. 4.1).

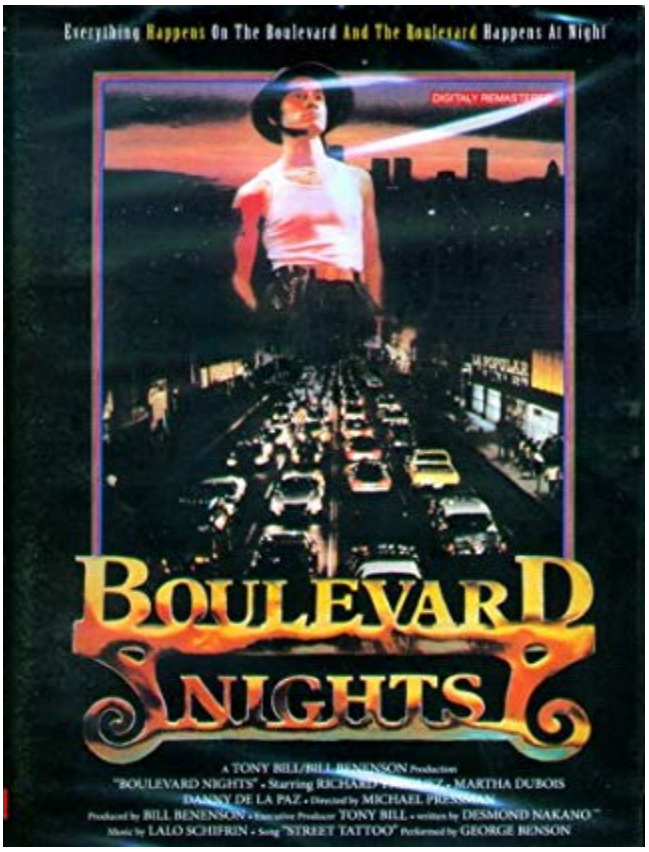

Figure 4.1 Pressman, Michael. *Boulevard Nights* (1979) *Theatrical Poster*

From the most current DVD cover, to the film's soundtrack cover, to thumbnails featuring the film on YouTube, the above image is most popular. Let's begin with the title itself. It is in a particular font, color, shape, and design. The viewer will also notice that the letters could not have been generated on a word processor; it had to have been hand drawn because the title of the film as it is presented in this visual rhetoric is a piece of art in itself. In the lowrider world, the text as it looks on the cover resembles a car club plaque. The plaques which this image seems to represent are used in the lowrider realm to identify which car club the car and driver belong to. Lowriders show their pride by representing their car club with a plaque mounted to their back seat, displayed behind the window. With this being said, earning and riding a lowrider with a plaque is a sign of an *accomplishment*. The idea of displaying a plaque is so that when one is

cruising, one is "flying colors," the car club colors. This is why car club plaques are traditionally hand made and designed, and typically have a polished brass or gold-plated finish. Hence, this is what the gold-like colors from the title in this image seem to represent. The plaque is awarded based on the principle that a car club member and his or her car meet certain standards. The same standards held to a lowrider car are also held to a lowrider individual, which are broken down throughout the film. Raymond and the various lowrider individuals from car clubs embody and display self-standards of pride and values, whereas the gang members do not: Chuco doesn't belong to a club; he belongs to a gang. Multiple car clubs (such as the Imperials) are featured in the film during the boulevard scene, but never is there any implication that Chuco has any affiliation; it is Raymond, the ex-gang member and positive lowrider who hangs out with people from car clubs. Therefore, this car club plaque-resembling text cannot regard the cholos in the film; it can only regard the true lowriders with values such as Raymond. At first glance, it would seem, that the title of the movie is celebratory of something—which it is. The title and font in which it is written does not celebrate the darkness of the boulevard or wandering gang members. Rather, it celebrates the glory of the boulevard—the glory shown by lowriders such as Raymond who cruise in unity. The plaque in the theatrical title only represents—as it must—the celebratory aspect of lowrider culture in the film.

I'd like to direct my focus to the overarching, yet small text, "Everything Happens on the Boulevard and the Boulevard Happens at Night." This is a large statement, and I think that in the context of lowriding solely, it is misleading. The words "happens," and "and the boulevard" are bolded in a yellow, opposed to the white text of the rest of the words. As I mentioned earlier on the discussion of car club plaques, gold or shiny brass is typically the color finish. It is as if this element of the visual rhetoric is trying to emphasize that the *boulevard happens*, as though the

boulevard is a pathway to creation or destruction—in other words, something positive or negative. I make mention of this because as we focus on the actual photographic image in Figure 1, we will notice there that on the bottom, there is an image of the boulevard. The boulevard is full with cars—lowriders in particular, and above the boulevard is Chuco, who is centered and caught between the boulevard and downtown Los Angeles in the background. Also, he is caught between the sunset and darkness. What this says on a very superficial level is that in Los Angeles, lowriders and their owners, also known as gang members, come out at night and create havoc. This type of message is most persistent in dominant American rhetoric, and thus lowriders suffer the label as an entire community.

The rhetorical message about us lowriders is that we are a threat to society and social order; we are gang members; we are criminals, and we are impractical. I'll stop right here and say that *we certainly are impractical*, and we do pose a threat to dominant social order through our popular cultural art forms and politics of difference. At the moment lowrider disrupt standard and/or dominant custom car art forms, we disrupt order. That's the beauty of lowriding—just not in the way Pressman's film seems to present this idea. There is not beauty, however, in violence. Thus, I argue that neither *Boulevard Nights* nor its advertisements intend to portray lowriders as violent gang members. What the image says to me is that there are Chicano gang members like Chuco, also known as cholos, and there are lowriders.

Indeed, I believe that the way of coming from the street and being impractical as a form of resistance to dominant culture is something shared by gang culture, lowriding culture, and Mexican(-American) culture. Although the three may intersect or share *certain* values, however, this isn't to say that they are the same as one another. The boulevard is a metaphor for life, as I read the rhetorical image. When reading the film, we can say that the boulevard holds potential

for three types of people—the hero, the villain, and the marginalized coming-of-age adolescent. "Everything happens on the boulevard," just as everything happens in real life because *everything can happen* amongst the subordinate, as this film and Mexican(-American) history show. This film shines light on the potential two Chicano brothers have. Lowriding and gang life are portrayed as paired together because one has the potential to save the other. As earlier mentioned, one cannot deny the fact that many lowriders are ex-gang members, just like Raymond. Lowriding is still a way of life that comes from the streets, but it isn't a way of life that depends on violence for survival. Lowriding is an *alternative*. Like it is for Raymond, it is a way of expressing one's self. He tries to explain this to Chuco by taking him cruising and getting him a job in a car shop, but Chuco doesn't realize the potential of what Raymond has offered him (the lowriding lifestyle) until he is far too invested in the situation and it is too late. Because of the lack of scholarly attention to lowrider culture, however, I can begin to understand why some audiences perceived the film and this poster to state that gang life and lowrider car club life are the same. It isn't, however. The matter is that there are two separate things: the car clubs and the gangs. They both come from the streets and the barrio, as do the two brothers in the film, but one is the *alternative* to the other.

Concluding Points on Pressman's film:

I conclude with the following points of analysis: Raymond tried to save his brother with an alternative lifestyle and although Chuco finally realizes it, he is dying and realizes it is too late. Although the ending is tragic, there is still hope for Raymond, the positive lowrider figure. This is the lesson the film presents: There is gang-life in Mexican(-American) culture, but there are also alternatives which can save an individual from falling into a life of trouble. This film does not condone violence; it uses the story of these two brothers as an example of the harsh

realities one faces if falling down those dark paths, and to exemplify lowriding's potential to save individuals from the streets. Even Chuco realizes that what his brother was aiming for, and tries to instill in him, is something positive. Chuco realizes that instead of getting out of Raymond's lowrider when they cruise the boulevard together, he should've stayed. There is something about Raymond that perhaps the film doesn't emphasize as much, and that is because it focuses on Chuco. The tragedy of the film is that Chuco is blind to the fact that his brother means well, up until his brother must witness him die. Raymond's choice of music, family values, way of expressing himself through his car and the artwork on it, are all common values held by lowriders. Tied closely to the culture of lowriding is the element of family, which Raymond demonstrates by supporting his brother unconditionally. No matter what happens, Raymond puts his family values before anything. He defends no gang, only his family. The positive message which *can* be taken, therefore, is that Chuco finally learned the value of family by the end, which can be argued based on the fact that he tries to beat his brother to the murderer of their mother. Whether or not Chuco would've changed if he had lived is a difficult question to answer, but based on our evidence, we can confidently argue that he is a character who recognizes and learns from his mistakes.

If there is anything I'd like my audience to take from this analysis of Pressman's film, however, it is that the culture of lowriding is an alleviating one, especially for people who have had a rough lifestyle. Lowriding is also something which can be passed down to younger generations, and it is up to the individual to embrace the beauty of it. Some people, like Chuco, however, don't take advantage of the benefits of an alternative culture, even when it is right in front of them. Lowriding speaks to the soul; it is one of the most intimate ways one can express their soul. I should mention—once a lowrider, always a lowrider. As a lowrider myself, I will

say on behalf of all lowriders that if you are one, no one can take that identity away from you, and *no one will* take it away from you. This is a phenomenon which I shall conclude with in the final proceeding chapter.

Chapter 5: The Legacy of Lowriding: A Potential to Write All-Inclusive Global Style

The Mexican-influenced lowrider culture—at its highs and lows—at its origins and its ends that seemed to be, has proved through its history to be a positive tradition to create space for all. Its potential has no limits, and can even save individuals from dark paths such as street gang culture, much like the message of *Boulevard Nights* suggests. While individuals of the dominant Anglo-American hegemonic culture point to films "about" lowrider culture to be self-harming to its image, I have attempted to subvert and disprove such a theory in Chapter 4.

Lowrider culture continues to provide a realm for individuals searching for their identity and somewhere to belong. Artifacts presenting false negative rhetoric regarding the culture set a negative public perception and resulted in the systematic effort to stop its growth. At its finest, cruising has been the essence of the lowrider; it's the way to show the public how "low and slow" we can be. Forces of the dominant Anglo-American culture did all it could to stop lowrider culture out of the streets—by harassing cruisers in particular—from individual traffic stops to specific county-wide laws passed, all were attempts to take lowriders off the streets. What they failed to do was to take the streets out of the lowrider. Such laws, however, would put an end to informal street-style cruising as it was done in the 1970s and early 1980s; this was the end of the golden era.

Despite harassment by the forces of dominant American culture, lowriders continue to make their legacy and demonstrate positive image and values—through alternative ways which don't necessarily require the presence of a lowrider car so much as they require the lowrider *spirit* amongst individuals to keep the tradition alive. In this sense, the legacy of lowriding has become so strong that it is possible to keep the culture alive even in the absence of the car, the culture's primarily symbolic language. Lowrider symbolic languages include, but aren't limited

to, oldies music, lowrider-style of dress, and communication. These languages are exchanged wherever the lowrider spirit is present.

As cruising became outlawed much like the precedent pachucos/as zoot suits were, lowrider culture transitioned from the streets to organized venues where lowriders can today be found. This can be seen in the family-oriented lowrider individuals and events known as *car shows*, *cruise nights, picnics, cruises, car club gatherings*, and more. These lowrider traditions have spread beyond the borderlands, all the way around the globe. This is something, indeed, worth celebrating. This essay concludes by presenting the fruits of lowriding and the way the movement continues to write back to dominant culture and rhetoric to this day.

Lowrider Culture: One of Many Elements and Decades of Influence

Lowrider culture intersects with Mexican-based cultures discussed throughout this thesis. It takes the best from each and subverts it into the best it possibly can be. For instance, the lowrider style may resemble the 'cholo' or 'Chicano' style, although lowrider individuals don't necessarily have to be active cholos, as I've pointed out. Yet people who are unfamiliar with the culture may see a lowrider car show or event, and be scared to approach it under the assumption that the occasions invite groups of "thugs,"—which I add, is a common term thrown out in today's political climate, to refer to subordinated individuals who don't fall within the dominant Anglo-American in-group.

I speak from experience when I say that members of the dominant Anglo culture particularly, spread the rhetoric that when lowriders show up to an event, trouble has arrived. I've had hot rodders tell me that flat out. An example is "Cruising Grand" in Escondido, California. A Snap-On tool dealer came by my dad's shop (I've worked with my dad at his automotive shop and many others from a young age to afford my education), and I remember clearly: He told me that

he enjoys going to Cruising Grand on Friday nights—but he likes "going early, before dark." By 6-7 P.M. he'd be gone, he said, because that's when the Mexicans and their lowriders—cholos and all—came to Grand. I stayed silent, as I was only 13 and couldn't quite elaborate what I've tried to express throughout this thesis. This is the type of stereotypical rhetoric which affects real people—lowriders and Mexican(-Americans) as an entire ethnic group.

The influence of lowrider culture continues in various forms. Although some original lowriders faced disillusionment and a sense of discouragement after being systematically discriminated and moved on to quit being lowriders, many people would join the movement and become active participants of the culture. Elements to lowriding such as the music, the style of dressing, and distinct dialect have all influenced, and live through, lowrider individuals, still. Thus, it isn't uncommon to see people in dickies and plain white or black t-shirts fill car shows and lowrider related events; it isn't uncommon to hear Mexican music or oldies being played by lowriders. Once getting to understand the culture, one understands the fact that lowriders are not to be feared; they wouldn't put all the work into a culture to do anyone or anything harm. It is, as Elsa Castillo of Ladies' Pride Car Club of San Diego explains, "[Lowriders] spent a lot of time and money on our cars, so the last thing people involved with lowriding wanted to do was to get involved with any kind of trouble" (qtd. in Pulido, 2014, 44:55-45:05). Here is an important concept to underscore: A true lowrider needs not to search for trouble nor wishes to. Not only does the car building process keep the individual busy and devoid of much spare time, but seeing the finished product of a lowrider custom car carries potential to change one's mentality. That is—once someone sees the beauty of their hard work, the process proves to be rewarding; this gives troubled individuals potential for new values. Thus, while true lowrider individuals value car ownership and craft, the positive is valued at an equal level.

"Family-Oriented" Car Club and Lowrider Culture Post-boulevard Era

Many of the lowriders from the 1970s and 1980s experienced police harassment and witnessed the downfall of 'street' lowriding. Many individuals would during this time marry and have children, whom would become the next generation of lowriders introduced to the culture—only this generation experienced the 'street-to-show' transition. That is, by this time, multiple car club councils existed in the borderlands. Much like the Southeast youth council of the 1950s in San Diego, the car club councils organized events. Some were formal, and others very informal. The concept behind the council was, and continues to be, to inform and invite other car clubs to events. Especially with lowriders giving birth to new lowriders, more than ever organized events and similar lowrider gatherings built their reputation to be very *family-oriented* environments. One cannot just say; one must *experience* a lowrider event in order to understand that they are not only appropriate, but inviting for all ages and all of one's family. The ultimate goal behind group assembly of lowriders is building community, after all. Although the following events to be discussed are slightly different, they all create a space and place for not only lowriders, but for any individuals with family values. This is one of the factors which contributes to the culture's growth beyond boundaries of all types.

i. Veteranos/as:

Because lowriding is a barrio tradition which picks and chooses the best, most *positive* aspects of barrio lifestyle, it is also inevitable that many lowrider individuals have pasts, either from participation or simply exposure to negative activity. A *veterano/a* is a veteran to the streets, an Original Gangster. The veteran/s thus has no need to be participating in gang or violent activity; the veteran has little to no interest in getting into things he or she did as a learning child. Aside from lowriding, many veteranos/as take on religion as alternatives to their street life. Christianity and Catholicism play a large role in Mexican(-American) cholo and

lowrider culture, for many individuals find themselves out of the darkness of their pasts and into the grace of God. Some individuals—veterans or just normal lowriders—are so excited about their faith, that they create car clubs based on their shared religious values. An exemplary club is the *Cruisers for Christ Car Club* of North County San Diego. The reason I bring up this example is to show that *some* lowriders could have been gang members at one point of their life, but the lowrider culture is *the* alternative to negative street life they become stereotyped of, much like I argue *Boulevard Nights* exemplifies.

ii. **The Car Clubs:**

Many lowrider individuals became, and continue to become involved in the lowrider culture through Mexican(-American) car clubs as the alternative to gangs. As aforementioned, car clubs have been historically misunderstood by the dominant Anglo-American culture. Car clubs became popular in the borderlands after the social clubs. As a matter of fact, some car clubs actually started as social clubs and changed their title when their member base consisted of only car owners. Many of the most popular car clubs emerged beginning in the late 1950s all the way through the 1970s. Some of the most notable which came out of this time period and are still going include the Dukes Car Club, Old Memories Car Club, and Oldies Car Club. The three of these clubs are *bomb clubs*, which means they focus on representing only with bombs (1934 through 1954 models).

While some clubs focus on a certain style of car—such as trucks only, impalas only, G-bodies only, and many more, there are also car clubs which have been born based on a common interest of *values* amongst members. Car clubs have had good intentions to promote positive image through Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, and Chicanos much like the social clubs of the early 1950s. Some car clubs which emerged in the late 1960s consisted of members who were

involved in the Chicano movement. The Amigos Car Club, for example, emerged in San Diego as a car club with an a pro-Chicanismo activist agenda. For some clubs, therefore, living up to their namesake is an important thing, for car clubs have goals. Thus, the names of certain car clubs reflects their interests. For instance, the Brown Image car club and Latin Low-Riders Car Clubs of San Diego reflect their values of unity and solidarity amongst their members.

There are very positive things which come from car clubs, and many benefits to join one as opposed to being a "solo rider"—although membership comes with expectations. *Standards* are something which many clubs have in order to for members to meet, both for them to belong to the club and fly the club's plaque. Some of these standards regard the car, and others are held to the member. Typical lowrider car club standards for the car to "be plaqued" include a nice paint job with minimal to no flaws, decent upholstery, and shiny chrome free of chips or dull spots. In this sense, for people unfamiliar with lowriders, the car must be "clean" and ready to hit the streets. This all boils down to the pride in lowriding, but nonetheless, many lowrider car clubs aim for a clean image, particularly because of their *appearance and service* in the communities they inhabit. This brings us to the next set of standards—the standards for the lowrider individual. While I cannot speak for all car clubs, in Old Memories Car Club, respect is a car club rule—respect to women and children, especially. One should not be involved in any sort of gang activity if in the club. Above all, a principle which can be applied to many car clubs is holding each member to a standard of pride, and a want to make the car club and the club's image better. Lowriding culture is always looking forward and toward the positive, and it shows through the various lowrider activities held by lowrider car clubs and individuals. This section purposely discusses car clubs in lowrider culture as an example of how community is formed to

do positive things within the larger communities, although lowrider individuals who don't claim membership to clubs, also play a great role in lowrider culture and are much appreciated.

Lowrider Dances: A Survived Tradition

Music was discussed in Chapter 3 in terms of resistance to the dominant, and how even as an artistic form, music made by certain ethnic groups (African-Americans, for example) wasn't considered good by standards of hegemony. This being said, some music, especially in the context of lowriders, can be considered composed *by minorities, for minorities* and more. Music therefore continues to follow lowrider culture at is every point in history, and significantly lives through dances organized by lowriders.

Mexican and Chicano bands composed a great deal of music which would create what is today known as the "East Side Sound" (Tatum, 121). Some groups were small time and played only in the barrio, never to make in mainstream. Many of these types of groups existed in the borderland cities, including Tijuana. As an example, my father and uncles made an oldies band named TJ Angels in the late 1970s in Tijuana, where they played popular oldies at dances. Despite their position on the Mexican side of the border, having grown up hearing such oldies, they embraced the barrio lowrider culture by playing popular songs such as "Greetings (This is Uncle Sam)" and "Hello Stranger." There are many other Tijuana oldies bands which were very successful and left a legacy for Mexican barrio lowriders. Some even continue to play today—Los Moonlights and Los Solitarios, as an example, recorded many records which still live through live performances and the speakers of lowrider individuals.

A popular exemplary East Los Angeles-based band amongst Mexican(-Americans) in the borderlands are Thee Midniters. For Mexicans and Chicanos, Thee Midniters are an iconic band much like The Beatles in the context of British Rock. It is fair to label them a Chicano band, not

only because of the members' ethnic backgrounds, but because of the style and content of their music. Some songs were originally composed by the group, such as "Chicano Power" and "Whittier Boulevard"—both of which are celebratory songs of the topics their titles capture. As a band which emerged from the East Los Angeles area, the influence of their music can be resonates in many other oldies bands which developed across the borderlands. While it is difficult to capture all Mexican and Chicano-style lowrider music groups, some other which continue to play today include Santana, War, El Chicano and Malo.

Music *continues* to play a significant role for Mexican(-Americans) and keeping positive aspects of their lowrider culture alive. It not only carries historical, but cultural connotations based on the individual's lowrider experience. During an interview, Francisco Gonzalez walks around his lowrider trophy room which also has memorabilia from as far back as the 1950s. As he particularly points at dance posters he's collected over the past decades, he states:

> *Esto ha sido mi passion—lo que son los autos y baile—va en conjunto con los lowriders porque se hacen los bailes y todos los lowriders van al baile; y todos sacamos los carros, a vivir lo del momento que tuvimos de joventud en ese tiempo—y que lo seguimos teniendo porque yo creo el Corazon no envejece.*
>
> This has been my passion, cars and dancing—dances go together with the lowrider because dances are put together, and all the lowriders go to the dance. We all take out our cars; we live in the moment that we had in that time of our youth—and that we continue to live in—because I believe the heart doesn't grow old. (qtd. in Pulido, 2014, 30:15-30:31)

I'd like to underscore the fact that this lowrider veteran is here referring to one of the oldest lowriding traditions—dances. This was a tradition lowriders inherited from social clubs of the 1950s. While dances existed on both sides of the border, an Anglo-American type versus Mexican barrio style dance is much different: While both were held typically in public halls, the music, ambience, and attendees were all different. The aftermath of these factors shows today:

the same type of music involved with Mexican(-American) lowrider dances is still very popular amongst lowriders today. Dances not only survived the hardships of lowriding, bur are as popular as car shows within lowrider culture; they make great occasions to literally celebrate an occasion "lowrider-style." Car clubs typically hold dances for special occasions such as the anniversary of the club itself, or "just because." For instance, the San Diego chapter of Old Memories Car Club held its first dance in celebration of its anniversary, and just recently held one (before the outbreak of Covid-19) during Spring, "just because." While the purpose of the first is more evident, the second was just for the love of getting people together through a lowrider cultural tradition, and with camaraderie in mind.

Figure 5.1 Ortega, Francisco. *Old Memories Car Club San Diego's 1st Year Anniversary Party.* 1980s-style poster for lowrider Dance held by Old Memories San Diego featuring "Grupo Casino," a cover band for Los Moonlights, a Tijuana-based oldies band. Poster's retro design influenced by posters of dances held in Tijuana.

Traditional Outdoor Lowrider Events beyond the Golden era

While the street-to-show transition has seen the slow of cruising and the abundance of lowriders informally cruising, alternative lowrider traditions such as car shows and picnics have become more popular venues to display one's art, enjoy family-oriented time, and build community. The following section discusses how these are organized, and one will notice that

these events are very much like Mexican(-American) family events—only they are public and welcome people of the Mexican descent *and more*.

i. **Car Shows:**

While lowrider oldies dances are typically held during "off-season" and colder months, car shows are right up amongst dances in popularity, particularly during the Summer and warm months. Car shows have become the most popular alternative venue for displaying lowrider art. By definition, a car show is meant for lowrider owners to "show off" their cars, and possibly even take home a prize. While not everyone is necessarily out for a trophy and doesn't have the same competitive attitude as the next, it is safe to say that car shows are a place to show off one's accomplishment and pride. There are different sized car shows—some are held in indoor arenas, which are often known as *super shows*. Others are held in public places, which welcome a greater variety of people. Typically, organizers of car shows charge lowrider owners a fee to display their cars. These fees go toward costs of holding the event and, though not a rule, some sort of community-based cause.

Especially in the context of smaller, local-based car shows, lowriders focus on organizing these car shows to benefit the community. This model was adapted from early clubs such as the Dukes, who began organizing events in the late 1950s to benefit orphanages and children's hospitals in Tijuana (Pulido, 2014). The influence of these types of car shows has spread all around the world. A personal example was last year's Summer Car Show to benefit The Peckham Center for Cancer and Blood Disorders at Rady Children's Hospital. The event, held by Old Memories Car Club, took place at a local bowling alley's parking lot. Although free to the public, fees collected from vehicle and bike entries went toward the cause. Also, there was a

donation box for anyone who voluntarily wanted to contribute to the cause and hadn't entered a classic car.

Our intention was to bring the lowrider community together to a fun public space, where non-lowrider individuals could also come experience the fun and culture. The venue gave opportunity for not only Mexican(-American) individuals, but also for individuals from the dominant Anglo-American culture to participate and experience our positive lowrider culture. Important to emphasize is the effort put into creating an inclusive, non-discriminatory environment: *Hot Rods were also welcome*. As the event's coordinator and with everything thus discussed in mind, my vision was to bring different car customizers of different cultural backgrounds together. It was beautiful to see individuals of a wide range of ethnic backgrounds—African-American, Anglos, Mexican-Americans and even some guests from Tijuana, Mexico. These are just some which stood out to me although I also saw some Asian-Americans come to spectate. I am very pleased to say that car shows like these give opportunity for diverse people to attend and get to experience the flavor of lowrider culture, all while benefiting children in need.

Activities and attractions included not only the car exhibition, but a jumper for kids, free carnival-style games with prizes, raffles, music, and even a beer garden for adults! Events like these give hope for understanding that the lowrider community is very interested in giving back to the overall larger inclusive community which they inhabit. Though many lowriders come from low socio-economic backgrounds themselves, many have come a long way—and that's why lowriding reflects one's experience. Hence, a beautiful aspect of lowriding is to see lowriders give back anything they can based on their position. With their own experience in

mind, lowriders keep in mind the idea that everyone needs a hand at some point. Fortunately, this car show was a success and raised funds for cancer patients at Rady's.

Figure 5.2 Ortega, Francisco. *Rollin' & Bowlin' Summer 2019 Car Show.*

The Summer Car Show for Rady Children's Hospital was the first for Old Memories San Diego, and nonetheless one of many lowrider car show inspired by greater annual events which have been established. Some car shows and events may even be *completely free*, because it is

sponsored mainly by the organizing club's treasury. When such is the case, it isn't uncommon for the sponsoring club to take help from community sponsors as well.

An example of this type of completely free event would be the Tijuana Duke's Car Club's "Dia Del Nino" celebration held every year in *La Colonia Libertad*. This large event is held in the barrio Dukes started in, and covers over three blocks. Everything is completely free to the public. Lowrider vehicles don't even have to pay to exhibit their vehicles; all that is asked for is participation. "Dia del Nino" is a Mexican holiday which means "Day of the Child." Hence, much like the concept behind Mother's and Father's Day, "Dia del Nino" respectively celebrates children. I find it significant that the club celebrates and honors a cultural value with their lowriders. Prior to the event, Dukes Car Club collects donated bicycles from their members and any community donors, all to give them away free to children the day of the event. Aside from the activities for children, this celebration makes a welcome environment for all ages. Live music, for example, has people of all ages dancing in the street and simply having a good time.

The "Dia Del Nino" is one of many, yet a great exemplary event which promotes positive community building within lowrider culture. It defies, and is far from, stereotypes of lowrider individuals as people who cause destruction to the community; the event is an example of how lowriders build and give back to their communities. The cars and car club members who participate play a great deal in making events like this happen. This is a good time to remind the novice lowrider: without the support of others, there is nothing. Having a car isn't the only element to being a lowrider. Lowriding is about family, friends, and supporting one another.

Events such as "Dia Del Nino" show how many people may not own lowriders, but have an even greater lowrider spirit and personality. Thus, the whole concept of this event is significant: It takes place in the barrio, where Dukes began. Further, the event combines *two*

major cultural practices: lowriding and the Mexican cultural practice of acknowledging children on their own special day. The live music played by the various groups on this day play *oldies,* one of the most popular and preferred genres for lowrider cruisers and individuals; it is the same type of music which was played in the borderland barrios. Everything about this show is from the barrio, and for the barrio. Finally, this show provides a model for how lowriders around their world should be giving back to their community. Although these are all selfless acts and are done with unconditional intentions, these very type of events prove exactly the contrary of what popular negative rhetoric says of Mexican-style lowriders as ready-for-violence criminals.

ii. Picnics & Car Club Gatherings:

Picnics and club gatherings share similarities with car shows, although are much less formal. Lowrider picnics and informal club gatherings nonetheless often include the presence of cars and, of course, lowrider individuals. Picnics are often held at public parks—lowrider owners bring their cars and grills out, and spend the day amongst friends and family. This makes for a great Sunday activity when no other lowrider car shows are being held. These informal gatherings make a great excuse for "camping for the day," if you will: lowrider clubs and/or families will bring out their canopies, lawn chairs, foldable tables, ice chests, and cook out for the day. Before one knows it, many canopies fill a park and underneath lie groups of people who may have arrived separately or be from different car clubs, but nonetheless share the same values! In this sense, cars become secondary and the shared culture—which includes family values—becomes the focus. Jovita Juarez, a former member from the Specials Car Club in San Diego, reveals through her dialogue, the positive lowrider spirit to which I refer: Even though I don't have a car, I still love to be around the cars; it's that pride in us" (qtd. in Pulido, 2014, 41:46-42:01). Again, spirit is much welcomed at this type of lowrider event as well as others.

Car club gatherings and informal lowrider get-togethers are similar, although not as publicly shared as picnics or car shows. These types of gatherings may come about as a result of a car club meeting, or "just because." Such gatherings are basically informal "private parties," and there doesn't have to be an occasion. This way of getting together "just because," I believe, is something borrowed from the Mexican tradition of having get-togethers and *carne asadas*, or barbecue cook-outs, on Sundays. A beautiful sight one can witness is the active community building at events like these—to see lowrider individuals sharing food with one another, and possibly even with other people who just may happen to be at the park, not knowing there was a gathering.

iii. Cruises & Cruise Nights:

Cruising has been brought back to public roads, but it isn't the street type of cruising which lowriders once trademarked as their own during the golden era. On the same note, cruise nights aren't necessarily the same thing as cruises. Cruising is accomplished by taking cruises—that is, on a certain level, lowriders plan and organize a caravan-style cruise. This can be "just because," or can be for a special occasion. Such special occasions include caravanning for quinceneras, which are Mexican cultural celebrations for females becoming "women" when they turn 15 years old. Other occasions include weddings and even funerals. Significantly, a lot of these special occasion cruises aren't just done as chauffer services, but are done amongst lowriders who are celebrating within their families. That is, lowriders help and support each other in time of celebration and/or loss. Thus, it isn't uncommon for large "last cruises" to be organized for lowriders who pass away.

There are much less formal cruises, however, which are done just for the sake of enjoying the weather and riding in one's car. Weekends make a great time to do such a thing. A drive on

a busy street or along the coast makes a great way to enjoy driving low n' slow. I remind my audience that cruising isn't the same as it used to be—that is, one simply doesn't go out onto a busy street and see it filled with lowriders in the same capacity anymore. There must be someone or something which brings people together. Sometimes, it may take one lowrider to call a few of his or her friends to get people together on a specific day and time. Other times, a cruise may take place on the way to or from a car event. One great occasion and place to cruise informally is when attending a *cruise night.*

Cruise nights have become popular in the lowrider community for many reasons: they are informal gatherings, which means there is no obligation or pressure to go as one may feel to participate in car shows. Although "cruise nights" have the word 'cruise,' these occasions are more like mini-car shows. This is a good thing, however: Cruise nights can be held on any day of the week and welcome all ages.

Preferably, cruise nights are held at a location where there are amenities for all ages. For instance, throughout 2017 and 2018, a cruise night took place in San Marcos, California. The cruise night took place on every 2nd Thursday of the month in Restaurant Row, a plaza full of dining establishments and breweries. The parking lot for these restaurants made a great meet-up location for lowriders and families to break up the week and socialize with one another over family dinner and drinks. At 9 P.M, the lowriders would line up to cruise San Marcos Boulevard, up to Rancho Santa Fe, until meeting the freeway where some would go West and others East. Many people would show who didn't own lowriders, but simply enjoyed the people, the music, the family socializing, and the scenery. It was quite a sight to watch lowriders leave the parking lot and cruise into the boulevard in a large line. People from the breweries and restaurants also got to see the lowriders as they dined, and that's part of the fun as a lowrider—

cruising somewhere where one can be admired for their hard work. This is just one example of cruising and cruise nights, although lowriders all over the world do things like this to keep lowriding cruising alive.

Figure 5.3 Ortega, Francisco. *Lowriders from the North County San Diego Summer Cruise Night.* Lowriders stop at a 7-11 on corner of San Marcos Blvd. and Rancho Santa Fe on their cruise out from Restaurant Row in San Marcos, California. Cruise night and "after" cruise taken place on 09/13/2019.

Beyond Spatial Boundaries of All Types: Lowriding Worldwide and Beyond

By its nature, lowrider culture actively continues to transcend boundaries—ideological and actual. Boundaries of gender, race, and class have all been overcome. One boundary implied within, but not extensively discussed, is the gender boundary: While lowriding has historically been a culture where men are primary agents and women play supportive roles, the culture has also allowed a space for women to claim their own agency and participate as independent lowrider individuals. The Specials and Ladies' Pride Car Clubs of San Diego were car clubs which celebrated and embraced the overarching identity of their members as primarily

female. These clubs would set an example for other women and individuals who hadn't yet gained the agency to participate in the culture to the extent they desired.

Some people see the following as appropriation, though many including myself consider cultural adaptation as celebration. Lowriding culture has spread all the way around the world; these traditions we've been practicing sacredly in the borderlands are being spread quickly. This shows there must be something good about lowriding. Lowriders and car clubs now exist not only in the borderland cities, but in cities not historically inhabited by Mexican(-Americans), or people of the Chicano style for that sake. The movement has spread amongst people of all types of different ethnic and national backgrounds. Afro-rican culture, for example, took on lowriding as a "hood" practice, much like Mexican(-Americans) created lowriding as a barrio tradition. Afro-rican lowriders are referenced and featured in the culture's music and films. Rap artists such as Eazy-E, Dr. Dre, and The Game make references to the "6-4" Impala in their music, and popular black films such as *Training Day* and *Boys in the Hood* feature lowriders as props for audiences to feel an authentic "hood" setting. Much like lowriders have in Mexican(-American) and Chicano cultures, the lowrider has become a character and symbol in Afro-rican media as well as for other cultures, which this thesis invites further exploration of.

Perhaps much less seen, but lowriders also exist in regions other than the Southwestern region, or 'West Coast' of the United States. It makes sense that the lowrider grew fame throughout the West Coast because of the spread of borderland states in its proximity to Mexico, although the movement would spread to the East Coast and all throughout the United States. The spread of lowriding doesn't just stop within the United States: the movement is international, and can be seen in well-known destinations around the globe. Old Memories Car Club, for example, has chapters all the way in Australia and Japan which abide by the same rules

and standards the founding "mother" chapter created. Some other car clubs have made their way to Europe as well. It makes sense that this would eventually happen in the place well known historically for art.

The lesson of this section, in discussing lowrider culture—in the context of the car itself and the people who embrace it to this day—is that together, lowriders are unstoppable. The culture, which continues to grow from an originally Mexican-style car customization movement to a culture of unity, of the people. opportunity—at any age, gender, race, or class—to find the alternative to negative street life in their pasts. It is never too late to overcome these boundaries through lowriding. Lowriding gives the opportunity to give back while enjoying one's self. Lowrider car clubs and individuals therefore have visions and goals to make a difference in the communities which they inhabit. The systematic discrimination against lowriders led to their biggest 'bump in the road,' although as this chapter has outlined, dominant Anglo-America wasn't *completely* successful at killing the culture as they perhaps wish to have done. In fact, the systematic effort to end the culture backfired, as the culture now grows much faster than it is dying.

Conclusion:

This essay has heavily emphasized the importance of ethnic inclusiveness of the subordinated Mexican descendant in lowrider culture. The tradition proves, however, to cross barriers of all types. It continues to prove itself to be a philanthropic culture which denies no one—regardless of the individual's race, gender or class. Lowriding, after all, is a way of self-expression. Anything and *anyone* with positive intentions and values is considered fair game. Individuals and car clubs to this day continue to show their different prides through the art of lowriding. The *Specials* and *Ladies' Pride* Car Clubs of San Diego are early exemplary clubs

which would combine their love for lowriding with their interest for social change—and indeed, though they admittedly faced their own challenges, they were accepted and made history. The same continues to happen as the history of lowriding expands; what happens next in its history is unknown, but one thing is for sure: With the spirit to back it, lowriding culture won't die soon.

While there is still resistance to this art of resistance, there is more strength in the power of lowriding culture to keep it around. We, the lowriders—from all borderland cities and beyond—*we* are not going anywhere. I conclude with radio announcer/DJ Xavier "the X Man" of Magic 92.5, "San Diego's Old School, who explains the significance lowriding plays in his life: Speaking specifically to the Mexican-American perspective, Xavier's is so well stated I intentionally left his interview for this concluding section:

> Lowriding means to me the beauty of my culture—the beauty of what I know, of where I'm from—putting it on a car and expressing how I feel about my life—and it's my identity. You know, it's art, and at the same time, it lets people know, 'hey *I'm here*—I'm here to stay, and I'm as part of the American melting pot as anybody else, but this is my style—and that's what this show's about. (qtd. in Pulido, 2014, 53:29-53:51)

It would be difficult to argue that any given lowrider cannot relate to Xavier's perspective in some capacity. Indeed, the Mexican-style lowriding tradition continues to be resented by forces of dominant Anglo-American hegemonic culture and rhetoric, yet it continues to grow exponentially. This is worth celebrating.

It is my hope that through demonstration of historic patterns, I've been able to illustrate lowrider culture as one of which emerged from subordination to ultimately become a family-oriented tradition which builds community. Dominant hegemonic rhetoric continues to oppress and result in physical and legal manifestations for subordinated groups. Although this thesis only speaks to one which I am most personally familiar with, I hope that along with gaining new knowledge of this culture, my audience feels moved to challenge dominant rhetoric which proves

to result in harsh realities against targeted individuals. There is certainly a lack of scholarship for many subordinated groups—the actual people. While we may not all write, it is up to us as individuals to do our part and speak up for what is right—we cannot just allow life narratives to be written for us and accept them for what they are. With this all in mind, regardless of one's current position, it is also therefore important to not forget where one comes from; we must acknowledge our people, for the next individual may not be as fortunate in life as we are. As we continue to write back to stereotypical hegemonic dominant discourse and rhetorical forms in whichever way possible, dominant society will find it more and more difficult to enforce and influence through their rhetoric. The war between the subordinate and dominant is long, ongoing one. There is hope for progress through writing and fighting back, however, as lowriding—the one exemplary culture explored through this thesis—continues to show to this day.

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Epilogue

Mexican(-American) writers must admit—amongst our people, some individuals "killed it" for the rest of us. Some perpetuated the very criminal image dominant American rhetoric illustrates of them. Gang, street and lowrider culture—all of which are different—have played a part in our history. I must re-emphasize, however, that even gang life was a way of resisting mainstream assimilation and marginalization. It is up to us to stay focused on positive community building, such as lowrider culture celebrates. This culture has offered a solidary ground for people living narratives of barriology, and more. Everyone has their way of expressing their own identity, and I hope this essay has inspired other subordinated audiences to take the first step: recognize the rhetoric, resist, and establish your own agency and voice. In the case of Mexican(-American) and its lowrider culture, gang crime is not condoned or considered fair game. What also isn't fair is to stereotypically assert that all Mexicans and Chicanos are gang members. The same goes for other subordinated, stereotyped, and cultures which have over time become suspected scapegoats of dominant rhetoric.

Not only in thesis have I attempted to influence and encourage positive, peaceful resistant art forms, but I would like to take the opportunity to invite first-timers to attend lowrider events. While the movement and its events can now be seen all around the world, some exemplary cultural events local to San Diego in which lowriders play a significant role include the Chicano Park Celebration Day in Barrio Logan Heights and the Dia De Los Muertos (Day of the Dead) celebration at Mission San Luis Rey in Oceanside. One can expect to experience Mexican(-American) and lowrider culture in these types of events. When the opportunity presents itself to attend this type of event, therefore, don't hesitate to attend based on historical stereotypes of lowriders—what you can expect is to experience a rich culture and meet warm people willing to share their experience, knowledge, and excitement of it. Don't be surprised to be welcomed with family-like hospitality, and aside from experiencing a unique scenery, experiencing the extras such as the unique music, food, and cold beverages which accompany lowrider culture, and welcome all. See you out here!

Visit:

https://chicano-park.com/

https://sanluisreyparish.org/events/dia-de-los-muertos-or-day-of-the-dead-festival/

About the Author

Primarily raised in San Marcos, California, Francisco Adrian Ortega grew up along the Mexico-United States border, where he learned a great deal of two cultures, and experienced hybridity. While he has love for both countries, he is very proud to be close to the motherland, where learned a great deal about lowriding, the Mexican culture, and values from his *jefito* (father), Jaime Ortega, and the rest of his family in Tijuana. Francisco is proud of his Tijuana roots, and to have been born into the car culture—which begins with his *abuelito* (grandfather), who owned a *yonke* (salvage yard), and taught his children to work by dismantling cars and chopping them with axes. Francisco was therefore born into a family of mechanics and auto body workers, who passed down their knowledge of cars, working, and hustling to him. As a child, he would enjoy helping his dad and *Tio* (uncle) Daniel, at their auto body/mechanic shop in Vista, California. While his own father was an auto body man, Francisco naturally enjoyed mechanical work more, and therefore thanks his Tio "Danny" for showing him what he knows about working on cars. The family shop saw a lot of cars Francisco's father and uncle would fix—especially classics and lowriders. This exposure, along with cruising with his jefito, his jefito's brothers and friends, made Francisco fond of the culture and dream of owning his own. At times, he would sit in a parked classic car and pretend to drive it as the stereo played oldie tunes. He could only imagine the day he had his own, and wondered what car it would be.

What started as a dream became a living reality; Francisco thanks his jefito and family for showing him that dreams don't have to remain dreams: Along with helping his jefe and uncle at the shop, the two would gift him scrap metal—transmissions, engines, and other metal car parts—which Francisco would tear apart to sell as clean scrap. He'd get enough together to sell it, and his jefe would take him to cash out. Having gotten some money together, Francisco bought his own set of yard tools and would do maintenance landscape work for his neighbors. He eventually had enough to start "buying and selling" things of all kinds—from popular devices such as iPods to car parts, and eventually inexpensive "five hundred dollar cars" to turn for a small profit. For his fourteenth birthday, Francisco's jefe offered him one of his cars as a present—a 1964 Impala convertible (known in hip-hop culture as "six-foe"). Although thankful, he turned down the offer and was determined to buy his own with his own money—even if it was a "bucket," and a much simpler model. The next year, this would happen. At the age of 15, he came up with just enough money to buy a 1954 Chevy Bel Air 2-door hardtop. It needed a lot of work, including mechanical, suspension, body, paint, and upholstery. Francisco initially stripped the car's primer, and observed his jefe's body work process. Thereafter, Francisco "block sanded" the car to get the body as straight as possible for paint—and it was at this time he realized body work wasn't for him. With his jefe's guidance and artistic skill, the car finally got painted, although it was quite a process. The next steps included other details including engine, transmission, drivetrain, accessories, tires, upholstery, and finally, *hydraulics*—because while the 54 is classified as a bomb, Francisco always wanted to have an authentic lowrider.

Having his own car made Francisco more curious about car clubs. While he had become familiar with some of the local car clubs through his jefe, two car clubs from outside the area particularly stood out to him. He looked up to, and was very fond of *Oldies Car Club* in Tijuana, which his Tio Arturo has been a part of for the past 10 years. He had also taken notice of *Old Memories Car Club*, which has been featured in "Lowrider" and "Streetlow" magazine. He was interested in either joining his uncle, which timing simply didn't allow for, or starting his own club—but the question was how, if he didn't know anyone from Old Memories? He liked the name, which shares the name of one of his favorite Tijuana-based oldies bands (whose singer passed away) from the 1980s; he found this significant. Old Memories, he noticed, is also a strictly bomb club, and he owned a bomb. His curiosity grew, particularly because he had never met or approached an Old Memories member, since most of their chapters are in the Los Angeles area. Francisco believes it to be more than chances, how he was introduced to the club: At the age of 17, he, his partner, and his future compadres, were at an Oldies concert sponsored by Art Laboe and Magic 92.5, "San Diego's Old School" radio station. It was this night they met "Little Cesar." Francisco and Cesar particularly hit it off and became friends through the love of music and the culture, but had no knowledge of each other's involvement in lowriding. Having exchanged contact information, Cesar, his wife, Francisco, and his partner, Kimberly, got in touch and planned to go to another concert later that year. It was at that point Francisco noticed Little Cesar wearing "colors," representing the East L.A. chapter of Old Memories car club. Francisco was astounded, and told Cesar although he had never met someone from Old Memories, he had great respect for the club. Cesar would begin to bring him around, telling him that he could see it already: a much needed chapter of Old Memories in San Diego.

Cesar continued to believe in the idea, and invited Francisco and Kimberly to join him and his wife at events such as dances and car shows in Los Angeles. Finally, at a dance held by the East L.A. chapter of Old Memories, Cesar introduced Francisco to the leading members of the "mother chapter," South LA, who invited Francisco to an all-chapter meeting. The day of the meeting came January 13th, of 2018. At this time the council of Old Memories voted, and blessed Francisco to start a chapter of Old Memories in San Diego. It was also this day that Oldies Car Club had *their* all-chapter meeting; thus, Francisco had just made it home from Los Angeles when he received a call from his Tio Arturo and one of his members from Oldies of Tijuana. Not knowing he had just been blessed with permission to build a chapter of Old Memories, and after all the years, it was on this same afternoon the Oldies had discussed amongst themselves and officially invited him to their club. Francisco felt honored, and thanked Oldies over the phone, but respectfully told them he'd be sticking with what had just become his own chapter of Old Memories to establish. He didn't have any members at the time, and was very relieved and thankful to have the other chapters of Old Memories reassure him that not only would he eventually recruit members, but members of the other chapters *are his members too*: one club, one big family.

Two of the cars Francisco has owned and "plaqued." Photo taken at Slow Lane Familia's "Lowrider Rollout" Car Show. The blue 1954 Chevy on the right is his first "keeper" bomb which he has managed to hold on to for 10 years as of this December. Pictured on the left is a '36 Dodge-Brothers he purchased as a project from his Tio Arturo in Tijuana, and finished as shown.

A *reconocimiento*, a recognition/acknowledgment of one's accomplishment, a congratulatory gift to Francisco and Old Memories San Diego Chapter for hosting their first car show. Framed recognition gifted by Arturo Ortega, and Oldies Car Club of Tijuana.

To this day, Old Memories of San Diego has a total of three members, including Francisco. They attend car shows, cruises, picnics, dances, and events held by other car clubs. They've also been fortunate enough to hold a few successful events of their own. Francisco continues to learn about the richness of lowrider culture which he is actively a part of. He is grateful for his blessing to be allowed to be part of Old Memories Car Club, which has played a great significance in his life. Not only does the name remind him of the Tijuana and his heritage, but he has made further connections which are significant to his cultural identification: He and his partner Kimberly named their first daughter "Leticia Isabel," which is the name of one of Francisco's favorite Spanish Oldies by the Old Memories group. He'd therefore like to stay with the club so long as he possibly can and plans to go *no where*, so long as health and life circumstances permit. He now looks forward to continue lowriding and spending time with loved ones, as he receives a graduate degree in Literature & Writing, and moves on begin a career teaching English composition with a cultural studies approach. He would like to make a special acknowledgement and say *thank you* to the following individuals:

- The members of his thesis committee, Dr. Cassel, Dr. Lush, and Dr. Yuan, for their involvement, patience, and guidance through both undergraduate and graduate studies, and dedication to helping him be successful with his Master's-level thesis project—their commitment is something he appreciates and admires, as he hopes to give back to his students one day;
- his *Jefito*, Jaime Ortega, for introducing him to lowrider culture, cruising, and the values and payoff of working rather than messing around in the street;
- his mother, Donna Ortega, who showed him the value of education, encouraged him to pursue his college degrees, and continues to encourage him to accomplish his every goal;
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- his little family: his partner, Kimberly, and their very special daughter, Leticia Isabel Ortega, who stand by his side;
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- Little Cesar, who brought him around Old Memories, and he is ever grateful for;
- The council of Old Memories Car Club, for teaching him the dynamics of a car club and blessing him with opportunity to start a chapter in San Diego
- Thomas, the *first* and remaining loyal member to join the San Diego chapter, and the *familia* Velasquez;
- Robert "Rocket" Alfaro and his partner, Rochelle, the second couple Francisco and Kim ever met from Old Memories, who have now transferred and not only become strong members of the San Diego Chapter, but like close, long lost family;
- the rest of his family, friends—inside and outside of the lowrider community—who show continued support for what he does, and the Old Memories *familia*;
- Finally, God, for blessing him with life, the people in his life, and the will to continue to aim to reach goals.