

I WANT MY CAR TO LOOK LIKE A WHORE

Lowriding and poetics of outlaw aesthetics

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Out here in the perimeter
there are no stars
Out here we is stoned
Immaculate.

—JIM MORRISON

Abstract

Material culture can be understood materially, socially and symbolically. The lowrider cars of Los Angeles are often analyzed in perspective of theories on ethnicity and gender. Here they are instead analyzed in perspective of class, seeking to understand the aesthetical taste which is expressed in the lowrider cars in light of the socioeconomic status of the people who build and own the cars. A special focus is put on the outlaw aura which surrounds the lowriders, and the thesis attempts to describe how also this is related to the owner's social standing in the American social hierarchy.

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Introduction

The objective of this thesis is to study the aesthetical expressions of the lowrider cars in light of theories on prestige, and to analyze the outlaw aura which surrounds the lowriders in light of the disenfranchised position of one particular segment of the American population, the Mexican-Americans.¹

As a result of the tendency in social studies within USA to treat themes in the light of ethnicity and gender, a major part of ethnographical studies portray the population groups they write about as exotic and describes them as physically and culturally isolated—as subcultures opposed to mainstream American culture. The same goes for descriptions of the lowrider culture, both in academic literature and in diverse types of popular culture. It has been argued that these themes which are now usually analyzed through ethnic and gender studies, might be better discussed within the paradigm of class (Ortner 1991, Bright 1995). I will here attempt to do exactly this, with my examination of the lowriders and their outlaw aesthetics, as I look at this visually spectacular expression of taste as a reflection of the social standing of the people who build and own the cars, rather than an expression of their ethnic background and gender.

The thesis is based on fieldwork I did in Los Angeles from 2003 to 2007. It has been my goal to simultaneously gather both emic and etic perspectives on the lowrider cars; to build an understanding of how the cars

¹ In the following text I use the noun *lowrider* in two different ways. A *lowrider* is either a car or a bicycle, but a *lowrider* is also the owner of a *lowrider car* or the owner of a *lowrider bicycle*. If it is not clear from the context whether I refer to a vehicle or a person, I will clarify by writing *lowrider car* or *lowrider bicycle* even though in speech the term is rarely used like that.

The verb *lowride* signifies the act of building a *lowrider*, owning a *lowrider*, driving a *lowrider*, or in any other way partaking in the *lowrider* culture.

are perceived by those who build and own them, but to also to see how the lowriders are understood by those outside of the lowrider culture. The field work method has mainly been participant observation, where the idea was to obtain an object and transform it into another object, thereby also changing its signification; in other words, I wanted to live among lowriders in order to build a lowrider so I could gain insights into the inner logic of this particular type of visual expression. Furthermore I wanted to experience personally the surrounding society's reactions to this aesthetical style. Meanwhile my intention was also to speak and listen to people outside of the lowrider culture as a mean to understand *their* perspective.

There's some good poetry in the aesthetics of a lowrider car. All I wish for is to capture some of that poetry. Put it under a microscope. Then ultimately—perhaps—I'll get to see the big picture.

Research design and methodology

We are not, or at least I am not, seeking either to become natives (...) or to mimic them. Only romantics and spies would seem to find point in that. We are seeking, in the widened sense of the term in which it encompasses very much more than talk, to converse with them, a matter a great deal more difficult, and not only for strangers, than is commonly recognized.

—Clifford Geertz in *The interpretation of culture*

The idea to write about lowriders came to me on the sofa in front of my TV one early winter evening in Oslo. Watching a music video channel (perhaps it was MTV) a song came on with particularly intriguing scenery, showing a rock band playing their song inside an empty circus tent, raised in a post-apocalyptic desert landscape. A young, quite peculiar-looking boy (is he an alien?) sneaks around, spying on the band. When the intro finishes and the power chords start, the video cuts to an urban street scene. Thronged around two or three shiny cars, a crowd of present-day-looking youth sways to the rhythm of the music, everything shot in slow-motion. The young boy is there with them, now flanked by two beautiful female models in red dresses; the models show a lot of legs, it's all very mesmerizing. The cars turn out to be lowriders, as one of them—probably using hydraulic pumps—jumps up and down with its front end. The video has a narrative—something about an evil-looking impresario-type; journalists sensing sensation; a fashion photographer

throwing his camera over his shoulder, his assistant ready to catch, it's spectacular; stars on the Hollywood Boulevard; there's money and joy, then despair—but I lost track of the story. Instead, lured by the visuals, I was lost in the lowriders. It wasn't the first time I had seen them, or heard about them, but it was at this moment I realized I wanted to go study them. I decided there and then that I would.

The images of the lowrider cars, jumping up and down, ignited a primitive functionalist curiosity, and although it was still philosophically and anthropologically very immature, the question I intuitively formulated in my head would later follow me all through my inquiry. Why do these people do such things to their cars?

I was far into the fieldwork before I allowed myself to formulate a theory around this first question, bearing in mind one specific anthropology research dilemma which always seemed sensible to me: If I go into the field looking for proof of a model or a theory, I might easily miss more important aspects of the culture I study. Therefore the strategy I developed for my field work was intentionally loose on theory. Instead I focused on location.

I started to develop a plan; I designed my project.

Since I knew from before that the lowriders were to be found in the United States, that's where I needed to go. I narrowed my choices further down to the Southwestern states, and finally picked Los Angeles as my field location, because most lowriders I saw described in magazines were from LA.

Inquiring anybody around me who would know, hitting the library, and generally trawling my surroundings for any applicable tidbits of data, I also concluded that I should travel via Mexico on my way to California. 1/3 of the

population in Los Angeles County is of Mexican heritage, so I figured it'd be good to have a look at Mexico before I settled down in my research. 6 weeks of traveling around in various parts of a country isn't much to build an understanding of a nation or a culture, but I decided that some is better than nothing. I later realized that in those 6 weeks I had seen much more of Mexico than many of the Mexican-Americans I met in Los Angeles ever had. More than anything my short encounter with Mexico gave me valuable insights into what Mexican culture can appear like from inside of Mexico, as opposed to what Mexican culture appears like from inside the United States.

Another idea I had about field method was that I would build a lowrider during my stay in Los Angeles.

Looking back this notion was somehow naïve, but ignorance is bliss and despite considerable flaws it was really a grand idea. I optimistically convinced myself that my lacking experience in working with cars could work to my advantage.

"Since I know nothing I will be forced to get in touch with people how knows," I asserted myself.

I would later discover that the creation of a lowrider car takes considerable more resources than what I—a graduate degree student of social anthropology doing fieldwork in a faraway place—could expect to muster. (There were other reasons, too, for me to eventually abandon the plan to build a lowrider. For one—participant observer or not—I am simply not a lowrider.)

Arriving in Los Angeles by Greyhound bus, this is what I had—a superficial knowledge of lowrider cars; an idea that I would somehow get in

touch with some Mexican-American lowriders (since most lowriders supposedly were Mexican-Americans); and an overly optimistic (and perhaps romantic) idea that I would build a lowrider during my stay. Within a week I had settled in. And I had purchased a car—not only so that I could build a lowrider, but also because, as any Angelino will tell you, you need a car to live in LA. And so off I was, looking for people to talk to.

But it didn't go smoothly. I never saw any lowrider cars in the streets, and this surprised me, since I had an impression—gathered from the material I studied before I left for the field—that the streets of LA would be packed with lowriders. I suddenly realized that my plan A of simply walking up to somebody with a lowrider asking to talk to them rested on a missing premise.

I also realized I had no plan B.

This made me very uneasy. In addition the unfamiliar suburban landscape of Los Angeles, with its seemingly lack of city planning, suddenly made my task seem unbearably hard. The poet Gertrude Stein once masterfully described the American suburbia exclaiming “There is no there there”—her poetic rendering taps straight into the emptiness, the dread, clutching newcomers who attempts to navigate the urban American sprawl. I remembered Stein's words as I desperately searched for a “there.”

It was horrifying coming to Los Angeles—with all my solitary anguish and all my insecurity, thrown out by myself on my first field work, a stranger among strangers—and have that angst dash straight at me. “Where do I go? Where is the action? Where is there anything I can study? Where is my material?” The abyss of academic failure never seemed further away than the next freeway exit.

In fact I gave up. "To hell with LA," I told myself. "I have to return to Norway in not too long, and I have no material!" I decided to take a trip to New Mexico. I had heard that the streets there were abuzz with lowriders. So I went to a book store, a traveler's book store, and found myself some guides on New Mexico. As I got ready to pay, the lady behind the counter asked me what I was going to New Mexico for.

"I'm looking for lowriders," I told her. And then I spilled my guts, revealing to her my failure as a social anthropology student.

"Perhaps I can help you," she offered. "I once worked for a museum, where we had some lowrider exhibition. I can give you some names and some telephone numbers."

A few phone calls and two days later I found myself in Chuy's backyard in East LA. It was an early Southern California night, warm and dark. Clutching a can of beer I stood staring into a garage where *Stoned Immaculate*, Chuy's 1963 Chevy Impala, was parked next to *Sun Goddess*, his nephew Victor's 1966 Buick Riviera. To my best efforts I tried to explain to Chuy and three-four of his curious friends why I had come all the way from the other side of the world to stand just there, just then. Not that it surprised them—a lot of people come to look at their cars. Yet, all the way from Norway was intriguing, it seemed, even for jaded members of Lifestyle—one of the most renowned car clubs of California, nay the United States.

I cancelled my plans for New Mexico, and stayed on in LA.



Figure 1: A can of Tecate beer.

At this time Chuy was the president of the club. This position gave him the authority to permit my presence at the club's meetings. As long as the president of the club accepted me, everybody else in the club would be willing to talk to me. Chuy was, in other words, my fieldwork's gatekeeper—he was the one who initially gave me access to the car club where I could meet the other lowriders.

But Chuy was not only the kind of person social anthropologists call a gatekeeper. He was also my key informant. He has a longer history of low riding than most other members of the club, and this involvement with the lowrider cars has given him a solid knowledge of the various mechanical and aesthetical elements of the cars. Since Chuy's involvement with the cars stretches back to the early 1970's, he is intimately acquainted with a significant part of lowrider history. And if I had any questions about the technicalities of building a lowrider, he could surely help me out.

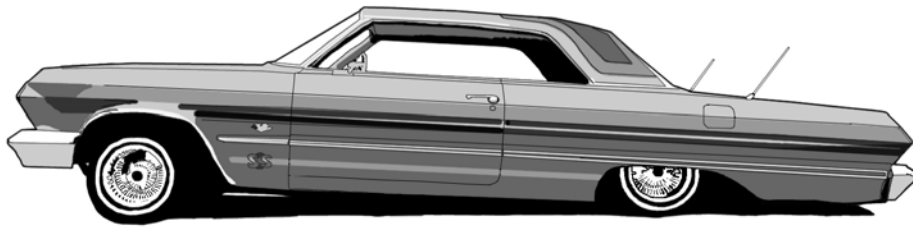


Figure 2: "Stoned Immaculate" Chuy's 1963 Chevrolet Impala.

Chuy was, however, harder to talk to as soon as I started touching onto the more philosophical elements of the culture, since he always seemed to try and figure out the intentions behind my questions before he would respond; thus I had a feeling he wasn't giving me access to his own raw opinions on the themes I ultimately wanted to talk about. He behaved like this probably because he was—at the time I first spoke to him—the president of Lifestyle. I think this role made him want to provide, to outsiders like me, a consistent picture of the club.

Chuy's answers to my questions also seemed to be shaped by his previous experience of what outsiders want to know about when they come asking about lowriders. I tried to indicate how I wasn't like those other outsiders. The concept of social anthropological fieldwork was somehow hard to convey, but as soon as I told the people I talked to that I was studying the lowrider culture, I spotted affirmative looks on their faces. *Culture* seemed to be a key word for communicating my respect for what these people do. And when I told them I was writing a thesis, I was swiftly labeled as some kind of writer, which is admittedly correct, or perhaps a journalist, which is wrong.

For my photographic documentation I used an Olympus Mju II. The Mju II is a small and eminent 35mm pocket photo camera; it's inconspicuous, which makes it great for snapshots. In addition I did my best to maintain

discreet while stealing my photos, keeping in mind the noble notion that I did not want to alter the scene by my presence. But since I photograph with what I like to think is an aura of craftsmanship—and even though I'm sure this aura sometimes looks closer to clowning—I have a feeling my use of the camera strengthened the perception that I was around for some professional gig. When I pulled out my sound recording equipment, I probably congealed this idea.

Not only did I deny, on all occasions, this notion that I was doing a job I would later be financially reimbursed for; I also repeatedly did my best to explain the true nature of my presence. More often than not, this created a new image of me: Taking it for granted that I was if not lying then certainly not telling the whole truth, I think it was assumed that I aspired to eventually become a member of the car club. This I then had to deny, taking great care not to step on somebody's toes. The club obviously provided a valuable fellowship and a sense of purpose to its members, and I naturally wanted to convey my deep-felt respect for this.

All this said the club accepted my presence with little ado. I was free to come and join them for meetings, usually held on weekday nights in one particular gas station's parking lot, or in some member's workshop. I went to car shows where they would go. I met some of the club members selling car parts at swap meets. On occasion the club would support a member arranging a *quinceañera* for his daughter, driving the party attendants in a lowrider caravan through the streets, from home to church to the park (for the photo session) and finally to the chosen place for the dinner and the dance. I would tag along, at the end of the caravan, along with other non-lowrider cars

of the procession. (Often I would lose them all, missing a green light at a crossroad, seeing the caravan disappear while I impatiently—cursing—would wait for the next green light. Then I would call Chuy up from some random phone booth, asking “hey, where are you guys?” Chuy always found this amusing.) I also visited selected members in their workshops and in their homes, for some unstructured interviewing, and sometimes to watch them work on their cars.

I also visited a member of Lifestyle now living in Mesa, Arizona. I talked to a car show judge in Gilbert, Arizona, whom I later joined at a car show, walking with him as he judged the cars. I visited a customizing shop in Phoenix. I rode through a warm, neon-night-shrouded Las Vegas in a lowered Cadillac, chauffeured (to my wedding) by the proud owner of the car.

In addition I visited several car shows in Southern California. I also attended a few car shows for other types of customized cars, thinking it is important to know of related styles of car customizing and to see the culture which surrounds these other traditions. I talked to hot rodders. I talked to artists, seeking the additional perspective of people on the outside (but still close to the lowrider culture), people who would be able to articulate their thoughts around a culture they knew but which they did not partake in. I read through countless issues of Lowrider Magazine, and other car culture publications.

Last, but not least, I lived in Southern California, and the USA, for a long period of time, immersing myself in the daily life of the culture which surrounds the lowrider I was there to study.

The geographical area and its demographics

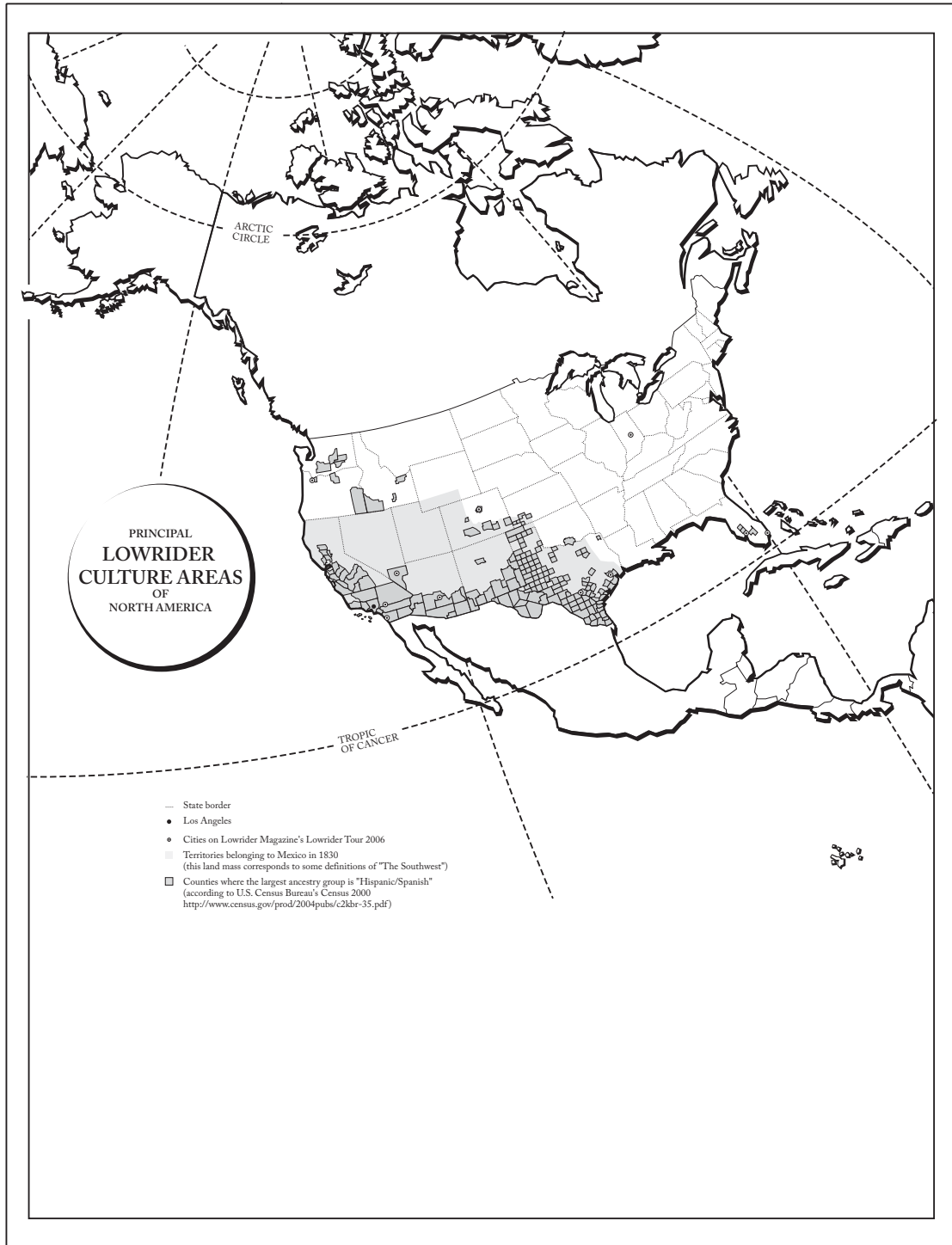
It is not down in any map; true places never are.

—Ishmael, the narrator in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*.

The lowriding Southwest

To map the relevant areas for a study of lowrider culture, it can be helpful to look at the route of the Lowrider Magazine's Lowrider Tour. In 2006 the Tour visited 6 places traditionally viewed as part of the US Southwest (Phoenix, Arizona; San Bernardino, California; San Antonio, Texas; San Diego, California; Houston, Texas; and Las Vegas, Nevada) and 5 places outside of the Southwest (Miami, Florida; Tampa, Florida; Indianapolis, Indiana; Denver, Colorado; and Portland, Oregon). 9 of these 11 cities have a big group of people who reported to be "of Hispanic or Latino origin" (U.S. Census 2006d). (Portland, Oregon does not have many people claiming to fall into this category, but the neighboring Hood River County has 25%. In Indianapolis, one of the cities on the tour, only 3.9% of the population say they are "of Hispanic or Latino origin"; I suspect the main reason for the Lowrider Tour to still visit Indianapolis is a wish to firmly establish the lowrider shows as a respectable "motor sport", since Indiana is considered the world capital of motor sports.)

Although lowriders can also be found in other states of the USA and to a certain degree in Japan, the bulk of the culture is to be found—and has always been found—in the Southwestern states of the USA. Other localities



might clearly be important for the study of lowriders², but it is widely agreed that Southern California and Los Angeles are focal points of lowriding.

Los Angeles and East LA

My fieldwork primarily took place in Los Angeles County, California, USA. The first neighborhood I visited, in which I could closely observe lowriders and talk to the owners of the cars, was situated inside the unincorporated community of East Los Angeles—commonly referred to as East LA—which is located east of the city of Los Angeles, just across the Los Angeles River.

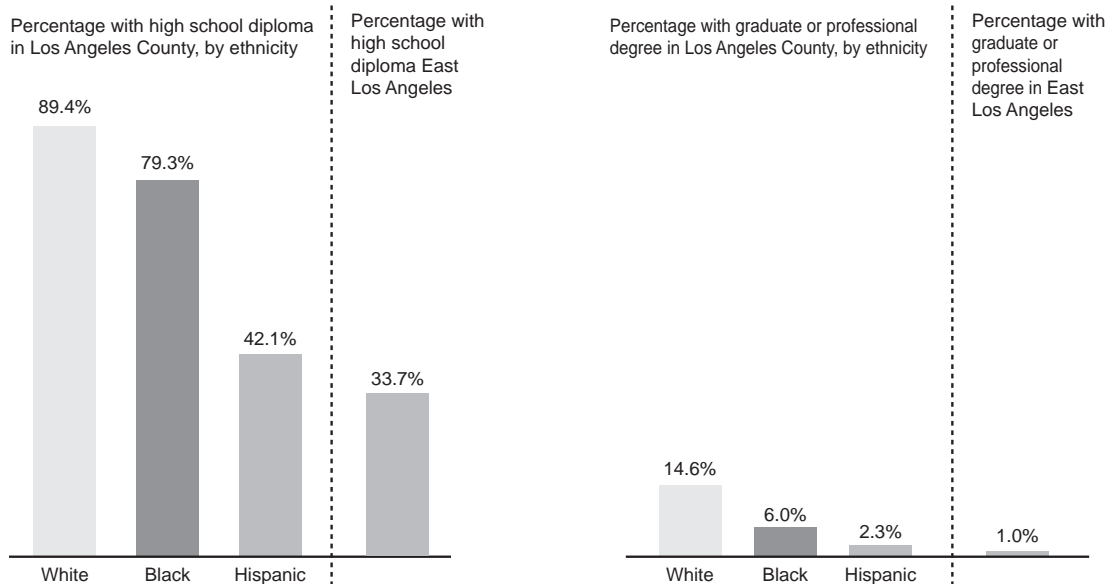
Ethnicity

In 2005 Los Angeles County had, according to U.S. Census Bureau estimates, a population of close to 10 millions (U.S. Census Bureau 2006e). Half of the county's inhabitants report to be of "Hispanic or Latino origin" (ibid.). In East LA—which in 2000 had a population of around 125.000—practically everyone (96.8%) report to be of "Hispanic or Latino origin". Most of them say that they are "Mexican". In East LA half of the population was born outside of the USA, just about all of them in Latin America (ibid. 2006a).

² The little village of Española in New Mexico has been nicknamed "Lowrider Capital of the World" (Penland, 2003:70), and San Jose Valley, south of San Francisco in California, is often described as a vital lowrider area (Trillin, Calvin and Edward, 1978; Gradante, 1982; Penland, 2003; Best, 2006, and others).

Education

The education level of the Los Angeles population has been documented by Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity at Stanford University and U.S. Census. They report that only 42.1% of the Latino population of Los Angeles County has a high school diploma. This is less than half as many as the number of whites with the same level of education (excluding white Latinos), among whom 89.4% have high school diplomas (Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity at Stanford University 2002a). The difference between whites with a graduate or professional degree and Hispanics with the same level education is even more dramatic. The same numbers for the population of East Los Angeles shows an even lower percentage for the level of education.



Based on numbers from Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity at Stanford University (2002a) and U.S. Census (2006a).

Figure 3: Education

Income

There are more poor Hispanics than there are poor whites in Los Angeles County (ibid. 2002b, ibid. 2002c).

Figure 4: Poverty

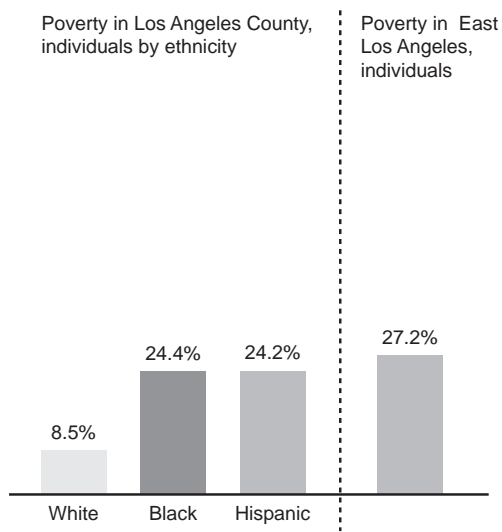
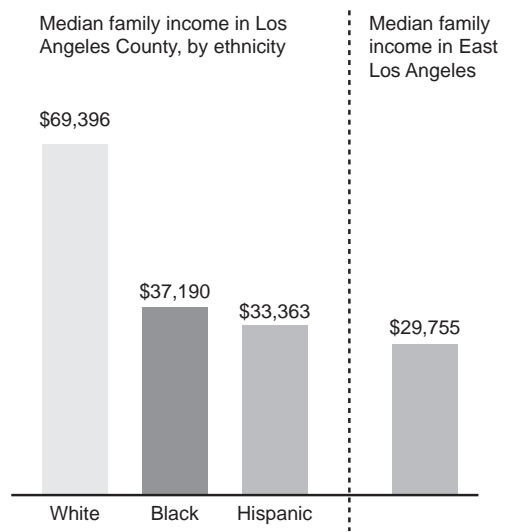


Figure 5: Income



Sources: Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity at Stanford University (2002b, 2002c) and U.S. Census (2006a).

In East Los Angeles, 27.2% lived under U.S. Census' poverty threshold in 1999. The nationwide percentage of individuals classifying themselves as white (not Hispanic), who lived under the poverty threshold, was 7.7. The computation of poverty level is somehow complicated, but the main point is easy to see: the amount of poverty in East LA is relatively *very* high.

Area of practice

According to U.S. Census numbers from the *2005 American Community Survey* (U.S. Census Bureau 2006b, *ibid.* 2006c) 39% of the workforce in East LA works in agriculture, construction, manufacturing, and transportation. The same percentage for the whole of LA County is 25%, indicating that more people in East LA work in low wage working class jobs. This suggestion is backed up by the fact that the median household income in East LA that year was just below \$32,000, while in the whole Los Angeles County it was \$48,248. Furthermore: Of the population aged 25 years and more, almost 75% in Los Angeles County graduated from high school or a higher education; only 33% of the same population segment in East LA did.

The lowriders I talked to didn't typically live in East LA, but from earlier in their lives (and they will proudly point this out) most of them have their roots there. Today the members of Lifestyle Car Club, my main source of informants, are spread out all over Los Angeles County as well as the neighboring county of San Bernardino.

*

To summarize: The Latin population, and perhaps particularly the Mexican-Americans, is financially marginalized in the American society, despite the fact that the Latin population now is the biggest minority group in the United States.

It is also rare to hear or see, in the news, the word Mexican immigrant uttered without also a mention of the words "illegal", "drug smuggling" and

“terrorist treat”³. The negative view of this population group is perhaps typical for what any new wave of immigrants to the United States have been met with—at some time the Chinese, the Japanese, and the Norwegians, to name some random examples, all suffered the same prejudice and condescendence.

I also believe that many of the traits which are credited to the Mexican American culture, and thus in turn are seen by the American society as typical for the Mexican culture, are in fact a reflection of this population’s class background. Mexican-American immigrants have been, and still is, mostly uneducated workers employed in low-paying, manual labor, for instance as migrant farm workers in California’s massive agronomical industry. And even though none of the people I talked to work as farm workers (some of their parents did), they are still mostly employed in manual work section, for instance as construction workers. Even though they might have moved up some levels within the labor hierarchy, they nevertheless fall easily within that category we call the working class.

*

Leaving the statistical data aside for now, let’s proceed to look at descriptions of *Americans*, the general population group, from the perspective of social sciences and social anthropology.

³ “Terrorist threat”, not because there is any recent history of terrorist attacks in America executed by Mexican-Americans, but because (so goes the argument) the “wave of immigrants” makes the border toward Mexico porous and vulnerable, open as an entry point for terrorist groups.

Who are the North Americans?

Northern America encompasses vast geographical areas, spanning from Mexico via USA to Canada. Most attempts at pinpointing common cultural categories for such an enormous region does not make sense—the differences between environmental conditions of the areas are too huge.

While early functionalists in Europe some hundred years back—and later the structural-functionalists—argued the use of comparison for understanding cultures, most anthropologists working in North America limited themselves to so-called “controlled comparison”. Controlled comparison—or “regional structural comparison” as it was sometimes also called—suggested comparison of only a few selected features from the examined cultures (Barnard 2004). Perhaps this reflected that the North American anthropologists worked within enormous geographical areas and thus saw limitations to the contemporary European methodological theories. The North American scholars would limit their studies to compare societies which were regionally and culturally close to each other—admitting that similar historical and ecological surroundings might produce similar cultural features (ibid., Vincent 2002). But they never claimed that such comparisons could make sense for the entire North American region. The vast size of the North American region has historically called for extra caution when applying theories on comparison.

However, common traits do exist, spanning across the entire geographical region.

The common history of migration

One such common trait is the relatively recent history of the conquering settlers from Europe, and the devastating consequences their invasion had for the indigenous populations. The existing cultures were wiped out, some places by straight genocide as in the case of most of the territories which now make up present day USA and Canada, and other places by a combination of genocide and genetic assimilation, as in the case of the territories which now make up Mexico. (The very start of anthropology in North America was based on the collecting of cultural artifacts, in an effort to gather, document and systemize data on these quickly disappearing cultures of the original Native Americans [Vincent 2002].)

With the wiping out of the existing population a foundation was laid out—in the whole of North America—for loosely rooted cultures mainly consisting of immigrants. By far the majority of the people in North America still trace their geographical and cultural roots back to other parts of the world, and therefore the study of most North American cultures is the study of a population who remembers their migration history, whether they went north, east, or west; a move they made—or more often their ancestors made—either because they could or because they had to. Some of these population groups, for instance the Irish-Americans or the Norwegian-Americans, carry histories of migration brought about by ecological, religious or economical crisis in the Old World, and by the opportunities calling in the New World. Others—like for instance the Mexican-Americans—bring with them the belief that their roots are traceable thousands of years back to the immediate geographical region. They too have a history of migration, but their historical migration is relatively

local. Others again have the violent history of forced migration, like many African-Americans, whose ancestors were brought over to America as slaves. Those are all very different histories, but they all pivot around the theme of migration. Migration is an integral element of anybody's identity in the USA, and one of the most obvious common cultural traits of North-America.

An important emic framework: The concept of race

But still, only to a certain degree does this history of migration manifest itself in the identity of the North American population, because it's mostly overshadowed by awareness of an ethnic identity and a national background. While this still ties the individual to a geographical location somewhere else than North-America, stratification purely based on the popular concept of *race* is very important for the American feeling of identity. The vagueness of the *race* categories and the overlapping *ethnic* taxonomy, as they are popularly applied in the American society, is an obvious field of interest for social scientists. (The classifications become even harder to grasp, and thus more interesting, as most Americans are "situationally ethnic" [Donald Tricarico in his "The Italians of Greenwich Village", quoted in Moffatt 1992:221].)

Trying to grasp what I saw as a frustrating and problematic system for categorization I made some notes, some time into my field work:

Walking around in my neighborhood one day, I spotted what appeared to be an African-American man about 35 years old, bicycling down the street. I was going the opposite direction, and when we passed each

other he greeted me saying “Hi, there, how are you?” in a loud and clear voice.

I had at this point lived in Los Angeles for more than a year, and as a devoted student of social anthropology I had spent the time faithfully soaking myself in the social reality of the region—at this point of my stay my body and my mind were finely tuned instruments for cultural examination. As a result this seemingly simple chain of events posed paradoxical problems of classifications.

“Much like Clifford Geertz in *The Interpretation of Cultures*,” I told myself, immediately insecure about what I had meant by that, so I made a mental note to re-read the book.

The data which presented itself to me seemed to run in opposing directions, drawing conclusions was hard.

The man on the bike was of considerable darker skin tone than everybody else in the neighborhood. He was what Angelinos normally refer to as *black*.

The concept of *black* as a human category should be troubling for anybody, and for a student of social anthropology this kind of terminology is like a semi-hard whack in the face with a wet magazine. That the concept of *human races* “really corresponds to something which exists” (Montagu 1942) has been constantly debunked within most academic fields ever since the idea was brought into play by George L.L. Buffon in his “Histoire Naturelle, Générale et Particulière” from 1749 (Montagu 1942, Montagu 1964a, Montagu 1964b, Hogben 1964, Anderson 1964). However, the academic rebuttal of race as a

concept has not obstructed the term from being employed generously within those very same academic fields, nor prevented it from taking deep root in popular practice.

Angelinos are no exception; in daily speech they don't seem to associate this terminology of human races with dark, historical burdens. Neither do significant taxonomic shortcomings pose a problem—the fact that the categories obviously are technically incomparable does not create any speed bumps for the use of the system. It is quite common to hear classifications like *black*, *Jewish*, *Latino* and *Asian* employed in the same sentence, describing diverse groups of the population—talk to anybody for more than half an hour, or turn on any channel on the TV or National Public Radio any week, and you'll probably get lucky—even though black, Jewish, Latino and Asian seem to be, to the naïve eye, categories from four different classification schemes: Black is a color hue, Judaism is a religion, Latin is a language group and Asia is a continent.

This might look, if to nobody else than at least to the social scientist, like a dissonance of the categories, because they are always confidently applied as if they were somehow biological, akin to what Roy Ellen calls non-social and mundane classifications (Ellen 2002). To an anthropologist they are quite the opposite; they are what Ellen calls social and symbolic classifications. They are also elements of what cognitive anthropologist may call the *emic* system, the “indigenous definitions” (Barnard 2002), or even *folk classifications* (Ellen 2002). In fact, when I myself state that this man was an African-American, my term is not much different from any of these other terms,

as long as I admittedly know nothing of the gentleman's ancestry. He could have been a very tan, curly haired Irishman as far as I know. Which is beyond the point for this story: The point is that I—in addition to already having classified him as 35 year old male—decided that he was *black*. Which I did because at this point of my studies I was sufficiently immersed in the local lingo and the Angelino mode of thought to ignore any doubts (at least temporarily) instigated in my anthropological sensibility by the term *black*.

I could actually have stopped short of applying the term *black*; as I already mentioned his skin color was considerably darker than most other people's skin color in this particular neighborhood, and this in itself was enough for me to see him as different, to see that he was not *of that neighborhood*.

One way or the other, I created boundaries where I previously had seen a continuum, enabling myself to produce two categories; one to which this man belonged and one to which he did not belong. There are, of course, countless ways to explain the appearance of an object in a setting where that object seems to not be at home. This man could have work to do in the neighborhood, for instance. Or he could be visiting somebody. Or he could simply be spending a lovely day exploring this part of town. This last theory immediately struck me as implausible, though; I was after all in Los Angeles, and in Los Angeles—particularly the part of Los Angeles I was in—most people do not seem to move around much for leisurely exploration. I myself move quite a lot around *solely* for reasons of exploration, but how I behave is hardly the point. Or maybe it is: By interpreting other people's reactions to my own movements around the neighborhood, I

had built a vivid (but perhaps paranoid) idea about how out of place such behavior is generally perceived. By this stage of my field work it was not likely to me that anybody else would be out in the neighborhood exploring, and consequently there had to be another reason for this individual to be there; his appearance left me no clues to what this reason might possibly be.

Then there was the fact that he was on a bicycle. It was a bicycle that didn't stand out; a normal, full sized bike built for not much else than transportation; so anonymous in its features, actually, that I am unable to recall any of its details. It wasn't a little BMX trick bike, an off-road monster, an aerodynamic racer, or a lowrider bike. It was just a plain run-of-the-mill men's bicycle, as non-distinctive as they come. There's nothing weird about that ... except once again, this is LA. And in LA using a bicycle purely for transportation is dubious.

"Why is that man here? What is he doing bicycling around? Who is he? Why is he not driving a car?" There's a South Californian mistrust directed towards anybody not inside a car. Pedestrians in Los Angeles have a stigma—there must be some horrible reason why you have to walk, or ride the bus, and those means of transportation are thus reserved for the poor, the handicapped and the lunatics. If you're on the bus, and you're not poor, handicapped, or a lunatic, then there is some other sort of weirdness about you, probably a dark secret. Being a devoted social anthropology student I evidently opened my psyche to this pathological state of suspicion—as I mentioned earlier; my body and my mind are my instruments of investigation—so at this stage of my fieldwork paranoia flowed frequently and freely through

my veins. Thus, this individual moving around on a bicycle struck me as outright fishy.

I also see from my notebook that he addressed me in a self assured, loud and clear voice. I am not sure exactly what this observation means, since I don't recall it very clearly, and my field notes don't provide further enlightenment. Maybe it was that he was articulate. In retrospect it is plausible that this is exactly what struck me as strange, since most of the time I surrounded myself with people whose language seemed to be on the simpler side of communication. It's tempting to claim that in these parts of the woods you'll get far with the three phrases "dude", "like totally", and "you know what I mean"; the majority of the Los Angeles population seem at ease with a very petite vocabulary.

The native jargon also tends to favor slightly slurry pronunciation, which made this man's speech pop out crystal clear. Even though his only words were "Hi, there, how are you?" it was as if he was the host of a BBC series on philosophy, presenting the legacy of Socrates.

It took me two seconds to pass the man on the bicycle. In this short time substantial amounts of data presented itself to me, plenty of information from which I should be able to draw a conclusion about this other individual. But the combination of data confused me, perceived as a whole it all seemed to defy neat classification. As far as I could see there was only one possibility left.

"He's probably retarded," I decided to myself, and walked on.

The need for simplified population categories is not distinctively North American, but seems to be a consequence in a place where practically the entire population is made up of international immigrants. Hence I might be justified claiming that this dominating willingness to categorize different population groups—and to attach simplified characteristics to the same groups—is a common cultural trait for the entire North-America.

It's also worthwhile to look at this phenomenon in light of theories of urban life. In "Urbanism as a way of Life" from 1938, Louis Wirth writes that one of the characters of urban life is that nobody knows everybody, and that all contact is "impersonal, superficial, transitory and segmental" (Wirth quoted in Hannerz 1980:62). This, according to Wirth, leads to certain universally recognizable features in city dwellers, one such feature being a tendency to make assumptions about people based on the visual cues they provide—to react to physical appearance instead of reacting to the publicly hidden life history of the individual (Hannerz 1980:62). Perhaps the strong attachment to the concept of race is due to a society where most interactions are "characterized secondary rather than primary contacts" (Wirth quoted in *ibid.*).

The American's place in the universe

I like the Americans because they are healthy and optimistic.

– Franz Kafka, who had never been in America, while
writing his novel *Amerika*.

In “The Dominant Value Profile of American Culture” (1955), Cora du Bois tries to outline how the American value system is rooted in Protestantism and eighteenth-century rationalism (Bois 1955:1232).

Bois describes four premises as instrumental for the American understanding of man's place in the universe. “(1) The universe is mechanistically conceived, (2) man is master, (3) men are equal and (4) men are perfectible” (ibid.:1233). According to Bois, these premises lay the foundation for the major opposition in the American value system.

Effort-optimism was a term first used by Clyde and Florence Gluckhohn in their “American Culture: Generalized orientations and class patterns” from 1947 (ibid.:1234), and denominates the belief that “hard work can get you there”—in other words, through the application of hard work the individuals strives to perfect not only themselves, but also to master the universe (ibid.).⁴

The logical result of the effort-optimism—the belief that man can master the universe, and the belief that man is perfectible—is material well-being. Material well-being is also an important part of the historical and contemporary American experience. This logic, that progress is only a question of hard work, sometimes leads to conflict with the natural facts. Bois

⁴ Bois also attaches the American cult of youthfulness to this value, since activity and work connotes the mobility and flexibility of the youth.

argues that this strong belief in how hard work almost inevitably leads to material well-being, can explain why the American relationship to the conflicting reality of physical pain, brutality and death, is treated in such stylized ways—as seen for instance in literature, television and motion pictures (ibid.:1235-6).

Bois points to how oppositional values in a culture will create a strain for consistency, which again can explain cultural change. According to Bois the strain in the American value system is articulated on one side in the praise of change, and on the other side in the stress on compromise. This, writes Bois, is illustrated in the third focal value; that of conformity.



**Figure 6: Conforming to the norm. Or not.
The Toyota Camry is the most sold car in USA for the last ten years.
The lowriders typically don't look anything like the Toyota Camry.**

She sees the value of conformity as an effort to ease the strain created by other values: The effort-optimism promises the possibility of maximum self-

realization; but since only cooperation can lead to the greatest achievements, and since equality is a common value, the effort-optimism must be put into action not for the betterment of the individual but for the betterment of everyone. Conformity is instrumental to such a combination of values, argues Bois. Conformity also eases the assimilation of diverse immigration groups into the American middle class (ibid.:1236-7).

The keyword here is *conformity*. And to us it is the keyword, not because the lowriders conform to the norm, but because they *don't*. The lowrider cars stick out⁵. I will come back to this later, when I describe this in light of prestige seeking. For now, having briefly sketched up some major themes from anthropology on Americans—social scientific traditions which might help me understand the lowriders—let me return to the cars and their owners.

⁵ To see if I could prove this alterity beyond mere aesthetical descriptions of the cars—if I could furthermore operationalize the statement—I reacted to a hunch telling me that most cars on the street don't have bright colors. Since most lowrider cars I have seen are painted in what struck me as radical bright color schemes—in addition to shades, pinstripes, gold leaf, and tons of shiny chrome—the prime color of the car is typically a pink, or an orange, or a purple, or perhaps a brilliant green. I went out and counted the passing cars on a boulevard around the time of the day when most people return back home from work. During the half hour I sat at my sidewalk café table I counted 505 cars. 60 of them were painted with a distinct color; the rest were black, gray or white (or they had very dark tints, so dark that they appeared black). In other words, roughly 9 of 10 cars were not painted in a bright color. It might seem like car manufacturers still operate after Henry Ford's philosophy: "You can have it any color you like, as long as it is black." Albeit I have a feeling that these days the customers lay the premises, not wanting any color that sticks out.

What is a lowrider?

They're very strange, the lowrider cars, with their pristine paint jobs, clean ornate interiors, and chrome and gold, everything contrasted in the crude mechanical dances. When Claude Lévi-Strauss described the masks from the Pacific North West Coast of America, he might as well have described this modern time motor sport folk art—the masks Lévi-Strauss was so taken with have systems of ropes, pulleys, and hinges which, when they are pulled, will make the mask come alive, mouths will open, eyes will roll. He writes: “This unique art’s representations blend the contemplative serenity of the statues found in Chartres cathedral and in Egyptian tombs with the artifices of the carnival” (Lévi-Strauss 1982:7). The lowriders, like the masks, are a little bit of Versailles, or rather a 20th Century Las Vegas interpretation of Versailles, “with it’s arrogant emphasis on crests and trophies, its almost shameless recourse to plastic metaphor and allegory” (ibid.:8), a dash of gangster themed antics and Chicano nationalism, topped with robotics lifted from the Haunted House of a roadside amusement park.

And the biggest mystery of it all—in the lowriders just as in the masks of the Pacific North West: “Why this unusual shape, so ill-adapted to function?” (ibid.:12). To theorize around this we need to understand man made objects—to paraphrase Bryan Pfaffenberger who writes about technology—as “simultaneously material, social and symbolical” (Pfaffenberger 1988). Starting with material, I’ll try to describe the cars from a technical perspective.

The New Oxford American Dictionary comes some way towards a consensual definition of a lowrider car:

low-rid-er *n.* a customized vehicle with hydraulic jacks that allow the chassis to be lowered nearly to the road. —**low-rid-ing** *n.*

In the opinion of most people I have talked to, a lowrider is characterized by the following:

- It's lowered, e.g. the coil springs are cut,
- It has hydraulic suspensions, enabling the car to be mechanically lowered to the ground,
- It has wire wheels,
- It has an extensive paintjob, and
- It has a flawless interior.

The style is often poetically referred to as “low and slow” (Gradante 1982, Stone 1990, Trillin and Koren 1978, West 1976, Padilla 1999), or in Spanish even more descriptively as “*bajito y suavecito*” (Stone 1990).



Figure 7: Pondering the cutting of coils.

Most often a lowrider will be an American car—preferably an older one—but this is not a strict rule; Japanese and European produced cars are sometimes turned into lowriders. It is commonly accepted that *any* kind of vehicle can be a lowrider (e.g. Hamilton 1996). I once saw an ice cream truck lowrider, and even though I have never before or after seen anything like it, it was obvious to everyone who saw it that it was a lowrider.

Still there are some clearly visible trends, or preferences, among those who spend their time with these cars. The 1963 and 1964 versions of Chevrolet's Impala model are two typical vehicles of choice, judging from what is being showcased at the car shows and in the different lowrider magazines.

At the end of the 1970's and the early 80's, the closing of many boulevards to cruising spurred the growth of the car shows (Page 2003:83). This laid the ground for a shift in focus for the lowrider enthusiasts and consequentially to a style change in lowrider cars. Since driving on the streets in a lowrider most of the time would draw undesired attention from the law enforcement and possibly result in the driver receiving a ticket, lowriders would less frequently be spotted in the streets of Los Angeles. Even today, a physical expression of state traffic laws in two places like for instance Phoenix (Arizona) and Los Angeles (California) are obvious in the number of lowrider cars on the street any given day; in Phoenix lowriders are a common sight—the drivers may even show off the hydraulics while still in traffic. In Los Angeles it's rare to see a cruising lowrider.

So since a considerable amount of the lowriding scene now can be witnessed at lowrider car shows, the rules for the judging of the cars in these shows might further help us define what a lowrider car is.

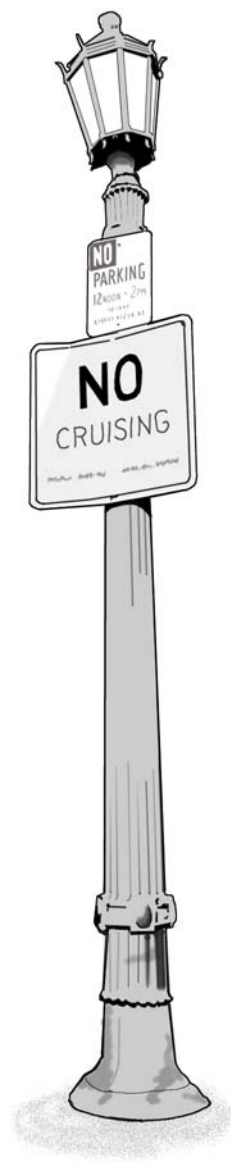


Figure 8: Nowadays, many streets in Los Angeles are closed to cruising.

Each year Lowrider Magazine arranges car shows in several big metropolitan centers across the USA. Their show rules for the 2006 car shows (*Lowrider Magazine Tour Show Rules 2006*) describe the categories and classifications of cars in the shows as follows:

All cars are judged in 5 key areas; body, engine, undercarriage, interior, and hydraulics/suspension. The degree of modifications done to the car in each of these 5 areas is judged as either minor or major, and the judges will place the car in the right class according to their judgment of these modifications. An example of a minor body modification is *shaving*, which means to strip the body of any decorative lists, door handles and key holes. For instance, a vehicle with a limit of 5 minor modifications, and no major modifications, will classify as *Street Custom*. Each class is then subdivided into year classes, so that for instance *Street Custom* from 1939 will be competing in another class than a *Street Custom* from 1943. Trucks are in their own class, and there are also classes for motorcycles and bicycles. Theoretically there can be around 120 different classes at every one of these shows, and 1st, 2nd and 3rd place prizes are given out in each class.

There's no straightforward definition of what a lowrider car is in Lowrider Magazine's show rules, but reading the point system we can see what criteria are most valued in the judging of the exhibited cars. For a total of 365 points, the most points can be scored by body modifications with a maximum of 45 points. High points can also be won by engine, interior, undercarriage, and paint (maximum of 30 points on each). And then craftsmanship/detail and hydraulics/air can each get the car 25 points.

Further down on the point system are murals, audio/video, wheels/tires, plating, accessories, striping, display, engraving, trunk/bed, and glass.

If we assume that the point system for Lowrider Magazine's Lowrider Tour Shows reflects the degree to which the car in question is a lowrider car, we'll see for instance that a lowrider car needs to have a lot of body modifications, a nicely done engine, interior, undercarriage, and paint job.

Then there's hydraulics.

§24008 of The California Vehicle Code states:

It is unlawful to operate any passenger vehicle, or commercial vehicle under 6,000 pounds, which has been modified from the original design so that any portion of the vehicle, other than the wheels, has less clearance from the surface of a level roadway than the clearance between the roadway and the lowermost portion of any rim of any wheel in contact with the roadway.

In other words, by California law, no part of a vehicle can be lower than the rim of its wheels. This law was passed in 1959, and spawned the invention of hydraulics in lowrider cars. To avoid citation for driving their radically lowered customs, the car builders installed hydraulic pumps, enabling the drivers to control how high over the ground the car's frame would be. To begin with the car builders would raid airplane junkyards, stripping WW2 airplanes for the hydraulic systems which controlled bomb doors and landing gear on the planes. Times have changed and now you can get brand new hydraulics setups for your lowrider from a variety of dealers. With a hydraulic system installed your car is *lifted* and *juiced*. (There's an alternative

system based on compressed air and rubber airbags which will also lift your car. Airbags are gaining in popularity among lowriders, but they're still *just not quite as cool* as the old school hydraulics.) Thus, whenever there was a risk of getting pulled over by law enforcement, the driver could hit some electrical switches inside the car lifting the frame of the car some additional inches, making it a "legal" drive. This became standard equipment in lowrider cars, and today most lowrider enthusiasts do not consider a car to be a lowrider without this height adjustment system. In the lowrider shows a car with hydraulics may score more points than a car with no hydraulics.

The Show Rules also state that "all entries must be able to start under their own power, meaning that an operable battery must be permanently positioned in the vehicle, the engine must be fueled by its own fixed fuel tank and transmission, shifted from the driver's position" (*Lowrider Magazine Tour Show Rules* 2006). In other words, the lowrider is expected to have what we usually consider one of the most important qualities of a car—as we can also deduce from simply looking at the word *automobile*—it must be able to move along *only powered by its own engine*. This rule might strike the uninformed as peculiar, seemingly stating the obvious, but only until they have seen some of the more extreme cars in the lowrider car shows; a lot of the vehicles are clearly created only for exhibition. Encountering an exceptionally baroque interior of one lowrider car I asked the owner, a Lifestyle C.C. member, how he would be able to get inside and drive it—there didn't seem to be room for the legs of a normal person, and since the owner of this car was overweight and did not strike me as the acrobatic type, I assumed that he would remove some of the decorations when taking the car for a spin.

“No,” he matter-of-factly informed me. “I never drive this car. It’s only for show.”

These are extreme builds, not intended to roll the streets—they have stepped from the world of transports to the world of plastic arts.

Thus, there is a difference between those lowriders which are called *show cars* and those which are called *street cars*, and this difference is more than technical; it is also a difference ripe with social significations.

Chuy stressed how he will use his car in a ways incompatible to the care given to show cars.

“I’ll hit the switches on my car! I’ll scrape,” he said, referring to the practice of lowering the car far down in the back while driving. Lowering the car like this will cause the undercarriage to touch the ground, dragging as the car moves along. The visuals created by this practice can be quite spectacular. Apart from the resulting weird angle of the car’s chassis, with the nose of the car pointing upwards as the vehicle moves along, it sometimes makes sparks fly out from under the car. But the noise it will cause is nothing but distressing: Metal scraping against asphalt in a teeth-grindingly audible alert to the kind of physical damage caused to the car.

“I built my lowrider so that I could scrape,” Chuy proudly points out. “And if I fuck the car up, I don’t care. I’ll just fix it again.”

The particular genre of lowriders called *street cars*, and the cruising with lowriders, is a sentimental nod to times past. Simultaneously—and perhaps more importantly—it is a symbol of resistance towards authorities, in particular the cops. When Chuy makes his statement about his own car, it is not his preference for vehicle treatment he declares as much as an aesthetic

taste. Still, when he declares this taste, he does this not by talking about his preference for specific physical traits—certain color or certain shapes—instead he speaks of a general preference for artistically expressing some kind of resistance, simply put a defiance of *the man*.

Now, as I have moved from describing the lowrider cars from the material angle, and as I already start to touch on the social and symbolical aspects of the vehicles, let's see how some people outside of the lowrider culture describe the cars and their owners.

Talking about growing up in Southwestern Los Angeles in the mid-1940s, Lawrence Weschler quotes artist Robert Irwin:

Then there were like 'pussy wagons,' which were strictly kind of like Chicano cars are now: lowered way down, everything exaggerated, blue lights under the fenders, Angora socks bobbing in the window, seats that tilt back, all that sort of bad taste, which has now achieved almost the level of profession (Weschler 1982).

Here's what Robert Williams—another Southern California artist—said, when I talked to him. Williams describes the custom cars, predecessors to the lowriders:

A custom car was for a person who didn't see himself in a noisy terrifying machine, but saw himself as an urban sophisticated person, who wanted to pick up the ladies. The nature of hot rod doesn't lend

itself to female company. They're noisy, they're like World War biplanes; they're kind of horrifying. They ride bad, they smell, are dangerous, the wind is blowing on you, it's a man's thing it's like a motorcycle. A hot rod is very close to motorcycle. A custom car was for someone who saw themselves as a playboy. You see? As a lover, a hip dude.

Even writing which deals closely with related cultural expressions, can cast light over the lowriders. Octavio Paz, for instance, wrote about *pachucos*⁶ in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. Paz starts his psychological examination of the Mexican culture by re-visiting the Mexican-Americans of Los Angeles, “a group for whom the fact that they are Mexicans is truly a vital problem, a problem of life and death” (Paz 1950:12). The *pachucos*, Paz writes, are “youths, for the most part of Mexican origin, who form gangs in Southern cities; they can be identified by their language and behavior as well as by the clothing they affect” (ibid.:13). According to Jose Quiroga—in *Understanding Octavio Paz*—Paz encountered the *pachucos* during his stay in California around 1943 (Quiroga 1999: 59). This timeframe explains Paz’ rather grim outlook on the *pachucos*’ situation; the Sleepy Lagoon Case and the succeeding Zoot Suit Riots took place in the summer of 1943 traumatizing both the Mexican-Americans and the rest of the American society for a long time to come (Gonzales 1999:169–170).

A *zoot suit* is a style of clothing with long padded shouldered jackets and pants high in the waist, wide at the thighs and tapering down towards the

⁶ From *The new Oxford American dictionary (second edition)*: **pachuco** ► *n.* (*pl. -cos*) dated a juvenile gang member of Mexican-American ethnic origin. H Mexican Spanish, literally ‘flashily dressed.’

feet. These *drapes* were popular in the 1940's—especially among Mexican-Americans and African-Americans, perhaps best known in the popular consciousness as the clothing of choice to many of that era's jazz musicians. The cut of the zoot suit called for an extravagant use of fabric, and in war times, with many governmentally imposed material restrictions, some Americans therefore saw the zoot suit as an unpatriotic piece of garment. Even though the Mexican-American enlistment rate for the US armed forces during WW II probably was higher than the rate for the rest of the US population—between 250,000 and 500,000 Mexicans of the 2.7 millions living in the USA took part in military service (*ibid.*:161)—some places the paranoia towards this ostensible lack of Mexican patriotism was strong enough to erupt into physical confrontations.



Figure 9: Zoot suit

The zoot suit riots weren't really riots; they were a series of sporadic but quite well-organized violent clashes between US Navy sailors and Mexican-Americans in several US cities during June 1943; the sailors systematically sought out and beat up Mexican-Americans wearing Zoot suits. The "riots" went on for several days—the press threw gas on the fire and the police force looked away, and it all quieted down only after the Mexican ambassador to Washington asked to talk to President Roosevelt about the problem, and the US President subsequently had the military take the sailors off the streets (ibid.:169–170; McWilliams 2002; Bender 2003:2–3).

Paz describes the *pachucos* and the novelty of their clothing style. Their clothes was opposite of the contemporary comfortable ideal of clothing fashion, the *pachuco*, by exaggerating the cuts—by creating art of the clothes—made them impractical, and by that turning them into a symbol of resistance towards everything American. The confrontational element in the *pachuco* clothing style was this opposition to mainstream American taste. However, Paz points out, since the clothes are mere exaggerations of the style it is rebelling, the *pachuco* actually celebrate the American style.

"In the case of the *pachuco*, there is an obvious ambiguity," writes Paz. "(His) clothing spotlights and isolates him, but at the same time it pays homage to the society he is attempting to deny." (Paz 1950:16) And Paz continues: "The *pachuco* is the prey of the society, but instead of hiding he adorns himself to attract the hunter's attention." (ibid.:17) Paz describes this fashion strategy as a mark of the rootless migrant, the ones who denies what they have left and who don't want to be part of what they have joined.

Those are harsh words, and might seem excessively categorical for an ethnographic account of contemporary lowriders in Los Angeles. But Paz' description of the *pachucos* is still interesting because when we exchange the word *pachucos* with lowriders, Paz statements rings with a clear recognition. "In the case of the lowrider, there is an obvious ambiguity," we could say. "His car spotlights and isolates him, but at the same time it pays homage to the society he is attempting to deny." And: "The lowrider is the prey of the society, but instead of hiding he adorns himself to attract the hunter's attention."

The lowriders interpret their artful constructions in quite other words. They'll use phrases like "expressing myself" and "showing where I'm from," and they'll say that they're representing their club, or their people, or their background. They use words and expressions which speak of a more conscious, controlled and accurate type of communication. Interestingly, though, to explain what they are they'll talk a lot about what they aren't. And what they aren't, is gang criminals.

Car clubs and neighborhood gangs

Early on, even before I left for Los Angeles, I encountered the popular belief—if not stated straight forward, then certainly expressed through strong insinuations—that there is a link between lowriding and neighborhood gang criminality.

In Los Angeles many people would tell me this.

“You’d better watch yourself if you’re spending time with those guys,” one young woman told me, referring to anybody involved with lowriding.

“They’re gangsters ... You know that, right?”

Nothing in the tone of her voice disclosed the gravity of the accusation she had just uttered; she sounded like she’d just expressed some unbiased pragmatic fact.

When I heard things like this I often would respond with an effort to draw some specifics, some data to back the claim. I never got anything more substantial than “Well, they look like gangsters, don’t they?”

Although it was clear to the lowriders that they weren’t gang banging, they all were still at pains to point this fact out for me. It was almost always my first conversation with any one of them.

“So what have you heard about us,” they would ask. “That we’re gangsters, right? Well, we’re not.”

Somehow the notion that they would be criminals seemed funny to me. I wondered how smart it would be for anybody wanting to do any type of crime to be driving around in a lowrider car. After all, a lowrider is created to attract attention. I was guessing real lawbreakers might want to draw as little attention to them selves as possible. A lowrider car—with its extravagant

ornaments and attention-catching hydraulics—would be a ridiculous choice of vehicle. In a promotional video for a hip-hop composition set in a dystopian future with an angry young man shouting over a rumbling bass about how he is going to shoot my heart out my chest, a lowrider might fit in as an effective part of the narrative. But in real life, lowriders as real criminals? I found this claim hard to believe.

Still the claim remained, and I realized it was a connection the lowriders themselves simultaneously strengthened and denied. There seemed to be something attractive to the outlaw air which surrounds the lowriders, something which they themselves were not quite ready to send packing.

*

“Do you see how this street ends up there? How it ends in that other street so that up there you can only go left or right?”

Javie is pointing up the street on which we are standing. I have invited myself over one early evening, after the end of Javie’s work day, to have a look at “The Crystal Ship”, his 1974 Chevrolet Caprice.

We’re standing in front of his parent’s house in a neighborhood called Atwater Village. Javie grew up here. To the west Atwater borders the Interstate 5—always heavy with traffic the freeway runs alongside the retro-dystopian presence of the concrete encased LA River. To the east of Atwater are the railroad tracks, running alongside a city street which so far has never struck me as anything but dirty, noisy and ugly; it’s dotted with muffler shops, body shops, fast food joints and car part stores. Close to a hardware store

chain I cross over the rail road (as I slow down to make a left turn Mexican day workers try to flag me down, hoping I'm there to find cheap labor). As I make another left to go back along the tracks I, see a rather shabby looking "Gentleman's Club" right on the other side of the rails ("Live Nude! Girls Girls Girls" is the promise, advertised on the side of the building, and a neon sign tempts "Free Lunch Buffet 12–2 pm"). There are rows of industrial complexes and warehouses— there's "Plumbing & Industrial Supply" and there's what looks to me like a major grocery store chain's distribution center. Coming from this side you can't see the residential houses until you duck in between those massive constructions, through one of the side streets, and trawl your way to the bungalows behind.

Javie doesn't live here anymore, but he still keeps his lowrider in his parent's carport at the side of their house. His mom is home when I visit. Javie invites me inside to get a poster he wants to give me. As we stop by the kitchen and say hello, his mother offers me some food. She doesn't speak much English, and my Spanish is rudimentary, but I haven't been known to turn down offers of food, so I use my best available Spanish to gratefully accept the soft tacos she gives me.

Once we're outside again Javie proudly, but composed, removes the car cover from his car, and on my request poses—which he does quite self-confidently—in front of it so I can snap some photos. Javie also urges me to photograph another young man who hangs out in the background with his friends while Javie and I talk. The young man has the word "toonerville" tattooed on his upper forehead, visible through his millimeter short hair. I get a good shot of him tilting his head for me to see the tattoo better. Javie laughs

and tells me: “He’s a gangster!” Toonerville, I later discover, is not just another name of this neighborhood, it is also well known to the LAPD as the name of criminal gang.

Javie continues his story.

“So do you see how this street ends up there? How it ends in that other street so that up there you can only go left or right?”

“I used to walk up this street every day. At the end of the street I had the choice: I could go either left or right. If I walked left, I’d find my uncle in his garage, a few blocks over; he would be in there almost all the time, working on his ride. I liked to go over there and just stand around and look at what he was doing to the car. Sometimes I would help him out; he would teach me how to do small repairs, have me polish it, and stuff like that. His car was really nice, I liked it a lot and looking at it made me think that one day I would want a car myself like my uncle’s.

Javie pauses to take a bite of his taco. He looks up the street.

“To the right up the street is where the gang was hanging. So if I walked right at the end of this street, I would run into them.

“I saw one of the guys in that gang on the TV not too long ago ... on *America’s most wanted* ... Do you know that show? I think it’s on FOX. This guy and I went to the same school, he was my quarterback on the football team—you know—he was the guy watching my back out on the field! Recently he was arrested, they caught him in Arizona. Now he’s in jail for murder, he’s being charged with 12 killings ... In this neighborhood. 12 killings; that’s more than Charles Manson is in for!

“Now, sometimes I would want to go over to the gang and hang out with them. You know I was just a kid, and I wouldn’t always do the right thing! But every day when I reached the end of this street, I would have to make that choice: Left to hang with my uncle and his car, or right to hang with the gang. Sometimes I went left, sometimes I went right. But over time I started going more often to the left, hanging out with my uncle and the car.”

*

Bugs tells me a similar story about the choice between crime and cars.

Bugs is 42 and the son of migrant workers. He was born in Idaho “because that’s where my parents were at the time”, but he grew up in Mesa, AZ.

He is currently a member of Lifestyle C.C. in Los Angeles. He lived in L.A. for a few years, painting there, and later on when he moved to Mesa he used to go back and forth for work between Arizona and California.

“But then, when I got my last son, I kind of got attached to that one. And I said I don’t want to be away from this one, so I stopped going to L.A. But I still want to move there. There’s always stuff to do in L.A. It’s just my wife don’t want to. She says it’s better here for the kids.”

Bugs paints cars for a living. Most of his income is from working with body shops, painting plain paint jobs on the cars they get in there for fix up. They’ll call him up in the day from the body shops, saying “we got a car for you,” and then he drops everything and goes over there and paint the cars they have for him.

“That’s how I pay my bills” he says.

But what he really likes to do is more expressive car painting—he is renowned as an artisan for his paint jobs of lowriders and other cars, and for his pin striping. He does this work out of his garage at the back of the house he rents with his wife in Mesa—one of the cities which make up greater Phoenix in the Sonora desert of Arizona. It’s one of those areas where the houses aren’t so close together, and you have to drive quite a bit to get around. Some of the neighbors have horses in their backyards, and chicken and goats. Bugs and his family have a lot of room on their property and the “garage” is huge with a separate big room which Bug’s use as something like an atelier.

“I remember when I was a kid and we would be driving over to California—going after work. My parents were migrant workers, so they would move around the country according to the seasons, just going to where there was ripe produce to be picked,” explains Bugs. “I’d be sitting in the back of the car, and I’d see those big trucks passing us. And they’d all have nice lettering and decorations on them—pin striping, and you know, that kind of stuff—and I’d be thinking, ‘I like that!’ That’s my first memory of this kind of work I am doing now.”

“In high school I started thinking lowriders were cool.” Bugs pauses. “Before that, I used to think they were stupid, you know, I used to laugh at them, but then I saw this car from the TV show *Chico and the man* at a car show, and I walked up to that car and I looked at it and I thought, you know, ‘I really like this one’.”

But in high school Bugs embraced the *cholo*⁷ style, with a shaved head, and white *wife beaters*⁸ and khaki trousers. “I did some stupid shit,” he says. “I got myself into trouble.” One day he got caught red handed in a junk yard, after hours stealing car parts, and while he was sitting in the police station and the cops were telling him they knew everything about him, and that he was in deep shit, he thought about the trunk of his car, and how it was full of stolen car stereos “the stereo in my car was stolen, too,” and how—if they found his car—he would be off to jail.

“And you know, the cop talked to me and I was all tough and stupid, and I was like ‘what are you going to do? Hit me?’ You know, I was all cool on the outside, but at the same time I was thinking ‘Fuck, I’m in big shit.’”

And so he prayed—right there sitting in the police station—and he made a promise to himself that if he got out of that situation he would leave the *cholo* life behind. And just like that the cops came back to him and told him that he could go. He went back home and got all his *cholo* gear—the *wife beaters*, and the khaki trousers, and everything—packed it up neatly in a plastic bag and got rid of it. “I had a gun, too. I got rid of that, and I said to myself ‘enough of this!’”

And after that Bugs focused on the painting and the lowrider cars, because he still liked the cars; he points out that there was no reason to drop his lowrider interests.

*

⁷ From *The new Oxford American dictionary (second edition)*: **cholo** ► *n.* a Latin American with Indian blood; a mestizo. ■ *informal, offensive* a lower-class Mexican, esp. in an urban area. ■ a teenage boy, esp. in a Mexican-American community, who is a member of a street gang.

⁸ **wife beater** *n.* *slang* tank top.

Danny D, who owns his own shop where he paints cars and motorcycles, is also a member of Lifestyle C.C. When I visit him in his shop he shows me how to pinstripe, and lets me try it out on a metal cabinet door. He later gives me a sheet of metal to take home, so I can continue practicing my pinstriping skills at home.

He also gives me his take on the gangs, or *the neighborhoods*, as he calls them.

“It’s not mafia, you know, it’s just part of LA. Either you’re with somebody, or you’re against them. That’s how it is.

“I think the whole neighborhood thing spawns from, you know, not having anything to grasp to, not having a steady family ... because I can honestly say that I could have went that direction myself—easily, I mean easily—because there was a time when my parents argued just like any typical parents do, you know, because no parents are perfect. My dad was an alcoholic. To this day, he doesn’t drink anymore; he hasn’t been drinking since 78 or 79; stopped drinking, stopped smoking. Prior to that, my memories of him is him coming home drunk. He was always a hard worker. But coming home drunk; that was his outlet. And my parents argued, had each other throwing things around, you know, us getting hit, or whatever. And, kids looking for something to bond to—when there’s so much pressure at home—they go “well, what do we do?” So maybe they hang out with this other guy who’s having the same problems, and they can all relate. And they hold on to that alternate family. And that’s basically what a neighborhood is; it’s your

alternate family. They accept you for what you are, and they are not putting you down. I think that's what, mainly, the gangs spawn from.

"I could have gone in that direction, but I didn't."

The distinction

“One thing first: Do you like Abba or Led Zeppelin?”

Chuy had presented me to everybody, in plenum, and asked that I talked a little about myself. It was a Sunday afternoon, and Lifestyle Car Club held a meeting in the shade of a tree after some hours of casual softball on the adjacent field. I had just introduced myself and my project to the car club, the club members standing around in a circle, listening.

“Abba or Led Zep,” somebody had asked. It was immediately clear to me what the *right* answer would be. “These guys aren’t Abba fans,” I thought to myself. And as Bourdieu points out: “Nothing more clearly affirms one’s ‘class’, nothing more infallibly classifies, than tastes in music.” (Bourdieu, 1984:18) So I figured I’d better give the right answer to make sure I gained some acceptance—this wasn’t the place for one of those pop cultural academic ramblings on how “Abba’s compositions and performances have delightful campy qualities to them, yet—and this might come as a surprise to the casual listener—they are not without the occasional dark vibration.” No, I figured, this was the place for straight and simple statements.

“I like Zeppelin,” I said. They all nodded and mumbled approvingly.

“That was easy,” I thought.

I fared much worse as soon as I mentioned my car and my plans for it.

I told them about my idea for a fieldwork method—that I would buy a car in Los Angeles and turn it into a lowrider while I was there and how I thought that would be the best way to learn anything about the culture.

“I don’t know much about cars from before,” I told them. “And I also know very little about lowriders, so to succeed with my project I figure I could need your help.”

They nodded their heads again.

“Cool,” they said. They seemed to like my idea.

Then one guy asked “What kind of car do you have?”

Not missing a beat—since I felt I was doing so well building credibility—I told them: “It’s a 1989 Cadillac Eldorado Biarritz. Two doors.”

They didn’t like that.

“Well at least it has two doors,” somebody mumbled.

“You can sell it,” somebody else promptly suggested. “Get a Chevy instead, or something.”

Chuy, the club president tried to muffle the protests from the other members: “Now, Martin is here to study the lowriders and he came to us to get advice, so we’ll help him out as best we can.”

But there was no order in the ranks by this time. Three-four people were talking at the same time, coming up with ideas on how I could get rid of my car and get a proper one.

“Hey, that’s what it’s all about!” Chuy tried to finish the discussion.

“That’s it. So shut up!”

I should have known.

The 89 Eldorado was not right. The last time the Eldorado was right, was back in the early 1970’s when Elvis Presley drove around in one, the pinnacle of looking hot. But the Eldorado stopped looking good—like so many other things stopped looking good—around 1980. And these days a 1989

Cadillac Eldorado Biarritz is the type of car that old WASP women with slightly purple hair drive when they go to church or wherever it is old WASP women with slightly purple hair go. The 1989 Cadillac Eldorado Biarritz is not hot, not hot at all. And for the guys in Lifestyle—I painfully and suddenly realized—my car was off the map.

“Just get one with hydraulics instead.” The protests wouldn’t stop. “It’s only 800 bucks ...”

“HEY, SHUT UP ALLREADY! One more word out of that ... that cocksucker ...” Chuy needed to move the meeting on.

There was two times in my fieldwork were my own presence and my own actions kicked off reactions like this among the car club members, reactions which were valuable to me as they taught me much, perhaps more than any other single piece of data, about taste in this particular clique of people. One of those occasions was this first time when I presented them to my 1989 Cadillac Eldorado. The other was when I got rid of the Cadillac and purchased a 1972 Buick Riviera to take its place.

One of the most celebrated cars from Lifestyle’s annals—Joey Ray’s “Dressed to Kill”—is a 1973 Riviera, a model originally almost identical to my new pride. As far as material for a lowrider project, I was back on the map with my new ride, Chuy smiled from ear to ear when I brought the car over to his house to show it to him, the bullet hole in the driver side door (of which the previous owner of the car had strongly denied any knowledge) somehow added to the excitement. And perhaps this is not exactly what Pelto and Pelto have in mind when they write about collecting material by presenting “a

special, standardized stimulus (...) to an informant in order to promote a stream of verbal material” (Pelto and Pelto, 1978:53). But that’s exactly how my cars worked for me.

I later on tried to ask several club members, what criteria a car would have to fulfill before it could fly the colors of the club.

“What is a Lifestyle car,” I asked. “What makes it different from another lowrider car?”

There were certain things they could all point to, certain very concrete physical attributes. Like the tires.

“We all roll on 5.20’s” they would say.

The 5.20 Premium Sportways are bias ply tires which—because of safety issues—went out of production some years ago. This means, of course, that they are quite hard to find, which again makes them even more attractive.

In addition, the club members pointed out, those tires need to be mounted on chromed wire rims.

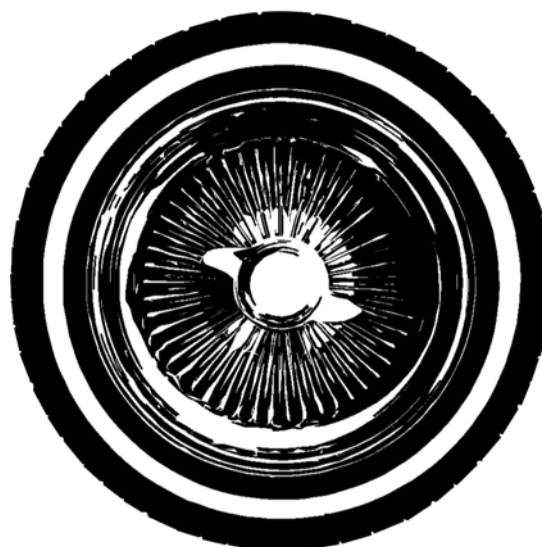


Figure 10: Knock off wire wheel with white wall tires.

“Two doors,” they also said. “None of our cars have four doors.”

In the literature I have studied lowrider cars are frequently described as family projects. *Dave’s Dream*, for instance, a 1969 Ford LTD which in 1990 was inducted into the auto collection of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History, is a typical example:

In 1978, David Jaramillo of Chimayo, New Mexico, bought a 1969 Ford LTD from an uncle and began converting it into Dave’s Dream—a lowrider that he hoped would win the top prize at a major auto show. Later that year, Jaramillo died in a highway accident in another car. His wife, Irene, and members of his family decided to continue work on “Dave’s Dream” as a memorial. (National Museum of American History 2006)

Furthermore:

In contrast to the hot rod—an individualistic expression of white-male aspirations of power—the Latino lowrider activity is fundamentally a community expression. Both Anglos and Latinos love to see and be seen in their respective automotive creations, but for Latinos, the lowrider and its creation and display deeply involve the nuclear family, the extended family, and the Latino community as a whole. The family is involved in financing the work, supporting the owner, and exhibiting and displaying the car. At organized car shows, the whole family participates, helps show the car, and helps accept any trophies. (ibid.)

When I talked to artist (and custom car history connoisseur) Robert Williams he also pointed out this connection between the cars and the family as particular to the lowrider culture: “Since the lowriders belongs to a social order that likes a large family, then they embraced the four door cars, which the *hot rodders* and the *custom car* builders hated!”

It’s quite common among most population groups in America to identify themselves partly by how they place importance on the family and on what is often referred to more abstractly as *family values*. This then is an important strategy for distinguishing oneself in America, and it’s worthy of considerate analysis⁹. However, since I can’t recall overhearing any of the club members of Lifestyle talking about their cars as family projects, I won’t go further into this discussion here. Still, it could be that Lifestyle’s insistence on two door cars in fact rebound what Robert Williams proposed; four door cars are family cars, two door cars are not.

Also, the Lifestyle cars don’t have any gold on them, except the plaque with the club name which hangs from the poles in the back window of the cars. Sometimes they also have some gold in the pinstriping. Other than that, everything metal is either painted or chromed.

“I tried to put rims with golden spokes on my car,” one of the members told me. “But the other guys wouldn’t stop giving me shit about it; they said it was bad taste, and they just kept on bugging me, kept on nagging about it. So in the end I just took them off, and got some chromed ones instead.”

Then they all pointed out the hydraulics. “We don’t have airbags,” they said. The hydraulic system which have been popular in the lowrider cars since

⁹ It could be added that placing importance on family and *family values* in fact is not a very effective distinguishing strategy, since it seems all population groups claim the same trait to be particular for their group.

at least the 1960's are nowadays meeting some competition from so-called airbags, rubber bags which are mounted between the wheels and the frame of the car to control the height of the chassis over the ground, just like the hydraulic system can. The airbag system is based on compressed air, rather than oil, and is known to create a much smoother ride than the hydraulics.

"I see the airbags coming," Chuy once told me. "I'm not against progress and change, so I realize that one day there's probably going to be Lifestyle cars rolling around with airbags. But not yet. We still prefer hydraulics."

Not only for Lifestyle is the hydraulic system defining for the cars. Despite the gaining popularity of the airbags, most lowriders still consider the hydraulic systems to be the heart and soul of the lowrider cars. The hydraulic system is the one feature which best distinguishes the lowrider cars from other styles of customized cars.

While all these features are easy to define, and understand, they wouldn't particularly well set any car apart from other lowriders I saw.

I asked about the type of cars. "Which cars can be turned into a Lifestyle lowrider? What models and what makes and what years?"

Chuy's answer was very vague. He listed some of the cars of the clubs as examples. "Tattoo Tony is coming out with his 1969 Impala now very soon. Brunik's car is a '76 Impala."

"A lot of Impalas," I suggested.

"Well, yes but then there's Victors 1966 Riviera. And 'L.A. Woman' is a 1977 El Camino. 'Dressed to Kill' is a 1973 Riviera. And 'Las Vegas' was a 1970 Lincoln Mark IV."

“Not from the 50’s then?”

“There’s Tim’s 1957 Bel Air. And Oishi’s ’59 Impala”

“So it can’t be a car from the 80’s?” I desperately wanted to narrow the definitions down to a level were I could grasp them.

“Yes, it can. Like James’ Monte Carlo is a 1980. That’s a good lowrider, too! I mean as long as the car has a certain look, a look which fits in with the other cars of the club, you know ...”

As for a definition of the acceptable aesthetics, this was as close as I would ever get; for a car to be accepted as a Lifestyle car, it has to look like a Lifestyle car.

Class and how it relates to taste

If you’ve been laying hot tar on a roof all day, I don’t think Mozart and a goblet of cognac will take out the kinks in your neck.

—Writer Jim Goad in *The redneck manifesto*, explaining what sociologist Bourdieu calls “variations in aesthetic disposition according to the area of practice.”

Let’s look at theories on the relation between social standing and aesthetical judgment—or class and taste. I think they can help me understand the lowriders.

Class—which usually is defined by a combination of occupation, income, education, housing and dwelling area—has been a mayor theme in social sciences from USA ever since the Chicago school of sociology started studying North American culture back in the 1930's. Here Warner and his colleagues, as a major method in their Yankee City-studies used what they called *social positions* (or statuses) to map individuals in a community on a social ranking system (Warner 1941).

Gunnar Landtman's "The origin of the inequality of the social classes" from 1938, and William Lloyd Warner's "Social class in America, a manual of procedure for the measurement of social status" from 1949 are texts with typical titles, clearly reflecting the focus of these studies. Michael Moffatt writes in his review of ethnographic writing about American culture, that the individualist mentality and the egalitarian spirit which penetrate the American identity prohibits a personal categorization like class, and to the degree that anybody are willing to place themselves within a certain class they will most often claim to be of the middle class (Moffatt, 1992:215-216). In fact, Warner and his colleagues disproved this notion, when they documented how the people they studied with ease could plot all the people they knew inside a hierarchical system of upper and lower *upper class*, upper and lower *middle class*, and upper and lower *lower class* (Pelto and Pelto, 1970:48).

According to Sherry Ortner, there has been a strong tendency within the fields of social studies in the USA, to threat themes in the light of ethnicity and gender, when it might have been just as fruitful, if not more, to discuss these themes within the paradigm of class (Ortner 1991, Bright 1995). A major part of ethnographical studies thus portrait the population groups they write

about as exotic, and describes them as physically and culturally isolated—as subcultures, opposed to main-stream American culture (Bright 1998). This view, lacking the focus of class, is very much in accordance with how members of the described population groups view themselves (Mofatt 1992:220–2). However, such descriptions, warns Brenda Jo Bright, might strengthen a view that segregation and cultural separation is natural (Bright 1995).

Some of the most successful studies of class in anthropology, and sociology, have been those which do not look so much at the definition of class in the light of Marxist theory—of class defined as relationship to means of production—but rather examining class in light of status and honor (Hann 2004). Mary Douglas made use of this in her description of consumption classes (ibid.). She describes how objects, not only cover physical needs, but also create and structure social relations and define social identities (Carrier 2004).

In this tradition, the study of objects and their social role, the most famous work is maybe the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's "La distinction; Critique social du jugement" from 1979 (released in English in 1984 as "Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste"). Simply put, Bourdieu points out that the different social classes have different aesthetical taste: When individuals appropriate objects, they build a relationship with the objects, they attach meaning to them. This relationship is important for the constructed sense of belonging and for a feeling of group identity. What individuals like, and how they consume what they like, therefore create, reflects and strengthens their bond to a social class (Bourdieu 1984).

Spurious consumption and spurious leisure

You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough.

– William Blake in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, plate 7.

There is a tendency in the texts I've read to describe the lowrider cars as heavily tainted by a Mexican ancestry. By drawing a line of art history back to the Mexican and Catholic background of the car's creator, the visuals we see in the cars are explained (e.g. Torres 1998). The argument seems to resonate with many lowriders' view of the tradition within which they work. This might be a reflection of the Chicano movement's rhetoric of the 60's and the 70's, stressing incorporation of traditional Mexican crafts and aesthetics into the modern day Mexican-American cultural expressions (Bright 1998:591). And frankly, it seems sensible to make such comparisons between, say, baroquely decorated Catholic church interiors of Mexico and the lowrider cars¹⁰.

However, to put this line of explanation into perspective it's tempting to point at another famous American example of the extravagant aesthetical taste: Graceland, the Memphis estate where Elvis Presley lived and died. His house has later been turned into a museum open to the public—frozen in time in the late 1970's it leaves us with a monument to the taste of a prosperous and proactive American aesthete. There's nothing Mexican about Elvis

¹⁰ I even briefly convinced myself there was a line between the wedding cakes I saw in a display window of a bakery in Mexico City and the lowriders of Los Angeles (which I still hadn't seen in real life). "Those are some heavily decorated cakes ... So unlike the Protestant cakes of Norway," I pondered. "Do the lowriders and these cakes draw inspiration from the same aesthetical tradition?"

Presley's background, and there's nothing Catholic about it either; yet, Graceland is like a residential version of a lowrider car. What we *can* see in Elvis' background, though, is low-status working class, a background which is intimately familiar to many Mexican-Americans. And it's easy to find additional examples of the same style in an American tradition: Liberace's Hollywood penthouse is a nice case in point. The Madonna Inn Motel in San Luis Obispo is another.

In the end, as Rubén Ortiz Torres' claims, lowriding might be "as American as a burrito from Taco Bell" (Torres 1998).

The poor words with which natural human speech is provided, cannot suffice to describe the Madonna Inn (...) Let's say that Albert Speer, while leafing through a book on Gaudi, swallowed an overgenerous dose of LSD and began to build a nuptial catacomb for Liza Minnelli.

—Umberto Eco ponders the architecture of the
Madonna Inn in San Luis Obispo, California.

In a passage from *Travels in Hyperreality* (the quote above is taken from the same book) Umberto Eco calls the craving for opulence "a trademark of American behavior" (Eco 1986:25). This representation of the American people is surely superficial—undermining Eco's claim is duck soup—but the conception is universally ever so popular; no matter where in the world we encounter it, the ostentatious and vulgar display of wealth strikes us as "so American".

Examining a related aesthetical expression, in “Mau-Mauing the flak catchers,” Tom Wolfe explains the “pimp style”. With a reference to the sociologist and economist Thorstein Veblen, he writes:

At the very bottom of the class system, down below the ‘working class’ and the ‘honest poor,’ there was a ‘spurious aristocracy,’ a leisure class of bottom dogs devoted to luxury and aristocratic poses. And there you have him, the pimp. (Wolfe 1971:157)

The popular success of Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class* might lend itself to a review by literary critic William Dean Howell who classified Veblen’s work as satire, and his text has since often been read as mere humor. It’s true that some of Veblen’s ethnological assumptions were quickly tagged unacceptable for anthropologists (e.g. Herskovitz 1936), and in addition Veblen’s rather monologic style, with a total lack of references, adds to the text’s failure of reaching academic standards. Still, some of the economic terms Veblen coined—*pecuniary emulation*, *conspicuous leisure*, *conspicuous consumption*, *conspicuous waste*—seem just as relevant today as they were when he wrote his book in 1899.

Veblen’s argument goes something like this: Private ownership, and the accompanying struggle to own more than the next person, might originally just have been a means to achieve ease of living; the ultimate end was to consume the goods, thus increasing the consumer’s physical, spiritual, aesthetic or intellectual comfort (Veblen 1899:17). But this reason for

accumulation of goods faded away and soon possessions related closely to prestige.

Since wealth in this way arouses respect from the neighbor, it also arouses self-respect. So, according to Veblen, to achieve this respect—from others and from oneself—it is important for the individual to reach their culture's elemental level of accumulated property.

“The possession of wealth confers honour,” writes Veblen. And preceding Bourdieu with nearly hundred years, he continues: “It is an invidious distinction” (ibid.).

This is what Veblen calls pecuniary emulation.

Conspicuous consumption is the “unnecessary” consumption which, claims Veblen, is typical of the higher classes, signifying excess and building status. A typical type of conspicuous consumption is unpractical clothing, like for instance the Zoot suit. Looking to anthropology, an obvious example of conspicuous consumption and how it builds status is the *potlatch* of the Kwakiutl and other North-Western Native American tribes (which is described, among others, by Franz Boas).

In the case of the lowriders, we can see the scraping and hydraulic jumping with the cars as conspicuous consumption, where the owner not only possesses the car, but he also aggressively wears it down, or somehow consumes it.

Veblen explains the “secondary, and in some sense spurious, leisure class” as people who are unable to do manual labor because of pride and honor—because they see themselves as too good for such types of work—and thus instead end up living in need and discomfort (ibid.).

“I want my car to look like a whore!”

While discussing with me his ongoing lowrider project, one of my informants explained that in the end he wanted his car to “look like a whore.”

Perhaps he meant to say “pimp”. Pimp as a word describing a particular style is used almost daily in different expressions of contemporary American pop culture, so I would have had to live under a rock to be ignorant of its meaning. I never heard anyone use the word whore like my informant, casually describing an aesthetical style. So, perhaps he meant to say pimp. But I like that he said whore. And perhaps I’m less informed than what I like to think I am; perhaps there actually is a subtle but meaningful distinction between the *pimp* and the *whore* style.

Still, such subtle distinctions should not make any difference; if we look at the two expressions in light of Veblen, the essence of both styles is the spuriousness, the “trying to fake being something else”, which probably rings equally true for both pimps and prostitutes.

Explaining the word *cool* journalist Donnell Alexander writes that *cool* is an “inclination to make something out of nothing and then to make that something special (...) Cool is all about trying to make a dollar out of 15 cents” (McAdams 2001, Alexander 1997). I suppose the *pimp* and the *whore* can be characterized correspondingly. They, too, try to make a dollar out of 15 cents. Still the product they flaunt isn’t necessarily cool, only spurious.

Pimp, whore, spurious or cool: None of the lowriders I spoke to qualify as the *spurious leisure class* of Veblen and Wolfe, since the lowriders are working class. Most of these guys do hard, manual labor. Many of them are people who not only know today’s price of concrete (I overheard two of them

casually discuss just this before one meeting in the club, and felt very incapable of joining the discussion). Many of them are construction workers—their workday involves moving concrete around. This is the type of work which *defines* the original meaning of the word “work”. They are not upper class or aristocracy, not even middle class. Still their lowrider cars are perfect examples of Veblen’s *pecuniary emulation* and *spurious consumption*. It seems the *conspicuous leisure* of the upper classes (and of the *spurious aristocracy*), as Veblen saw it, now fails to define that upper class. Instead the phenomenon spilled over to other social segments of society a long time ago.

Still it can be argued that a factor behind the outlaw aura which accompanies the lowriders is related to this spurious consumption, since spurious consumption is typical of those who have an excess of goods, not of those who have little. And since the lowriders are low status working class, it is suspicious when they partake in excessive conspicuous consumption. When a person of this status owns a car like a lowrider—which is dressed up to look like an object of excess—the onlooker might question how this excess could be gained by legal means. The scraping and jumping around with the car strengthens the outsider’s suspicion. While it’s common knowledge how someone like Elvis or Liberace gained their wealth—and their conspicuous consumption is thus not suspicious—it is a riddle how a supposedly poor, working class, low status Mexican-American gained access to enough wealth for a seemingly equal level of consumption. Thus, just as in the case of the witchcraft accusations Kluckhohn writes about in *Navaho Witchcraft*—those who stick out by building up more wealth than others will be suspected of

witchcraft (Willis 1996)—through their swagger the lowriders raise suspicion that criminal behavior lies behind their accumulation of wealth.

Prestige and status

One particularly convincing way to display one's power is symbolically through the control of valuable items in the society

—Gary Ferraro in *Cultural anthropology: An applied perspective*.

Approached through the materialist stand point we would assume that there is a relationship between wealth and honor—what Elvin Hatch calls the isomorphic thesis (Hatch 1989:341–344). In this view the lowriders' status only partly makes sense. The lowriders exaggerate their wealth, flaunting their expensive creations while they are at the lower end of the income ladder; they brag about a wealth they not totally possess. How this show-off affects these people's place in the honor system is unclear. It can look like their status is often low, and that this low status is sometimes cemented by their swank.

I remember with sympathetic pain how two bare-chested young white men, perhaps European tourists, pointed and laughed in spite at one of Lifestyle's more extensively decorated cars—a Chevrolet El Camino named *L.A. Woman* which is made up as a memorial to the late Jim Morrison. The club had brought their cars down to display on Venice Beach as part of a promotional event for a multinational shoe company, and now these two spectators could just about smother their mockery. Danny D says: "Some people understand, and some people don't. Some people laugh, some people appreciate it—I always think the ignorant people laugh. It's okay, though, because they'll laugh but they still take a picture." Lifestyle don't need my

sympathy, they hold their heads high just fine without my help. But the incident showed me a failure to gain respect.

We can interpret behavior as a mean to increase capital. Capital then, is “resources of different kinds that give some people advantages over others”, which is how Bourdieu (according to Hatch 1989:344) use the term. Bourdieu explains that high brow culture is scarce, because it takes a lot of cultivation to access it. The lowriders relationship to their creations is likewise characterized by how the intuitive understanding of the culture is only for those who invest a lot of resources—time, money, work, creativity—into it, and the lowrider culture is thus, somehow, low on supply, and in line with Bourdieu’s theory it can be used as “a distinguishing criteria for ordering people within a hierarchy of standing” (Hatch *ibid.*).

Who among us has been sufficiently loved, whose heart has
been fully realized in the returning gaze of the beloved?

—Lewis Hyde in *The Gift*

Danny D tells me about his first memories of the Lifestyle cars:

“I’d always see a Lifestyle car in the street back in the days when you could see them in the streets, and I would say ‘Fuck, look at that car coming from down the street’ and in my head I’m thinking ‘It’s got to be Lifestyle! It’s got to be Lifestyle!’ And as it’d pass me by, I’d see the plaque up in the back of the car: ‘Yeah! I *knew* it was a Lifestyle!’

“And when I built my car—or rather when I was asked to join the club—I thought my car would never represent Lifestyle. It was just a clean stock car,

powder blue—it was really nice, but just stock. And I had met Joe Ray [Lifestyle President] a couple of times, and we were at a car show and he goes ‘hey, *holmes*¹¹, I hear you got your car out!?’ So I say ‘Yeah, I got my car out. It’s over there in the corner.’

“And then I told him ‘Check it out and let me hear, you know, what you think about it. Cause it would mean a great deal to me.’

“And he came back, and he said ‘*Holmes*, I saw your car.’

“So I ask ‘What do you think?’

“He goes ‘Eh ... It’s a beautiful car, but you’re missing two things!’

“And I’m thinking ‘Wait a minute! I bought every molding NOS¹², hunted two years of swap meets to find every part that was missing, the right tires, the right rims, hydraulics, every accessory for that model, make and year, you know and ... I got power windows, I got power seat tilt, telescopic wheel, AC, everything, I’m not missing shit ... I got bumper guard, I got everything. But he goes ‘you’re missing two things!’

“And I’m like ‘What? What!?’

“And then he says ‘You’re missing plaque poles hanging from the rear, and a Lifestyle plaque.’

“I thought ‘Wow!’ That’s pretty deep, you know! And then my friend tells me: ‘Did you hear that? Joe Ray says that car is clean enough to be in the club! That’s crazy!’

So when I brought my car to the club, like I say, it was like that, just stock. And it’s a beautiful car—it would hold it’s own by itself—but next to the rest of the cars in the club it got no attention. Don’t get me wrong, it would get

¹¹ **holmes** n. *slang* used to address a male friend or stranger.

¹² **NOS** *abbr.* new old stock; parts manufactured a long time ago, but never used.

attention by itself: ‘Hey, who painted this, where did you get this, where did you get that, how did you do this?’ I thought that was pretty cool! But like I say: I got no attention next to the other Lifestyle cars. So then I tore my car down to paint it the way you see it now and took it to a show, and inside the show – it was at the LA Convention Center last year at the LA Auto Show, and I was representing for Meguiar’s¹³—I went no colors¹⁴ ‘cause I like to stand around listen to people talk, you know, kind of undercover ... So I was standing there and I heard this guy running over, he looks in the back window and he starts yelling: ‘I told you! I told you! I told you it was a Lifestyle car!’ He turns to his friends: ‘Look at this motherfucker! Look at this motherfucker! It’s *bad!*’

“And when I saw and heard that, to me that meant I had made it—to represent Lifestyle—because it referred to back when I used to see their cars in the street and to how I’d see that plaque in the back window ... You know the car would have a certain look, but I’d look at the plaque to verify what I’d suspect from looking at the car. And when that kid at the car show did the same to me, it was like, full circle: Now I represent Lifestyle.

“It gives me little chills to think about it.”



Figure 11: Lowrider Magazine’s logo is designed to resemble the car club plaques, placed in the rear window of the lowrider cars.

¹³ Meguiar’s is a car care product brand.

¹⁴ “No colors” means that Danny didn’t have any clothing on him signifying his association to Lifestyle C.C.

Heftie tells a similar story. A young member of Desirable Ones C.C., he explains his prime reason behind lowriding as he drives me through the strip of late night Las Vegas in his juiced up 1982 Cadillac Fleetwood “Love Loaded”. He finished installing the hydraulics in his car just yesterday, and now he watches to see if anybody turns their head as we roll by.

”You’ll see it yourself when your car is finished, Martin. Sure, you’re frustrated now, working on it. You’re standing outside in the boiling heat, and there’s a tiny little shit of a piece you need to get out of some inaccessible place behind the dash—maybe it’s your speedometer you need to fix, and you can’t get it out because your steering wheel is blocking when you try to pull it out and there’s also some cables on the back of the thing and they’re too short to get the whole thing out, and you can’t get it out and now you can’t even get it *back in*, and you pull and jiggle and suddenly a part brakes off inside and you can’t see what piece it is, it just went CLICK and then something fell down somewhere, and you swear out loud, and the neighbor lady peeks out at you from behind the curtains in the window at the front of her house and she ponders if she’s going to call the parking department, she called them earlier because she doesn’t like that you park your car outside her house—of course it’s not illegal to park there for anybody, I mean it’s a public street and all, but she couldn’t care less, she doesn’t like anybody else parking old cars outside her house, it makes her nervous, so well it’s not illegal, but it’ll still be *your* problem to explain yourself to the parking department if they come over, won’t it?

“Now you’re pouring sweat and your knuckles bleed because you hit something with your fist, the top of the dashboard, trying to reach far in there,

and when you're eventually able to put back the piece-of-shit-piece, anxious as fuck that you'll do a mistake, you're afraid you won't remember in what order you took the whole thing apart so how are you going to remember in what order to put it back together, and when, against all odds, you are able to put it together and you reconnect the battery to see how everything works, I mean you didn't do anything but take a part out and look at it and then put it back in so why would anything be different, but hey, maybe that fixed the problem? But then you test it and you discover that now the gas needle doesn't work, either, and that's just plain stupid, because the gas needle worked just fine before you started this whole damn thing, and now you have two things that doesn't work on the car, not one, but two ... by then you won't understand why you even bother, and you're boiling furious, and even though you don't say a word, your body is so tense with rage that the neighbor lady, that bitch, is wondering whether she should call the police, not the parking department, but the police: "Yes, hello, there's a lunatic in the street, he looks like he'll blow up any moment, I've seen him around, I don't trust that he's sane.

"But, listen to me, dude: When you finish your car, when you've done everything you planned to do with it, I mean, you have new wheels, and new tires, and a sick paintjob, and a slick interior in a color combination nobody thought you could pull off but you did, and you're driving up the street, you got some music on ... the cops are going to pull you over just to get a look at your car, dude, just because they think it's so *bad*, man, and chicks are going to run out to the edge of the sidewalk and try to flag you down as you pass them, like you're on the race track or something ... And then you'll understand what

it's all about. It's that attention that makes it all worthwhile. That's the whole point, dude. That's why we do it: The attention."

According to Bourdieu—and here he is very much in line with Thorstein Veblen's description of *spurious consumption*—the reason why the upper class prefer certain types of commodities before others, and certain types of culture before others, is not because it gives them increased comfort, because it is materially *better*, but because it symbolizes how they are different from others.

I've put \$15,000 plus unaccountable amounts of work into my car. Because of all that energy I put into the car, I was accepted into the club. That's what gives me the right to wear a T-shirt with the Lifestyle logo on it. I don't want that T-shirt to be available to just anyone for \$24.99

—A Lifestyle member, on why there's no Lifestyle C.C. merchandise available to non-members.

Respect and being exceptional

“I remember the first time I saw a lowrider,” says Victor. Victor is a graphic designer and artist. Never having owned a lowrider himself, he still uses the image of the cars in his art, because he grew up in Los Angeles and the lowriders are part of LA.

“I thought the car was fucked up, that something had gone wrong! It was parked—I think it was in a school yard or something—and the body of it was all the way down to the ground, there was no clearing. I was sure the thing was broken. But then I thought it looked so perfect, like it was done on purpose, so I thought I got to see this, I got to see how to hell he’s going to drive away with *that*. I don’t remember if I had already heard somebody talk about lowriders, so maybe I kind of knew about them, but I had never *seen* one. But like I say I might have heard about the hydraulics and stuff. So I was curious, right? And then the guy comes over and he lifts the car up, with the hydraulics—and it goes nuiiiiiiii, nuiiiiiiii, nuiiiiiiii.”

Victor does his best impression of the sound of the hydraulics lifting a car.

“And I was *deadly* impressed! So then they started jumping around with the car, using the hydraulics, and the whole thing was noisy as hell—when that car starts jumping up and down, hitting the ground, you know—it wasn’t *not* gracious. You’ve seen it right? I mean sometimes stuff pops off because of the stress the action is doing to the car, right—the wheel or whatever comes off, and stuff brakes; because obviously it’s not good for the car! They even catch fire sometimes, because there are all these batteries to work the pumps, and then the oil they use in the hydraulic system leaks out and gets

into the material they've lined the trunk with and it starts burning. It can be a real mess! So this guy is jumping around with his car, and you know In fact it was more annoying than cool; I mean it wasn't aesthetically attractive to me. But I was still impressed, you know."

An individual can acquire respect by sticking out in an exceptional way. But more commonly individuals gain esteem by conforming to the norm. As described earlier on, Cora du Bois lists conformity as a principal American value, and if she is right conforming to the norm would be, in the US, an effective way to raise one's own prestige.

Since it appears that the lowriders seek higher status not by conforming, but rather by sticking out, I'll look at some other theories of prestige seeking.

Elvin Hatch describes two theories on what he calls calculated prestige seeking (Hatch 1989:346), theories spurned from functionalism. One type of this calculated prestige seeking, is cynical calculated, where individuals manipulate the rules of a society for their personal benefit. As examples of this theory, Hatch points to Leach's *Political systems of highland Burma* and Malinowski's *Crime and custom in savage society*.

Another approach to a theory of status is the *ludic*, where playfulness is at the base of any honor-seeking activity. Hatch gives Johan Huizinga—with *Homo Ludens* from 1949—as the best example of this theory. While honor is the price that can be gained, the challenge is the driving force behind the activity (Hatch 1989:347). Refining the definition of what types of play the

prestige seeking individual will prefer, Kroeber adds the element of tension; a competitive element must be present for play to be part of a status system.

I once saw long time president of Lifestyle Joe Ray give a passionate speech to his fellow club members explaining his philosophy on how to keep building the best lowriders. The club had recently visited the final car show of Lowrider Magazine's Car Show tour in Las Vegas, and returned dispirited due to lack of attention—in a car show attention is mainly expressed by how many prizes you take home and this time only one Lifestyle car had received a prize—and now they were discussing how to regain the club's status as the prime movers in the national lowrider scene. Joe had been asked earlier in the meeting to say something, but refused, mumbling something about being too bummed out to really say a word, but eventually he gave in to an urge for expressing himself.

"It works like this," he said. "I come out with my car, and I have it all fixed up and I'm proud as hell, and I'm driving along. Some other dude comes along with his car. I check him out. Now, my car is the shit, so his car doesn't hold itself towards mine, but I still check his car out, because maybe there's some little element in there that makes me go 'hmmm, I hadn't thought of that'. Maybe it's something simple, maybe his rims are hotter than mine, so I go back home and I get rims like that, just that I get those that are one step up from his. Or he's done something to the body of his car I haven't seen before, so I go back to my garage and I incorporate it into my car, only I do a better job than him, and I make it work even better on my car. It's a competition; I have to beat that sucker, right!? He drives up with a blonde chick in his passenger seat; well, the next time I come back, I have a fucking redhead in

my passenger seat. Get it? It's all about being better, to beat that other guy! That's the inspiration to build the car."

Joe Ray thus illustrates the merging of two of Hatch's theories of status hierarchies; the cynical calculating status seeker, and the ludic.

He also, I later discovered, incorporates Lowrider Magazine's present official view on lowriding, as they now denominate lowriding as a *motor sport*. In most Western societies the calculating prestige seeker is often frowned upon, whereas playful creativeness is, in itself, honored. Therefore, for anyone seeking to elevate their own status in a hierarchy, the only well working tactic—psychologically, as well as socially—could be to present the prestige seeking as some kind of play.

Hatch also provides an example of last theory of status systems, one which incorporates the conception of a *meaningful and well-spent life*, and ultimately also the notion of *self-identity*. The idea is that many actions are undertaken with the idea that they provide a "pleasure of achievement for its own sake, especially important where aesthetic values are involved" (Geddes quoted in Hatch 1989:349). The paradox in this viewpoint is that we have no way of deciding what we consider a meaningful and well-spent life without taking into consideration what people around us think of the matter, and so it fails to explain hierarchies of standing (Hatch 1989:349). What the theory succeeds to incorporate, though, is how this sense of identity is intertwined with a hierarchical prestige system. This viewpoint also helps explain how low ranking members of a hierarchy feels they have a stake in society; a feeling of fulfilling one's role and a low rank is not incompatible (ibid.:351).

Still the question remains, in regard of the lowriders, how casting oneself as an outlaw increases their social capital. For them the cars symbolize how they are “better” than others, because the cars distinguish them. However, towards the surrounding Anglo Saxon culture that’s not the effect. It might seem that while the lowrider cars still cast owners of the cars as different, they are *not* perceived as “better”. Instead the lowrider cars are seen as symbols of their owner’s outlawry.

*

To understand the outlaw aesthetics and its effect on status, I believe I’ll need to briefly examine the outlaw myths and their place in American society.

The mythological outlaw archetype

There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.

—*Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*

The Americans believe there should be a tight connection between justice and law. But it's also important to bear in mind that justice does not necessarily equal law, and law does not necessarily equal justice (Meyer 1980). Henry David Thoreau articulated this important distinction when he wrote *Civil Disobedience*. Here he endorses to cultivate respect for “the right” rather than for “the law” (Thoreau 1849:387, Meyer 1980:94). Closely related to this principal is—and this is what Thoreau ultimately agitated—an inclination to resist unjust authorities. There is a widespread belief that this inclination is one of the cornerstones of what it is to be American and the creation and popularity of American outlaw myths is anchored in this belief.

Of course, the outlaw archetype is not American, but rather universal (Meyer 1980, Hobsbawn 1959). Eric Hobsbawn calls it *social banditry*, “little more than endemic peasant protest against oppression and poverty; a cry for vengeance on the rich, and the oppressors, a vague dream of some curb upon them, a righting of individual wrongs” (Hobsbawn 1959:5).

The mythological outlaws have certain common traits (Simeone 1958, Steckmesser 1966, Meyer 1980):

- a) They come from a good family. This does not necessarily mean wealthy—since wealth mostly is suspect and associated with corruptness—but it means that they come from a *well respected*

family. They are also always “of the people”, which is reflected in their good behavior towards the common and the poor man.

- b) They are skillful and they are courageous.
- c) They fall into outlawry because of personal shortcomings or conflicts, or they are pushed to the “wrong” side of the law by extremely unjust treatment by the ruling authorities. Albeit being on the “wrong” side of the law, they are praised in folklore as heroes, because the law is corrupt and unjust.
- d) They often go in disguise. And they are known as tricksters, often fooling the authorities or others with their disguises, or with other tricks. A classic example is reversing the horse shoes, to fool the pursuers.
- e) Their foes are religious authorities and civil law. Simultaneously they are religiously conservative and have a keen eye for justice.
- f) They don’t use violence other than in self defense.
- g) They often have a posse. Robin Hood had The Merry Men, Jesse James had the James-Younger gang, and Butch Cassidy had the Wild Bunch.
- h) They receive loyal support from “the people” and the poor.
- i) They rob the rich. And they give to the poor. “The poor” can be brakemen on the trains the outlaws rob, or widows in danger of loosing their homes. Or, as in the case of the stories about Billy the Kid, they are plainly Mexicans.

- j) The authorities are never able to catch them by conventional means, but ultimately they are caught because they are betrayed by some “dirty little coward” close to them.
- k) They eventually give themselves up to the law. Or, if they are American outlaws, they are killed, unrepentant killers to their last breath. If they are killed they are mourned by “the people”. Often the outlaw is rumored to not have died at all—rather they struck a deal with the authorities, to fake their death, and they now live in peace and quiet in a secret place.

The lowriders and the outlaw archetype

Before I go on I'd like to point out how lowriders often present themselves in accordance to most common traits of mythological outlaws, as they are listed above.

First of all, they have a background from working class families; they can often easily trace their background a few generations to migrant/immigrant agriculture workers. This makes them *of the people*—as the conception of *the people* often simply means the lower social classes of the population. It also means they are from a *good family (a)*, in as much as migrant agricultural workers are among the poorest segment of the hard working population. "The fact that people are poor or discriminated against doesn't necessarily endow them with any special qualities of justice, charity or compassion." The radical community organizer Saul Alinsky is credited with

having said that (Thompson 1967:165). And Alinsky probably had a point. Nevertheless, in mythology and popular tradition being poor is usually equal to being morally good.

The lowriders are *skillful (b)*—they know their automobiles in and out, and often they have done great parts of the work on the cars themselves.

As far as the lowriders are on the wrong side of the law, it is because the laws (in this case mainly the California Vehicle Code) are—according to the lowriders—either stupid, or unjustly enforced. It is for instance commonly believed—among lowriders—that the cops commonly racially profile when enforcing anti-cruising laws (Best 2006:38–42; Penland 2003:65).

Danny D describes the phenomena:

“We used to go to my grandmother’s house for Christmas and Thanksgiving; thirteen cousins were there with all their kids ... back the first time, when we moved my grandmother in there, the cops showed up: ‘What are you guys doing here?’ You know we had these lowriders parked in this ‘white area’, and we’re like ‘we’re moving our grandmother in, can’t we do that? Grandma bought a house!’”

And he continues:

“When I was married I lived in Atwater Village, which is right on the border of Glendale, so when we would cross over the border of Glendale, we used to get harassed. As a kid—because I used to live in that area as a kid, too—as a kid I used to get pulled over on a lowrider bicycle by the Glendale Police. I’d go: “What?” You know, “what am I doing?!” And they’d go ‘you look

like somebody who's coming out from a different neighborhood,' or something like that. They were just harassing you. Glendale is notorious."

The lowriders are tricksters. The lowrider equivalent of reversing the horse's shoes is the hydraulics. In fact, the mythology of the hydraulic setup tells us that it was invented to fool cops. Here's how Paige Penland retells the story in *Lowrider* (Penland 2003:19):

"X-sonic" gleamed in the San Bernardino sunshine as Ron Aguirre led the *Krankers* car club on a caravan to the *Renegades'* 1958 Memorial Day Car Show in Long Beach. Between the cruise and the show, however, was the law.

"The motorcycle cop cut across the center divider and made a U-turn, pulling us all over," remembered Aguirre. "By the time he got to me, I had raised the car up to legal height."

"I could have sworn this car was too low," said the officer after carefully measuring the car's clearance.

"It's just the style," Aguirre replied. "It just looks like it's really low."

As the officer, skeptical, crossed to the other side of the freeway, Aguirre dumped the valves. The officer turned around and had to believe what he saw; he waved them through, unsure why the club's members were laughing.

The lowriders are *religiously conservative and have a keen eye for justice (e)*. The lowriders I spoke to didn't seem concerned with religion, but a walk around any lowrider car show will give many examples of religiously

themed decorations in and on the cars. Even though this religious decoration is often more a nationalistic statement—*la virgin the Guadalupe* is a commonly used symbol of Mexican-American pride—there is, among Mexican-Americans and among lowriders, a strong pride in their religious traditions.

As for the keen eye for justice, internal enforcement of club rules and regulations seemed important to at least Lifestyle car club. Each meeting in the club involves a quickly executed session of swatting some selected individuals. This is how it happens: The names of those who are going to be swatted is called out by the disciplinary officer, and sometimes the reason for the punishment is also announced. Who will get the swat, as well as how many swats the punishment will be, is decided by the officers of the club. (On those occasions the reason for the swatting was not announced, it seemed to me that all the members still knew the reason—perhaps it had been called out on some earlier meeting, perhaps it was called out without me hearing it, or perhaps for some other reason it was just clear to everybody else than me why the person in question was being punished). The person who was going to receive the swats then had to step into the middle of the ring formed by all the members of the club during the meeting, so that everybody would have a view of the punishment scene. He would bend over, grasp his legs with his hands, and the disciplinary officer would execute the punishment, to the accompaniment of humorous comments and friendly laughter from the other members of the club. The number of swats was usually one, as far as I can remember never more than three. They seemed to be hard enough for the punished person to feel a good physical sting, but it also seemed clear that

the social sting was the main reason for the ritual. As far as I could decide, the most common reason for receiving swats would be a failure to pay the “tax” to the club. Secondly, any kind of misbehavior which would take the clubs reputation in vain would be, if it was picked up, reason for punishment.

In other words the lowriders are far from anarchists and nihilists; instead they have an eye for justice more in line with Thoreau’s argument to respect “the right” rather than “the law”.

Like the outlaws from mythology, the lowriders have a *posse (g)*. The lowrider posse is the car club.

We could say that the lowriders *receive loyal support from “the people” and the poor (i)* by how they often are praised as crusaders for the *Chicano* struggle. The lowrider cars are admired, acknowledged and praised as icons of Mexican-American pride by a much wider group than the lowriders themselves.

In November each year, on the club meeting preceding Thanksgiving, all the members of Lifestyle brings a turkey. They then give them away to a local organization who will use the food to make a Thanksgiving dinner for the needy—in 2006 the turkeys (around 140) went to the Boys and Girls Clubs of East Los Angeles. Thus, Lifestyle in fact also *give to the poor (j)*.

Three types of outlaws

The popular conception of the outlaws, whether they are stories we have from folklore or stories more close to actual historical events, are usually hard to

trace back to the sources—for instance the idea that Robin Hood was a friend of the poor can only be found in one line in all the ballads about him, but it is still accepted as the most important characteristic of Robin Hood. We bump into similar problems tracing the creation of American outlaw myths (Steckmesser 1966:350). Even while historical data shows no proof that a specific outlaw was good to the poor—perhaps the proof even speaks of the opposite behavior—the downtrodden will, as both Steckmesser and Meyer writes, idolize the outlaw (ibid. 1966:350, Meyer 1980:96).

“In any peasant society there are ‘landlords’ bandits’ as well as ‘peasant bandits’ not to mention State’s bandits,” writes Eric Hobsbawm in *Primitive Rebels*. “Only the peasant bandits receive the tribute of ballads and anecdotes” (Hobsbawm 1959:13).

Many cultures are so ripe with these ballads and anecdotes it’s tempting to say it’s obsessive and pathological, and USA is no exception. I could probably, with ease from the top of my head, fill a page with names of American outlaws who have a place in the collective US consciousness. But there’s hardly any need for that. Suffice to say the American outlaw is ever-present in contemporary culture: I did a search on an internet search engine for online news media, and found 13 references to “Billy the Kid” in the last 11 days (the music from Aaron Copland’s 1938 ballet “Billy the Kid” is on a radio station’s Sunday morning Classical Music playlist; a writer for Colorado weekly Telluride Watch uses Billy the Kid’s gravestone as an example of a typical tourist attraction; an article in Wired News describes how the computer kills the Renaissance man stating how “sitting at a computer when you don’t have to is to be cripplingly passive, even if you’re playing the bloodiest, most

maniacal shooter game ever. Sorry, podnah, but that doesn't make you Billy the Kid.”; The Wall Street Journal quotes an ESPN columnist who describes the uniforms of a football team, The Oklahoma Outlaws, who “came to play in black duds with a Billy The Kid-esque thug on the helmet”; MovieWeb reviews a new release of a Paul Newman collection on DVD—one of the movies is Arthur Penn’s *The left Handed gun* from 1958, with the tagline “I don't run. I don't hide. I go where I want. I do what I want”, in which Newman plays Billy the Kid.)

The mythological American outlaw is well recognized all over the world, as their life stories are now repeatedly spread through the films, music, and books of an effective American entertainment industry. In many of these stories, old as well as new, the protagonist is a good hearted outlaw hero. The popular folk singer Woody Guthrie celebrated the outlaws “as the populist heroes they’d been back in Oklahoma, as poor people who preyed on the rich” (Klein 1999:126). That most of the real life outlaws in fact stole from everybody and kept everything for themselves is well documented, but makes little difference for our love of the myth. In one of his most popular outlaw ballads, about the Oklahoma outlaw “Pretty Boy Floyd”, Guthrie illustrates the same point as Eric Hobsbawm, as he stress the difference between the “landlords’ bandits” and the “peasant bandit”, declaring their allegedly contrasting morals:

Now as through this world I ramble,
I see lots of funny men;
Some will rob you with a six gun,
And some with a fountain pen.

But as through your life you travel,
As through your life you roam,
You won't never see an outlaw
Drive a family from their home.

Hobsbawm's academic authority and Guthrie's artistic eloquence aside, I suggest that there are three distinctive outlaw archetypes, and I believe they have relevance to the understanding of lowriders and their outlaw aesthetics. I shall call my three outlaw archetypes *the philanthropic outlaw, the selfish outlaw, and the nihilist outlaw*.

The philanthropic outlaw

The philanthropic outlaw robs and kills the rich, and gives to the poor.

Most famously exemplified in the tales of Robin Hood, the philanthropic outlaw is also descriptive of other characters we know from medieval British ballads and Icelandic sagas (Simeone 1958).

We also know this type of outlaw from later American stories. Some of these tales are purely fictional. According to Sandra Curtis, in the foreword to a 1998 edition of Johnston McCulley's *The Mark of Zorro* (Curtis 1998), the novels about Zorro are partly inspired by Joaquin Murrieta, a real life outlaw of the California gold rush era, still the Zorro legend must be considered an example of a purely fictional outlaw story. Other stories are loosely based on

historical figures, for instance those about Sam Bass, Billy the Kid, and Jesse James, who were all figures we can trace in historical documents.

The philanthropic outlaw character is the individual who defies the established law system, because that system is corrupt and unjust.

The selfish outlaw

The selfish outlaw robs and kills the rich and keeps everything for themselves.

There's a fascinating memorial plaque in the gardens behind *The Flamingo Hotel* in Las Vegas, Nevada. It tells the true story of Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel, the mobster, and his association to *The Flamingo*; according to the legend Bugsy built the original *Flamingo Hotel* and was thus instrumental to the growth of Las Vegas as we know it today.

The most fascinating aspect of the memorial is not the story told on it but the fact that it has a prominent place at the back of *The Flamingo*. No sources I've come across describe Bugsy Siegel as anything else but a cold hearted brute, a man who never hesitated to use violence and murder as means to reach his goals. Bugsy is typically described as a full-blown sociopath. "(He's) an unlamented, arrogant killer who rose to malodorous eminence as one of the chief executioners for the infamous Murder Inc. mob," as one of his pulp-fiction biographers introduces him (Carpozi 1992). Yet, his bio is displayed as some sort of a wicked variation on The American Dream, where the final conclusion lingers unpronounced in the air but seems to be somewhere along the line of "if you achieve your goals by immoral methods ... hey, you've still achieved your goals!" The story of Bugsy Siegel is a story of a very immoral outlaw; still his achievements are paraded as a

success story—so much so that association to his chronicles somehow suits the marketing of a well respected establishment like a Las Vegas family hotel. Bugsy Siegel is a bad man but his story is fit for consumption. While legends of different types of Robin Hoods strike powerful notes in the popular mind, so do—somehow surprisingly—the stories of the *selfish outlaws*. The *selfish outlaw* brake the law, nay kills, purely for personal gain; they feed their own avarice, showing no compassion for the penniless. Yet, they are heroes.

If you walk into any mall in Los Angeles, you're guaranteed to find at least one little whole-in-the-wall-store peddling T-Shirts with Al Pacino as Tony Montana from Brian de Palma's 1983 gangster epic *Scarface*. Montana is a bad man in that movie; still his image is passed off as a symbol of dark bravery, representing the underbelly of heroism.

The nihilist outlaw

The nihilist outlaw robs and kills for no reason.

The nihilist outlaw does not instill respect and praise, as the philanthropic outlaw does, or even understanding and acceptance, as the selfish outlaw might do. Instead the nihilist outlaw disgusts; often stirs up fear and panic. There seems to be no noble cause behind their action, they seem to lack morals and ethic guidelines and their misdemeanors are not aimed at symbols of corrupt power and moral degeneration. Their acts of violence seem random and serve no purpose.

One good fictional description of the nihilist outlaw is Abner Snopes, the poor migrant farm worker in William Faulkner's 1939 short story "Barn Burning". Snopes gets back at the wealthy farm owners by coldheartedly burning down their barns (Faulkner 1939). "Barn Burning" has been tagged as a portrayal of so-called *white trash* (Thompson 1967:153), but Faulkner's narrative reaches further; it's a description of people, of any skin color or ethnic background, who have seen too many disappointments. They are people who have lost their hopes and their dreams, who ultimately nurture only hate and despise for the world around them. And it is the description of people who act upon this loathe with no intention of bettering neither their own or other's situation. There's no heroism involved, not bravery, no tricks nor skills, no "taking from the rich and giving to the poor." There is only primitive rage and revenge.

And that is the nihilist outlaw.

There are plenty of examples of this kind of behavior in American folklore and popular culture. My favorite example is the outlaw motorcycle gangs we could see in the biker flicks of the 1960's and early 1970's, where the villain protagonist (perhaps played by a young and dapper Peter Fonda) would step forward to some authority figure and proclaim—right before his gang tears the place down—their deepest inclinations:

We don't want anybody telling us what to do. We don't want anybody pushing us around. We wanna be free to ride our machines without being hassled by The Man! And we wanna get loaded.

—'Heavenly Blues' in Roger Corman's motion picture *Wild Angels* from 1966.

Anyone looking for eloquent plots and plausible narratives might find these movies to be of dubious quality, but they are cultural products from a time when the stories of maniac motorcycle gangs were quite common also from traditionally more trustworthy sources than, say, Roger Corman movies. These movies are indicative of a scare which swept the American nation in the 60's, a scare which also helped sell newspapers and magazines. Highly respected national publications, like *Newsweek*, *Time*, *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times*—brought horror stories about motorcycle mayhem (*Los Angeles Times* 1965, *New York Times* 1965, Thompson 1965, *Time* 1965, Thompson 1967). "Their logbook of kicks runs from sexual perversion and drug addiction to simple assault and thievery," wrote *Time*. "No act is too degrading for the pack". *The New York Times* described the "terrorism of ruffian cyclists", and *Los Angeles Times* described the motorcycle gang as a "threat on wheels".

Despite these horror stories (or perhaps because of them), it looked for a while like these gangs were about to turn into everybody's favorite outlaw heroes. The motorcycle gangs were embraced by different branches of the

60's counter culture; beat poets, hippies, and LSD gurus all loved them (Thompson 1967, Wolfe 1968). However, over time the motorcycle gangs fell into disfavor—now we mostly remember them as nihilist villains not worthy of the downtrodden people's respect.

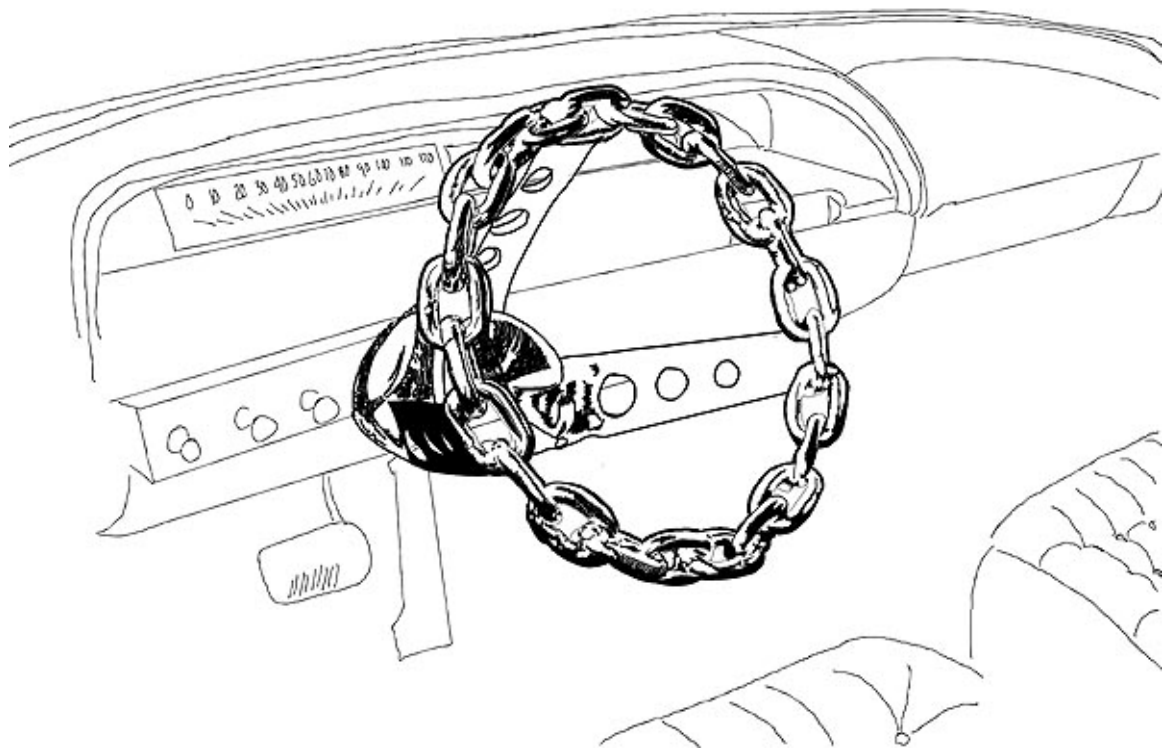


Figure 12: Chain steering wheels used to be popular on lowrider cars in earlier years.

Outlaw exploitation

The violence, the hate, the way-out parties...exactly as it happens!

—Tagline for *Hell's Angels on Wheels* (1967)

This nigger is killing motherfuckers every day, and like ... he's got bitches, and he's pimping, and he's selling drugs. *And he's rapping, too!!* I'm like: "*Damn! I gotta look up to this guy right here!*" When I heard his album; it was incredible—from the skits to every verse. So it was a relief to find out that he was really just a poet, with a great imagination. When I found out that this artist that I respected wasn't really a killer, it was a relief!

—Musician Fat Lip talking to film creator

Spike Jonze about Notorious B.I.G.

It's easy to get the narrator and the narrative confused—tangled up in the attraction of a well told fable anyone can easily mistake the story teller for one of the characters of the saga. A lot of people thought, for instance, that Johnny Cash did time in prison; he sang a lot of songs about it, didn't he? Many even thought he served time for murder because he famously sang about shooting a man "just to see him die."

Perhaps we can say that the lowriders fall victims of same type of confusion, as they "talk" about gangsters (with their cars) and are mistaken for criminals. They actively partake in this myth building, when they sometimes

rent themselves and their cars out for films and video shots, in which they mostly are portrayed as gang members and shady criminals.¹⁵

Anybody can be tricked into swallowing the lowrider outlaw myth. The last time it happened to me was when I opened the November 2006 issue of *Juxtapoz Art and Culture Magazine's* (*Juxtapox 2006a* and *Juxtapox 2006b*), with feature articles on tattoo and airbrush artist Mr. Cartoon and photographer Estevan Oriol. The two of them have made a career portraying Los Angeles gang culture, popping up now and then in different channels for distribution of culture. I'm familiar with their art and I am also familiar with the style in which they present themselves—or perhaps it's rather the way they are presented by the journalists. There's always much mention of “knowing the streets” and neighborhood gangs and drug use and “being real”, both in text and images. The story told in articles like this one in *Juxtapoz* are so powerful in their use of effects that once again, looking at the photos, I caught myself doubting my own impression of the lowriders.



*We Thread our Way
Through a Forest of Symbols*

Figure 13: Text style popular in paño art (prison art) and in single needle tattooing. Lifestyle member Mr. Cartoon uses this style in his work, both as tattoo artist and as a muralist. Mr. Cartoon has painted murals on some of the cars of Lifestyle C.C.

“Damn, these guys are *really mean*,” I thought to myself, pondering the images.

¹⁵ It turned out that the cars I had seen in the music video back in Oslo when I decided to go study the lowriders, belonged to members of Lifestyle C.C.

“There must be a lot more to the lowriding scene than what I have observed, because these guys are *obviously* real gangsters! They’re probably from down in South Central, or something,” I decided to myself. (Even though I haven’t been in South Central, it felt strangely natural to assume there’s a lot of violent crime going on in that part of LA.)

Not until I looked closer at the lowrider cars featured in the photos did I recognize them as Lifestyle C.C. cars. I have never talked to Mr. Cartoon, but I know that he’s a member of Lifestyle C.C.; so it makes sense that Mr. Cartoon’s partner Estevan Oriol would snap some photos of Lifestyle cars. But then, who were these villainous-looking people in the pictures?

“They are not the owners of the cars,” I slowly and painstakingly explained to myself. Simultaneously I realized that these guys who stared so intensely out at me from the pages of the magazine ... they weren’t even photographed *with* the cars! And what was more: They wore clothes clearly marked with the logo of The Joker Brand, which—I learned from the article—is Cartoon and Estevan’s own clothing line. In other words, some of these photos, which I had initially misread as documentary, were actually advertising! The cars, on the other hand, were photographed adorned with scantily clad women models, like as if it was a spread in an issue of *Lowrider Magazine*.

But even while I can analyze my way through such visually deceiving pop culture, I’ll most probably be fooled again, when lowrider cars are featured in close proximity to some gangster imagery—in a movie, a press clip or another photo feature. It’s obviously very easy to trigger my

associations in that direction; perhaps I'm particularly enthralled by that type of stories.

The powerful and empowering effect of outlaw art in lowriders

The greatest art offers us images by which to imagine our lives.

—Lewis Hyde in *The gift*

The anthropological study of art has, according to Cannizzo (1996), moved from Boas' polemics against the grand evolutionary theories on culture—and his arguments for studies of culture based on the narrower focus of cultural historical particularism—through British anthropology's functionalism, to the semiotics and symbolism of the 60's and the 70's. Levis Strauss' would later put French structuralism to use in the study of art objects, and relatively recently the subject has been viewed in light of anthropological studies of colonialism and gender.

In *Primitive Art* one of Franz Boas' more important points—in regards to the lowriders—is that art is form brought about by human activity and that it expresses some emotion and a conscious process (Boas 1927:9–16). The lowrider cars, of course, are special as art pieces as they are shaped from objects already designed by other people. What is even more, cars are also already designed to trigger certain emotions in the consumers. So the lowrider

car, then, is a customized aesthetical object, transformed to express other emotions than what was originally expressed in that object.¹⁶

Boas writes that our reaction to certain forms depends on our cultural background.

“Purely formal art, or perhaps better, art that is apparently purely formal, is given a meaning endowing it with an emotional value that does not belong to the beauty of form alone,” writes Boas. “It is an expressionistic element that is common to many forms of primitive art. It is effective because in the mind of the tribes certain forms are symbols of a limited range of ideas.” (ibid.:350)

And herein we see an echo of how the aesthetical language of lowriders is understood by the outsiders. Why is it that a lowered car—a simple aesthetical form, but a symbolically heavily laden modification of an already existing form—makes a particular image pop into the head of the onlooker; that of a rebel or an outcast, or even that of a criminal.

In fact, as an attempt to describe emotions, ideas and concepts by use of abstract forms and shapes—and if we allow ourselves to measure success by the size of the audience who gets the message—the lowrider car is far more successful than most endeavors in modern abstract art. Thus, not only

¹⁶ It is also quite easy to learn how most of the lowrider owners neither view themselves as artists, nor act as artists. The customizations on the cars might be thought up by the owners of the cars, and it's common that they do some parts of the work themselves, but most of the physical work on the car will be done by somebody else. I joined one member of Lifestyle at his home, when he had other members of the club over to cut the coils on his car and install hydraulics. He admitted he knew little about the technicalities of the work. Sometimes the actual work will be executed by somebody who views themselves as artists. In this way the owner of the car ends up being the project manager for the creation of this particular art object, but he is not the skilled artist. The vision might be his, but the execution is by somebody else. And the inspiration does not need to be grander than “I want Walt Prey to do the pinstriping” or “I want it to be a candy light grey”. Perhaps we can even call the lowriders art curators: It's like as if the lowrider owner pulls together the different artists to work on an exhibition, except it's not an exhibition, it is *one* object, one art piece; the lowrider car.

are the lowriders objects of art, they are also very *good* art as they effectively provoke emotions in the viewer.

But they do not only instigate fascination, often fearful, in onlookers. One important reason for the popularity of outlaw myths is their puzzling ability to also arouse pride and confidence in some of their audience, and this goes equally for the lowrider cars. In fact the most important audience for the lowrider car's outlaw aesthetics is the lowriders themselves. Because, despite the fact that it is often roused by stories of ill behavior, this ability to stir an empowering emotion is the true power of the outlaw myth. Such a source for a feeling of empowering is most valuable, of course, to a group of people who feel they do not have power, to the disenfranchised and the poor, to the invisible.¹⁷

¹⁷ It is interesting to note that the one other American population group in which we can also find many lowriders is the African-Americans. In a brief analysis of income and education among the Los Angeles population, I found that the "black" seem to be doing slightly better than the "Hispanics". However: According to U.S. Census Bureau (2006d), while about 7% of the general population in California report to be "black", numbers from the State of California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (2006) report that close to 30% of the prison population is "black". African-Americans, then, are clearly marginalized in the American society. And the fact that we find much lowrider culture also in African-American neighborhoods of Los Angeles might speak furthermore of the empowering effect some people find in the outlaw aesthetics of lowrider cars.

Conclusion

The lowrider cars are traditionally described as products heavily influenced by the owner's Mexican heritage. While there is obviously much to be said for these accounts, they often fall short of considering the class aspects in the judgment of aesthetical taste. I have pointed to data which illustrate how class background might be just as important, if not more, in an effort to analyze the cars and their owners place in the American consciousness.

Additionally, the outlaw mystique which clings to the cars and their owners is a social problem for the lowriders. It can be argued that this particular type of aesthetics is a mean to gain visibility for a group of the population who has long suffered from invisibility. But why not instead stick to a less shocking visual narrative? Maybe because—for a group of people who belong to a low status segment of the American population—the outlaw mystique is a valuable source for a liberating feeling of empowerment.

Perhaps the outlaw aesthetic in the lowriders play the same role as folklore did for the rise of the European romantic nationalism. Just like the scholars of that time gathered histories to demonstrate “connections with the cultural glories of supposed common ancestry” (Herzfeld 1996) the histories that are told through the outlaw aesthetic are stories seeking to establish an abstract common background. The stories unfold a world with a different much tougher value system. The inner logic of this mythological value system is fully comprehensible only to the initiated. Although the imagery tells stories of violent conflict solving, loose sexual morals, liberal use of recreational drugs and a strong focus on material values, the everyday reality for the majority of the people who parade this imagery is much more mundane; theirs

is a life lived within a framework in agreement with the moral code of society. For those who take a liking to the imagery, there is a shared understanding that the displayed themes tells a story of where their group come from; the aesthetics creates a common sense of cultural ancestry. But these are not stories of the group members present-day behavior; they are stories of other people who live and act according to some much tougher set of values, a set of values which inner logic this group's members claim to understand and which they wax lyrical. This type of imagery, the outlaw mythology and all ways to depict it, comes with an empowering spirit. And in the hypothetical understanding and lionizing of that other set of values, emotionally empowered the group come together and define themselves.

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