

Expressing the Chicano Culture: A Lowriding Experience

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Abstract

This research paper focuses on the rich heritage of the Chicano people who chose to express their culture through the customization of vehicles and other means of transportation. I discuss the history of the automobile in the Chicano culture and the reasons why lowriding became such a dominant idea for Chicanos instead of hot rods which were the popular choice during that era. Cheaper parts compared to the components needed to create a hot rod further strengthened the idea of embracing the lowriding persona. Customizing in terms of painting, lowering, sculpting, and fabricating gave the Chicano's a favorable alternative activity besides joining a gang. This positive movement motivated and generated a generation of workers who excelled in the field of automobile customization through their artistic capabilities and/or their skilled labor learned during WWII. Barrios (neighborhoods with a majority of Mexican American population) gave rise to new ideas that eventually lead to the suggestion of using hydraulics to raise and lower a vehicle. A law passed in 1959 prohibited the use of any vehicle with any part of it below the rim base. This new law was focused towards the Chicano lowrider population. The new concept of using hydraulics was necessary for the popular lowrider generation to survive. Customizing also helped integrate art and politics especially during the Chicano Art Movement. Many of these gifted vehicle modifiers chose to express their needs and also the needs of their barrio through their designs and intricate paintings found throughout their vehicles.

The automobile has become a useful commodity in our everyday lives. We use these modes of transportation to safely transport ourselves from our home to our work, school, parks, the theater, etc. With the revolutionary use of the production line assembly to mass produce automobiles for the general public, our society has had the great fortune of having such vehicles available at a reasonably cheap price. As with the art world, vehicles too can be used as a blank canvas for the artist's creation. This idea of using an automobile as a canvas began after World War II. Chicanos in particular chose this idea of expressing themselves through their vehicles by modifying them in such an inspiring way that their culture has actually influenced other cultures to express themselves in similar ways. Not only did they use their vehicles as a symbol for their identity, they also used them as a gateway to creating a social aspect in the lowriding culture.

The lowriding scene began around the late 1930's. During these earlier years of vehicle production, the population in southwest California was rising. There was a massive influx of immigrants seeking jobs in agriculture and manufacturing. Many of these immigrants could not afford such a luxury as an automobile but thanks to the American culture, the market would soon be flooded with cheap used cars that were more affordable to these new immigrants. "In the eyes of most of America, a car is no good after 2 to 3 years. You should trade it in and purchase a newer car." (Caissie, 2014, p.1) As soon as these new Chicanos were able to afford these used vehicles, they quickly started making the rides their own. Sand bags or heavy bricks were placed in the trunk to achieve a low rider look. This was the exact opposite of what the Anglo society perceived as culturally defining when they started the hot rod craze. Countless

hours were spent on shedding weight and amplifying the horsepower in the engines of hot rod owners. Chicanos on the other hand, did not want to go fast. They wanted to cruise the streets low and slow for all to bear witness to their magnificent creation. This was a very defining moment in the early development of the Chicano culture.

According to Ben Chappell, a lowrider is, "...An automobile customized in a popular aesthetic style, which is practiced mostly but not exclusively by Mexican Americans in the U.S. Southwest." (Chappell, 2012, p.2) This "modification" idea is very broad and can include such items as a custom interior, custom wheels, extravagant paint jobs, a complex stereo system, and the modification of a vehicles height. All of these ideas can be used to help portray a message from the vehicle owner to his or her audience. There is really no end to what a person can do to create their ideal lowrider. Some like a classy more traditional look while others want to achieve a complex or 'out of this world' art piece on wheels. Either way, these lowrider aficionados share one common thing: the love of an art that stemmed from the Chicano culture.

When a person references a lowrider, they most likely talk about hydraulics. The addition of hydraulics to a vehicle stemmed from unfortunate laws in California that targeted the Chicano population and more specifically the lowriding culture. Around the early 1960's laws were passed governing the height of all vehicles. As soon as this law passed, cops in southern California began giving tickets faster than they could write them. This was a failed attempt to frustrate the rapidly growing population of Chicanos who were the main audience that lowered their vehicles in this fashion as a means of expressing their cultural identity. The Anglo population was not targeted in these new laws. Their hot rods were not lowered in the same manner. However, one could argue

that the loud engines and exhausts of the hot rods were a disturbance to the peace but because it was coming from the dominant culture, the law makers simply looked the other way. These newly passed laws were unable to stop the popular trend of the lowriding culture. World War II was over and many Chicanos who served in the Armed Forces learned skills that were vital in creating a solution to these laws. Hydraulics were commonly used in the Air Force. They were used to raise and lower heavy items to achieve different heights necessary for proper function. This idea was implemented to fight against this newly passed law. With hydraulics properly installed on a vehicle, the height could be quickly adjusted from a very low stance to a higher legal stance when a person of authority was near-by. Chicanos have faced many obstacles living in the United States. Every time they face one of these obstacles, instead of giving up or backing down, they find a way to prevail and overcome these barriers and they usually come out on the other end stronger than ever. It is the pride they have in themselves and their culture that should be applauded instead of creating obvious laws that target their society.

As I mentioned earlier, the lowriding culture also contains a social aspect. Local scenes coalesce around the streets and parks where lowriders gather to cruise, display their rides, and socialize. This socializing aspect typically leads to a community gathering in one local spot where they can discuss what's going on in their community whether it is concerns they might have or ways to improve their neighborhood. Lowrider events are excellent opportunities for neighborhoods to gather in one place where they can discuss social aspects such as certain distresses families might have toward a local business or their opinion about upgrading a local park for their barrio. Community

members can also take this opportunity to share thoughts and ideas they have like sharing a good recipe or letting another family know where to buy fresh local fruit at a cheaper price.

This social aspect of the lowriding scene would not be possible if lowriding shows were held at a location that required payment upon entry. Once money is involved in any community event, people are secluded from such events if they cannot afford to pay for themselves or for their families to attend. Now it is no longer a full community event. This idea of holding lowriding shows at publicly free locations guarantees that all who enjoy the lowriding culture can attend. This creates an atmosphere where an entire neighborhood can socialize over beautifully sculpted vehicles. All it takes is an unbiased event like a free lowriding show to help a community start the much needed process of communicating with their fellow neighbors.

Although there are plenty of positive implications that go along with the lowriding culture, there are also some unfortunate negative myths that have grown with the help of the mass media. After watching a television show, movie, or even playing a video game, one might assume that a person associated with the lowriding culture might be affiliated with a gang, be involved with illegal drugs, or just be an all-around dangerous person. These thoughts stemmed from the mass media are incorrect. It is an unfortunate truth that some gangs like to use the lowriding culture for the style standpoint but these gangs count for the minority of the lowriding society. The majority of lowriders should not be grouped together with these minority gang associations.

In fact, the majority of members of the lowriding community are middle class, law abiding citizens. A father who grew up in the lowriding scene might take his knowledge and teach his son what he knows while they build a lowrider together. This is an excellent opportunity to strengthen family bonds while also keeping young children out of trouble like joining gangs. Lowrider clubs also address the issue of gang affiliation. Many clubs are actively involved in their communities with the intentions of contributing to a better and safer society. Arizona, for example, contains one of these clubs. "The parking lot of the Bryman School in North Phoenix was full of Lowriders Sunday afternoon during the 2nd Annual Lowrider Style's "Say NO to Drugs" car show. The show brought in some beautifully painted and detailed rides from many different car clubs." (Hahn, 2012, p.1) What typically catches the spectator's eyes in such events are the elegant murals painted on the vehicle's panels.

Hours upon hours are spent on what I like to think is one of the most important aspects of a good lowrider; the artwork found throughout the vehicle. These murals give the chance for the artist to express their thoughts and ideas for all to appreciate. Combining their past and present situations, their own cultural beliefs, and telling a personal story are all excellent ideas that a lowrider artist might choose to display on his or her vehicle. It is a chance for them to express themselves in a very personable way. During the Chicano Art Movement, many Chicanos created amazing art pieces all over their cars which could then be displayed whenever they drove around town. They took the popularity of two rising ideas and combined them into one, just like the combining of their Mexican heritage with the new American lifestyle to create the Chicano culture. They are both hybrids meant to create something spectacular.

Just like the hybrid mixing of the two mentioned cultures, others have also combined their dominant culture with the popular lowrider culture. The lowrider ideology has become so popular, you can now see Japanese people embracing the lowriding culture. Spanning across large oceans, the lowriding culture has been welcomed and accepted into the dominant culture of Japan. These Japanese “cholos” can be heard mixing Spanish, English, and Japanese in their music as they stand next to a lowrider vehicle.

Today, lowriders are seldomly seen on the streets in as large of numbers as those seen in the 70's. Political pressure and enforcement by the police have generated clamp-downs in many communities. Thankfully, organized lowrider shows and hopping competitions help the lowriding community maintain their culture. These large shows still take place in many popular cities throughout the country like Los Angeles, Portland, and Las Vegas. There is believed to be more than ten thousand lowrider vehicles in existence with more cars constantly being built and more than 500 lowrider clubs stretched throughout the country. With this many actively involved participants, one can only assume that the practice of modifying vehicles in this unique way will continue to thrive for years to come.

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