

# Lowrider Legacies

## Motion, Identity, and Resistance in Chicana/o Communities

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In 2021 photographer Kristin Bedford published *Cruise Night*, an inspirational text dedicated to representing lowriding: aesthetically modified vehicles lowered to within a few inches of the ground and equipped with a hydraulic suspension system.<sup>1</sup> Bedford chose to stay away from the well-documented prurient elements of lowriding, instead documenting Los Angeles's Mexican American lowriders and car culture in ways that challenge the many misconceptions about lowriding as an exclusively thugish and misogynistic activity. Bedford's text features 75 mostly candid photographs of young women, and heavily tattooed men tenderly holding animals or children, or in otherwise nonthreatening poses.

One photograph features a man's bare chest adorned with tattoos that form an automotive triptych of his three favorite classic lowriders (see fig. 1). The vehicles are arranged under the catchphrase

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1. "Lowrider" is also now a term used to describe the adornment not only of cars, but of various other objects such as home furnishings, clothes, art, and even toilet seats.

“Guilty By Association,” echoing the judgments and prejudices associated with both lowriding and tattooing. The tattoos showcase a 1959 Chevrolet Impala stretched across the chest so that two of the car’s four headlights are “illuminated” by the man’s nipples. He displays a 1958 Chevrolet Bel Air Impala Sport Coupe atop the right ribcage and a 1960 Chevrolet Impala Convertible on the left ribcage, just under his heart (Bedford 2021:24). This canvas of skin is a contemporary tribute to modified vehicles using an ancient aesthetic practice that inscribes the flesh with an indelible mix of ink and blood. Lowrider artists use the same unforgiving technique when they etch, engrave, and sand lowrider automobiles to create beauty out of damage in what philosopher James Maffie calls an “inamic agonistic unity” (2014:137) where opposites struggle for dominance but cannot exist without each other; and where this struggle produces a never-ending, self-unfolding, and self-presenting whole.

In the Mexican community of the 1920s, the Mexican American community of the 1950s, and the Chicana/o communities of the 1960s, tattoos, or *tatuajes*, were associated with gangs and criminality. This has changed over the past few decades due in part to the pioneering work of Tomás Ybarra-Frausto, who helped elevate tattooing to an artform (1990:61). One community where tattoos have always been embraced, especially those made with improvised materials, is the Chicana/o prison population. It was here that, according to B.V. Olguín, tattooing became a “political claim against systemic human degradation” for the way it empowered Chicana/os to reidentify themselves “as oppositional Subjects with human needs, desires, rights, and above all, counter-hegemonic agency” (1997:164). These exercises of agency bled into the lowriding lifestyle that has in turn become a part of American popular culture. Today lowriding, a much demeaned and criminalized form of expression, has found its way from Mexican communities in the southwestern United States to locations all around the world. Examining the ethnic and criminal encoding of lowriding engenders a clearer understanding of the adverse responses and oppressive strategies institutionalized power structures employ to immobilize lowriders and their vehicles. This repression elevates lowriders from artistic artifacts to modern chariots in a battle for cultural survival.

From the first recurring broadcast of a lowrider on the 1970s sitcom *Chico and the Man* (1974) to several contemporary hip hop music videos, various groups have deployed lowriders as signifiers of wealth, sexual appeal, and urban excess. For example, Marilyn Manson’s 2001 music video *Tainted Love* begins with the band pulling up to a party in a custom black lowrider with a front license plate reading “GOTH THUG.”<sup>2</sup> The film *Lowriders* (2016) features Academy Award–nominated actor Demián Bichir as a lowrider-obsessed father trying to hold his family together. The 2018 live show *Lowrider Super Show Japan* remains indistinguishable from lowrider shows in Los Angeles, Phoenix, or San Diego. The most recent illustration of lowriding’s status as a worldwide cultural phenomenon is *Work*, the 2024 music video by superstar K-Pop group Ateez, which features lowriders both actual and in miniature throughout their video.<sup>3</sup> Taken as a whole these examples demonstrate that lowriding is no longer tethered to what was born in the Chicana/o community of Southern California in the 1950s.

2. View the video at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=MpcJbUoQ\\_KI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MpcJbUoQ_KI).

3. View the video at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=VGnOpZhsPk4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VGnOpZhsPk4).

Figure 1. (facing page) Tatuaje, Las Vegas, 11 October 2015. (© Kristin Bedford; digital image courtesy of the artist)

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Also contributing to the international popularity of lowriding culture are such mainstream representations as Netflix's 2019 *Queer Eye* season four episode six "A Tale of Two Cultures," which depicts a lowrider enthusiast gaining confidence in herself with the help of the show's five non-Chicana/o stars. Mainstream or high art, as Chicana/o studies Professor Denise Sandoval argues, "[w]hether within a gallery's white cube or driving down a boulevard, the origins and roots of the lowrider as art object reveal the complex interplay of history and identity-making, and the political struggle for civil rights" (2017:4). This struggle continues in many inner-city communities where lowriding has taken root.

Motion is the key to unlocking a more complete understanding of lowrider art and the epistemologies of its ethnic minority communities. Though in recent years lowrider vehicles have become increasingly static because they are displayed in museums and galleries, the vehicles are most associated with motion—with cruising. According to the Los Angeles County Code of Ordinances, cruising is "driving of a motor vehicle two or more times within a six-hour period, in a particular direction, past a traffic control point."<sup>4</sup> Alberto López Pulido and Rigoberto "Rigo" Reyes, who explore lowriding from the 1950s to 1985, agree. "It is impossible to talk about the history of lowriding without also talking about cruising" (2017:94). They see cruising lowriders as a prominent element on the historiographical map of Chicana/o motion.

Cruising reverberates along multiple lanes of the Chicana/o community's journey resonating with past cultural practices such as the *paseo*, a Mexican jaunt where young people perambulate in a public square or plaza to socialize. Or as Sonny Madrid, the late cofounder of *Lowrider Magazine* (LRM) put it on a 1979 network television special titled *Lowriders of the Barrio*, "I blame the Indians. I blame the Mayas, the Aztecs [...T]hey were the first lowriders. They customized their body, like nowadays they're customizing their cars" (Lowrider Fever 2022). This endorsement of an explicit connection between lowriding and indigenous practices from a lowriding pioneer demonstrates that lowriding has a long-standing history that informs present-day lowrider art and cruising practices.

Los Angeles cruising is characterized by many interactions between the spectators and lowriders. It is not uncommon to see people walking up to lowriders paused in traffic to hold conversations with the drivers or take photos with the car as a backdrop. Anthropologist Brenda Jo Bright describes this practice as "an activity that serves to mark out boundaries of performance and to create a theater of actions. [...] The park or the street becomes a setting where low riders can introject their narrative of belief and memory into the city" (1994:29–30). Given this level of complexity and the imbrication of the human and the mechanical, I concentrate here on lowriding as a cultural practice where mobility becomes a catalyst for Chicana/o subject formation.

In its infancy the manifestation of subjecthood in lowriding was focused primarily on the male body, though many of the images emblazoned on the automobiles featured female images. Today, however, women lowriders have embraced lowriding not as passive observers but as actants. Over the last decade women, through their unique approach to the lowriding lifestyle, problematize the concept of the "passenger princesses," a phrase that Sandy Avila, founder of the three-year-old Lady Lowrider Car Club, uses to describe the more traditional role embraced by women in the lowriding scene (Avila 2024). Avila represents a new generation of lowriding women who engage in areas traditionally reserved for the male enthusiast, including repairing her own car; *bitting switches*, which means manipulating a car's hydraulics to make it dance; and exhibiting meticulously detailed paint jobs that bear witness to the unique perspective, skills, and dedication that women bring to lowriding.

Today much of what's painted on lowriders evokes abstract symbolism combining color, shape, and lines to decorate and accentuate a vehicle's body. Regardless of the thematic content of the design, the defining characteristic is the same as tattoos—deeply embedded representations that assert individuality and humanity through body modification. Lowrider art transforms vehicles into works that mobilize and assert a unique cultural perspective despite (in some cases) a high cost in flesh and blood.

4. View the video at [https://library.municode.com/ca/los\\_angeles\\_county/codes/code\\_of\\_or\\_dinances?nodeId=16274](https://library.municode.com/ca/los_angeles_county/codes/code_of_or_dinances?nodeId=16274).

A spectator confronting an artwork on a mobile human or automotive body must contend with motion as a factor of visual consumption. Unlike two-dimensional art, lowrider art is not completely observable from any one angle; total appreciation of a lowrider requires the spectator, the art, or both to move. With both automotive and human tattoos, an observer must engage kines-thetically, circling a person's tattooed limb or a vehicle, though in some larger car show venues the lowrider rotates atop a platform. The artwork on the body of a classic car can signify or narrate a story, even when the design is abstract or devoid of recognizable symbols as with the *Xicalcoliuhqui* design motifs of ancient Mexico. Other images emblazoned on lowriders feature not only pop culture references but also what Charles M. Tatum calls "visual imagery for the wider community's civil rights struggles" (2011:97). The latter images provide lowriders with a connection to their Mexican revolutionary heroes, such as Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, who fought for liberty from tyranny just as lowriders fight for equality.

It is this association with civil rights that has brought a significant number of Black lowriders to prominence in the south Los Angeles region. The Watts community boasts no fewer than three car clubs with predominantly Black membership, including: Watts Finest Car Club, Watts Life Car Club, and Watts 4 Life Car Club. These clubs prize bragging rights over cash prizes; they focus more on community service than trophies.

Lowrider culture simultaneously asserts and deconstructs the ideas of legalized locomotion. Juxtaposing auto steel and human flesh invites broader questions of embodied knowledge and subjectivity. The modified vehicle is both a literal and figurative extension of its lowrider owner; conceptually, the images on a lowrider's car are indistinguishable from what's tattooed on their flesh. The images tattooed into a lowrider's flesh also implicate them in what cultural studies scholar Ana Elena Puga calls "suffering-as-commodity" and "suffering-as-currency," where suffering-as-commodity "may be packaged and sold" and suffering-as-currency can be "traded for empathy, sympathy, or solidarity that may in turn facilitate mobility" (2011:228). Thus, both lowriders (owner and vehicle) convey ineradicable evidence of atonement by the engraved images they carry. The lowrider becomes an auxiliary for its owner rather than representing them.

Deeply influenced and energized by the explosion of ethnic pride, the Chicana/o youth of the 1960s and '70s searched for alternate ways and innovative places to express their newfound self-esteem. According to Juan Gómez-Quíñones and Irene Vásquez, they "sought to express their dreams and angers and to have their status recognized [...by using] their neighborhoods, their bodies, and their cars [...] as subjects" (2014:237). This search for fresh canvases led them to the walls of their barrios, the skin on their bones and, ultimately, to every part of their cars. In an ironic twist, Chicana/os' search for new ways to express themselves as modern subjects took them back to their pre-conquest roots, a search that was precipitated by the civil rights movement of the time but reified concretely through the arts. This helped Chicana/os rediscover indigenous principles and practices as resistance to modern normative culture; they incorporated these into their nascent and evolving Chicana/o aesthetic, political, and spiritual cosmography. From its birth, lowrider art, like the tattoo art that inspired it, has been about seeking, inviting, and controlling an audience's gaze.

The decorative patterns on most lowriders are essential to understanding that lowrider art extends to what can be seen as *transit tattoos*—culturally specific images that, when displayed on cars, function similarly to tattoos on human bodies. The artwork on lowrider hoods, trunks, and side panels share many elements with the tattoos on lowriders' bodies. What is more, transit tattoos alter not only a vehicle's signification but also its functionality.

## Inscribing Lowriders

*Lowrider Magazine (LRM)*, published from 1977 to 2019, is the most comprehensive archive of lowrider culture, including not only the cars but also politics, music, and fashion. Journalist Roberto Rodríguez, who worked for *LRM* from 1977 to 1981, describes the magazine's early days:





Figure 2. The 1985 Buick Regal nicknamed El Rey Azteca, featured in a 2014 MotorTrend article. (Photo courtesy of MotorTrend Group, LLC)

The first issue of *Lowrider* was fresh and unique. It was kind of crude, but despite its crudeness, you could tell that it was on its way. It was aimed at the streets, the heart and soul of the barrios. (1997:23)

*LRM* was a place where young Chicana/os displayed their cars and themselves, advertised their events, showed off their fashion sense, and gave their opinions on urgent issues of the day. An 18 December 2019 *Los Angeles Times* article on the

shuttering of the periodical, “The Road Ends for Lowrider,” praises *LRM* for being “Particularly popular among Mexican Americans” and for being “as much a statement about Chicano identity as it was about the long, ground-hugging vintage cars” (Pineda 2019).

*LRM* is not without its critics. Rodríguez himself complained about “how Chicanas were portrayed in the magazine” (1997:25) in the early days. Ironically, it was a woman, Lolita Madrid, who loaned her son Sonny “El Larry” Gonzalez and his friends money to start *Lowrider*. But Rodríguez noted that “*Lowrider* was encouraging a negative lifestyle, contributing to projecting false stereotypes” failing to contribute “anything of substance to the youth” (26). The magazine eventually dealt with these criticisms by phasing out “scantily clad women on its covers,” working to challenge “negative, stereotypical perceptions of lowriders,” and establishing scholarships (Pineda 2019).

A 2014 feature on the 1985 Buick Regal nicknamed El Rey Azteca (The Aztec King; fig. 2) is reflective of how *LRM* (which was purchased by *MotorTrend* in 2017) covered highlighted vehicles. The owner transformed the Regal, which he purchased new from a factory-made dealer’s stock, into a lowrider that represented his vision of gendered, intercultural, and political mobility. The car sported a candy red finish overlaid with ordered lines and shapes hugging the car’s curves, stressing its contours. Resting just over two feet high on four Coker whitewall tires, this classic lowrider was alive with a vibrant color palette of red, yellow, and gold-leaf—incongruously, the colors on the Spanish flag. The car unapologetically echoes the silhouettes of the women’s bodies depicted in *LRM*—not surprising given the magazine’s misogynistic reputation for “selling not only the bodies of cars, but also the bodies of women” (Sandoval 2003:195). Tricoated across the Regal’s side panels, hood, trunk, tire carrier, and top are many detailed airbrushed images and patterns depicting classic ’70s geometric designs, ancient Mexica iconography,<sup>5</sup> and uncovered indigenous female bodies. One of these depicts the naked and headless torso of a woman, creating a paradox: a Chicana/o cultural space atop a dismembered, but still sensualized, female body (fig. 3).

Lowriding sometimes consumes the female body in the same way that a lowriding enthusiast may consume a meal at one of their “taco plate benefit picnics.” Lowriders often employ food sales as “a popular means of fundraising for some cause, such as a neighbor’s or friend’s hospital bills” (Chappell 2012:197). It is a practice that recalls lowriding’s historic days when young white working-class men in Los Angeles called lowriders “taco wagons” (Best 2006:199). It is also not coincidental that in the

5. These were the indigenous people of the valley of Mexico, who ruled until the Spanish conquest of 1521.



Figure 3. *El Rey Azteca* side panel. (Photo courtesy of MotorTrend Group, LLC)

1960s the winner of a “Miss Hot Tamale” contest in a chili festival would land a job extolling “the power of ‘hot’ engines” (Krevsky 2008:92), welding together women, desire, and automobility, a perspective that persists to this day.

Thus, when organizers place actual whole material female bodies, often tattooed and at various stages of undress, next to a lowrider vehicle at a car show or in a magazine, they create a mirroring effect between the bodies and the lowrider: one mirror of steel and one of flesh. They reflect mobility, misogyny, and modification back and forth *ad infinitum*. Later in this *LRM* profile, readers learn that Ramiro Leon of San Luis, Arizona, the vehicle’s owner, was drawn to lowriders by his brothers and by his border town. This highlights the cultural and familial bonds welded into lowriding, and the influence of the Borderland on many Chicana/os who navigate the liminal space between the Mexican and Anglo worlds.

Lowriding’s mobility<sup>6</sup> and its emphasis on craftsmanship led early lowrider enthusiasts, who were almost exclusively Mexican American, to look for new ways to not simply practice moving in and with their vehicles, but to do so in keeping with a long tradition that emphasizes craft and aesthetics (Donnelly 2000:50). Today, lowriders often feature artwork with images ranging from expressions of religious zeal to historical episodes of Chicana/o culture charged with political, gendered, and social resistance. The painting often resonates with the grand iconography of classic Mexican murals. The influence of Mexican art in general and Mexican murals in particular has greatly impacted lowrider art and has a pronounced resonance with Chicana/o cultural expression.<sup>7</sup> Today, key lowriding scholars, most notably Charles M. Tatum, theorize lowrider art as *portable murals* (Tatum 2001:174), unique vehicles that reshape the urban geography of Chicana/o communities. Bright explains the relationship between lowriders and murals: “Chicano car murals draw

6. Here I am referring to the experience, management, and meaning-making attached to movement, drawn from Mimi Sheller and John Urry’s work in “The New Mobilities Paradigm” (2006).

7. The contributions and influences of the Mexican mural movement extend far beyond the Chicana/o community. Diego Rivera, one of the most well-known Mexican muralists, painted multiple works in the United States and had a deep impact on American art, including through one of his American pupils, George Biddle. Biddle was inspired by the Mexican postrevolutionary government-sponsored mural program to design one of the New Deal’s five federal arts projects, which hired unemployed artists to decorate government buildings (Dunitz 1998).

on a variety of relevant sources, such as Catholic imagery, Aztec mythology and American popular culture, to create visual narratives about identity, experience and fantasy” (in Donnelly 2000:41). What Bright leaves out are the more abstract designs that were “common on lowrider cars as early as the 1950s” (Tatum 2001:95).

The traditional mural is large because its purpose is to be viewed by as many people from as far away as possible. In cruising, the lowrider driver also wants a large number of spectators. However, the driver increases the audience for their lowrider not by standing still as the audience moves by, but by driving by as the audience stands still. Lowriders and their transit tattoos produce their meaning by rejecting the fixity and scale of murals. Lowriders produce pleasure by slowly revealing, in motion, intimate details both inside (chromed engines, upholstered interiors) and out (ornate paint jobs, detailed accents).

### Body Modification, Tattoos in Transit

According to archeologist Aaron Deter-Wolf and research associate Carol Diaz-Granados, from prehistoric times to today, people use body modification like tattooing “to define, classify, decorate, enhance, and sanctify themselves and others” (Deter-Wolf and Diaz-Granados 2013:xi). Likewise, the artworks on lowriders celebrate ethnic identity, not as an essentialized quality but as what sociologist Amy L. Best calls a “historically contingent ritual enactment” (2006:17). Tattoo artwork is often small, adapted to specific body parts, symbolic and unsigned—like much of the art found on lowrider vehicles. Sometimes lowrider art is an arbitrary and almost random assemblage of images similar to tattoos. Danny D (aka Danny Galvez), one of the “top car painters on the West Coast of the United States,” goes as far as to say that “painting a car is like doing a tattoo on somebody” (in Calvo-Quirós 2011:246). Some lowrider art is made by scraping steel and carving glass—more akin to tattooing than to painting.

In these ways, a work of lowrider art is a transit tattoo, uniquely reshaping the urban geography, both in and beyond communities with large Chicana/o populations. By understanding that both steel and flesh bodies are in a constant state of change, the body modifications used by lowriders paradoxically signify attempts to change as much as maintain their identity. To achieve this level of self-representation, lowriders employ historical, spiritual, and political palettes featuring many indigenous images with political and social connotations. The art has found its way from the “Chicano street” or urban lowrider art to “copyists outside the neighborhood, including unique body tattoos” (Gómez-Quñones and Vásquez 2014:237).

Refocusing lowrider art away from murals and onto tattooing shows the latter to be a practice that produces a dynamic canvas of human flesh pierced and painted with ink and blood. This helps to account for the ways lowriders invest their artworks with kinetic potential, using mobility and modification to create a network with other drivers and artists. It is from this network that lowrider art receives its direction and the rules of the road. A lowrider’s designs must be compartmentalized because the car’s three-dimensional canvas does not allow an audience a comprehensive gaze. The art must be strategically located so that its placement lends itself to narrative, even when the image is singular. The artist does not sign their lowrider art, avoiding a diverting textual element that would distract from the image’s kinetic energy.

According to Bright, constructing a lowrider in the early days followed a recognizable pattern: “A Mexican American takes his car, usually an old model Detroit brand, and refashions it into a baroque ride.” He achieved this by removing “all signs of the manufacturer” and refashioning the vehicle as “a distinctly Chicano aesthetic” (1994:26). Removing the model name from a car is a symbolic step in making the vehicle a *tabula rasa*. *Rolling Stone* journalist Tim Cahill recounts an interview with “Bernardo,” who told him: “your ride [...] is your pride and to have a big chrome advertisement for Buick Rivera on it is tantamount to having Buick Rivera *tattooed on your chest*” ([1978] 2011:298–99; emphasis added). Lowriders speak more to an amalgam than an all-out rejection of capitalist artifacts. Lowriders’ robust investments in their cars illustrate a commitment

not so much to transportation as to a unique cultural practice proclaiming their agency, identity, and mobility. Ben Chappell points out how “lowriders” is an appellation for both man and machine: lowrider owners become identified not only by their vehicles but as their vehicle (2012:15). It remains to be seen if this will apply to the many women lowriders joining the lowrider scene.

Constructing a lowrider is no casual hobby. It typically involves securing a classic vehicle, preferably from the 1960s or ’70s, perhaps because their design offers the most surface area to customize and their sturdy steel frames can handle the stress of hydraulic-induced shocks in a vehicle that is made to hop, do push-ups, and dance. Lowrider owners gradually start decorating these cars with high gloss multicolored paint jobs, upholstering them with theme-colored crushed velvet interiors, chroming every external metal surface, in some extreme cases even the entire engine, and adding the all-important hydraulic suspension systems. Lowrider owners often add a sound system with amplification powerful enough for blasting and a bass that announces the vehicle’s approach from a block away by rattling windows and turning heads on both sides of a city street. This is a way of moving through space without losing one’s place. Alternatively, a static personal space, the inside of a lowrider, merges with a dynamic public space; the cruising lowrider becomes a literal and metaphorical slow-moving cultural sign.

Understanding the lowrider as a cultural sign explains the patriotic feelings lowrider owners express in emphasizing the Americanness of their cars when confronted with customized foreign cars. As Roman, a lowrider from Austin, Texas, said, “I drive an American classic, not foreign plastic” (in Chappell 2012:75). Chicana/o lowriders’ preference for American cars with their large sturdy frames ideal for hydraulic motion does not necessarily extend to allegiance with an American car company. Who first proclaimed that American cars are steel and foreign cars are plastic is unknown, but the idea has taken root in the lowrider community. As Bright and Bakewell write, lowriders are “identified with their owners, and by extension, with both his ‘home’ turf and his cohort” (1995:101). A lowrider provides both an individual and an entire group with a new way to assert their identity, one that invests not in fighting negative representations, but in illustrating their fallaciousness by creating more accurate ones.

Denise Sandoval guest curated the Petersen Automotive Museum’s 2017 *The High Art of Riding Low: Ranflas, Corazón e Inspiración*. The only other previous lowrider exhibitions were *La Vida Lowrider: Cruising the City of Angels* in 2007/08 and *Arte y Estilo: The Lowriding Tradition* in 2000 (Sandoval 2017:2). According to Sandoval, Gilbert “Magu” Luján was one of the artists to first recognize “the aesthetic and artistic value of the lowrider car.” She credits him with saying, “we [Chicana/os] have taken a Detroit machine and we have personalized it [...] We Chicano-ized it” (in Sandoval 2017:3). Magu colorfully depicts this in his 1983 serigraph *Returning to Aztlan* (fig. 4), which features a south-facing view of the North American continent with two Mexica warriors aboard an ancestral-themed lowrider. They have crossed the border and are marking the American road with stars and stripes as they slowly cruise across the southwestern United States. The muted yellow color used for the earth is the same as the paint job on the image’s central object: a lowrider whose scalar magnitude is larger than any other object in the frame. The artwork evokes the low, slow, and festive traversing of space, reinforcing the importance of both place and space for many Chicana/o youth.

One of the most telling elements in *Returning to Aztlan* is that for Magu, Mexico and the USA are indistinguishable except by a thin strip of barbed wire, broken in many places and easily crossed by the lowriders.

The lowrider that is both literally and figuratively central to this serigraph is not only the axis on which the painting’s metonymy resides, but also an avatar for migrant bodies who, like the Mexica in the artwork, are coming home to explore the purloined northern part of their country, and leaving their mark on it. Their manner of traversing the terrain is also telling. The central figures in the image are off-roading, perhaps to assert that self-made roads, highways, or paths reconfigure, however slightly, the dominant map. Perhaps they are exploring the indigenous roots





Figure 4. Returning to Aztlan, 1983. (Photo courtesy of the Estate of Gilbert “Magu” Luján)

of Chicana/o identity on a type of present-day codex that accounts for Chicana/os not as fixed objects arrested on a static map, but as drivers at the wheels of their own destiny.

This image then activates the idea of the road as a body willing to be uncovered, explored, and marked by tires with transit tattoos. The concept of leaving one’s mark, be it on a lowrider, the road, or one’s own body is central to this artwork, as it is to Chicana/o culture today. In this context, tattoos offer a valuable vocabulary to articulate the ways lowriders and their art herald cultural, political, and erotic allegiances. In the painting, the lowrider is not only making a mark, but is marked with iconic Chicana/o iconography that serves what Margot Mifflin calls “diary entries [...], protective shields, conversation pieces and counterculture totems” (1997:178). The symbols, icons, and indexes on the artwork include the United Farm Worker’s eagle logo, a raised fist, a cross, a heart, a jaguar, and, that most political “C/S”—*con safos*, which loosely translates to untouchable or perpetually protected. All these images are slight in scale, strategically located in nonnarrative relations to one another, and without signature. They do not form a mural, but a collage of tattoos.

When examining the influence lowriders have had on culture and the craft they have inspired, not everyone acknowledges or considers these effects and artworks as universally positive. There are many instances of reluctant acceptance, ambivalence, or even alarm. The tattooed lowrider enthusiast and their vehicle extend each other. Together they function as conduits and mediators between their spectators and Chicana/o culture. This exchange between lowriders and their vehicles enables an alteration that forms a protective skin decorated with transit tattoos communicating the individual’s status within the community—a club, a family, or a society. The lowrider, particularly when altered with artwork and in public motion, serves as an avatar for the lowrider driver.

Lowrider participants differentiate themselves from gang members, even though gangster imagery is prominent on lowriders—second to Catholic and biblical religious iconography. In response to

the prevalence of gangster representation on the vehicles, various competitions held at large car shows have rules designed to foster order and even reverence including prohibiting “dented, damaged, unfinished, or incomplete vehicles” from the indoor exhibit space and a “strict prohibition against displaying anything in or around a vehicle that the judges would consider being obscene, profane, or that could be construed as a weapon” (Tatum 2011:177). These rules indicate the high value the lowriding community places on dismantling the stereotype that lowriding is a hobby for gangs.

Lowriders competing in car shows often bear names that are markers of cultural pride. The names range in theme, but the most common ones reference colors such as Brown Sensation, Aztec Gold, and Crimson Envy, illustrating pride in the color of one’s skin, pride in cultural wealth, and pride in sparking envy in outsiders. These names also illustrate the lowriding community’s awareness that they have the power to change the perception of lowriders by using nomenclature that reflects their pride.

As Chappell explains, “countering the stereotype of lowriding as a manifestation of gang culture was [and is] a priority for many car clubs” (2012:170). Unfortunately, the perception of lowriders being associated with criminal behavior, as Bright found during one of her earliest interviews with a New Mexico-based lowrider, has long been part of the culture. The informant said “we aren’t like lowriders in L.A. We aren’t into gangs” (1994:4). Attitudes like this one recorded decades ago are still a big part of the reason that promoting a non-gang reputation is difficult. Like it or not, the lowrider remains associated with urban gangs in mainstream media representations of Black and Brown life. There is, however, a strong movement spearheaded by women to highlight the positive aspects of the lowriding lifestyle and even its connections to Chola/o<sup>8</sup> culture. India Garza, a Las Vegas lowrider driver who cohosts the YouTube channel *Chopping It Up with the Cholas*, told me that a lot of people assume that she is gang-affiliated simply because of her tattoos and style of dress, when in fact she considers herself to be “one of the sweetest people you can meet” (Garza 2024) once you get to know her. This ill-founded assumption about Garza is made about women lowriders in general.

## Motor Maidens

The black-and-white photograph of a woman’s untattooed body shows her lying on her left side with tucked legs inside the trunk of a 1939 Pontiac Deluxe Six (fig. 5). Her left arm supports her as she waves and smiles. She is wearing a two-piece bathing suit with her hair partially pulled back across her crown, accentuating a cascade of curls on either side of her face. The Pontiac features custom white rubber wheels, white painted metal parts, and elements of chrome, copper, or nickel-plate with its outer shell constructed completely of transparent plexiglass. The car’s transparent body reveals all the vehicle’s internal components. This photo principally shows the contents of its trunk: the cramped and immobilized confined body of the smiling woman with only a replacement tire to keep her company.

In front of her is a plexiglass sign reading in part “Body by Fisher Pontiac Classic.” At first glance it appears that the sign is referring to the 1939 Pontiac Deluxe Six show car. But there is another possibility. Given that the transparent sign cannot be read without some part of it appearing atop the woman’s body directly behind it, and that the women’s pelvis and thighs serve as the sign’s backdrop when read head on, the sign is in fact *branding* not only the car, but the women’s body too. The sign’s perpetual presence on the woman’s body makes its text look like a tattoo, albeit one that the viewer superimposes on the woman’s flesh. Viewers can also perform their own scopophilic sparagmos on the woman’s partially viewed, immobilized body; and presuming a heterosexual male gaze, he can visually devour whatever parts of her he chooses.

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8. This term refers to members of a subculture that often includes working-class Mexican American youth who may participate in neighborhood gangs.





Figure 5. “Body by Fisher Pontiac Classic.” Transparent car with model tucked inside the trunk, 11 June 1940. General Motors exhibit at Golden Gate International Exposition, San Francisco. (Photo courtesy of the Wyland Stanley Collection)

The photo is dated 11 June 1940. General Motors (GM) and Rohm and Haas (R&H) chemical company originally built this vehicle, now known as the “Ghost Car,” for the 1939/40 New York World’s Fair, one of only two ever made (Tate 2017). Perhaps this exhibit was a publicity stunt or an unorthodox attempt to highlight the strength and merit of R&H’s newly invented shatterproof synthetic crystal-clear plastic. Whatever the motivation, the fact remains that it is not just the car’s body that is marketed, but a woman’s inscribed body as well.

The woman in the photo remains unidentified, as does the person who encased her in the trunk, a compartment designed to carry spare parts and chattel, not live humans. The Smithsonian Institution displayed the car from 1942 to 1947 and in 2017 it brought \$308,000 at auction (Ramsey 2011). Whatever the Ghost Car’s story is, the concern here is with the unknown woman in its trunk. The photograph of her reclining body recalls how vehicles made long ago can still construct bodies in, through, and with motion, an act performed low and slow through lowriding.

Women have long been objectified in lowriding, so it is difficult to untangle this from its history. However, lowriding’s aesthetic cannot be categorized as singularly prurient; lowriders are often called “pimpmobiles” by enthusiasts, and upgrading and modifying one’s vehicle is *pimping out* one’s ride. The context of these rhetorical examples makes a difference. Take, for instance, Chappell’s point that “the connection signaled by the term ‘pimped’ lies in a common aesthetic of degraded opulence” (2012:86), rather than an actual relationship to the sex trade. I believe we need to put the “pimping” of lowriding into a broader context.

Lowrider culture reduces and compartmentalizes women’s bodies, subjecting them to a surrogation in which their bodies represent vehicles ready to deliver pleasure. While this practice is not limited to lowriders, it is historically rooted in lowriding. This surrogation of the body of flesh for the body of steel indicates a symbolic dehumanizing and dismemberment of women. It is no

coincidence that many lowriders feature representations of the goddess Coyolxauhqui, who suffered dismemberment at her brother's hand. She is a graphic reminder of the primacy in lowrider culture of the masculine over the feminine.

## Ancient Motivations

Examining the Mexica foundational myth of the battle between the moon and sun enables Chicana/os to see themselves along a spectrum of indigenous identity. This myth provides the connection that keeps present-day lowriding rooted in an indigenous ethos no matter how far it spreads. Coyolxauhqui's story emphasizes the primacy of motion. Franciscan friars translated this foundational Mexica myth from the original Nahuatl into Spanish between 1548 and 1585. It tells of the pious goddess Coatlicue's divine conception. While Coatlicue was sweeping the holy temple atop the mythic Serpent Mountain, an orb of white feathers descended from the heavens. Upon seeing the orb, Coatlicue reached for it and placed it into her womb. When her 400 children heard of this, they became enraged not knowing who the father was and because the insemination had taken place on sacred ground. Coyolxauhqui, Coatlicue's only daughter, rallied her brothers to cleanse their dishonor with their mother's blood. One brother however betrayed the plan to their mother and, as he did, his unborn brother Huitzilopochtli spoke to Coatlicue and told her to have no fear.

When her children arrived to perform the matricide, Huitzilopochtli emerged from his mother's womb fully armored. Brandishing a blazing serpent sword, he vanquished his brothers and decollated his sister before hurling her off the mountain, triggering her dismemberment. His victory in this battle made Huitzilopochtli, the god of the sun, the supreme deity in the Mexica pantheon. Coyolxauhqui, the goddess of the moon, was subservient to him: silver subservient to gold and the feminine subservient to the masculine. This myth is still paramount in Mexica religious theology and by extension in Chicana/o culture. Critical to this myth is the role that motion plays in the assertion of male superiority. Huitzilopochtli, the god of war, uses his serpent sword to behead his sister but, rather than opting for a total sparagamos, he throws her down Serpent Mountain. Coyolxauhqui's forceful impact has forever tattooed her on the Chicana/o psyche.

Recall El Rey Azteca's many detailed airbrushed images and patterns depicting ancient Mexica iconography, along with the scantily clad indigenous women described as "culturally inspired Aztec murals" in a 2014 *MotorTrend* article by Dustin Volo Pedder. This way of representing both lowriders and the women on and around them is, according to Sandoval, characteristic of "the eroticization of the female in relation to lowrider cars, car shows, and magazine representations [and] is an endemic part of the vocabulary of low rider culture in general" (2003:181). The artwork on the passenger side of El Rey Azteca is instructive. It depicts the naked and headless torso of a woman, who has the decollated head of Coyolxauhqui superimposed atop her shoulders.

This image points to the way lowriding sensualizes not only women's bodies as a whole, but also their dismembered parts. Caroline Acosta, a member of the Brown Satins, the first all-female car club founded in 1975,<sup>9</sup> points out that many women did not participate in this sexualization of women in lowrider culture; they stayed away from "wet T-shirt contests and all that [...W]e concentrated on family entertainment" (in Penland 2003:44). Women have for many years made their own choices about what parts of lowriding they want to embrace and reject the rest.

Tropes, unexamined notions, blurred distinctions, and an aversion to what Jacques Derrida calls *aporia* (1993) mark the discourse around lowriders and their representations of women. Past discussions have called lowriding to task for displaying naked or partly clothed women in highly sexualized ways, but the lowrider's problem with actual women is worse. As atrocious as lowrider's portrayals of women may be, it is their actual assault on the female body that is the problem. Take

9. View the image at [www.pinterest.com/pin/thee-brown-satins-the-first-lowrider-all-female-car-club1975-actual-lowrider-cars-not-vw-buggs-lady-bugs-lo--741545894869566751/](http://www.pinterest.com/pin/thee-brown-satins-the-first-lowrider-all-female-car-club1975-actual-lowrider-cars-not-vw-buggs-lady-bugs-lo--741545894869566751/).



for instance the treatment of show models: “behind the scenes, dressing rooms are filled with tales of trauma inflicted by hours in stiletto pumps, corsets, and dangling earrings. Metallic gowns gouge the skin; latex dresses stultify sweat glands” (Krevsky 2008:6). These women offer up their bodies on the same stages where lowriders are worshiped. *LRM*, famed for its misogyny, is described by Sandoval as “dependent” not only “on the bodies of cars, but also the bodies of women” (2017:7). Sandoval is generous in her assessment. Further analysis shows that as far as many ribald lowriders are concerned the only parts of women worth depending on are their breasts and buttocks.

The silhouette of many a lowrider echoes the silhouettes of many models’ bodies, often wearing bikinis that match their corresponding lowrider. While many car shows feature bikini models, in large lowriding shows the models play the role of present day Coyolxauhquis. This was demonstrated on the cover of *LRM*’s 1996 special Cinco de Mayo issue, which features a young brown-skinned woman on a sand-covered surface, adorned in an all-gold outfit, bedecked with an intricate *penacho* or feathered headdress and ankle cuffs studded with *ayoyotes*, genuflecting in front of a 1958 Chevrolet Bel Air Impala Sport that in turn has the Mexica Sun Stone behind it (fig. 6).

Lowriding and its artifacts often function as a cog in the machinery of an oppressive, if also sometimes empowering aesthetic value system. An analysis that casts women who take part in lowriding as hapless victims of an oppressive system undervalues a key aspect of lowriding: agency, a subject’s power to make choices and affect change. It is not unheard of that women who partake in lowriding as models, car owners, or support staff act in their own best interest and of their own free will. What is more, of all the interviews I conducted for this article, all of the female informants made it clear that as lowriders they would not participate in eroticized modeling at car shows; they have chosen to participate in the other channels of lowriding culture.

Still the objectification of women in lowriding is undeniable; yet so is the freedom of women to profit from it. Naturally, one can make the same argument for sex work or most any capitalist venture that looks to profit from the objectification of women. Lowriding then simultaneously exploits women by displaying their bodies and rewards them...in the short-term, at least. Lowriders are both “reliquaries of ancient and contemporary images,” containing “keys to sexual and spiritual union” (Bright 1994:25–26), and a powerful way to objectify and exploit women. At one end of the spectrum are images emblazoned on lowriders of scantily clad and often suggestively posed women. The other end is equally fraught. For scholars such as William Calvo-Quirós, lowrider males lack agency. He situates male lowriders as members of wound culture, where suffering ennobles and justifies questionable behavior such as the choice to embrace “desires for a ‘customized world,’” that is then “erroneously” inflicted on the bodies of women (Calvo-Quirós 2011:78). But this conclusion undervalues the male lowriders’ agency, without which one has little hope of understanding why lowriding is so popular, and how exactly women have emerged not as mere passengers but as powerful drivers of change, challenging and reshaping a space historically dominated by men.

Chappell examines the consequences of sexualizing the lowrider by associating it with the eroticized female and states that “when lowrider mural images draw on sexualized and objectified iconographies of the female body, they also conscript women to the role of pleasure providers for male subjects” (2012:86). The actual physical bodies who pose and interact with spectators on and around the lowriders surpass these sexualized representations on cars. Tatum states that it is “common to have women in tight, revealing two-piece outfits walk the floor of car shows” (Tatum 2011:105). The reality Tatum neglects is that this often takes place in drafty exhibition halls where the models cannot don sweaters, shawls, or scarves lest they limit the view of their exposed bodies.

In this way men make objects of both cars and women. The preferred uniform for car models creates a level of exposure that tests the women’s endurance and vulnerability and, in this way, mechanizes their bodies. The audience’s gaze demands that the lowrider open its various interior compartments and so the mechanized model must as well. As the car doors remain open, so must the legs; as the car trunk raises so must the buttocks. The car’s glossy paint and sleek design in this context serve the same purpose as the curves of the women—to spark the fantasy of the pleasure that riding both would bring.



Figure 6. "Cinco de Mayo" special issue of Lowrider Magazine. 5 May 1996. (Image courtesy of Lowrider Magazine)

While an objectification of women has been historically pronounced in the auto industry, their stripping down has not. In the 1930s Chicago Auto Show, the "original auto show models [...] worked in fur capes, coats, stoles, and wraps in sable, mink, chinchilla, Persian lamb, and silver fox" (Krevsky 2008:44). The presence of women contributed to a rise in attendance from

“125,000 visitors in 1935 to 225,000 in 1939” (Krevsky 2008:44), laying out the basic formula that lowrider car shows have made their own.

An illustration of just how far the relationship between women’s bodies and automobiles has come are the infamous wet T-shirt contests at car shows, where the drenched transparent fabric clings to and accentuates the shape of women’s breasts. Crowd reaction determines the winners of cash prizes, which motivates contestants to display expressive poses and suggestive gyrations. Some shows have emphasized other portions of the female anatomy such as the “hot legs contest” (Penland 2003:45) or “Bad Girl” contest where women don “elaborate, seductive and beautiful dresses” and, according to Bright, engage in “problematic” performances (1994:57). In the past the lowriding community in the southwestern United States has countered the accusation of objectifying the female body by creating contests that partially objectify the male body. Large car shows now also feature “hard body” competitions in which men compete for prizes by displaying their muscled and sculpted bodies. Interestingly, however, they only remove their shirts.<sup>10</sup>

In the early 1990s some lowrider shows featured competitions known as zoot suit contests, where males lined up on a stage in a stance known as “the warp,” where they lean their body back with one leg extended forward at a 45-degree angle and the other bent at the knee (Bright 1994:55). These early and minimal attempts at equality have largely fallen away and today the objectification of human bodies in lowriding is reserved almost exclusively for female bodies. Though Debbie Flores, the founder of Latin Queens, an Inland Empire all-women lowrider club, does state that she would not mind having hardbody competitions at lowrider shows (Flores 2024). During a car show and resource fair at Ted Watkins park in Watts, Low Down, the president of the Watts Life car club, explained the displaying of bodies as a desire to be seen: “we just want people to see that we are all about positivity and beautiful things out here” (Low Down 2023).

Countering their objectification, some women organize their own lowrider clubs, such as the Fortunettes in Orange County, California, and the Dukettes in Los Angeles (a branch of the Dukes, an all-male lowrider car club). Other examples include the Lady Bugs of San Diego, who built an identity and reputation around the Volkswagen Beetle, and the Specials Car Club founded in 1980 as a response to the San Diego car club’s prohibition of women. While many of these clubs are no longer active, other contemporary groups of women have embraced lowriding, and as Flores points out, it is in the last five years that there has been an explosion of women-only lowrider clubs (Flores 2024). In fact the phenomenon of women lowriders has spread all over the world, sustaining Ladies of Lowriding Worldwide, LLC, an organization established in 2015 with the expressed purpose of establishing “comradery with all female lowriding enthusiasts” and “to unite a diverse group of women” (Ladies of Lowriding 2022). This organization boasts a membership from countries as widespread as Nigeria, New Zealand, Bangladesh, and Cameroon. Then there is the highly active Ladies Pride Car Club of Los Angeles who claim they are “the first women-only lowrider car club in the history of the movement” (Avila 2024).

Nonie Samano, a cofounder of the Specials Car Club, shares her perspective: “The value that I saw in lowriding is that you made a commitment...stepping out of where you’re supposed to be confined, you know, we’re not in our kitchens we’re in our cars [...] we’re part of the community and we’re being role models for the younger generations” (Samano n.d.). Women’s lowriding defies simplistic evaluations. Today, after many years of ignoring if not flat out rejecting the group, the Car Club Council of Greater San Diego, rebranded the San Diego Association of Car Clubs in 2013, finally acknowledged the Specials Car Club, whose official membership in the male-dominated San Diego car scene indicates that none of the aforementioned strategies used to exclude women proved effective in the long term. Women who are espousing lowrider culture and tattooing do so of their own volition and with images and

10. The resonances with the hard body trucks and *muscle* cars that appear in the show room floor are worthy of a deeper analysis.





Figure 7. No Soy de Ti, Whittier, CA, 22 June 2018. (© Kristin Bedford; digital image courtesy of the artist)

in locations of their own choosing (fig. 7). However, even if one rejects sexualized lowrider images and celebrates women's participation in lowriding, misogyny continues to play a key role in lowrider life.

ShaVolla Rodriguez, a lowrider who with her daughter Nayeli curated *Rucas y Carruchas: Ladies in Lowriding*, the first all-women lowrider show at the California Automobile Museum in Sacramento, California, set out to celebrate the “contributions of women in the lowrider community, highlighting their creativity and passion for customizing these iconic vehicles” (CAM n.d.). That she did so with her younger daughter is a testament to the familial bonds that women lowriders emphasize in their clubs. Another example of this is the Latin Queens, which proudly counts three generations of Flores women as members: mother, daughter, and granddaughter.

Ending here belies the complexity of a cultural practice that embodies the inamic agonistic unity of opposites in a struggle for dominance; that created both a cultural phenomenon that transcends its origins while retaining its deep-rooted cultural significations; and that, despite its sexist roots and misogynistic representations, offers a space where women assert agency and redefine their roles, gaining global recognition.

The interplay of motion, art, and identity in lowriding encapsulates the spirit of a community in constant pursuit of self-expression and empowerment. As lowriding continues to gain influence, the dedication and creativity of these individuals ensure that their voices and artistry are integral to the narrative, driving forward not simply cars but also a personal expression of identity. By merging tradition with innovation, lowriders continue asserting a unique and enduring presence in the cultural landscape, standing together as a powerful testament to the creativity, resilience, and strength of the Chicana/o community.

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