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Lowriding Through New Spaces

By: Beatriz Cano, UC Santa Barbara

ABSTRACT

Although lowriders may be a familiar image, many people merely label these custom cars as a manifestation of gang culture rather than seeing them as a Chicano cultural production. The former view dismisses the rich background that informed and led to the creation of lowriders. This paper argues that the creation of lowriders is not a manifestation of gang culture, but instead reflects efforts to create a space that expresses Chicano identity informed by inequality and segregation. The lowrider is a way of symbolically and literally traveling beyond segregated spaces that marginalize Chicanos, giving rise to Chicano pride and power. Lowriders also express Chicano identity through their abstract and representational painting, for example the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, a significant Chicano icon, which is often painted on lowriders. The lowrider is more than a vehicle; it is a representation and display of Chicano identities informed by experiences with inequality, segregation, and resistance.

Keywords: Lowriders; Chicano identity; art; space; Virgin of Guadalupe; resistance

LOWRIDER ORIGINS

Since the late 1930s, lowriders have represented personalities, identities, and experiences of many Chicanos. Lowriders are “any automobile, van, pickup truck, motorcycle, or bicycle lowered within a few inches of the road.”[1] The type of moving vehicle does not matter, the style of cruising low to the ground is the definitive characteristic in naming a vehicle a “lowrider.” Cars are often customized with “heavy-duty hydraulic suspension systems, costly lacquer paint jobs, stylized murals, etched glass logos, and plush interiors.”[2] The multiple creative and artistic aspects of lowriders require time, devotion, and style. Chicanos invented the first lowriders when custom cars were “modified primarily to achieve a specific style, with the goal of showing off the vehicle by traveling slowly down

[1] Michael C. Stone, “Bajito y Sauvecito [Low and Slow]: Low Riding and the ‘Class’ of Class,” *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 9, no.1 (1990): 85, doi: 9612300797.
[2] Ibid., 85.

the streets."[3] In other words, Chicanos wanted slower vehicles in order to successfully display the artwork put into their moving vehicles. Lowriders became transportation art.

Although lowriders began in the 1930s, it was not until the late 1940s that lowriders became popular. During that decade, Los Angeles went through a transformation in home construction due to a high demand for housing, which renewed interest in custom cars.[4] The amount of buildings and highways being built led people to perceive cars as a more necessary and convenient form of transportation around the city. This prominence of cars spurred interest in custom cars. Chicanos began to purchase used cars from the White middle class Americans that traded in their used cars usually only after two to three years of use.[5] Used cars gave monetary room for the reconstruction of a car so Chicanos were able to build their "own parts in a way that enhanced their own pride and at the same time helped distinguished one car from another."[6] Chicanos included parts into their car that showed ethnic pride as well as parts that displayed how their identity and lowrider was distinct from someone else's identity and lowrider. In the late 1950s these vehicles, and the culture that produced them, became known as "lowrider" cars and culture.[7]

Lowriders originally represented a rich culture in the twentieth century, but the value of these cars has faded since then. The lowrider culture has been accused of being associated with gangs and violence due to media portrayal. This negative view on lowriders caused community policing to move toward the regulation of space, which limited the continuation of the lowrider culture. This essay will seek to demonstrate that lowriders are not manifestations of gang culture, but cultural productions creating a space that expresses Chicano identity informed by inequality and segregation. I will illustrate this through a general discussion of the role of mural art on lowriders, and the specific usage of a significant Chicano icon often painted on lowriders, the Virgin of Guadalupe. Lowrider art allows Chicanos to discover and display their identity as individuals and as part of the Chicano community.

LOWRIDING CHICANO IDENTITIES

The act of driving a lowrider initiates the representation of a Chicano identity throughout local and distant spaces, in both geographical and social terms. William Calvo explains, "Lowriders represent mobile spaces of transgression against urban ghettoization, segregation, and gentrification."[8] In other words, lowriders create new spaces in various communities for Chicanos by transcending restrictions imposed on Chicanos by the preferences of the White middle class for segregated areas. For example, city governance

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[3] Charles Tatum, *Lowriders in Chicano Culture: from Low to Slow to Show* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2011), 4.
[4] Ibid., 7-8.
[5] Rebecca Cuevas de Caissie, "The Lowrider History," *BellaOnline: Hispanic Culture Site,* last modified 2014, http://www.bellaonline.com/articles/art39902.asp.
[6] Tatum, *Lowriders in Chicano Culture*, 9.
[7] Ibid., 4.
[8] William Calvo, "Lowriders: Cruising the Color Line" (PhD diss., University of California Santa Barbara, 2011), 195.

bodies are often comprised of White middle class community members, and through designating an "affordable housing" area working-class Chicanos are effectively concentrated. These affordable housing areas are often far-removed and therefore exclude Chicanos from middle class communities. However, when lowriders are taken outside of the barrios to socially distant communities, Chicanos are actively making their culture, identity, and presence visible to communities that segregate areas in order to avoid coexisting with Chicanos. By being visible, lowriders have the power to reach communities outside of the barrios and show how Chicano identities and culture has formed as a result of discriminatory segregation.

Chappell agrees with Calvo on the claim that lowriders are critical to the production of space. Chappell points out that, "Lowriders play a dynamic role in these processes of spatial production," by "carrying an association with the barrio and its specific ethno racial identity as they move throughout cities."[9] Indeed, throughout different areas there is an association between lowriders and barrios, which are a lower socioeconomic class environment created by segregation as well as inequalities in housing, schooling, employment, and resources. When people see a lowrider, their minds also see the Chicano barrio culture, and create a new psychic space where Chicano identities are acknowledged beyond the boundaries of segregation and inequality. Chappell explains that "by making themselves difficult to miss, lowriders concentrate and locate the capacity to affect and be affected, making their presence and the occupation of a site an event."[10] Lowriders receive a great amount of attention due to their luxurious colors, designs, artworks, and hydraulics. As a result of this attention, Chicano identities are displayed to a greater extent. The increased attention also results in larger psychic and physical spaces filled with the recognition and presence of Chicano identities. Chappell, therefore, emphasizes Calvo's claim that lowriders successfully exhibit Chicano identities formed from barrio culture to outside communities.

Although lowriders began to symbolize Chicano identities in California, other Chicanos in states such as Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and Colorado also adopted lowriders as a means of representing their identities. In Texas, lowriders were seen as early as the 1940s along the south Texas-Mexico border, but lowriding did not become firmly established in Texas until the 1960s.[11] Lowriding in New Mexico began in the 1950s in the city of Española, which held the first lowrider show of New Mexico in 1975 and earned the reputation as the center of lowrider culture.[12] In Arizona, lowriders were first seen cruising in Tucson and Phoenix in the early 1960s.[13] In that same decade, lowriding was also common in Denver, Colorado, where low and slow cruisers could be seen at night.[14] As an increasing number of Chicanos use lowriders as a way of displaying their identities to create new spaces, the lowrider culture begins to be seen as cultural citizenship. Dylan Miner describes the concept of cultural citizenships as a "range of social practices which, taken together, claim and establish a distinct social space for

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[9] Ben Chappell, *Lowrider Space: Aesthetics and Politics of Mexican American Custom Cars* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2012), 33.
[10] Chappell, *Lowrider Space,* 33.
[11] Tatum, *Lowriders in Chicano Culture*, 22.
[12] Ibid., 23.
[13] Ibid., 24.
[14] Ibid., 25.

Latinos."[15] Lowrider culture has become a social practice since Chicanos from various areas have adopted it to promote new spaces for themselves, and in doing so, transformed the lowrider culture into a symbol of cultural citizenship.

In addition, Chicanos have adopted this social practice largely in unison due to historical and present segregation and inequality. This concept of cultural citizenship is also extended by the attention that lowriders receive from people of marginalized backgrounds when owners drive their lowriders to other communities. Lowriders are a symbol of cultural citizenship that allows Chicanos to be visible to outside communities. Through being visible, lowriders have become and continue to be a form of cultural citizenship established by Chicanos to successfully create social spaces that include Chicano identities, which transgress segregated spaces.

MURALS OF OUR FACES

Abstract designs began to appear on lowriders in the early 1950s, but it was not until the mid-1960s that representational figures became popular on lowriders. William Calvo describes how this new phenomenon of murals recreated Aztlán, the mythical homeland of the Aztecs argued to be a small part of the southwest as shown by Aztec codices and oral histories.[16] Calvo explains that through turning "the images of heroes, gods, and Aztlán… into quotidian symbols, which are real and accessible to all."[17] The murals of indigenous gods, legendary heroes, and mythical Aztlán painted on lowriders intended to be seen every time the lowrider is used, invoke a revolution that ultimately creates a new homeland. By bringing these indigenous and mythical aspects from the past as a part of everyday life in the present, these aspects become real and existent to everyone in both local and distant communities. The gods, heroes, and Aztlán are no longer part of a distant world, but rather part of their land, the barrios, and surrounding communities. The production of lowriders gives rise to the new Aztlán where Chicanos no longer conform to segregation, inequality, and invisibility, but voice Chicano identity and indigenous culture. The creation of representational murals on lowriders symbolizes identities from barrio culture beyond segregated areas, which further expands space for Chicanos living in the new Aztlán.

In addition, Dylan Miner explains that this form of art encourages ethnic and cultural pride, Chicano power, which further emphasizes recreating the new Aztlán where Chicanos no longer conform to inequalities and segregation. Chicanos' increased pride in their indigenous roots empowers them to fight for spaces where no spaces exist for them. Miner describes, "For Xicano and other Indigenous artists, art-making affirms and galvanizes Indigenous political, social, and intellectual sovereignty."[18] Through building lowriders, Chicanos use the art form as a way of reclaiming their cultural roots, which allows them to embrace and galvanize around

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[15] Dylan Miner, *Creating Aztlán: Chicano Art, Indigenous Sovereignty, and Lowriding Across Turtle Island* (Tuscan, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 2014), 86-87.

[16] Apaxu Maiz, *Looking 4 Aztlán: Birthright or Right 4 Birth* (Northville, MI: Sun Dog Press, 2004), 151-152.

[17] Calvo, "Lowriders," 195.

[18] Miner, *Creating Aztlán,* 87.

their indigenous identity in order to fight for political, social, and intellectual power. This also means that Chicanos no longer wish to live in an oppressive government system, but rather be educated people with political and social power that allows them to actively take part in their government. Last, through attaining some societal influence, Chicanos create opportunities to change some of the inequalities and segregations they experience on behalf of their government. Chicanos go from passive participants to active participants in government. In the end, lowriders express more than identities, they express pride, power, and hope for change.

The film *Blood In Blood Out* also illustrates the pride and hope Chicanos feel in their indigenous culture. This film is contextualized in East Los Angeles around the 1970s and is based on real experiences of Chicano poet Jimmy Santiago Baca. In *Blood In Blood Out*, the character of Cruzito is a lowrider artist and an example of how lowriders invoke the new Aztlán and assert indigenous sovereignty. In an early scene of the film Cruzito explains one of his paintings depicting an Aztec man carrying an Aztec woman in his arms: “This is Quetzalcoalt, the great Aztec [god]. He rode the kingdom of Aztlán that was from Mexico all the way up here to Califas.”[19] This figure is an important piece of Chicano culture because according to myth, he was the god that observed an eagle standing on top of a large cactus, and established that location as the Aztec civilization. The incorporation of this indigenous god into lowrider art reveals the pride many Chicanos carry in their history and indigenous roots.

Cruzito’s art also illustrates Calvo’s argument of representational art recreating Aztlán in a new land. Perhaps unintentionally, Cruzito brings Quetzalcoatl as well as Aztlán back from the past into the present through his art. Cruzito explains, “This *vato* [man] is coming back some day to reclaim the raza’s kingdom.”[20] Cruzito clearly believes that Quetzalcoatl will return to reclaim the land of Chicanos, further enforcing the ideology that the land is Aztlán and belongs to Chicanos. As Maiz explains, “As the original peoples with rights originating from natural law, we are entitled to our inheritance- the land. The lands and ancestry where the blood, bones, and artifacts of our ancestors has been stolen (reidentified) and placed beyond reach.”[21] Through lowrider art, Chicanos are reclaiming the land and creating a space that brings their roots into reach. This also shows how indigenous art empowers Chicanos to fight for their equality in terms of space. In all, the film *Blood In Blood Out* provides an example of how Chicano identities are expressed through lowrider paintings, which contributes to the creation of new spaces for Chicanos.

THE VIRGIN OF GUADALUPE

In the 1960s and 1970s, Chicano artists also turned to Mexican muralism as an artistic expression of their ideological beliefs. Tatum emphasizes that the renewed pride in “Mexican Indian, indigenous, and mestizo cultural heritage [was] expressed through the incorporation of religion icons and symbols such as the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico’s most important

[19] *Blood In Blood Out,* DVD, directed by Taylor Hackford (1993; Los Angeles, CA: Buena Vista Pictures, 2000).
[20] *Blood In Blood Out.*
[21] Maiz, *Looking 4 Aztlán,* 168.

religious figure."[22] Indeed, the Virgin of Guadalupe is popular among the Chicano community in aspects of religion, faith, and strength. While the image can unify a community through shared significance, the image can also embody personal significance and unique meanings for individuals. In essence, the popularity of the Virgin of Guadalupe on lowriders recognizes and helps establish the icon as an important aspect of Chicano identity.

The image of the Virgin of Guadalupe symbolizes the need for Chicano identity, hope, and resistance. Deborah Boehm describes a historical event when "Father Hidalgo evoked her name and presented her image when he gave the call for Mexico's Independence."[23] First, as Boehm describes, there is an association between the symbol of the Virgin of Guadalupe and Mexico's independence. The association between the two can lead people to view her image as a proud symbol of Mexico's courage to fight for their freedom. Since Mexico was successful in gaining independence, Chicanos may also see the Virgin of Guadalupe as a symbol of strength.

There is another association between the Virgin of Guadalupe with hope and resistance. When Father Hidalgo used her image to evoke Mexico's independence, it demonstrated peoples' resistance to living under Spain's rule. Father Hidalgo transforms the Virgin of Guadalupe into a revolutionary symbol of hope for change and resistance to oppression. The Virgin of Guadalupe is also associated with identity because her image has played a significant role in historical events. Boehm documents, "Leaders used her image on banners of political protest."[24] This shows that the Virgin of Guadalupe continues to appear in times of political change for Chicanos that influences the development of new identities. Her image is part of the character and experiences that contribute to developing a Chicano identity. The Virgin of Guadalupe contributes to the development of Chicano identities through associations with pride, strength, hope, and resistance.

In addition, the Virgin of Guadalupe can express identities in both collective and individual forms, depending on the context for how it is used. In terms of a community, Rodriguez explains that the Virgin of Guadalupe "calls for the restoration of the dignity of those crushed by sustained dominations and oppression."[25] For groups that have been treated as inferior, the Virgin of Guadalupe can be seen as motivation to fight for dignity. This is seen through Father Hidalgo and the people of Mexico. On the individual level, "the memory of Guadalupe passes on the values of self-worth and appreciation of one's own language, culture, and tradition,"[26] meaning that the image is associated with the subjective realities of each individual. The image initiates a process of reflection on one's own language, culture, and traditions that compose their identity. Whether collectively or individually, the Virgin of Guadalupe represents Chicano identities that have experienced inequalities and oppressions.

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[22] Tatum, *Lowriders in Chicano Culture*, 97-98.
[23] Deborah A. Boehm, "Our Lady of Resistance: The Virgin of Guadalupe and Contested Constructions of Community in Santa Fe, New Mexico," *Journal of the Southwest* 44, no. 1 (2002): 102, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40170240.
[24] Boehm, "Our Lady of Resistance," 102.
[25] Jeanette Rodriguez, *Cultural Memory: Resistance, Faith, and Identity* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2007), 32.
[26] Ibid., 32.

ART NOT VIOLENCE

Sadly, lowriders are not always seen as artwork meant to represent Chicano identities in order to create new spaces for Chicanos. Mark Moreno contrasts this with a view on lowriders that is associated with gang violence. Moreno claims that the publication Low Rider Magazine is a display of *cholo* [Chicano gangster] culture as it shows "photos of Chicanas and Chicanos across the Southwest wearing khaki pants, black leather shoes… and plaid shirts buttoned at the top"[27] around custom lowriders. According to Moreno, members of gangs are usually dressed in this manner. The reality is that when Chicanos dress in this style, they may or may not be a member of a gang. Even if a Chicano, who was involved in gang activity, owned a lowrider, the gang violence produced has little to do with the lowrider or any other form of vehicle. Instead, gang violence can arise from a plethora of other reasons including personal vendettas and drugs.[28] The significance of lowriders should not be based on how magazines or other forms of media wrongfully portray custom cars. The focus should be placed on the importance of how this form of art allows Chicanos to display their identities and create new spaces for the Chicano community.

CONSEQUENCES OF ASSOCIATION

Although lowriders are not directly related to gang violence, the association still brings consequences that greatly impact the lowrider culture. One consequence is the tendency of increased attention from police officers, which limits the lowriding culture. Chappell explains, "The high visibility and race- and class-marked aesthetics of lowrider cars increase a driver's chances of being target for surveillance."[29] Lowriders are not targeted with a true suspicious association with gang violence. Instead, lowrider owners are being surveilled for simply driving a lowrider vehicle. This increases unequal and oppressive acts towards Chicano and barrio culture since police officers stereotype lowriders, a barrio cultural production, as gang related. Through interviews with lowrider owners, Chappell describes, "Every lowrider I met had been pulled over, often times for reasons that they described as dubious at best."[30] This shows that when police officers attack lowrider drivers, the officers cannot give a validated reason for stopping the driver. As a result of the association with gangs as well as of stereotypic attitudes toward the Chicano community, lowrider owners cannot cruise freely or without the worry of being targeted by police officers. The simple existence of lowriders does not commit acts violence or threatens anyone, yet lowrider owners are still stopped and questioned by the police officers. In all, this

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[27] Mark E. Moreno, "Mexican American Street Gangs, Migration, and Violence in the Yakima Valley," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 97, no. 3 (2006): 133, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40491948.
[28] "Gang Violence," *TeenViolenceStatistics.com*, last modified 2009, http://www.teenviolencestatistics.com/content/gang-violence.html.
[29] Ben Chappell, "Custom Contestations: Lowriders and Urban Spaces," *American Anthropology Association* 22, no.1 (2010): 36, doi: 10.1111/j.1548-744X.2010.01029.x.
[30] Ibid., 33.

unequal and largely unjustified policing of spaces perpetuates oppression towards Chicano identities and culture.

The policing practices of lowriders and barrio culture can also function as a way to attempt maintaining Chicanos in segregated areas. Chappell details, "Spatial governmentality emphasizes the regulation of space by managing populations, that is by removing undesirable persons and practices from particular sites."[31] This illustrates how police use the association of lowriders with gang violence as a reason to remove Chicanos from white middle class areas. Those communities then adopt this association to justify increased, unequal policing in every barrio, every Chicano community, in order to maintain their community's exclusivity. This forces Chicanos to remain in the barrio, distant from middle class communities and resources, and is a form of discrimination that maintains segregated and unequal treatment towards Chicanos. Lowriders may not be affiliated with gang violence, but unjustified stereotypes and assumptions perpetuate societal inequality and segregation for Chicanos.

CONCLUSIONS

This essay has shown how lowriders are used to create space and display identities for Chicanos. The exploration of Chicano identity can continue efforts to resist, deconstruct, and ultimately defeat inequality, segregation, and oppression. If they do not, Chicanos may internalize a negative self-conception. For example, renowned writer Richard Rodriguez has told how he felt self-hatred as a child because he did not view himself as a worthy Chicano due to the inequalities and discrimination that he experienced because of his brown skin.[32] Laura Fine explains, "His family has taught him to believe in his ethnic inferiority, so that when others [yelled] a racial insult, he [felt] badly about himself, not angry at them."[33] The constant feeling of inferiority led Rodriguez to perceive himself in a negative manner. He internalized what others told him of his identity, and did not seek, nor did he have permission from perhaps his family, to develop his own identity.

Lowriders are a way of finding one's own Chicano identity. Through lowrider art, Chicanos can display who they are as part of a Chicano community and as an individual. This form of art also captures the attention of local and distant communities resulting in new spaces with Chicano identities. The art on lowriders also gives rise to a sense of power that motivates Chicanos to seek political, social, intellectual power. Lowriders are not a manifestation of gang violence, but a form of art that allows Chicanos to feel proud of who they are and where they come from despite their experiences with historical and current inequalities and segregation.

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[31] Ibid., 37.

[32] Laura Fine and Ted Fortier, "Claiming Personas and Rejecting Other-Imposed Identities: Self Writing as Self-Righting in the Autobiography of Richard Rodriguez," *Biography* 19, no. 2 (1996): 122, doi: 10.1353/bio.2010.0309.

[33] Ibid.

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