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Mexican American low riders: An anthropological approach to popular culture

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Rice University, 1994

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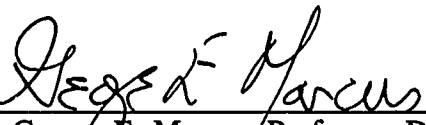
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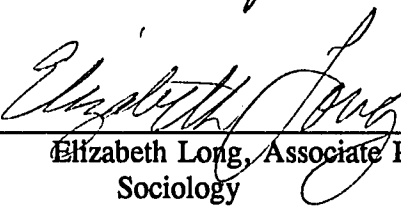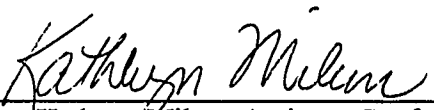AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH TO POPULAR CULTURE

by

BRENDA JO BRIGHT

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

"Mexican American Low Riders:

An Anthropological Approach to Popular Culture"

by

Brenda Jo Bright

Within contemporary anthropology, the tradition of the single site ethnography is being challenged as inadequate to the task of representing the complexity of modern social life. A multi-site ethnography examines the network of complex connections within a system of places and the implications for the formation of group identity through popular cultural practices.

Low riding is a popular culture organized around the activities of fashioning and showing baroquely customized automobiles by men and women from 13 to 45 years of age and is considered to be a distinctly "Chicano" (Mexican American) form. Low riding originated largely in the 1960s in Los Angeles, a center of industry, mass media communication, and Mexican American culture in the United States. There low riding practices serve to remap the bounds of mobility to correspond to experienced limits and to express and facilitate preferred forms of sociality. In Houston, Texas, low riding became popular in the late seventies simultaneous with the oil industry boom and regional distribution of <u>Low Rider Magazine</u>. It served as a way for Mexican Americans dispersed throughout the city, many only recent residents, to create a community. In Española, New Mexico (also known as "Little L.A."), a largely Hispano town located

between the art and tourist centers of Santa Fe and Taos, Chicano low riding is part of the regional intensification of ethnic identity that has been born from the potentially alienating experiences of labor outmigration to California and other areas of the Southwest coupled with increased ethic and recreational tourism in northern New Mexico.

Low rider car culture has created an alternate cultural space for performance, participation and interpretation, one that allows for the reworking of the limitations placed upon "minority" cultures in the United States, but one that also indicates how racial discrimination and class identification become divisive to the assertion of cultural identity.

family while they constructed "Chima 2" for the Smithsonian's "American Encounters" exhibition, currently on display in the National Museum of American History. They deserve special acknowledgements for their time and friendship as do our Chimayó landlords, Sam and Angie Martinez. They opened their hearts and their homes to us and enriched our lives. *Muchas grácias a todos*.

This work has also benefited from the attentions of my thesis committee. George Marcus has been an important source of intellectual stimulation and support. Elizabeth Long has been both an advisor and an important friend, a sympathetic yet critical reader, and has been a part of my intellectual journey from the beginning. Michael Fischer, through his support and his own work, has continually inspired me to explore the many significant planes of the ways people live in the world. This project has been enriched by the participation of Barbara Babcock. I cannot imagine this project without the lively engagement of George Lipsitz, who at the beginning fortutiously knew something about low riders. He has been a supporter throughout the entirety of this project and has read numerous drafts of many chapters. He has stressed, both in his guidance and by his example, the crucial importance of understanding other people's struggles. Through the years, they have all become friends <u>and</u> advisors.

Numerous other people have supported me through the years. Liza Bakewell has read numerous drafts of my writing about Los Angeles. Diana Hill has been a special friend since our first days together in graduate classes. The writing of the dissertation was made possible by the Ora N. Arnold Fellowship at Rice University and by the Luce Foundation/ American Council of Learned Societies Dissertation Fellowship in American

Art. Speaking engagements at Goucher College, Rutgers University, Stanford University, and the Smithsonian Institution have enabled me to clarify my thinking along the way. My students in "Latino Popular Culture in the U.S." at Amherst College and Smith College have challenged and broadened my understanding of the struggles and pleasures involved in popular culture.

I have saved the best for last. My family has been a constant source of support, diversion and direction, but most of all joy. Throughout the years, Tom has guided and cajoled me while reading draft after draft after draft and listening to my many laments and anxieties. Through his work, I have gained a better understanding of the politics and political cultures of the United States. I cannot imagine life without him. My children, Irene and Jimmy, have enriched our lives. I am thankful for their lively personalities and their own curiosities about the social world around them.

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INTRODUCTION

Postface: Views From the Rearview Mirror

In the morning of the last day of August, 1990, I left Chimayó, New Mexico. Tom and our year old baby Irene had flown out of Albuquerque a few days earlier, leaving me to finish drying the chiles, pack up the cabin and drive the car home. I was to return via a stay in Houston to visit my committee and make a few follow-up calls to low riders in Houston.

Driving south and west toward Fort Stockton in west Texas, I watched the *piñon* slowly disappear and the Sangre de Cristo mountains melt away. In their place stood cattle and wide open lands. Trucks and blazers replaced the profusion of rental cars and Range Rovers, trucks of all sizes as well as cars of various vintages and finishes that we regularly saw in our perpetual drive around northern New Mexico. The lone giant cross atop a small bluff signaled that I had entered the Lone Star State, having left the protective custody of the Santa Cruz Valley where crosses are smaller, yet more plentiful. Those crosses staked out protected territory. They marked the land in an intimate way, inscribing it with the presence and absence of loved ones. Sometimes the occasion for their appearance was violent. Roadside crosses, being the work of loved ones, remember lost souls who died tragically on the road. Little crosses adorn the *capillas* (family chapels) and *moradas* (penitente chapels and chapter houses) that house family practices often continued through generations. This lone giant cross evoked a more anonymous, a mass, audience.

With this change in landscape complete, I knew with sad certainty that I would not be returning to "our" cabin that evening or any evening in the near future. When I had left that morning, Angie stood with her baby Bettina at the curve in the path near the makeshift cabin that served as the horse Pepper's barn. From her house, Angie walked me as far as the barn but refused to go any farther. There in the bend, she was close enough to the cabin to say good-bye, but still far enough away that she would not be able to see me drive away. People are not supposed to leave Chimayó.

I was haunted by the image of her standing there as I watched the *piñons* disappear that day. I am haunted by it still. Chimayó was the place where I had first seen low riders and so holds a prophetic meaning for me. In the fall of 1983 I visited a Texas friend's property there. He along with some art school friends from Texas Tech had bought a five acre piece of land with a condemned adobe house on it back in 1971. They were part of what Sylvia Rodriguez refers to as "The Great Hippie Invasion" of the 1970s. They partially restored the adobe and built a rustically beautiful cabin out of joist tailings next to the *acequia* just beyond the house. I spent much of that trip reading -- sometimes inside the cabin, sometimes outside on a lawn chair in the apple orchard.

At this time, I was in my second year of graduate school taking Michael Fischer's course on American popular culture. During the course, we studied class and status conflicts, popular culture of all kinds, and identity processes, including gender and ethnicity. This course was eye-opening. It allowed me to be curious and critical of the culture I had grown up in, which was predominantly white, Texan and masculinist in its orientation.

I had grown up in Houston, the only daughter of parents also born in Houston. My grandparents had all been born elsewhere in Texas, but moved to Houston early in their lives. My father played on Lamar High School's State Championship footbal team. My father and my brothers are avid hunters and fishermen. Even though I attended junior high and high school in Houston the late '60s and early '70s as the schools were being desegregated, I never had other than white friends until college. When I returned to live in Houston after completing my studies to be an architect at the University of Texas, I started exploring the city. In the process of my driving around, I began to realize that most of the areas I had been discouraged from learning about were areas where African Americans and Mexican Americans lived. Naively, as I realize in retrospect, I started to think about the fact that even though I had all white friends as I was growing up, most of the men who worked for my father, a general contractor, were either African American or Mexican American. I had realized that my family was sexist as well as racist, or as my grandmother would say, "white oriented." I began to wonder what the correlation between the hierarchies was.

During that first stay at the cabin, I was reading Herbert Gans' *Popular Culture and High Culture: An Analysis and Evaluation of Taste*. Out on the roads, I saw for the first time, very beautiful and very low cars -- low riders -- being maneuvered confidently and with virtuosity through water-rutted, bumpy, sandy *arroyos*. As an Anglo, this image perplexed me because I knew that in this situation, Anglo common sense would dictate raising the auto, not lowering it. As a woman, I was struck that all the drivers of these cars were men. My sense of racial, cultural, and gender difference, made

manifest in a sense of not having adequate tools for understanding and interpretation, provided the impetus for this project, and provided the first confirmation for my abiding sense that anthropological projects of cultural interpretation do matter.

Upon returning to Houston, I learned that low riders were popular there too. I called George Lipsitz, then a professor of history at University of Houston, Clear Lake, specializing in American popular culture. He told me that a video had been made on Houston low riders, "Por un Amor," by Carlos Cabillo (1983). I was able to view it at the Southwest Alternate Media Project and that proved to be the start of my research. In the context of taking a course on the art of ethnography, I set about to research low riders and the relationships between style and identity. That research developed into my Master's research project, which is the basis of Chapter 1.

In 1984 while researching my Masters Thesis in Houston, I was often told, "We aren't like low riders in L.A. We aren't into gangs." I did not know much about Los Angeles low riders or gangs and wondered what was at stake in such a comparison. A newspaper article was published that year celebrating the fact that there were not then gangs in Houston. As I finished my course work, I met my future husband, Thomas Dumm. We moved to Amherst Massachusetts in the summer of 1985 and I finished my Masters Thesis on Houston low riders the next spring.

In 1988, when designing my dissertation research, I broadened it to include Los Angeles and Española/Chimayó in order to trace out low riding's local and translocal dimensions. I was interested in studying whether there was any unanimity of meaning among people who practiced low riding. I knew from reading *Low Rider Magazine* that

low riding was very popular in Los Angeles and had been for some time. I wondered how such a practice could be popular in a semi-rural area like northern New Mexico as well as in populous urban centers like Houston and Los Angeles.

Tom and I spent his sabbatical year from Amherst College, 1988-89, living in an apartment in Montebello, just east of East Los Angeles. I was pregnant for most of my fieldwork. In the course of my research there, I learned that Chimayó was a rural place where low riding was quite popular, a place that represented the widespread popularity of low riding. This testimony confirmed my determination to complete my field research there. I returned to Española and Chimayó the summer of 1990 accompanied by Tom and year-old baby Irene who had been born at the end of our stay in Los Angeles. My Texas friend had sold the property to Sam and Angie Martinez who owned the adjacent land. They kindly rented the cabin to us. While we were there, I learned that Española is nicknamed "Little L.A."

The study that follows is based upon field research in Houston in 1984/85, in Los Angeles in 1988/89, and in Chimayó the summer of 1990.

Why Popular Culture?

Popular culture has become important area of study for the current generation of social and cultural researchers. Mukerji and Schudson call popular culture studies "a swift intellectual river where expansive currents from different disciplines meet" (1991:1). The major intellectual concerns of popular cultural studies have been two-fold. First, they address the practices of "common" people, "working people" (as opposed to elites), and the "popular classes." Popular culture studies are often informed by concerns

with hierarchy, hegemony and systems of social control on the one hand, and culturally-based meaning-making on the other. Secondly, those studying the twentieth century culture and history have had to account for the emergence of media and consumer culture, as well as the multiple influences of global capitalism on contemporary cultural practices.[1]

In many fields, engagement with popular culture has challenged the basic assumptions which had previously barred scholarly attention to popular forms, especially the university's emphasis on imparting knowledge of so-called "worthy" traditions and canons of knowledge. The fields of history, sociology and literary studies have been particularly influenced by this elitist perspective.[2] In most disciplines, developing approaches to popular culture has involved challenging dominant notions of what constitutes "culture" as well as what defines the practices and approaches of a particular discipline. Indeed, the idea of "disciplines" has become somewhat attenuated as scholars search for more adequate methods and theories by which to engage in studies of contemporary culture. In this search, ethnography has become central to "an emergent interdisciplinary phenomenon" of descriptive and critical cultural studies (Rosaldo 1989:39) that seeks to account for the cultural dimensions of contemporary political economies.

Appadurai and Breckenridge have made an important contribution to the multi-disciplinary concern with contemporary culture. They use the term *public culture* to refer to the multiple contexts, conjuntions and disjunctions that influence contemporary culture-making activity. Public culture is then an arena, a "zone" in which cosmopolitan

cultural forms shape each other. In their words, "...this zone may be characterized as an arena where other types, forms and domains of culture are countering, interrogating and contesting each other in new and unexpected ways" (1990:6). They intend for the rubric of *public culture* to expand our notions of contemporary culture and to persuade us that current notions of "popular, folk or traditional cultural forms simply are not adequate for the interpretive challenges posed by the cosmopolitan forms of today's public cultures" (1990:8).

The idea of public culture serves a important function in theorizing global culture and today's cultural flows, but it must be noted that there is a difficulty in the wholesale discarding of the terms high, popular and folk. As Appadurai and Breckenridge acknowledge, these terms invoke debates which, while they may or may not be appropriate to other than Western contexts, indicate certain hierarchies and contested zones that remain to be considered and analyzed in the United States. Hence labels do retain some heuristic value for considering different cultural forms. In using them, we must struggle to be cognizant of the processes and disjuctures of our contemporary world.

In the best writings on popular culture, scholars recognize and stress popular culture as a zone of contested practice with no fixed forms.[3] Stuart Hall argues,

> The important fact, then, is not a mere descriptive inventory -- which may have the negative effect of freezing popular culture into some timeless descriptive mould -- but the relations of power which are constantly punctuating and dividing the domain of culture into its preferred and its residual categories" (1981:234).

Hall advocates understanding the transformative work of popular culture,

> the active work on existing traditions and activities, their active re-working so
> that they come out a different way: they appear to persist -- yet, from one period
> to another, they come to stand in a different relation to the ways working people
> live and the ways they define their relations to each other, to 'the others' and to
> the conditions of life. (1981:228)

George Lipsitz argues that "the historical circumstances of reception and appropriation determine whether novels or motion pictures or videos belong to a sphere called popular culture. Similarly, individual artifacts of popular culture have no fixed meanings" (1990:13). In the context of the United States, Lipsitz stresses the centrality of popular culture as a realm of cultural experience not just worthy of scholarly attention, but central to contemporary configurations of historical consciousness. In as much as mass communications dominate public discourse, commercialized leisure serves as a cultural resource in the form of a repository for collective memory (1990). This has important ramifications for understanding the "contemporary landscapes of group identity" (Appadurai 1991:208). Interrogating the relations of historical consciousness and mass culture takes on heightened importance when the researcher shares, to some extent, in the culture of those s/he is researching.

One might argue that popular culture has always been a province of anthropology, in as much as it takes into account the beliefs and practices of so-called "ordinary people." Be this as it may, two of anthropology's foci have historically undermined its relevance for the study of contemporary popular culture. The first is its focus on exotic

and traditional cultures with a disregard and even disdain for mass cultural forms (Appadurai 1991). Murkeji and Schudson cite films and tourist art as two forms historically overlooked by anthropology (1991:5). The second focus, related to the first is its historical focus on site-specific field studies. As Ferguson and Gupta argue, the social sciences seem to take spatial discontinuity as their starting point for studying societies and cultures (1992:6). "Field work" has been historically predicated upon the idea of the fieldworker's mastery of the culture of a particular place. This predilection has meant that, until recently, anthropology had not begun to take into account what Clifford refers to as the "transnational political, economic, and cultural forces that traverse and constitute local or regional worlds" (1992:102). The advent of cultural studies and the interdisciplinary adaptation of ethnography for cultural research projects thus coincides with a critique of anthropology that seeks to develop its practices in consonance with the realities of contemporary social life.

A paradox between place and identity that has important implications for anthropology and ethnography is described by Appadurai.

[T]he central paradox of ethnic politics in today's world is that primordia (whether of language, or skin color or neighborhood or kinship) have become globalized. That is, sentiments whose greatest force is in their ability to ignite intimacy into a political sentiment and turn locality into a staging ground for identity, have become spread over vast and irregular spaces as groups move, yet stay linked to one another through sophisticated media capabilities. (1990:15, emphasis mine)

In response, he advocates an important change in direction for contemporary research. While acknowledging the importance of "the local, the particular and the contingent which have always been the forte of ethnographic writing", he stresses that "the ethnographer needs to find new ways to represent the links between the imagination and social life" (1991:199). While his work stresses the importance of the imagination to contemporary processes of group identity, his interest in anthropological approaches appropriate to the local, translocal, and transnational conditions of contemporary culture is shared by George Marcus, Michael Fischer and others (Fischer & Abedi 1990, Gupta & Ferguson 1992, Marcus 1990, Marcus & Fischer 1986).

Marcus and Fischer have been leaders in advocating multi-site ethnography as a way of linking ethnography with broader issues of political economy. Such work would entail, they suggest, a different kind of fieldwork.

> Rather than be situated in one, or perhaps two communities for the entire period of research, the fieldworker must be mobile, covering a network of sites that encompass a process, which is in fact the object of the study. (Marcus & Fischer 1986:94)

The problem as described by Marcus and Fischer is "how to represent the embedding of richly described local cultural worlds in larger impersonal systems of political economy" (1986:77). They argue for taking "a view of cultural situations as *always* in flux, in a perpetually historically sensitive state of resistance and accommodation to broader processes of influence that are as much inside as outside the local context" (1986:78).

To do this, certain recent ethnographies have sought to mesh interpretive

approaches with political -economic perspectives. In the interest of portraying this process, some have taken the forms and content of indigenous historical consciousness as their problem. These latter have the effect of portraying indigenous conceptions of culture and history while critiquing the way Western scholarly approaches have tended to assimilate indigenous peoples into a "timeless" past. Hence, these combined concerns indicate an important project for contemporary anthropology is the search for approaches that address the practices and contingencies of contemporary cultural life just as they critique the limitations and injustices of anthropological practice.

While there are more calls for multi-locale ethnography than there are examples, there is a growing ethnographic literature addressing the relationship between the imagination and social life, between popular culture, group identity and, to some extent, locality. Limón's recent work on dance halls relates women's folklore and leisure practices to gendered experiences of racism and the division of labor (1991). Abu-Lughod and Radway describe the incorporation of commodities into women's lives. Abu-Lughod details how the purchase of commodities such as women's lingerie by younger Bedouin women is linked to the increased spatial circumscription of their lives and is evidence of generational differences between Bedouin women. The young women who now operate in more stationary and circumscribed realms of autonomy see their roles and relationships differently than do their elders (Abu-Lughod 1990). In Radway's study, American housewives seek pleasure in the form of imaginary recreation (recreating women's lives in the imaginary) as a relief from the demands of, and their dissatisfactions with, patriarchy in their lives (1984). Traube delineates the ideological

import of Hollywood films and how they contribute to the American social "imaginaire," influencing how Americans think about "real" historical events (1992).[4] All of these efforts delineate important aspects of the relationships between the imagination, media and consumer culture, and social life. In some of them, especially Abu-Lughod and Traube, "place" is problematic.

Hamid Naficy's study of Iranian exiles in the Los Angeles (1993) most completely integrates these concerns for the shaping of both identity and cultural forms in the present. He argues that the terms of accommodation for living in the United States are negotiated in the syncretic interactions of popular culture, cultural practices, and, in the case of Iranians, forms of nostalgia arising from the experience of being displaced from one's homeland (1990). These works are important for developing an approach for researching and analyzing culture that takes the influences of mass cultural productions into account.

> If 'mass culture is not something completely external, is not something which comes to invade the popular from outside but is actually a development of certain potentialities already within the popular itself', what we are dealing with is an intermingling of popular traditions and a mass imaginary. (Martín-Barbero quoted in Rowe & Schelling, 1991:8)

Rowe and Schelling advocate understanding manifestations of mass culture as developments of potentialities already within 'the popular.' Indeed, Stuart Hall describes the process of communication, of discursive production, as "'a complex structure in dominance', sustained through the articulation of connected practices, each of which

however, retains its distinctiveness and has its own specific modality, its own forms and conditions of existence" (1987:128).

In "An Insider's View of the Westside," Chicano historian Ricardo Romo describes his involvement with cars as a San Antonio youth in the fifties, ten years before low riders became popular. He and his friends shopped the junkyards, had neighborhood ironworkers and welders help them create their "rides," then spent their Sunday afternoons at the drag races. In a funny vignette, he describes one particular Sunday.

> Cousin Benny, who owned a '50 Chevy, arranged for us to use a small building and garage on Guadalupe Street near Zarzamor for our (car club) headquarters. One early Sunday morning, he came by with three spray cans of paint and invited us to help paint his engine green. We sprayed a bright glaze over dirty metal and drove out to the drags. At the race grounds, we parked his Chevy in a well-traveled spot and lifted the hood to give hot rod admirers a good look. (Jasper & Turner 1986:57)

Ten years later, the importance of "looking" manifested as Romo's fellow car club members easily made the transition from hot rods to low riders, lavishing increased attention and money on the looks of their cars.

All of these examples point to the necessity for increased attention to contemporary cultural life and the forms that it takes. Appadurai is right in his call for acknowledging the increased importance of the role of the imagination in social life. Anthropology has important contributions to make in the study of contemporary culture, but it must orient itself to the shifting grounds of culture and social life in order to do

so. These grounds include "markets, media, social movements, wealth and crises, rather than villages, social structures, neighborhoods and the like" (Marcus 1990:25). Attending to popular culture holds great promise for this endeavor.

Chicano Poetics and Ethnographic Practice

How might we begin to account for the particular inflections of Mexican American social events and for the poetics of Mexican American cultural productions? How is the rubric of popular culture outlined above appropriate for the study of Mexican American low riders?

Ramón Saldívar begins his study of Chicano narrative by sketching a historical profile of Mexican Americans as an ethnic working class minority as a way to locate those narratives in "the history of which they speak and from which context they arise" (1990:10). With the United States acquisition of Mexican lands from 1836 to 1848, Mexicans in the Southwest were forcible included in the United States and the Southwest was ideologically and politically transformed. In the course of this transformation, Mexican nationals were converted into an ethnic minority subject to racial and political discrimination as well as cultural erosion. The course for the industrialization of the American economy had a decided impact on the Southwest and its Mexican American citizenry. As Mario García describes it,

> Limited in industrial production, the Southwest was in special need of unskilled railroad hands, farmworkers, mine and smelter laborers, and a variety of other forms of menial labor. Lacking a local labor market and finding it difficult to recruit European and Asian immigrants owing to geographic distance and racial

prejudices, entrepreneurs soon discovered a profitable and acceptable labor supply south of the border. Together, industrialization, regional economic specialization, and Mexican immigrant labor launched an economic boom in the Southwest and in the process created new and enlarged Mexican communities in the United States. Mexican immigration, as such, is rooted in late nineteenth-century American economic developments associated with the growth and expansion of American capitalism. (Garcia 1981:2, quoted in Saldívar 1990:19)

Mexican American settlements and participation in the United States economy are predictably diverse and continue to be effected by transformations in the United States economy (Foley 1990). Currently the decline in well-paying blue-collar jobs has let to concerns about the prospects for economic stability and upward mobility among Mexican Americans. The decline in jobs portends the necessity for more family workers to work and contribute to the family finances. Under such situations, younger members are often called to full time employment before completing high school, ensuring their continuation in low wage employment.

Saldívar contends, rightly I think, that Mexican American narrative forms that respond to this history "constitute the Chicano resistance to the cultural hegemony of dominant Anglo-American civil society." He argues that we can thus justifiably think of Chicano narrative as a "resistance" literature (1990:24). Saldívar's work is part of a growing body of literature concerned with the poetics of Chicano practices (Calderón & J.D. Saldívar 1991, Fregoso 1993, Griswold del Castillo 1991, Limón 1991). On the whole, these studies emphasize Mexican American attempts to maintain autonomy, as

seen in resistance to domination figured through rhetorical challenges as well as through inversions and subversions. These studies also define cultural resources, strategies and vernacular meanings of artistic creations.

In an exemplary study of Mexican American folk arts, Kay Turner and Pat Jasper argue for understanding Mexican American visual distinctiveness as a kind of "aesthetic loyalty" whose forms

> mark in graphic detail the history and sense of connectedness which in part defines Mexican American identity here [in San Antonio]...these forms help to shape the community's sense of itself by articulating the continuities that exist from generation to generation while actively informing people's lives on a day to day basis. This idea of art *creating* cultural realities ... allows us to see that Mexican American folk art in San Antonio exemplifies the very way in which art-making may constitute strategies for affirming and recreating anew loyalties in the family, the neighborhood, and the community at large. (1986:10).

Significant in their analyses is the idea that through folk art production, the residents of the San Antonio *barrios* they study are able to produce an enclave of human value --

> "of *confianza* (affection) and *respeto* (respect) -- within an urban metropolis that is often both hostile and impersonal. Such productions -- created in collective equality -- negate the alienating constraints of the historically given social order that exists for *mexicanos* in Texas, and affirm the possibilities, at least, of a different social order. (1986:48)

The arts they describe include wood working, saddle making, metal work, home altars,

religious paraphernalia, and ceramic production. The artists have a special role in defining and transferring "sensibilities that inform the cohesiveness of a people" (1986:60). These sensibilities are practiced and maintained through apprenticeships, the "art of kinship," the pleasure of art and the pleasure of work, and a deep sense of pride in one's work.

Tomás Ybarra-Frausto identifies an important form of bicultural sensibility for Chicanos embodied in the aesthetic norm of rasquachismo, a "a bawdy, spunky consciousness" that seeks to "subvert and turn ruling paradigms upside down. It is a witty, irreverent, and impertinent posture that recodes and moves ouside established boundaries" (1991a:155), best exemplified in everyday practices and in forms of popular culture. He cites urban youth cultures as masters of this particular aesthetic and uses low riders as an example.

> A common strategy is to subvert the consumer ethic of mainline culture. In fashion, the retro look of the past, pachuco styles circa the mid-1940s are preferred over the latest trend. Other consumer icons, the automobile, for example, are recontextualized with oppositional meaning and function. Low riders reverse the mania for speed by recycling car models of the past, customizing them, and driving them "slow and low." Through such strategies of appropriation, reversal, and inversion, Chicano youth cultures negate dominant models and values. Rasquachismo feigns complicity with dominant discourses while skillfully decentering and transforming them. (1991a:161)

Seen in these arts of "making do" are some of the strategies of Mexican Americans for

cultural critique and the communication of in-group values. Thus they stress a Chicano concern with the ideology of difference (Saldívar 1990:7). Chicano artists and scholars argue that these practices challenge hierarchies of assessment (Chabram 1991) and enact criticism of cultural boundaries. They advocate instead understanding the dialogics of assessment and relevance by virtue of studying art and narrative forms in context or as "contextualized social processes" (Carmen Lomas Garza 1992, Griswold del Castillo, etal. 1991). Most importantly, they indicate the importance of cultural creation as means of negotiating issues of identity.

The point of my research on low riders is not to define a subculture, but to identify cultural expressions relative to a process of cultural inscription and the assertion of cultural/historical continuity located within residual culture. A translocal examination of low riding evinces that it is a "popular" phenomenon in the Latino/Latin American sense of "*lo popular*" which Rosa Linda Fregoso interprets, through the writings of Michel de Certeau, as meaning " the oppositional practices of everyday life."[5] But it is also popular in the mass culture sense of the word. Its popularity and many of its practices have grown out of the potentialities and practices of the Mexican American 'popular' (skills, crafts, family leisure, public display, etc.). But as a mass culture phenomenon, it has been translocalized and popularized through the media, especially through Low Rider Magazine and that magazine's productions and events.[6]

Low Riders: Products of Pleasure

The presence of highly ornate cars with multicolor paint jobs, crushed velvet interiors, hydraulic suspension systems, and numerous other features -- low riders

-- has become a common sight in the metropolitan areas of the Southwest. Their ubiquitousness in parks, boulevards, and shopping centers, as they ride low and slow, elicits perceptions of either aversion or admiration on the part of bystanders. (Plascencia, 1983:141)

Low riders, as Plascencia indicates, are most often enjoined into two already existing discourses concerning Mexican American identities. Either they are perceived as a relatively new form of anti-social and gang-related activity, or they are hailed as a harbingers of cultural continuity, self-conscious rebellion against middle-class ideology, and positive assertions of cultural identity. Evinced in these dominant conceptions of the meaning of low rider productions and performances is the problem of valuations of cultural production, the "othering" of racialized identity in the United States that tends to either criminalize or exoticize behavior, and an unreflective reproduction of cultural paradoxes in trying to assign low riders a "place" in United States culture. Missing from these assignations is an understanding of the "necessity" of such productions to refract the very discourses in which they are both subject and object. Missing from most accounts is an understanding of the nature of the effacement of history in our culture, the generative sources of violence in poor communities, and the transformative powers of cultural commodities.

For those who engage in practices of contemporary popular culture the relationship of rights, nationalism and gendered ethnic identity is complex and dangerous (Moore 1978, Willis 1977). Hebdige's notion of the "blocked" identities of race and class, which he uses to discuss the sources of style for working class subcultures,

provides a fruitful opening to the question of self-representation.

> There is no reason to suppose that subcultures spontaneously affirm only those blocked 'readings' excluded from the airwaves and newspapers (consciousness of subordinate status, a conflict model of society, etc.). They also articulate, to a greater or lesser extent, some of the preferred meanings and interpretations, those favored by and transmitted through the authorized channels of mass communication. (1979:86)

In this, Hebdige alerts us to what Hall calls the double-stake in popular culture, "the double movement of containment and resistance, which is always inevitably inside it" (Hall:228). What is called for is an account of culture that takes into account the communicative process involved with being "American" yet being marginal to dominant definitions and expectations vis a vis socioeconomic conditions and racial myths.

Recent theories of material practices, especially of the relationship between narrative and material objects, assert the importance of recognizing the object's place in a system of exchange and of understanding commodities as cultural objects (Appadurai 1986, McCracken 1988, Stewart 1984). Such a system must be theorized to include institutionally based conditions of culturally meaningful behavior if it is to address the significance of material practices. .

According to Zizek, popular culture is invested with an excess, predicated upon "experience," in which the "answer of the real" (1991:34) creates a "surplus enjoyment that has the same paradoxical power to convert things into their opposite" (1991:12). Accordingly, "what fantasy stages is not a scene in which our desire is fulfilled, fully

satisfied, but on the contrary, a scene that realizes, stages, the desire as such" (1991:6).

Because "bodies," either bodies of men and/or women and/or cars, always appear on low rider murals, they carry the weight of representation. Through them, an important self-identification is being made. In a study of the relationship of narrative to its object, Susan Stewart makes a series of assertions relevant to analyzing the cultural meanings of modified car bodies and their relationships to men's bodies. First she says, "The body presents the paradox of contained and container at once" (1984:104). Then,

> The fetishized object must have a reference point within the system of the
> exchange economy -- even the contemporary fetishization of the body in consumer
> culture is dependent upon the system of images within which the corporeal body
> has been transformed into another point of representation. (Stewart 1984:163)

And finally,

> [W]e must conclude by saying that kitsch and camp, as forms of
> metaconsumption, have arisen from the contradictions implicit in the operation
> of the exchange economy; they mark an anti-subject whose emergence ironically
> has been necessitated by the narratives of significance under that economy.
> (1984:169)

The cars that are the subject of this study embody Stewart's three themes in ways that are important to understanding the problem of creating identity out of the blocked identities of race and class: they engage in culturally constructing their own bodies through their cars. In as much as their bodies and their car bodies are already represented in a system of images (advertising, policing, and media) having to do with

civic participation, they must enter into those discourses in order to transform the effects

of representation. And finally, to the extent that low rider cars and men appear as anti-

subjects, or at least as self-created cultural subjects, indicated through the creation of an

outsider aesthetic, their engagement is necessitated by the "narratives of significance" of

our social system. What I hope to show is the convergence of these narratives in

commodities, media, popular images and policing and to examine the ways they are

reconfigured in the productions of low riders.

Low Riders and Laughter

Coming from predominantly lower-middle and lower income backgrounds, many low

riders are truck drivers and small business owners. As low riders, they are a highly

visible element of the Mexican-American community and, since the mid-1970's, have

become a powerful organizing and orienting force. In Dallas, Frank García claims that

> one of his greatest satisfactions is to encounter the non-low rider -- particularly
>
> the Anglo-American -- as it is one of the few situations in which he can interact
>
> in a positive manner with "white people." "When they see my ride, they know
>
> I'm a hard worker and a serious and responsible person, because they know I've
>
> put a lot of time and money into it." (Gradante 1982:36)

Many young Chicanos aspire to be low riders. For them, it is a path to both pleasure

and respectability.

Still, the image of the low rider is controversial and is not accepted positively by

all strata of the Mexican-American community. For many within the Hispanic

community, the image the low riders project is dangerously close to the stereotype of the

"Mexican" hood - violent, lazy, drunk and mean. While the low riders' pachucho[7] is an ironic turn on this stereotype, for many he re-embodies a degraded, debased state of culture. In their eyes, he too closely takes as his the stereotypes many believe to be detrimental to Mexican-Americans. By raising the pachuco as the symbolic figure embodying the experience and history of certain Mexican-Americans, the low riders have enlisted a "dangerous" figure through which to represent themselves. Yet, however dangerous this presentation is perceived among some Mexican Americans, the low riders understand this move as a way of taking control of their contradictory image.

Among low riders, as I hope to make clear, the boundaries of Chicano identity are maintained through cultural features even while those features are contested among different strata of Chicanos, and as those features are presented as evidence of a good reputation. In the case of the low riders, material dichotomizations are used to mark off the boundaries of identity through the central figure of the car. Low rider style[8] is usually explained in opposition to hot rod features such as low versus high, slow versus fast, little tires versus big tires, luxurious versus sporty, and beautiful instead of utilitarian. Likewise, the figure of the pachuco is employed as a stylish emblem of ethnic identity. The style of car and manner of dress serve as ethnic markers whose unique formal features are interpreted as being Chicano.

For the low riders, the politics of laughter is exhibited in the car's most distinctive feature, the hopping movement enabled by hydraulic lifts. Contained in this single modification of a car's standard movement is a profound parody based upon the understanding that to make a car hop is indeed funny. When street riding, the favorite

activity is "dropping" your ride while stopped at a street light. This always evokes laughter and amazement from people in nearby vehicles. When I have asked low riders what it is that attracts them to low riding, they most often contend that they just like the hydraulics.

The meanings contained in the low riders' cultural productions tell of the incongruities, the contradictions affecting their community, particularly the conflict between the "ideology of affluence and the experience of [relative] deprivation" (Hebdige 1979:12). They are also indicative of changes affecting the urban Chicanos and the status of industrial work. In working on themselves and their cars, low riders attempt to create a new ethnic identity that unifies their culture and their image. But it is a unity based upon incongruity, as Rosaldo argues.

> With its peculiar double vision and sense of incongruity, humor itself is
>
> constitutive of Chicano culture and its political vision. (Rosaldo 1987:75)

The cars are produced with a sense of irony and seriousness. As explained by Teen Angel of Low Rider Magazine, "Humor is born from the ironies of life. Two cultures rubbing against each other sometimes produce the biggest laughs."

Symbolic Crusades

Low riding is practiced and appreciated by a range of people and as Calvin Trillin illustrates, some are poorer and have harder lives than others. One *vato loco* described how car clubbers were different.

> "Let me tell you, they're a hundred percent different from us...They were never
>
> raised like us, to suffer like us. They might have a beef, all they do is maybe

beat on each other's cars. They ain't been through what we've been through."

(1979:72)

In low riding, there was and continues to be a class-based split between those who have had "hard lives" and those whose lives have been not so hard. There are gangster low riders in Los Angeles who live with a great deal of violence and economic insecurity. There working class low riders with stable jobs and family lives, although such jobs are increasingly difficult to come by.

Those familiar with the worlds of low riding know that there is sometimes an element of violence associated with some low rider events, but not all. Low Rider Magazine deals with the split by promoting the production of cars as a transformative endeavor, a practice of self-pride through which one which can transform one's life. They promote good behavior as a way to influence public opinion and create good reputations for low riding's practitioners. Rather than ignore or, alternatively, exaggerate the element of violence associated with low riding, I focus on the ways in which people create a discourse about themselves and their cars. I make violence the focus of my work when it is endemic to the particular constellation under consideration. As will become apparent in the chapters to follow, this approach inevitably illuminates best the communicative and performative practices of low riders as situated knowledges. I seek, not to deemphasize violence, but to contextualize it.

The Cars

"These cars are more than gaudy displays of a group that has misunderstood the American dream. They are reliquaries of ancient and

contemporary images that contain keys to sexual and spiritual union."

In these cars...the church and sex, death and family congeal and American capitalism collides head-on with long centuries of Hispanic tradition.

(Meridel Rubinstein quoted by Jim Sagel)

Low riders are a feature of the Chicano southwest. A Mexican American takes his car, usually an old model Detroit brand, and refashions it into a baroque ride. He removes all signs of the manufacturer and refashions the car according to what is considered to be a distinctly Chicano aesthetic. He lowers the car to within a few inches of the ground, makes it beautiful inside and out, and drives very, very slowly. This practice exists in all the states of the Southwest, namely California, Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico and Texas. It is what Dick Hebdige calls a subcultural practice, engaged in by Mexican American men of all ages, with a gamut of car related experiences, ranging from mechanical expertise to style-consciousness (Plascencia 1983). The car becomes the center of a constellation of practices that are referred to as being family-oriented.

Low riding is purported to have begun at least as early as the 1950's (Gradante 1982), perhaps even as early as the 1930's (Plascencia 1983). Low riding has achieved new popularity since the 1960's in California, and since the 1970's in the other Southwestern states. Most importantly for my purposes, only since the 1970's has low riding has been interpreted as a presenting a positive image for Chicanos.

A low rider car is a conventionalized form that is made up of fairly regular system

of modifications. It requires the car owner to devise strategies for actualizing his modifications, for making his "ride." While it may be commonly assumed that each car is the outcome of one man's work, most do some portion of the work themselves and commission the skilled work, such as exterior painting, body work and interior upholstery, from qualified craftspeople.[10]

There is a basic series of steps taken to turn a car into a low rider. First, he removes all traces of the car manufacturer, leaving only the body shape and bumpers. It is unusual to see logos, factory pinstriping or chrome strips on a low rider.

> The first thing you want to do...is mold the make and model name off
>
> your car. Your ride is your pride and to have a big chrome advertisement
>
> for Buick Riveria on it is tantamount to having Buick Riveria tattooed on
>
> your chest. (Cahill 1978:40)

The next important step is to create the features of a streamlined design. The car is lowered, often by removing approximately one half of each suspension coil. The old wheels are regularly replaced with Tru-Spoke wire wheels, which have spokes and are deeper than normal. They widen the appearance of the car by pushing out the face of the tire, often making it flush with the outside of the car body. Then tires are replaced with tiny thin tires.

Hydraulics are installed to enhance the car's movement. In "juicing it all

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3. This system seems to replicate the way the upper classes make their houses. Indeed, the interiors of many low rider cars have the decorative baroque ambiance of formal living rooms. That the process of assembling a low rider car resembles the process of assembling a house suggests that these may be different strategies taken towards similar ends.

around," a hydraulic lift system which can raise and lower the car is created by installing car batteries and hydraulic pumps in the trunk that are connected to "lift cylinders" at each wheel. The lifts are then activated by a toggle switch within easy reach of the driver. Once this hydraulically powered suspension is complete, the car can hop, move side to side or dance. If it drops one side, the hood and trunk can be seen. For many at this point in the process, the car comes alive. It is now a low rider.

Much of this preliminary work is done by the owner, although he is often helped by friends or other acquaintances. On some occasions, the hydraulics are professionally installed. Often, the work is undertaken at someone's garage or shop.

Body work creates the sleek lines of low riders. "Suicide doors" are made by hinging them at the rear rather than the front. They make for easy, graceful access. Tops are chopped to lower the profile of the car, making it look "mean." Little modifications are made here and there, removing door handles, recessing French antennas, and adding rear wheel skirts, all in the interest of streamlining and customizing the body. These modifications, save for the addition of the skirts, require the expert skills of welding and finishing. They are completed before painting begins. They emphasize the love and luxury of the car, not its functionality.

Once the body is improved, it is finished with primer paint, until such time as its owner can have it painted. Until the time a car receives its final paint job, it is referred to as a "primer car." Then, when the owner has the time and/or money, it is finished with custom paint and pinstriping, another job requiring skill. The paint job is commonly acrylic with three finish choices - metal flake, pearl or candied. All require

at least 16 coats of paint to achieve color, effect (metallic, rainbow or glasslike layer) and gloss. Trends in colors and designs vary from year to year, although most low riders do not change their own schemes that often.

Last of the major modifications are the paintings, the murals. These most often appear on the trunk and the hood, but can also be seen across the rear as well. The standards for murals are quite high, currently depicting a variety of scenes ranging from mythical to personal. These pieces are commissioned. The owner presents his idea to a mural artist for execution. When completed, the car is ready for the last important details.

The last touches give the car its metaphorical "soul." Such additions include small chain steering wheel, chandelier, television or bar and of course the famous fuzzy dice, to give just the right flair. Many add small tributes to Jesus or the Virgin of the Guadalupe. The emphasis of these cars is on beauty and luxury, and often relationships, not function.

The Car in the City

Most every city where one finds low riders has a place of public display. It is always a visible place where low riders get together informally, for cruising and hanging out. In Houston, it is Memorial Park. In Austin, it is Sixth Street. In Española, it is Riverside Drive, and in Los Angeles, it is Hollywood Boulevard. These public places include major streets and public parks where people can both promenade and get together.

The practice of promenading is a way of using the city. It is 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. For the low rider, as for the Dandy, it is the style of movement coupled with movement through public space which is important. Both Benjamin and Sartre understood the city to present important opportunities for self-assertion and manipulation. Importantly here, Michel de Certeau is helpful in conceptualizing the relation between spatial structure and spatial practice.

> A place is the order in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence. It thus excludes the possibility of two things being in the same location (place). The law of the "proper" rules in the place: the elements taken into consideration are beside one another, each situated in its own "proper" and distinct location, a location it defines. A place is thus an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability. A space exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it. Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities.

He continues,

> [o]n this view, in relation to place, space is like the word when it is

> spoken, that is when it is caught in the ambiguity of an actualization,
>
> transformed into a term dependent upon many different conventions,
>
> situated as an act of a present (or of a time), and modified by the
>
> transformations caused by successive contexts. In contradistinction to the
>
> place, it has thus none of the univocity or stability of a "proper." ...In
>
> short, space is a practiced place. Thus the street geometrically defined by
>
> urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers. (1984:117)

This is the kind of transformation I take to be accomplished through low rider activities.

To give an example, Memorial Park is the most "public" place in Houston that was frequented by low riders in 1984 when I did my fieldwork. On nice weekends from spring through fall, they made the trek from their homes on the North, East and other sides of town to the park. They usually drove the circular park road once, then parked and positioned themselves for an afternoon of relaxing and "hanging out." The traffic moved slowly on the park road, providing a wonderful opportunity to see and be seen.

Memorial Park is an urban place, one "geometrically defined by urban planning" as a leisure facility located along prosperous Memorial Drive. As "public" democratic place, it becomes an arena for proper takeovers and carnival creations. It became, for the low riders, a space believably "theirs."

> The body is paraded, put on display, in time as well as space; most often
>
> those contexts in which it appears are structured so that there is little or
>
> no division between participants and audience...The mask and costume
>
> are, like the face, apprehended in..."democratic space,"...

Public space is then a space of confrontation.

> But it is not simply the fact that this space can be confronted which makes
> it democratic; its democracy, its reciprocity, depends upon its public
> quality. It is just beyond the space that each culture variously determines
> as the private and just within the space that culturally determined
> perception defines as remote. It is space occupied by the other, the space
> of dialogue. (Stewart 1984:107)

In the public space of dialogue,

> The participant in carnival is swept up in the events carnival presents and
> he or she thereby experiences the possibility of misrule and can thereby
> envision it as a new order. (ibid:108)

It is a place where low riders and friends can engage in activities they enjoy and be seen
doing it.

Maps: Locality and Identity

Much of the media coverage of low riding tends to portray it as a popular,
somewhat exotic, scene that just happens to occur in the settings that it does. Maybe a
little dangerous, but still exotic. Of the three academic articles on low riding, Gradante's
"Low and Slow, Mean and Clean" is a fine, detailed ethnographic description of the
customizing and showing practices of low riders in the Dallas, Texas area (1982).
Plascencia (1983) examines the meaning of the symbols of low riding and its diffusion
by Low Rider Magazine throughout the Southwest. Stone analyzes low riding as an
"exploratory project" framed in the discourse of American youth culture, and formed in

an "ongoing dialogue between "American" and Mexican-American" styles. These articles exhibit the tendency of scholars to know one area well, and to read the literature, but the paucity of research on the similarities and differences between communities themselves or ethnographic research on the diffusion process by which lowriding has been generated.

This then is the project that I have engaged in here. My research strategy has been to construct genealogies of local practices at the different locales. I am also interested in expanding our ideas of the ability of anthropology to provide informed accounts of contemporary culture.

Low riding is in its many localities is concerned with ethnicity as identity and ethnicity as style. Still, the particularities of those concerns are highly influenced by the localities within which they are practiced. While the primary concern of this project is on the site-specific practices and modes of representation and reflexivity of lowriding, such a project entails also engaging with the ways in which popular culture is multi-faceted. How does it travel? How is it implicated in the transcendence or reinscription of cultural and geographical boundaries? Are these boundaries necessarily local? How are the boundaries themselves influenced by their "total context", to use Fabian and Fabian-Szombati's term? What follows are three geographically based chapters examining low riding practices in each locale and a conclusion that considers the three sites in a comparative framework.

An important effect of engaging in a comparative project such as this its inherent critique of the limitations of ethnographic practices of studying one location in depth.

Such studies limit ethnographic understanding to the processes under way in a particular locality, but tell us ultimately less than we need to know about cultural processes in the contemporary world. They also tell us less than we need to know about the pervasiveness of certain cultural phenomenon, a tendency that multi-locale and media studies will hopefully help us correct.

Notes: Introduction

1. See Mukerji and Schudson's "Introduction: Rethinking Popular Culture." (1991):1-61.

2. Historians are paying greater attention to "people's" history, the beliefs and practices of ordinary people (Ginzburg 1980, White 1978). For those working in the twentieth century, this means taking into account practices involving mass media and consumer culture (Lipsitz 1990). Sociologists of culture are addressing the meanings as well as structures of mass society by examining the practices of consumer culture, such as reading groups (Long 1986) and television watching.

3. This is true in folklore as well, where folklorists are increasingly concerned with the "cultural predicaments" of folk art and folklore productions. See Babcock (in press), Limon (1992), Briggs & Bauman (1991).

4. Another front of anthropological investigation has begun to break down the categorical boundaries of anthropological research, revealing the processes by which objects are defined, acquired, transported and categorized. Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Taylor's film, "In and Out of Africa," (1992) on "primitive" art is an excellent example, as is Barbara Babcock's "Marketing Maria" (in Press) and Sylvia Rodriguez's "Art, Tourism and Race Relations in Taos" (1989).

5. In Spanish, the terms '*lo popular*,' '*arte popular*,' and '*cultura popular*' all refer to the productions of popular classes of people.

6. My research strategy has been to attempt to construct genealogies of local practices at different locales in order to de-essentialize low riding. I am also interested in expanding our ideas of the ability of anthropology to provide informed accounts of contemporary culture.

7. Pachucos were rebellious, second-generation Mexican-American youth in the 1940's who distinguished themselves, in part, by dressing in zoot suits. Playwright Luis Valdez considers pachucos to be the first Mexican-Americans to have confronted and expressed the problems of being Mexican and American. I will explain this further in Chapter 1.

8. The features of low rider car styling were created primarily in opposition to hot rods and predate the appearance of "high riders," which is a predominantly Anglo form.

Chapter 1

RE-ENACTMENTS: HOUSTON LOW RIDERS

Down here in Houston, and in Texas, it's [low riding is] all sort of like a family

deal. We go to dances together, all your different clubs, all over the state, we

get together for a good time. (Joe Coleman in *Por Un Amor*, Cabillo 1983)

"Por Un Amor"

"Por Un Amor," a video about low riding in Houston low riding, opens with

Robert Garcia putting on his zoot suit. The background song is "Matilda" by Cookie and

His Cupcakes. The camera follows Garcia's every move, emphasizing the ritual aspects

of his dressing up. The suit is carefully laid out on his bed. Piece by piece, Garcia's

appearance is transformed. In the end, he is smartly dressed -- Stacy Adams shoes,

baggy peg leg pants, long jacket, an ankle length watch fob, a fedora hat, and of course

sun glasses. After dressing, he gets into his '64 Chevy convertible, called "Puro Oro"

and drives off, bouncing his way down the street. The film then introduces many people

and lets them speak about Houston low riding.[1]

In the film, Latin Attractions member Roland Llamas noted that low riding was

about "money, pride, clean rides, and, family." One of the most important themes was

that of family participation. People repeated stressed that low riding was a "family

thing." By that they meant that their families were involved. They attended low rider

"happenings" together and participated in the contests and events. Family members, especially teenage children, often helped in the production of the car itself.

One Houston low rider detailed the importance of low riding as follows:

The main thing is showing our talents, what we do best, what the Chicano is all about. This is something the Chicano really has...Most of us are good with our hands, you know, paint work, body work and customizing. And, it's something the Chicano has right now, to look forward to, that you can say, "This is ours. This is what we started. This is what we do."

Low riding can be really nice, beautiful you know. That's the kind of image I want to have, a Latin image. Its to show what our race can do. (Fidel of Latin Image Car Club, quoted in Cabillo 1983)

This statement indicates the positive values and identifications that were attached to low riding in Houston. The film stressed positive connections between skill, style and identity as well as the pleasures of performing, socializing, and of course, hydraulic lifts.[2]

This film was my first introduction to Houston low riders. After having seen low riders during a trip to New Mexico, I returned to Houston and called George Lipsitz to see if they existed in Houston. He suggested that I see "Por Un Amor." Luckily SWAMP, the Southwest Alternative Media Project, had a copy and allowed me to view it in their offices. This proved to be quite fortuitous. The film was an excellent introduction to low riding and the Houston scene. I was entranced and excited by it. It not only presented people who turned out to be important in Houston low riding but it

also presented them talking about the meaning of their activities. In their own words they described how they viewed their actions and how they wanted their actions to be interpreted.

As it turned out, someone at SWAMP knew Richard Reyes who was featured in the film. Reyes was a social worker and playwright who had written a Christmas play called "Pancho Claus" in which Santa's sleigh was not pulled by reindeer, but by low riders! I called Reyes to explain my project and ask for his help. He was interested and helpful. We agreed to meet at the upcoming Low Rider Super Show where Reyes then introduced me to many of the low riders in the film, including Joe Coleman, Leo Sosa and Roland Llamas. The most important person I met was Joel Carmona, president of Los Magnificos Car Club. After explaining my project to him, I was invited to attend a club meeting. After that, I spent most of my time with Los Magnificos and their families, attending meetings, shows, and once accompanying them to a state show in Dallas. Through them, I learned the low riding scene in Houston.

Low rider happenings and the idea of "reenactment"

The ethnographic focus of this chapter is on low riding in Houston from January 1984 through August 1985, examining how low rider popular culture has been adapted and re-created in the Houston area. Low rider organizations and events in the 1984 season were significant for competitions that featured the whole family. These included car customizing, car hopping contests, low rider bike contests, zoot suit contests and "bad girl" or "Madonna-look-alike" contests. Local low riders noted three primary emphases of their activities -- "family" participation and pleasure, "Chicano" identity,

and creating a "positive" image. Car show performances functioned to enact and communicate these identities by utilizing symbols and identities drawn from low rider popular culture.

In this, they evoke Roger Abraham's concept of "enactments," referring to performance as cultural displays. Enactments are "heightened events," "heightened and often self-consciously rendered cultural experiences" (1977:81). Abrahams argues that there is "both a continuity and a dialectic between everyday activities and these intense events" (1977:100). In his formulation, enactments serve to bring forms of experience into dramatic focus. Performances (as opposed to rituals) provide models of how and how not to act in certain types of interactions (1977:107).[3] In addition, they require that "action be framed and notably marked as significant symbolic behavior and be judged as well as understood, interpreted, and reacted to" (1977:107). That is, while they are dramatic they are also self-reflexive and require some degree of self-consciousness. It is the performances themselves and the self-consciousness that attends them that are the concern of this chapter.[4] I have modified Abraham's term, preferring "re-enactments" as a concept that allows us to think about the re-created yet particular qualities of local adaptations of mass-mediated popular culture.

Houston beginnings

During my research, I interviewed Teo Doria at his autobody shop. Explaining low riding's beginnings in Houston, Teo Doria noted that in 1976 when he began to make his first low rider, the prevailing custom style was the hot rod. As low riding was little known in Houston before that time, Doria's first introduction to low riding came

not in Houston, but in San Diego where he was stationed in the service. There a friend from San Diego took him to shows and explained low riding to him.

> I told him, "Hell, back in Houston we don't have nothing like this." He said that that'd been going on ever since he was a little boy, ever since he could remember. And I got interested and I said, "When I get out of the service I'm gonna go home and I know what I am going to do!" I started building my first low rider in 1976, a '64 Chevy. (interview, 1985:1)

He explained the significance of this time.

> Like I said, my friend Bobby in San Diego. He's the one who started taking me to shows, you know. [He'd say] "There's a low rider show. Let's go!" I started seeing different cars, different styles, everything! And that's what I wanted. I wanted to get something started in Houston. [ibid:10]

> When I got out of the service, I came to Houston and I told my brother about low riding, what I had seen over there [in San Diego]. At first, he thought it was stupid. He said, "No man, I'm going to build my car as a hot rod."

> I said, "All right man, go ahead. As soon as I get me a job, I'll build me up a low rider." So that's what I did.

> When I got out, I got a job. Bought this '65 Chevrolet, a family car my brother-in-law owned. I started working on it: I started dropping it, small tires, rims...I had to order parts from California. (Interview, August 1985)

When Teo Doria started working on his car in 1976, there were few other low riders in Houston. He modified his car based upon the new styles he had seen in

California. At first, people would laugh and ask him why he did not just put big wheels on it and turn it into a hot rod. That, he noted, was before Cheech and Chong came out with their movies in which they drive a low rider. It was before people in Houston knew very much about low riders. But other people liked the idea and wanted to make their cars into low riders. The following is Doria's retelling of how he learned to work on cars and how the first club, the Finest Few, organized.

We were - me, my brother and the Finest Few, which at first, there were maybe about 12 members. They were all from Houston. They saw my car. They all liked it. You know, they liked the idea. I started helping them with their cars.

"What size of tires do I use for this?" and I'd take them to buy their tires.

"You need this tire. You need this rim."

They all started to get together, asking questions, asking "Why don't you go ahead and work on my car, okay?"

"Okay, bring me the money and I'll buy the parts, put 'em on."

By the time I knew [it], in about a year or a year and a half's time, we had at first, about '77, about 8 cars. We met the sponsor, Victor. He was the oldest person. All of us were about twenty-five on down. We met Victor, who was about forty something years old.

He had a shop on Main. He said, "I'd like to sponsor ya'll." He saw that we were trying to get organized. Victor was from El Paso. He knew about low

riders. He got us together and said, "I got a shop I ain't using. I'd like to sponsor ya'll." I used that shop before I had this shop here.[5]

"Ya'll can use my shop and everything. Paint ya'll's cars there, learn how to paint." That's how it started. That's where I started, at Victor's. We'd all get together, the whole club. [We'd] work on each other's cars: body work, sand, primer...you know, the best we can. We didn't know how to do it too good. The tools we had weren't good. I learned it all [welding, etc.] - there...working on my friends' cars.

That's how I learned, really, doing it on my own. Doing it...slowly, I started learning slowly. And, I had friends that were body men, painters, telling me, "No, no. Do this, do that. Do it this way. Do it that way." I took their advice and [would] keep it in my head. I'd try it out and if it works, I'd keep it and I [would] never forget. From then on, I went into custom paints. I started jumping into custom work and it's about the same way...it took me about five years to learn.

It took me that long to really learn how to shoot the paint right. And, body work, how to do it right, how to weld. But, really, I did it on my own. If you really want to learn something, you can.

This telling indicates what people first thought, where the work was first performed, and how it was learned. Much learning of craft and style took place during this early period. People learned body work, priming, painting and hydraulics installation. Today, much of this knowledge is passed man to man, often in a club

setting. What is not passed on as "how to" do something is passed on as "where to" get it done.

Victor's shop became the first place where people got together to work. Doria later opened his own low rider shop [Figure 1.1]. Doria said that Victor wanted people to get together, although his reasons are not clear. At one point in our conversation he suggested that perhaps Victor saw a way to make some money because it is possible to make money from car shows, but it could also be that being older, Victor saw the political need for people to be organized. It is important to note that the men had a desire to organize as low riders, and Victor saw this as important.[6]

A turning point in the popularity of low riding in Houston came with the local introduction of hydraulic lifts.

> When people started seeing hydraulics on cars [snapped fingers], that's when everybody started working on theirs. "I want that on mine." "That's what I want on mine!" And that's when it got big. It took about 3 or four years, but it got real big. Back in '79, '80, '81, '82 and '83. Them five years was booming with low riders Everybody was spending money on their cars. You know, jobs were better too. That's when it really hit root real good. [ibid:11)

With the popularity of low riding came the formation of car clubs, beginning with Chicano Pride and the Finest Few in 1977 and after them the Low Masters. Initially, when the clubs first began forming, members taught each other how to do the customizing work on the cars. Their activities were organized not just around car shows and competitions, but also around what Doria called "extra entertainment," events such

Figure 1.1: Doria's Low Rider Shop
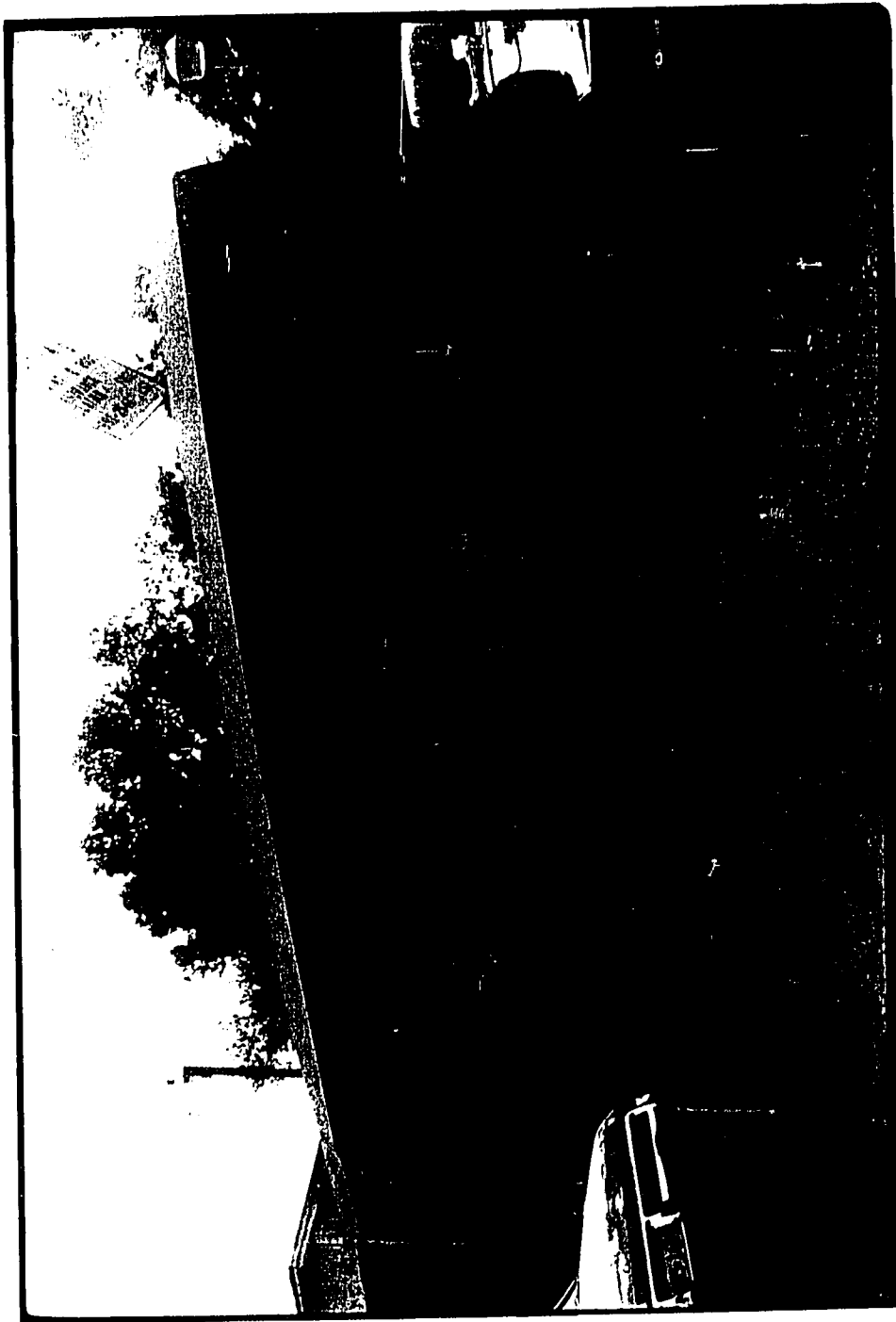
as picnics, parties and baseball tournaments which involved everybody -- low riders, their wives or girlfriends, and families. At these events, they would take their cars, park them lined up, then start picnicking or partying. In that early context, there was an emphasis on participation in communal events.

In 1980, the club Latin attractions formed and after them, Taste of Latin and Latin Image. Los Magnificos formed in 1982. The way in which local low riding became popular brought about significant shifts in low rider events. Car shows became the most important forum, and as a result, show competition between cars became more intense, as did the monetary investments necessary to compete. One result was that competitive customizing became more expensive. Another was that car show events became the new forum for family participation, with competitions designed to be able to include all family members. This latter was the hallmark of Houston low riding in 1984-85, and made it distinctive from low riding in my other two fieldsites. It is the car show and low rider events as sites of "enactments" that I will be concerned with in this chapter.

The Houston Context

The time period that Doria referred to in the previous quote, 1979 through 1983, coincides with the end of Houston's boom years. During the 1960s and 1970s, Houston became a technology-distribution center for the world's oil and gas market system. Houston's large population increases between 1960 and 1980 were closely tied to the city's role in the international oil market. Houston's Latino population doubled between 1970 and 1980 from 212,444 to 424,903 .[7] Two rises in the price of oil, the first in

1973-1974 and then again in the late 1970s, served to encourage investment in oil-related projects, consolidating Houston's oil based economy. When oil prices downturned in the early 1980s, it created a major recession that effected not just oil businesses, but Houston's economy in general.

Between 1983 and 1986, unemployment grew from 9.7 percent to just under 15 percent. Houston was in severe recession from 1984 through 1987. Hence the low riding scene in 1984 came at the end of the boom and the beginning of the recession. In this respect, Doria was right in 1985 when he asserted that between 1979 and 1983 the low rider scene was going strong. Mexican Americans had moved from San Antonio and other parts of Texas in search of better paying jobs. They also moved Houston from out of state, as did one member of Los Magnificos who had moved from Fresno, California. In this period, jobs _were_ better and people _were_ spending money on their cars. Low riding remained strong through 1984, then clubs and events began to atrophy in 1985. Although at least one club from that early period is still in existence, namely Los Magnificos, the low riding scene has never recovered. Given contemporary economic conditions and the ensuing generational separation that has accompanied the death of most of the early clubs, it most likely never will.

"Re-enactments": Performance and Identity

The prevalence of low rider activities and car clubs in Houston raises the question under what conditions are appeals to a large scale identity made? In New Mexico, as Sylvia Rodriguez so clearly illustrates in her work on New Mexico Hispanos, modernization has altered local cultural conditions in such a way as to increase the

salience of small scale identities at the same time as it alters the conditions of their organization, necessitating large scale identities as a resource. A somewhat different dynamic is at work in Houston during boom time. Here increased in-migration and buying power tended to reduce smaller scale ethnic boundaries as they created conditions under which it was possible and necessary for people to create their own. Employing a "reactive model" of ethnicity which states that modernization creates ethnic distinctions, Michael Hannan suggests, "if the effect of modernization in reducing ethnic diversity results in the elimination of smaller scale ethnic boundaries, the organizational potential of larger scale ethnic organizations is increased" (1979:271). If such conditions are experienced coterminous with racial discrimination, this also enhances the importance of larger scale organizations.[8]

What are the sources and markers of such identities? An important source is the media, as Dick Hebdige argues. "The loaded content of subcultural style is likely to be as much a function of what Stuart Hall has called the 'ideological effect' of the media as a reaction to experienced changes in the institutional framework of working-class life" (1979:85). In Hall's words,

> As social groups and classes live, if not in their productive then in their 'social'
> relations, increasingly fragmented and sectionally differentiated lives, the mass
> media are more and more responsible (a) for providing the basis on which groups
> and classes construct an image of the lives, meanings, practices and values of
> other groups and classes; (b) for providing the images, representations and ideas

around which the social totality composed of all these separate and fragmented

pieces can be coherently grasped. (Hall 1977)

Through commodities, people increasingly live in consumer society, with the media

providing an important access to ideas about society.

Through the years of low riding's popularity, low rider activities developed and

maintained a particular identification with the Chicano movement. The dialectics of this

identification were sealed in the 1970s. As Chicano artists strove to define a distinctly

"Chicano" poetics, they identified Mexican American expressive culture as symbols of

their bicultural reality. In particular, Gilberto Lujan directed artists to

> Examine Chicano folk art such as sculptured *ranflas* [low riders], the calligraphy
>
> of wall writings (graffiti), the gardens of our *abuelos*. More refined examples of
>
> Chicano art would be sculptured *menudo* bones, drawings on *tortillas*, *vato loco*
>
> portraits, woodcuts of famous Chicanos, etc. (Lujan 1970)

Likewise, from its inception, Low Rider Magazine has sought to portray the positive

assertions of identity accompanying low riding activities.

> We relate to cars that are close to the ground because they are bad. Hey,
>
> anybody can go finance a new car. But not anybody can find a bomb and fix it
>
> up. It takes a little talent, time, patience, bloody knuckles, greasy levis, and *feria*
>
> [money]. But mostly work. And the more you work, the nicer your ride
>
> becomes. I respect people like that. Work hard and create something beautiful
>
> and a little different from everyone else's ride. (Teen Angel, staff artist
>
> for "Low Rider Magazine" quoted in Gradante 1982:30)

The idea of hard work, respect and making something beautiful as manifest in low rider style were then interpreted as expressive of an affirmative Chicano identity. After the production of the movie, "Zoot Suit," in which the pachuco experiences and stylistic identity of the 1940s was dramatized as a precursor of Chicano identity, Low Rider Magazine maintained the symbolic equation of low riding and zoot suits.

As Plascencia describes, Low Rider Magazine promoted low riding in the Southwest as "Chicano", employing an identity that was seen as positive among working class Mexican Americans (1983,160). His article describes how Low Rider Magazine promoted low riding in the Southwest. Sonny Madrid, the editor, spent eight months in Texas from January through August of 1980. He organized the first "Low rider Happening" in San Antonio in March of that year, opened distribution offices throughout the state, hired field representatives, and engaged in positive public relations projects, such as voter registration drives. Plascencia's article notes that the magazine's vested interests and those of his advertisers were served by these activities which tended to promote low riding among youth with some disposable income who could actively participate in low riding activities. But he also indicates that its readers had their own agenda. Each place where low riding was popular had its own life. So that while it may be true that the activities and symbols that low riders employed were disseminated through the magazine, they tended to serve local interests.

Houston's low riding scene was already in operation by the time Low Rider Magazine began its Texas promotions. Hence its early influence in Houston came mostly by way of its influence on the California scene and through local sales of the Magazine.[9]

In Houston in 1984, a Chicano identification for low riding was manifest in three different aspects. First, low rider events were represented as a forum where "La Raza were together, throwing parties and happenings." Second, customizing skills and low riding style were (and still are) seen as arising from the unique working class experiences of Chicanos. Finally, in its collective aspect, it was also seen as a way to promote the "la raza movement" (Cabillo 1983).

In Houston, identities which stressed these values were created and communicated through performances in the realm of popular culture by relying on "Chicano" markers of identity such as low rider cars and zoot suits. Car club rules instantiated the values associated with public visibility and the possibilities of their communication vis a vis behavior (communicative action) by legislating against fighting and public drunkenness and by dictating the requirements of club participation. Club rules were routinely concerned with enforcing good public behavior as the grounds for their claims to good reputations. Their success in creating a positive, multi-faceted performance environment made low rider happenings a desirable forum for all ages and attracted other popular forms, such as break-dancing by teenagers.[10] The club covenants made possible the creation of a positive public identity for Mexican American low riders.

"Re-enactments": car competitions

Low rider clubs regularly sponsored and attended car shows which placed a great emphasis on performance. These shows had a variety of sponsors (car clubs, civic associations, beer companies), and depending upon the sponsor, were held at a variety of locations. For example, if a car club sponsored a show by itself, it was likely to be

held in the parking lot of a night club [Figure 1.2] or some locally owned business. The proceeds might be kept, but most often some portion of them were donated to a local cause such as a little league baseball association or a social service such as Ripley House. If a low rider association sponsored a show in conjunction with a beer company, it was most often held in a convention hall.

Low rider car shows and benefits had a fairly standard set of activities. They were generally all afternoon events, sometimes lasting into the night. The car show itself was the organizing element. The car show began with a morning set-up period. Every low rider and family brought its car, paid the entry fee, made sure the car was clean, gave it a final wax, and set up its display accoutrements which often included such things as trophies, a list of work credits, and sometimes a scattering of plastic roses. Then the cars remained on display for the rest of the day for viewing and judgment. At some point during the day the judges would come around, classify and rate the cars. The awards ceremony would occur towards the end of the day. Meanwhile, there would be several other events.

"Re-enactments": Zoot Suit and "Bad Girl" Contests

There were two outfit contests, the "zoot suit contest" and the "bad girl contest." Each was conducted for both children and adults. There was a "zoot suit contest" for men and one for boys, ages two to twelve. There was a "bad girl contest" for women and another one for girls ages two to twelve. The outfit is essentially the same for all (the important variations I will note later): a zoot suit, a fedora, hat, a long watch chain and pointed shiny Stacy Adams shoes [Figure 1.3, 1.3a, 1.4]. In the men's contest, the

Figure 1.2:   Car Show in Picazzio's Night Club parking lot
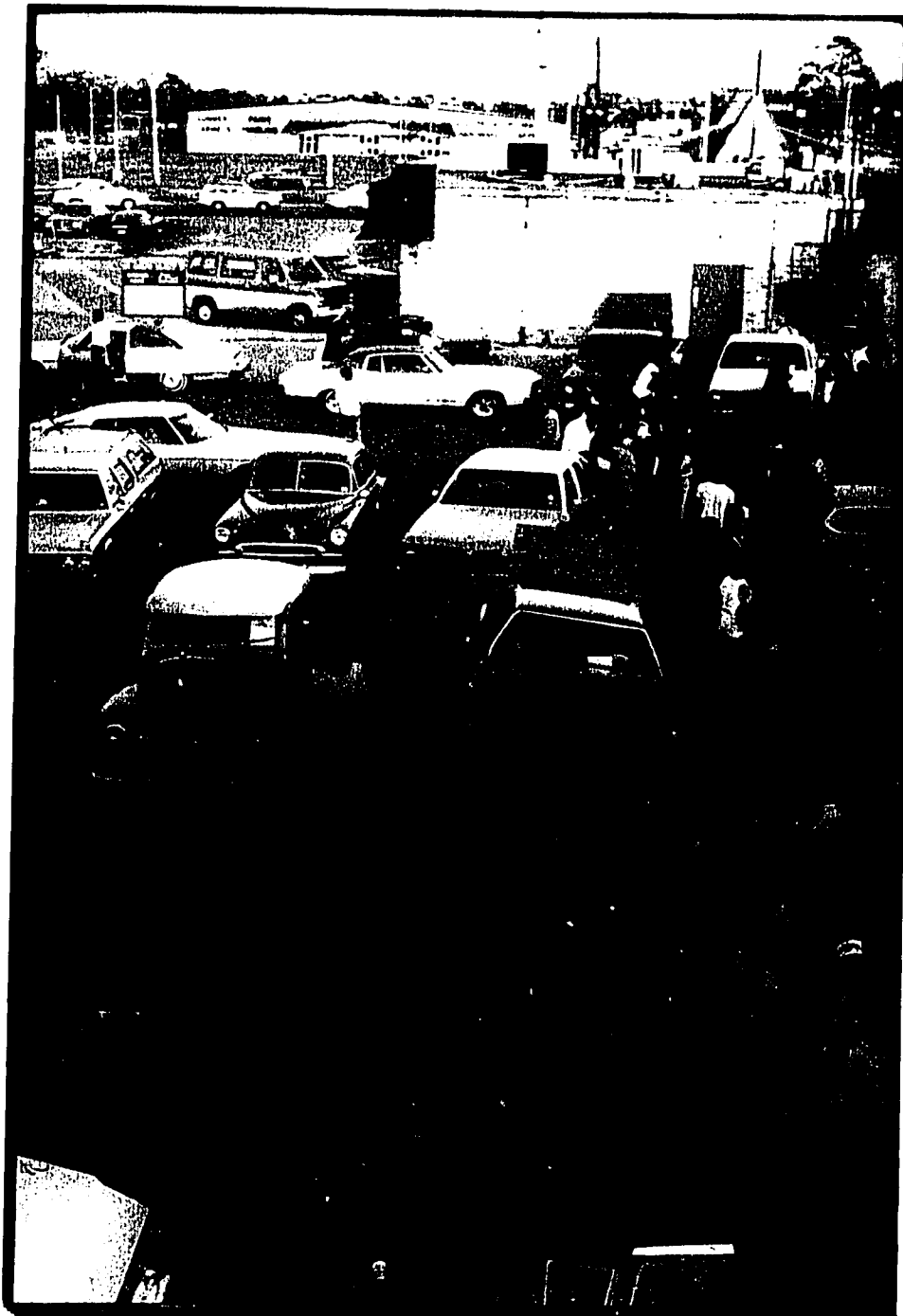
Figure 1.3: Denise Llamas in zoot suit
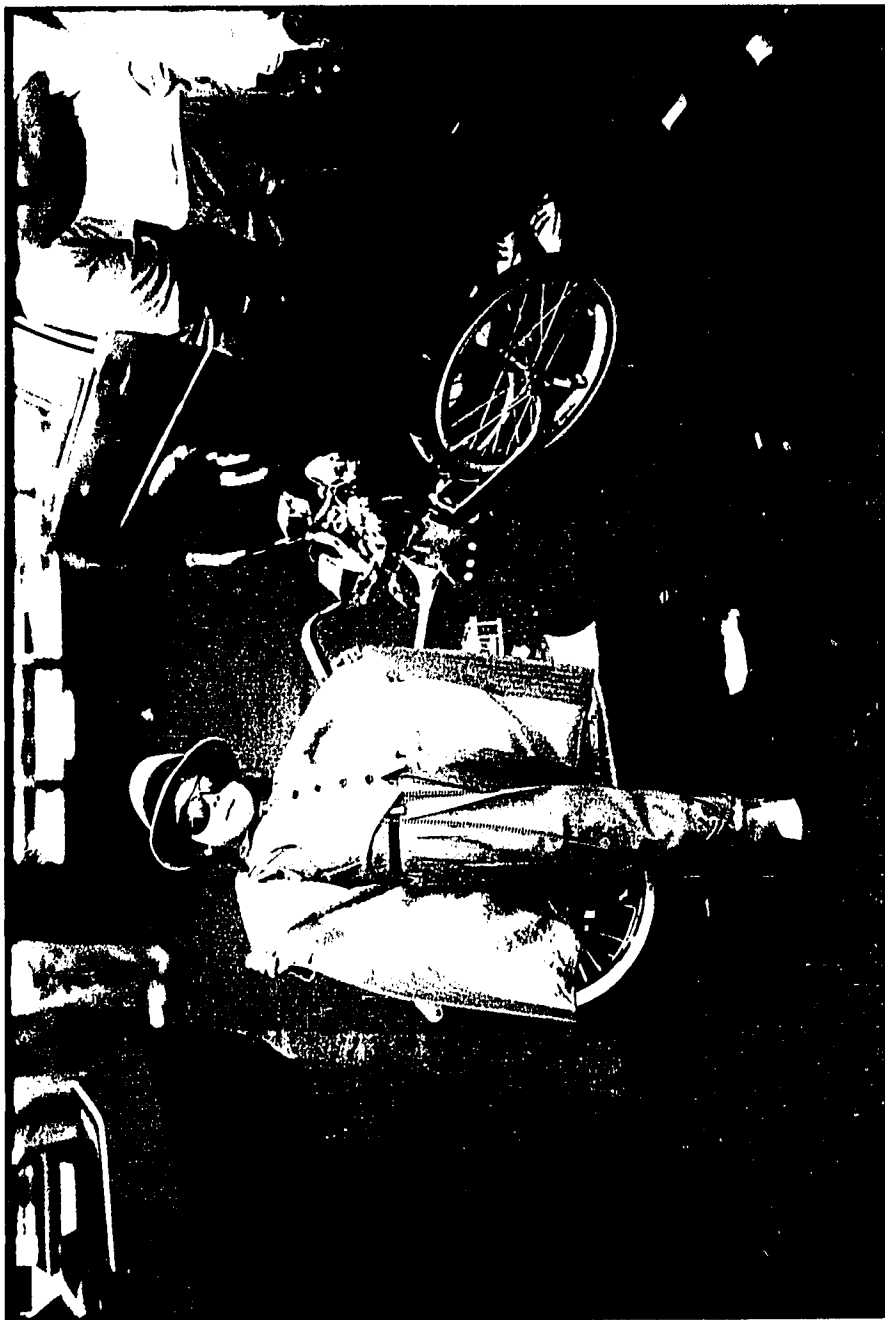
Figure 1.3a   Denise Llamas in zoot suit

Figure 1.4   Children in zoot suits

contestants always wear zoot suits and sunglasses, hoping for an allusive, cool image.

They line up, side by side, about five feet apart. Each stands in "the warp," leaning his

body back with his front leg extended [Figure 1.5]. Then on the instruction of the

contest director, one moves forward. He warps in different directions for the audience.

This is repeated for each contestant. Finally, the director polls the audience for their

choice based upon the loudness of their applause, then announces the winner and presents

the awards.

Figure 1.5:   Men's zoot suit contest

This same procedure was repeated for the boys' zoot suit contest and the girls' bad girl contest, usually without hitch or comment. However, the women's "bad girl contest" was often different. The women who entered were usually single, or married to a club member and without any children. Women's outfits usually departed from the regular zoot suit. Most often, they wore skirt suits with suspenders, an appealing blouse and high heels. Sometimes they wore elaborate, seductive and beautiful dresses. Sometimes the performance was problematic.

The idea of being a zoot suiter was to be good at being "bad." While men and children could achieve this, it was difficult for women to do this and still maintain the wholesome atmosphere of the show. Men, boys and girls all appeared in a non-sexual ethnic image that is disjointed from their personality. In these enactments, women could not. If they appeared "bad", they could be interpreted as being promiscuous. This created difficulties for a contest that is intended to show a positive ethnic image. It is my opinion that for this reason, the "bad girl" contest was dropped in some car shows and replaced with a "most beautiful" contest.

In 1985, at the height of Madonna's popularity, the "bad girl contest" was sometimes replaced with a "Madonna-look-alike" contest. This latter contest, in contrast to the "bad girl" contest or even the "most beautiful" contest, allowed women to perform a disinterested parody of beauty and sexuality. Madonna was at that time, after all, ironically beautiful, enacting a parody of men's desire with her girlish use of socks, lace and women's lingerie. This performance was less problematic, because in it, a woman

can ironically present herself as "cool," sexy and in control. In these contests, even the name "Madonna" became a play on the idea being good at being "bad".

The Low Rider equation of low riders and zoot suits has indeed been a pervasive one, influencing both the dispersion of the low rider subculture and its re-enactments, its connections to memory and history. For many people today, the 'pachuco' is a figure faded into the past, who has left his suit in the present. The zoot suit is popularly remembered as part of working class and ethnic leisure cultures of the 1940s. It was worn by second generation Mexican American youths to mark themselves as urbanites, distinct from their immigrant parents, and to distance themselves from farm workers. In the 1940s, it was a sign of difference and division in the community. It was popularized as distinctively "Mexican American" in the late 1970s through two major media -- Low Rider Magazine and the play, "Zoot Suit."[11]

The zoot suit has a history in Houston. As in many other places, it was worn in the war years by Blacks, Mexican Americans and others, then abandoned. In 1984, it was worn by Chicanos, both young and old, at special events such as annual low rider shows, high school graduations, as well as zoot suit contests, which are central events in low rider car shows. Many who wore the zoot suit considered it a sign of being a Chicano rather than of being a 'pachuco' or having descended from the pachucos. The most prevalent memories of Houston club members were of elder family members, such as fathers or uncles, who made their cars into low riders in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Most of these people did not remember their relatives as pachucos. A pachuco was considered by many in Houston car clubs to be part of Mexican American history,

only he was as far removed from them as Houston is from Los Angeles, or at least El Paso. To dress in a zoot suit then was to differentiated oneself as belonging to, or being in sympathy with, popular Chicano subculture.

Joe Coleman was an important figure in this movement. His shop, Coleman's Menswear in North Houston, made most of the zoot suits and was the source for most of the low rider fashions in Houston. "Coleman's" was heavily involved in the low rider community and its activities. In addition to clothing, the shop sold Low Rider Magazine. It also set up sales booths at almost every low rider event, including LULAC benefits and out of town car shows. But more importantly, Joe and his wife Virginia were involved with people's lives. They started making zoot suits in 1979 as a result of a special order:

> We got started with our next door neighbor, the Del Vasquez that own the restaurant next door. Their two sons, Renee and Angel, came in to me and asked me [if I could] cut out any suit they wanted. They brought me this book that had a low rider in it, you know, and said, "Can you make me a suit like that?" I said, "Oh, it's no problem. You let me know," and I did. I made them a zoot suit, They wanted it out of khaki material and everything, and I did. And they said that nobody that they had tried, nobody wanted to do this, so we did. (Joe Coleman quoted from Cabillo 1983)

The Colemans kept a photo album containing most of the outfits they have made over the years. In one corner of the shop, there was a board with photographs of many of their customers in their zoot suits. On this board are the Del Vasquez brothers.

People who then could not find what they want ready-made have come to Coleman's with their ideas and desires. There were no readily available low rider fashions in Houston when Coleman's made those first zoot suits for the Del Vasquez brothers. That was the beginning of what became for about five years the major focus of their business.

> The majority of low riders come in here and they tell me what they want, or what they want made of designed, and I get with my buddies in New York or L.A. and we come up with a design, or my wife will create, that's what she does, she's the one that create and design the clothes. (Joe Coleman, ibid.)

Coleman's has also worked to supply items that are part of the low rider fashion system.

> We've been working for about two years to get some shoes for boys under size 6 1/2, which Stacys go down to size 6 1/2, from 6 1/2 on down we've been going from everywhere to get somebody to make shoes. Now we have boys shoes down to size three, similar to Stacy Adams, and that took us two years to do. It's just what we do. If they tell us, give us an idea of what they want, then we go about seeing what we can get made or how we can get it done, even if we have to make it ourselves. No problem. (Joe Coleman, ibid.)

The history of Coleman's business charts the rise in popularity of low rider fashions, but like most businesses associated with low riders, it has participated actively in the development of what has come to be a community of people involved in related activities working to enjoy themselves and present a good image. Coleman's has made zoot suits for several people in town, such as local playwright Richard Reyes, who try

to use the zoot suit and low riders to portray positive qualities. Coleman considered that

he works with the low rider community and that the idea is to do positive things.

> Some of the people we've been working with, like Richard Reyes, which is
>
> known as Pancho Claus, and the Latin Attractions, they present a positive type
>
> image for the low rider, because I've heard a lot of things in the past about the
>
> low rider or the pachuco, you know in the old days, something like that which
>
> was a bad image. Now, we are doing positive things in the schools and donation
>
> for charity group or something. Like I went to L.A., in which L.A., from my
>
> talking to different peoples of business orientated up there, low riders in L.A.,
>
> in East L.A., have a negative type atmosphere, a gang-type atmosphere. Down
>
> here in Houston, and in Texas, it's all sort of like a family deal. We go to
>
> dances together, all your different clubs, all over the state, we get together for
>
> a good time. (Joe Coleman, ibid.)

Who wore a zoot suit? According to Coleman, a zoot suit was an important

purchase. Quite often it was a gift, especially in the case of teenagers. Parents would

give a zoot suit for a certain rite of passage, such as advancing from eighth to ninth

grade, for making good grades, or graduating. They wanted their children to know how

hard they have worked to get the suit, so it is an important event for all. This is

concurrent with De Vos's notion that "it is particularly in rites of passage that one finds

highly emotional symbolic reinforcement of ethnic patterns" (De Vos 1975:24). Parents

giving children zoot suits represented a marked difference from the conditions that

generated the zoot-suited pachuco of the 1940s.

While teenagers were important wearers of zoot suits, there were also others. Some older men bought them as have important members of the community such as Coleman, Willie Sanchu (a KNUZ radio disc-jockey), and Richard Reyes. Some smaller children wore zoot suits to compete in zoot suit contests. Mostly these were children of car club members. Denise Llamas, whose father Roland was a member of the Latin Attractions, competed for a couple of years [Figure 1.3]. The same was true of Michael Villareal, whose father, Eddie Villareal, belonged to Latin Attractions, and Mandy Carmona, whose father Joel Carmona of Los Magnificos also competed in zoot suit contests.

In addition to boys, men and small children, teenage girls and young women also wear zoot suit fashions, although their adaptations often varied from the standard suit worn by the others. Teenage girls often wear the suit slacks of suit skirts with suspenders and shirts with ruffles. Young women often transgressed the most, wearing outfits that ranged from skirted zoot suits to seductive dresses in the zoot suit blacks and greys.

Clearly low rider fashions, of which the zoot suit is the central ensemble, were important to a wider variety of people than was the dress of the pachuco. Wearing a zoot suit in 1984 was a sign of inclusion in a much broader group -- both in numbers and in generations -- than it was for the pachuco.

The above is intended to show the transformations of the meaning of the zoot suit. Once it was worn by second generation Mexican American youths to mark themselves as urbanites, distinct from their immigrant parents, and to distance themselves from farm

workers. In the 1940s, it was a sign of difference and division in the community. Today, the zoot suit captures the expression of resistance for the identity of a subculture that is simultaneously in opposition to (by marking its difference) and appeal to (making claims to reputation) its wider cultural setting. It has become a fashion with historical ethnic references that works the stage of representation through clothed expressions of social roles.

"Re-enactments": Break-Dancing Contests"

The other up-and-coming contest was the "break-dancing contest." Break dancing was a popularized form of dancing in hip hop culture which developed on the East Coast in the late 1970s. Its trademark was the kinetic transfer of isolated body movements. The participants in this contest are teenagers, in groups or individually, of both sexes from the ages of twelve to eighteen [Figure 1.6]. The teenagers often saw break-dancing as providing benefits similar to those of low riding -- through a good "bad" performance that required skill and dedication on their parts.

"Re-enactments": Car Hopping Contests

One contest that was and continues to be professionally oriented, aside from the judging of the show cars, is the car hopping contest. Battery powered hydraulic lifts are operated to make the cars hop up and down in an attempt to achieve the greatest distance from the ground, usually in the range of twenty-four inches [Figure 1.7, 1.8]. While the zoot suit contests and the dance contests could be judged by the crowd, the hopping contest requires measurement by a judge with witnesses [Figure 1.9]. This is in part because car hopping contests often award cash prizes in addition to trophies.

Figure 1.6   Breakdancing

Figure 1.7   Batteries for hydraulic lifts

Figure 1.8   Chevy in the middle of hopping contest

Figure 1.9   Car hopping judges and equipment

Zoot Suits, Popular Culture and the idea of Re-Enactments

In these car show performances, the family was represented in its multiple social relationships. For a moment, family members made the transformation into social figures, although it appeared that the zoot suit culture had difficulty encompassing the identity of women. The men performed as professional and "bad." The children were seen as decorative and "bad." The women's performances were problematic and, while they often remained behind the scenes as part of the production, they continued to negotiate their performances and participation. In this way a series of performative roles were enacted. As they were drawn from historical figures and low rider popular culture, then we can say that they were re-enacted. From the structure of performances, we see that the term "family" is used to refer to an organization in which the full spectrum of family members performed functions and roles. Hence, when low riders said, "It's a family thing," they meant not just that the whole family was involved, but that the whole family as a whole was represented. I interpret this to mean that the benefits of performance are shared by all.

"Pancho Claus"

The creation and emphasis on a positive identity also facilitated the re-enactment of these aspects in a locally produced play, "Pancho Claus"[12] in which Santa has eight low riders instead of reindeer. This play utilized popular symbols from Chicano public life in order to communicate themes of love, respect and sharing to Mexican American children while also exposing Mexican American children to live theater. It was

performed annually first in Houston, and then in other towns and cities throughout south Texas.

Constrictions

The decline of Houston low riding significantly increased in 1986 in the midst of the local 1985-1987 recession. The Latin Attractions, one of the most visible clubs in 1984, disbanded. Joe Coleman attributed the decline to two primary factors, the economy and people's lack of good jobs, and the increasing mood that discouraged events featuring public alcohol consumption. The public influence of "temperance" groups such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving meant that low rider shows, which had historically been sponsored by beer companies, were less attractive to local merchants as publicity venues. Houston's recession coincided with the hiatus in the publication of Low Rider Magazine and its promotion and sponsorship of car shows.[13] Whatever the constraints, the 1986-1988, 1989 period was a slow one for low riding and there were few organized low rider events during this time. One important result was the decline not just in low rider clubs and low rider events, but also in low rider related businesses, such as hydraulics shops, low rider bike shops, and Coleman's zoot suit business. This ultimately meant a dilution of the symbols and performances that had been the focus of so much low rider symbolic activity.

New Generations

During the period of decline in low rider activity, customized minitrucks became the favored vehicle among young Chicano customizers, including those who had been bike customizers during low riding's heyday or whose fathers had belonged to low rider

clubs. These young customizers, like their counterparts in other cities, maintained cruising and congregating in parking lots as their primary activities and hence they were not severely effected during the decline.

Low rider car clubs who wanted to remain active were forced to seek other show venues and sometimes other car styles. For example, the Houston City Cruisers who branched off from Los Magnificos in 1985 began attending International Show Car Association car shows which accept and judge all types of cars and levels of customizing, not just low riders. In 1989 the Houston City Cruisers sponsored a softball tournament instead of a car show. Los Magnificos diversified its membership and its car shows. Of its twenty eight members in 1990, 12 had low riders, 5 had Volkswagens, 10 owned minitrucks and one owned a hot rod. While they have managed to sponsor a car show every year since 1982, 90 percent of the 70 entries at their 1989 annual car show were hot rods, a change unthinkable in 1984.

Closing Comments

It appears then that the low rider scene in 1984 was an culmination of what had come before it in terms of both the organization of people and the organization of symbols. It also appears that Houston's low riding community was the result of recent migration. With its participants spread throughout the city and without the depth of local social and familial ties that low riders often have in other places, the idea of low riding as a "family thing" took on added emphasis. It is hard to know what it might have happened in Houston if it had not been for the oil industry recession, which appears to have had, at least temporarily, devastating effects. It is possible to understand the

constellation of symbols and performances that constituted low riding at that time as constitutive of a positive identity, organized around largely male interests and symbols. Low riding was understood, in its multiple performances, not only as an interest and entertainment, but as providing benefits for all.

The media was an important source for low riding style and events in Houston. Even the adoption of zoot suit contests for car shows was understood as having originated with low riding itself, particularly in California. But the performance, the re-enactments nevertheless served as an important ground for constructing a local leisure community. In this, it is similar to low riding scenes in other urban areas outside of California. It suggests that with the largely fragmented experiences of Mexican Americans living urban centers, elements of low riding culture can serve as important stylistic sources for creating social and symbolic communities.

Notes: Chapter One

1. The video was made in 1983, long before music videos began to feature singers dressed up in zoot suits.

2.   These themes were reiterated during the course of my fieldwork.

3. In distinguishing performance and ritual, Abrahams notes, "Both performance and ritual draw on the abrogation of order, but the former will most commonly break social rules in some way, while the latter creates more of a cosmic mess" (1977,107).

4.   Working class experience - especially among migratory and minority populations - means participating in a larger, urban whole. This necessitates certain kinds of self-consciousness concerning commodities and buying power, visibility, employability, forms of discrimination and dominant assumptions, as well as one's relation to less fortunate populations. See Chapter 2 and Harvey 1985.

5. Doria owns a paint and body shop called "Doria's Low Rider Shop."

6. See Placencia 1983. I will discuss the adoption of symbols in the next section. The rise of the low rider movement come on the political heels of the late 1960's with the rise of the Chicano movement. In the late 1970s several movies about Mexican-Americans were released. The play "Zoot Suit" was first performed in 1978 and in 1981 released as a movie. The publication of Chicano literature increased in this time, and Low Rider Magazine distribution commenced in January 1977.

7. Rodriguez 1993:110. See also Shelton, Rodriguez, etal. 1989. Houston's Latino population, while diverse, remains primarily of Mexican origin. There is a significant working-class Mexican American population.

8. Car clubs exhibited some of the contradictions inherent in the large scale-small scale juxtaposition. Many lowriders had family in the area and often preferred to be in organizations with kin. One person would often join a club, and then later leave to start up his own club in conjunction with a brother or cousin.

9. Although the first Super Car Show, sponsored in part by the Magazine, was held in San Antonio in 1980, Houston's first Super Show was not until January of 1984. After a hiatus that lasted until 1990, the annual Texas Low Rider Super Show now alternates between Houston and Dallas.

10. This earlier inclusion of teenage breakdancing groups and lowrider bike customizers enabled a segue to the current generation of lowriders and minitruck owners with its music/rap emphasis, as seen in contemporary car stereo "sound off" contests.

11. Zoot Suit" collapses two incidents of historical importance in Los Angeles. The first, the Sleepy Lagoon Incident, began August 2, 1942, when Jose Diaz was found dead in a barrio swimming hole. Members of the 38th Street Gang had been reported in the vicinity the night of Diaz's death. Twenty two members were arrested and stood mass trial, a sad and unusual event in U.S. judicial history.

The second historical incident was the Zoot Suit Riots referred to in the last scene, which occurred during a week in June 1943. There had been mounting tensions between service men stationed east of the barrio and young Mexican Americans. According to Ricardo Romo, the enlisted men "considered the youngsters from the barrio as draft resisters" and the "Mexican Americans resented the constant traffic of soldiers and sailors in their community." On the night of June 3, 1943, fighting broke out between Mexican gang members and sailors near a dance hall in Venice. Over the next few days, sailors sought out and beat any zoot suiters they could find. See Romo and Mazón.

The play (and film) had a dual emphasis. It was "for the positive, internal reactions of pride, dignity and self assertion" as much as it was "against social and racial injustice." Valdez understood the oppression faced by zoot suiters as being against the clothes they wore and the "race" they represented. Therefore, the zoot suit became the organizing symbol for the expression of his ideas.

12. "Pancho Claus" by Richard Reyes and El Teatro Bilingue de Houston was first performed in 1981.

13. Low Rider Magazine went bankrupt in 1985 and resumed publication under new ownership in 1988.

Chapter 2

REMAPPINGS: LOS ANGELES LOW RIDERS

Introduction

With a teenage life, there are so many roads you can take, and I chose this one

[car customizing]. It brought me closer with my family and my dad in building

the car. (Dukes Car Club member)

If I hadn't been into cars, I probably would have ended up in a gang.

(Lifestyles Car Club member)

In Los Angeles, Mexican American car customizers often map the possible paths

of their lives as having been decided in an adolescent choice between gangs or cars.

What is for many a long personal involvement with cars is narrated to the ethnographer

as a "choice," as one road of possibility taken instead of another which would have been

more limiting. The road of gang membership involves one in a locally-based community

where neighborhood, cohort and identity converge and must be protected. The other,

low riding, involves one with others from all over the city in both cooperative and

competitive networks.

In this male-dominated popular culture, not only is the development of skills

important, but so is the participation in a variety of social networks for manipulating

commodities and creating symbolic circuits. Low rider car club members describe the

art of customizing and the organization of the club as giving one mobility and providing options for employment, camaraderie, leisure, public display and cultural pride, and ultimately pleasure. These car customizers contrast their organizations to gangs, narrating gang membership as a dead end, limiting at best in terms of social affiliations and, at worst, as a road to incarceration.

Quite often the conditions conducive to youth gang involvement are concentrated in the early teenage years, especially in junior high or middle school, as social cliques develop but before driving or working become real alternatives. To be sure, gang membership and car customizing are not exclusive activities. In working class and poor neighborhoods, adolescent males engage in both, but extensive modifications are discouraged both by cost and by the potential violence of gang conflicts. After high school, the intensity of gang participation can abate. Often then, contrary to popular impressions of car-based activities as part of teenage youth culture, the car becomes an increasingly important locus for symbolic and social activity.[1] The opening quotes are representative of narratives told by car club members ranging from 20 to 35 years of age.

Cars, Mobility and Territory

Having a car does not necessarily give a man the mobility he desires. On a Saturday night soon after the airing of the Rodney King tape in March of 1991, many Chicanos out on Hollywood Boulevard admitted to also having been harassed by the police or witness to a severe beating similar to the one King received at the hands of the Los Angeles Police Department. A lesson many learned prior to the publicized beating of Rodney King is that a man of color driving a car is not necessarily free to move about

the city as he pleases. Latinos and blacks have long been subject to strict surveillance and delimited mobility. As policeman Bruce Jackson set out to prove in Long Beach, California in 1989, a black man driving an old car through a predominantly anglo cum middle- or upper-middle class neighborhood is likely to be stopped and harassed, as Jackson was by the Long Beach Police Department.

This chapter addresses the relationship between territory, mobility and self-representation as configured in car customizing in Los Angeles. For low riders, the automobile is the center of a constellation of cultural practices, a mobile canvas for cultural representation and critique. In this chapter I will examine how low rider car culture has created an alternate cultural space for performance, participation and interpretation. The presence of such a cultural alternative allows for the reworking of the limitations of mobility placed on racialized cultures in the United States, especially in a city such as Los Angeles with the legacy of surveillance and conflicts between racial minorities and the police. Following Jules-Rosette (1985), I suggest that "deterritorialized" culture is often symbolically remapped in people's uses of material forms. This work is done symbolically through performance in the world of commodities, social networks, and popular culture.

Underpinning the restrictions on the spatial mobility of racially marked men are notions of class mobility in United States culture. Sherry Ortner (1991) argues that given the lack of explicit discourse on class in the United States, concerns about class are often displaced onto race, ethnicity and gender. She reveals that there is a great deal of talk about mobility in which class is coded into these other terms. Continuing anxieties about

class coded in terms of race and culture in the United States serve to reinforce de facto segregation. Operating in conjunction with cultural codes are three major factors contributing to the segregation of neighborhoods according to members of the same ethnicity/race and class. They are patterns of industrialization, de-industrialization and re-industrialization; residential settlement patterns originally controlled through legalized racial segregation and later by Anglo out-migration or "white flight"; and continuing police enforcement of racial boundaries as criminal boundaries.[2]

The reproduction of segregation can be seen in United States ethnographies. Ortner contends that generally anthropologists have ethnicized populations within the United States, their accounts tending to exoticize and isolate spatially and culturally those they study. While granting communities a certain amount of authenticity on their own grounds, such studies tend not to problematize cultural separations or the conditions of inequality under which they are produced. Instead, the studies replicate segregation with the result that cultural separations appear natural.

Los Angeles is a site of central importance in low rider popular culture. As the city with the largest population of Mexican descent outside of Mexico City, it has long been one of the largest and liveliest centers of low riding in the United States. I had gone to Los Angeles in order to research low riding there and to learn more about its history. Given that people in Houston had often said that low riders in Los Angeles were to some extent affiliated with gangs, I also hoped to learn what relationship, if any, low riding had with gang participation.

Given my research topic, from the start it was impossible for me to spatially and

culturally isolate my subject. In fact, in the beginning of my Los Angeles field research, it was even difficult for me to locate low riders. The first day Tom and I drove into Montebello to look for an apartment, I saw a customized 1957 Chevrolet. It was the last low rider I was to see for a while. I spent the first few weeks or so on the phone, trying to locate networks and setting up interviews before I ever talked to someone involved in low riding. Eventually I made connections that proved fruitful and met a wide range of people with important knowledge about the low riding scene, about Low Rider Magazine, about the history of low riding, and about gang participation in Los Angeles. Car shows proved to be the easiest place to meet low riders.[3] For a while, cruising was popular on Whittier Boulevard a half block from our apartment. When the Montebello police began blockading the street, the low riders, mini-trucks and motorbikes were rerouted up our street. After months of being thwarted by the police, they went somewhere else.

In contrast to my previous research in Houston, fieldwork in Los Angeles was difficult. While in Houston, some key people decided to trust me and cultivate my understandings of their lives and activities. In Los Angeles, I felt that the history of surveillance of Chicanos by dominant Anglo society made people more suspicious of my motives and protective of their privacy. Surveillance combined with racial segregation served to make my interest in Los Angeles low riders somewhat anomalous. Some people wondered if I was an undercover police woman. Many treated my as they would a magazine reporter, telling me their stories in a somewhat guarded manner. Others of course, were quite open and gracious with their ideas and their time. My experience in Los Angeles was that of working a highly contested zone.

Through the research process, the question that emerged is what is the relationship of the process of segregation and surveillance to art and cultural identity? How do we account for these processes in the United States? Often representations of popular culture categorized as "folk art" and "ethnic art" are interpreted as mere "reflections" of cultural values, rather than produced by people acting in complex political and economic circumstances. In order to counter these limitations, it is important to explore the relationship of cultural representations to social geographies as part of the historical material conditions under which they are produced.

In east and central Los Angeles gangs have historically attempted to control their areas, their streets, borders and resources in a hostile, racially divided environment. In contrast, cars and car clubs have provided a means for young men to transgress and transcend limited territories. With increased urban migrations after World War II greater ethnic mixing occurred. As car ownership increased in this era, car clubs developed among all groups in this era and began to participate in youth culture, especially music and dances. Many early car clubs took their names from popular bands and lyrics. In Los Angeles, I learned that cars constitute an important cultured object for the examination of territory, mobility and self-representation.

Car-based experiences among Chicano and Black men serve to create the car as a site of resistance. They understand the police actions taken against them as indicating assumptions about race, behavior and buying power. For Mexican Americans the displacing and the "othering" experience of surveillance converges with a working-class socio-economic position that quite often necessitates buying second-hand cars and cultural

traditions that emphasize craft skills and tinkering on objects in order to make them pleasurable. In commercial advertising the new automobile has 'always already' been located within a narrative economy that promises its owner the potential pleasures of expression, experience and travel based upon aesthetic choice and buying power. These locations of selves and objects are taken up and contested in the imagery of many low rider cars. The cars then become the place where the symbolic field is entered and pleasurable scenarios are imagined and created.

An example of this can be seen in Figure 2.1. Frozen in a field of red, the mural painted on a Chicano's low rider displays an image of itself, a classy '65 Chevrolet Caprice convertible, parked in front of a fashionable upscale restaurant. The top is down, and the car is empty. Behind it, a policeman stands next to his police car, eyeing this beautifully customized automobile. The owner is inside enjoying the cuisine while the policeman is outside at work. What occurs on the trunk of this car is a significant transformation, an inversion. The image creates a moment in which the car arrests, seduces and transforms the surveillant gaze of the law enforcer. The look of the law is symbolically transformed by the owner's creation at the moment of his recreation.

The car in this image has been lowered, restored and customized. In the mural, the owner stages his own interpretation of the meaning of the car, that the 'crafted' revival of the automobile is an act of culturally distinctive labor that produces the pleasures of sociality. As the objects of narratives, these cars enact the meanings of a man's working-class life which is for the most part oriented around highly gendered realms of activity, sociality and authority (Willis 1977). The cars are most often

Figure 2.1   '65 Chevrolet Caprice convertible
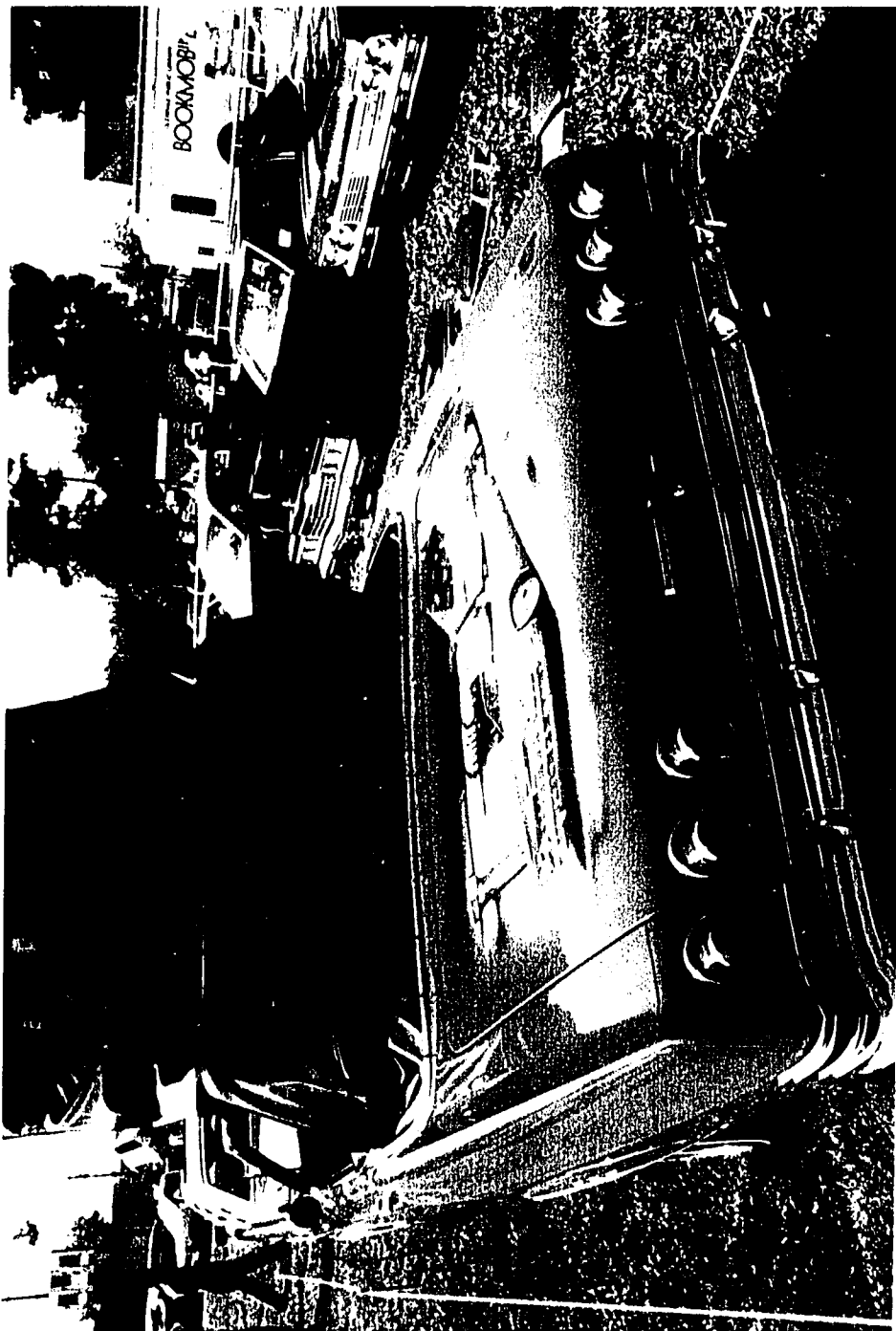
second-hand and customized to be luxurious while retaining their "outsider" distinctions by modifying both customizing fads and market definitions of automobile aesthetics.

On the '65 Chevrolet described there are important traces of the multiple confrontations that engage Chicano low riders in the making of their pleasure places. In the introduction to Homeboys (1978), cars are identified as an important source of conflict in the lives of barrio families. The family car is second-hand, often breaks down and cannot be repaired immediately. The police get involved with the family through traffic warrants. Barrio residents are regularly stopped and given citations for minor violations, or simply stopped so that a warrant search can be done on their vehicle. Hence law enforcement and education are major sites of conflict with the larger Anglo society, but frictions are also apparent in deportations and urban uprisings. In the mural conflict is depicted in the image of police surveillance, notorious in Los Angeles for its racial bias. The racial distribution of the Los Angeles Police Department inverts that of the population of the city and county. The mural suggests the most obvious and easily representable experience of racially experienced institutional control and repression, but one that is related in important ways to the marginalizing of Latino and African American men by demonizing and criminalizing as well as exoticizing them in institutions and the media. The rhetoric of criminalization in Los Angeles has been historically and cynically localized in the bodies of men of color in central and East Los Angeles. As described by Mike Davis, 1950s Los Angeles Police Chief Parker, "invoked racialized crime scares to justify his tireless accumulation of power...[He] constantly and self-servingly projected the specter of a vast criminal reservoir in South Central

L.A...held in check by an outnumbered but heroically staunch 'Blue line'" (Davis 1990:295).

In Figure 2.1, the owner transforms the fact of being under surveillance into the pleasure of being watched. He transforms himself pictorially from being the despised object of social control into an envied subject acting out his own desires. Here the desire is to control not only social assets and the exercise of pleasure, but their staging as well. This is the affective redundancy of the mural -- first, the car's customizing relocates it within the symbolic material system of cars. The mural then serves as a performance of its meaning. In the mural, the car is located within a material luxury economy of pleasure (a convertible car, a luxury restaurant, and a beautiful date) and all within a dialogue on social power. In the image, at least, "the gaze" directed at the car owner is one of envy and desire, not scorn and discipline.

The mural provides perhaps the most succinct manifestation of "simulation." As defined by Celeste Olalquiaga, simulation is "the establishment of a situation through intertextuality instead of indexicality. In other words, rather than pointing to first-degree references (objects, events), simulation looks at representations of them (images, texts) for verisimilitude" (1992:6). Car murals locate truth not in actual objects or events, but in the retelling or simulation of these objects and events. The red car alters the surveillant moment so pervasive in relations with the police and in media coverage of minorities. It places in its stead a moment of consumptive pleasure.

In the wide range of low rider self-images, this mural succinctly expresses the important transformative experiences that low rider cars are seen as enabling. In Los

Angeles, they are both "objects of" and "objects for" social pleasure. They are snap shots that stage a performances of self-imagined identity enacted against an inverted background of cultural stereotypes and racially marked experiences. The automobile, an object that traditionally makes Chicanos the objects of surveillance and subjects them to the power of bureaucratic tyranny (Moore 1978, Stone 1990), can be transformed through the skills of symbolic manipulation, money, hard work and creativity into a vehicle of possibility, pleasure and resistance.

Car customizing exhibits complex interrelations between consumer culture, surveillance, gendered race and class positions, and craft skills. Focusing on the interplay between class, territory and consumer culture, in this essay I will examine the ways in which the automobile is made the object of subjectivity. As a form of popular culture, low riding provides an important example of how cultural forms emerge out of contradiction and interrelated cultural arenas. As will be shown, the car is a locus for playing out the contradictions of consumer culture. The form is drawn from the cultural arenas of generational relationships, industry and craft skills, youth culture, and institutional relationships. The hallmark of popular culture, as Andrew Ross notes, is its dialectical appeal to both self-respect and cultural authority. This is accomplished through both complicity and decentering strategies (Ybarra-Frausto, 1991). In this, style becomes a means to symbolically control the contradictions between Chicano experience (confrontations with the law and bureaucracies, stereotyping by the press, etc.) and dominant culture roles generally denied them. What emerges from this examination of automobile culture is a picture of the difficulties of breaking out of neighborhood,

ethnicity and class. Popular culture serves as a means to do this. It is a forum for cultural participation. The pleasures depicted in the scenes of low rider popular culture are a great deal more than epiphenomenal, superficial adornments of an impoverished life.

In what follows, I will attempt to construct a genealogy of the present for low riding, for which Los Angeles is a particularly important site. After introducing low rider cars and their place in the landscape of Los Angeles, I will examine Chicano narratives of neighborhood, cars and male identities in the 1950s. The second part presents the development of Mexican American car clubs, car customizing and low riding in the 1960s and 1970s. Next, an analysis of car murals provides a look at the self-images and cultural critiques of the metropolis characteristic of low riding creations in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Finally, I will elaborate the implications of this research for remapping the concerns of anthropology.

I.

The Places of Pleasure

The ultimate world-historical significance -- and oddity -- of Los Angeles is that it has come to play the double role of utopia and dystopia for advanced capitalism.   (Mike Davis, City of Quartz)

For many, industrial Los Angeles nevertheless remains a contradiction in terms.

(Edward Soja, Postmodern Geographies)

Los Angeles is known worldwide for its wealthy film and television industries, its stars and its conspicuous consumption. However, the television coverage of the insurrection in the wake of the King verdict in May 1992 created a shocking reminder that Los Angeles is also an industrial city subject to all of the class and racialized struggles that typify capitalist industry. As an industrial city, it exhibits the characteristic geographies of two urban revolutions. First, like other industrial cities, Los Angeles concentrated residents and factories, capital and labor within it. Second, Los Angeles too experienced a "postindustrial revolution" that diffused production and population. The second process, as described by Mollenkopf, "has dismantled the mosaic of blue collar ethnic segmentation which developed within the occupational and residential order of older industrial cities. This mosaic has largely given way to a new central-city mosaic dominated by more recent, lower-status minority groups, particularly Blacks and Hispanics" (Mollenkopf 1983:13). The major effects of de-industrialization are the loss of blue-collar manufacturing jobs and an increase in non-unionized, minimum wage employment that often favors illegal immigrants.[4] This "new central city" in Los Angeles is noticeably absent from popular positive representations of the city and eludes the understanding of most non-residents as well (Moore 1978:20, Wilkerson 1992, LATimes). Instead, following de-industrialization the area composed of the old central manufacturing district and the working class and poor neighborhoods that surround and permeate it, is most often featured in the press as a site producing racialized poverty, desperation and criminality or occasionally aspiration and assimilation.[5]

Mexican American settlement in Los Angeles results from two patterns. The

initial segregation of Anglos, Blacks and Chicanos in the early 1900s confined Blacks to the south central area while limiting Chicanos to downtown East Side neighborhoods. The subsequent evacuation of Whites from central and eastern Los Angeles has meant a greater intermixing of Blacks and Latinos in south-central, while the Eastside and the suburban cities to the east are primarily Mexican American and Latin American (Lipsitz 1991, Griswold del Castillo 1991, McWilliams 1946, Collins 1980). Currently third and fourth generation Mexican American populations are found throughout Los Angeles County, especially in the San Fernando Valley to the northeast; Glendale, Pasadena and South Pasadena (El Cereno) to the north; East Los Angeles, Boyle Heights and Lincoln Heights at the center; Montebello, Pico Rivera, El Monte, Baldwin Park, La Puente, and La Habra to the east; South Gate, Watts and Compton to the south; and Pomona, San Bernadino and Riverside to the far east.

"Cruising" in one's best car on a favorite boulevard takes place in many of these areas. Each has its own local "loop," or route, for meeting people and being seen. There are also a few cruising strips famous throughout the city. Until 1979, Whittier Boulevard in East Los Angeles was the premier cruising strip for Chicanos. Especially in the 1960s and 1970s, they came from a five-county area -- Los Angeles, San Bernadino, Riverside, Orange and San Diego -- to cruise Whittier Boulevard where it cuts through the heart of the largest Chicano barrio, East Los Angeles. As the Chicano part of town it was a "safe" place for them to cruise and congregate without the worries of conflicts and infractions from Anglos and Blacks. Whittier Boulevard was once the most important place -- where La Raza, the people, came together to have a good time, in cars that

showed that they "had it together," and where those who were able competed with each other's cars to have the nicest ride. At the height of its popularity thousands of people would come on Friday and Saturday nights to cruise bumper to bumper until early in the morning. As described by R. Rodriguez,

> ...(C)ruising was a tradition...it was a Chicano alternative to Disneyland. It brought Raza together from all parts of Southern California. It was unequalled entertainment for a minimal price. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that love and romance flourished on the Boulevard. (Rodriguez ND:23)

Ostensibly worried about the violent impact "Boulevard Nights," a movie released in 1979 about cruising and street violence, would have on the cruising scene, the L.A. County Sheriffs brutally closed down the Boulevard over the weekend of March 23-25, 1979 by cordoning it off and sending in armed police. There were over one hundred police and at least four hundred arrests, more than four times the arrests of a normal weekend. Whittier Boulevard was never reopened to cruising. With the closing of Whittier Boulevard the only major cruising strip in a Chicano-dominated area was abolished one night and with it the chance for Chicanos to cruise in a place that felt like it was theirs. Now, on Friday and Saturday nights, they are among the young men and women who come from all areas to cruise Hollywood and Sunset Boulevards. On Hollywood and Sunset the cruising scene, made up of a broad mix of youths from all races and all areas of town and with all varieties of cars, dates back several generations. In this well-known part of town, local police and sheriffs monitor the traffic but have never peremptorily closed off these streets.

II.

The Pasts of Pleasure

1. Old Maps: Cars, Neighborhoods and Youth Culture in 1950s Los Angeles

In an 1979 Low Rider Magazine article, Manuel Cruz lists some of the places that 'la gente' liked to recreate in Los Angeles after World War II. They were mostly public places, like Lincoln Park, Olvera Street, and Old Chinatown. Families would travel out of their neighborhoods in Los Angeles to Rancho Daniel, to the rivers and beaches. By contrast, the scenes they left behind within the barrios was often more conflicted for at this time Los Angeles was legally racially segregated.

"La Vida Loca": Cars, Gangs and Neighborhoods

Max Rodriguez grew up as a member of the 38th Street Gang in the 38th Street area of central Los Angeles in the 1950s. This gang is dramatically depicted as the defendant in the Sleepy Lagoon trial in Luis Valdez's play (1978) and movie (1980), Zoot Suit. Their area was a couple of blocks wide, and many more deep. They were separated from Blacks to the east by a commuter rail line running down Long Beach. To the west a freight line running down Alameda separated them from White Huntington Park, a town they were allowed to enter only on Friday nights and Saturday afternoons to use the movie theater. In Rodriquez's words, "we had the tracks, the dump and a park, which because it was too small for three neighborhoods, we divided up between ourselves."

In this restricted territory and in the gang, Rodriguez learned to protect his turf and his reputation which rested on the embodied values of manhood and responsibility.

In the 38th Street area, as in many other barrios, territory functioned as a cultural resource that corresponded to familial and cohort loyalties and had to be protected by barrio youth. Territory and identity overlapped with reputation as the index of one's ability to secure boundaries.

Rodriguez's family had moved to Los Angeles from the mines around Bisby in southern Arizona. His family settled near other members of his father's family. His primary responsibilities as a youth were earning his own money and making the area safe for his family and sisters. He often worked several jobs. At one time, he worked for a local grocery, swept out the school, and on his way home would steal beer to sell to his father's friends when they came over at night to play craps.

To get to school, the kids in his area had to walk through areas that were designated as "belonging" to others. The boys had to fight their way to school, then they fought their way back home. The important result of the boys' reputations manifested in their willingness to defend themselves and their families, especially their sisters. "There are a lot of girls alive today because we were there...Other than ranching, it was the best way to grow up. That way, you grew up as a man, not giving any shit, but not taking any either." Protecting the neighborhood was central to male identity. In this setting a boy's male cohorts -- usually neighbors and relatives -- constituted an important source of friendship and allies in securing the neighborhood. This reinforced the notion of manhood as one of male bonding and responsibility to one's family, one's neighborhood and one's cohort group. The privileges of mastering this gendered identity of earning and protecting were substantial -- autonomy in one's behavior and authority

over the neighborhood and the women in it.

In Rodriguez's youth cars were an important part of barrio life. Barrio boys could distinguish residents' cars from outsiders. For the boys, they were more than just transportation, they were markers of identity. Neighbors often hired them to watch the cars when there were parties. They were identified with their owner, and by extension, with both his "home" turf and his cohort. But they were also a source of adventure -- either forays into other areas, cruising, searching for girls, for drag racing, and when necessary, for quick get-aways. Rodriguez bought his first low rider, a '49 black Ford, in 1955. He was sixteen. He spent the next eleven months customizing it, marking it as his, making it into a low rider. First he C-framed it, then he inverted the springs, removed the shocks, reversed the rims, louvered the hood and added lights, had the engine bored out and replaced it with a full cam race engine, and added side pipes to mellow the tones of the engine's roar. The interior had roll and tuck upholstery, rabbit fur, and white pearl on the dashboard. He installed wheels on the bumper so he could race down Alameda and scrape at the same time, without ruining the bumper.

As a teenage member of the 38th Street Gang, Rodriguez was considered a "vato loco." In his generation, this meant he was "a very serious person, respectable person, [but] very dangerous, very dangerous. A vato loco could be a judge, could be a lawyer... [Most of all, he was] very dangerous and very respectable."[6] After Rodriguez's father left his mother, young Rodriguez had to drive her over to his sister's house in Florence, an area south of the 38th Street area. At that time, a gang from Clover barrio was "pulling a raid" on a gang from Florence, putting Florence on the

lookout for outsider cars. They stopped Rodriguez in his '46 Oldsmobile called "the big brown dog," and asked him where he was from. "38th" was the reply. "Prove it," he was told. "By tomorrow you'll be dead," he responded ominously. The point was that 38th's word, '*la palabra*,' was good, and to question it was to force them to prove it, often with serious consequences.

Rodriguez's story is typical, one where a "crazy guy" (*vato loco*) is respected and feared. as he negotiates life on the streets, "*la vida loca*" (the crazy life). But it is a story that holds little in common with bourgeois rationality. In his story, there is no mirroring of the bourgeois relationships between work and reward, where the work itself is rewarding emotionally and/or monetarily. Instead, it is a life on the streets, dangerous with few financial rewards. One is encouraged to gamble, to operate on a model not based on bourgeois rationality where hard work pays off, as a means of legitimating your own imagination and desire.

Landscapes of Memory: Clothing, Gangs and Neighborhoods

There are other stories of growing up in Los Angeles that emphasize different aspects of the crazy life. North of 38th, up in the barrio of Lopez Maravilla, the situation was similar. In the fifties, before the freeways were built, Lopez was bounded by hills on one side and a dump on another. The local boys controlled the dump, which they saw as a resource. As L. Cordova told me,

> We were raised with the dump. We used to get clothing from there, we used to
>
> get food, like fruit half rotten, cut the bad part off, eat the rest, shoes, empty jars
>
> for glasses, broken furniture that we would patch up. Just about every family

around here would go up. And guys, we used to charge guys to go up there. Or when they would come down, we used to see what they got, you know, take some of their stuff. We used to cross the hill to Monterrey Park. Sometimes we would score, because it was nothing but white [people] everywhere. So we used to go through the rivers and then go into the community and get the clothing from the clothes lines, and we had pretty good clothes. Or else we'd find this big camp of boy scouts. We used to raid them take their shoes off and everything, and we'd have brand new shoes, boots, and tennies."[6]

But in 1971, some twenty years later, these same men continued to exhibit a strong connection to their neighborhood. Contained in the landscape of memory is the struggle of poverty and imposed racial boundaries, all creating a landscape of identity in which the contours of identity are metonymically recalled, through houses, streets, ruins and the absences created by the freeways.

In Cordova's telling, the contours of identity are created not only by the boundaries of territory, but by markers of conflicts as well. Born in 1938, Cordova thought he was lucky;

I was lucky that some of my uncles were pachucos...And, one of my uncles used to take me with him and I was able to see when they were getting beat up by the sailors.(11) I remember when, once when they used to beat up the Ku Klux Klan. The Ku Klux Klan used to meet over at Arnold's Hair...The pachucos used to go over there with bats and all kinds of stuff, chase them out of town. So I was lucky to be able to see that, that part. My generation was the last one

to dress sort of like the pachucos. After that the baggies came in.[7]

In this landscape, generations of clothing also become the territory of memory 'vested' with signs of conflict, resistance and necessary manhood. First, pachucos and zoot suits.[8] Then vato locos and baggies (high pants with pleats). Now low riders and cholos wear zoot suits and baggies. In this way, clothing has become another terrain of tradition kept by subsequent generations. And yet, landscapes of memory vary for each generation. At each remove from immigrant experience, ethnic and familial enclave, and historical conflicts, technology and media present new memories and possibilities.

2.   Overlays: Car Clubs, Cruising and Customizing in 1960s and 1970s Los Angeles Youth (A)venues. In Fifties Los Angeles, teenage groups were critically aware of the "others" around them. Susie Turner, then an "Okie" teenager, contends that her group worked hard to distinguish themselves from Chicanos and Blacks via cars, dress and language, and suggest that this was a response, in part, to the low status that Okies had in Los Angeles.[9] Yet in this period among youth, there was racial mixing as well as boundary maintenance. As Lipsitz demonstrates in his article on Los Angeles minorities and rock and roll, the mass migrations caused by the post-war industrial boom in Los Angeles had the effect of producing unprecedented interethnic mixing. They also brought "radically new social formations that encouraged the development of alternative forms of cultural expression" (Lipsitz 1989:269). Crucial connections were made during this period between teens' cultural productions and the craft expertise of their parents. Aero-industry workers influenced surfboard construction, as auto-industry workers influenced and perpetuated car customizing, and a combination of the two influenced car

racing.[10] From this nexus of industry and youth culture in Los Angeles emerged the rod and custom car magazines, such as <u>Motor Trend</u>, <u>Rod and Custom</u>, and now <u>Low Rider Magazine</u> that support and encourage car customizers inside and outside the United States. Simultaneously, as Lipsitz details, rock and roll mobilized youth across racial, class and ethnic lines. This mobilization occurred through the music and dance, integrated performance venues, at clubs in working class parts of town, and at the cruising strips and diners found in all parts of Los Angeles. In this milieu, cars became integral to youth culture activities.

<u>Car Clubs</u>

The tremendous growth of car ownership in the fifties meant the development of an alternate form of group membership -- that presented by car clubs. To give one example in 1954 some teenagers from the barrio of Tortilla Flats in East Los Angeles did not want to belong to the local gang. They approached Mike Duran, a local ex-gang member then working as a counselor for Juvenile Hall, and they asked him to sponsor them as a social club.

> "Why me?" [I asked.] They said, "You started college, you're smart, and
>
> besides that, you're tough enough to face up to my brothers. So if you told them
>
> to lay off of us, they probably would. We want to start a club." So they started
>
> a club called the "Honeydrippers" and for that time, it was the best organized
>
> club in L.A... They considered themselves a car club, except in those days, not
>
> everybody had a car. So how can you be a car club if not everybody's got a
>
> car?...Of the whole group [of 25], maybe ten people had a car. They were all

working to raise money to buy their cars and so in between, ...they would have

can good drives and give out baskets to the needy and this kind of stuff.

In this discussion, "getting it together" in terms of money, saving, craft and group

cooperation that focuses activity on individual ownership, community benefit and

sponsorship created the possibility of a new context for "social" activity. The

development of youth car culture enabled the active invention of, and participation in,

an alternate landscape of socializing, rock and roll, and dances.

In the Fifties, in part because car clubs were breaking out of being territory

based, members began to forge ties with other clubbers. As Mike Duran said,

One thing about the car clubs too, once they became social in nature, they started

saying, "we ought to break up this crap about being prejudiced towards other

races." The guys from East Los Angeles would go to Whittier and talk with the

guys, talk it out with them and say, "Why can't we get together and be friends

instead of enemies, just because we're white and we're brown. We both love

cars as a common thing." [11]

Clubs and cruisers shared a common interest in cars. Both used them to transcend

territorial identities. The Dukes Car Club, begun in the late 1950s, officially started in

1962 by the Ruelas brothers and a handful of close friends from the 38th Street

Neighborhood. By 1965, they had a hundred members, mostly Mexican American, from

different parts of Los Angeles - the south side, the west side, the north and the east. The

Dukes were one of the few Latino car clubs to attend the early car shows thrown by

white R.G. Canning and the Tridents Car Club in the late fifties and early sixties. [12] Car

shows have became one arena where different racial groups participate together.

Cruising and Customizing

The low rider name "tag" was introduced in the sixties. It signified both the customizers and their rides. While the cars retained the low custom looks of the fifties, this was made problematic by a California State Vehicle code that states that no part of the chassis or car body may be below the bottom of the wheel rim. Low riders began installing hydraulics pumps on their cars which could raise or lower the chassis with the simple flip of a toggle switch. Originally an aircraft technology used to power wing flaps, and also used to power the tailgates of bobtail trucks (West 1976), hydraulics were first engineered for cars in the early sixties. One version of the story of their adaptation has it that they were adapted to cars when Joe Baline, a prominent local customizer, put them on a '59 Corvette in the early 1960s. After that, they grew in popularity. Not only did they enable lowered cars to travel at legal heights, but they were soon seen to have enormous performative and competitive potential.

On Whittier Boulevard, the cruising strip, a common sight was two cars heading opposite directions, hopping for each other in an automobile version of the dozens. Perhaps due to more sophisticated customizing and the flexibility of hydraulically powered movement, the popularity of low riding grew. The marker of this growth is most evident in the increase in car club numbers from two or three in the early sixties, to fifteen or so by 1970. The Boulevard generated its own forms of cultural expression, according to Ralph Perez:

I guess when you want a low rider, you want to be number one. You want to go

down the street and say out of five hundred cars out there low riding, you want to be number one out there, which these other guys out there just want to be the same...So the next thing you know, we were having contests who could jump the highest straight up and down, sideways, who could outlast somebody. And you know, it would just progress as you went on. And then they got into paint. Who had the best paint? People would spend $3000 on a paint job, $4000 on the interior, and another $5000 on chroming everything. So after a while, you spend a lot of money fixing up a car. Which you had your different categories. Guys who were working could afford it. Guys who weren't were just rims and tires and hydraulic suspensions and that was it.[13]

The cars were customized to Mexican American standards that challenged and minimized their status as mass produced objects and created them anew in the vision of their owners as unique objects of desire.[14] Techniques such as removing all manufacturing labels, chopping and channeling, cutting and welding side panels to bodies of different year models, or interchanging accessories and details such as putting '57 Cadillac tail lamps on a '62 Chevy Impala were employed to make each car the unique creation of its owner.

Sam Gomez joined the Dukes Car Club in 1979, the year of the first annual Low Rider Magazine car show. His car, a chopped '50 Mercury with '52 rear quarter panels (Figure 4), is a telling example of the technical sources, memories and cultural inspirations that low riders draw on. It is the combination of these that constitute the subtle moves that low riders use to subvert customizing categories as they inscribe

personal visions and memories onto their vehicles.

Gomez's family moved to Montebello, the first municipality east of unincorporated East Los Angeles, in 1971 from the White Fence area of East Los Angeles (Moore 1978). In 1973, when Sam was twelve, he briefly joined a local gang, but quickly got out. He traces his interest in cars to that same time.

1972, 1973 was when I got started with this interest. Now that's a young age, a really young age. With a teenage life there are so many roads you can take, and I chose this one. It brought me closer with my family and my dad in building the car.

In 1975, his father bought him his car, then in bad shape, from a used car lot [Figure 2.2]. They bought parts and accessories from area junk yards. They traded other parts with friends. They worked on it together for the next three years while Sam attended high school. The '50 Mercury has family meaning because Gomez's father had owned a '51 Mercury in the early days of his marriage. Home movies show the young couple and their car in a family caravan driving out to a nearby lake. Sam evokes his own "memory" as a suburban kid through the image of James Dean's car in the film "Rebel Without a Cause," which was also a '50 Mercury. In these two referents, Gomez invokes both his father's experiences as a young man, his family's past, as well as his own. Sam traces his rapport with the Dukes Car Club to the fact that his mom and dad grew up in the same area as the Dukes, the 38th Street area represented in the film "Zoot Suit."

Few of the older low rider clubs still cruise, largely because of the harassment

Figure 2.2   Customized '50 Mercury

they receive from the police. Currently most car clubber activities revolve around car shows, meetings and benefits. These have proved to provide two related features important to low riders. First, they are generally safe ground for groups getting together in that the cars are safe from defacement, their owners from harassment. Second, they provide an arena for competitive performances. In this way, cars represented the atomization and fragmentation of territory and identity. Even as vehicles are designed to "allow" transit for their occupants, low riders became a kind of "territory" in motion, designed not only for movement, but in their visual elaboration for "stasis" and performance as well. They are designed to make a place of themselves.

III.

Pictures of Pleasure: Contested Images and Safe Ground

Often, elements of imaginary geographies are used interchangeably as metaphors for more abstract distinctions. Sites become symbols (of good, evil, or nationalistic events), and in tandem with other sites can be taken up in metaphors to express (gendered) states of mind, of affairs and different value positions. (Shields 1991:29)

In this chapter I have discussed the car as a site of the imaginary, marking the coincidence of place and travel, of the self and the social, and of affect and performance. In discussing the "places" and the "pasts" of low riding, I have traced the integration of the car into the imaginary of the neighborhood and city as a social site (Vigil 1988). In this section, I would like to present how the imaginary is integrated onto the car via

murals. Here, imaginary geographies presented in the images map the male subject onto the "object" as such and thereby locate him in and create an alternative map of identity by way of the city.

For low riders, the car is a 'cultural vehicle' much as it is represented by Chicano artist Gilbert Lujan in his series entitled, "Cultural Vehicles." In these drawings, he depicts Chicano families in cars "on the road" in Aztlan, traversing landscapes constructed of Aztec monuments, Southwestern visages and city fragments. In his usage, the cars are both vehicles and metaphor for cultural travel. The drawings depict an adaptive strategy for 'moving on' in a way that includes one's past, one's traditions and one's family and friends. They show the necessity of re-inventing culture as one goes along. The important effect of these drawings, and of low rider cars as well, is that they create a new kind of home for Chicanos in a landscape of symbols containing histories of the present. Refigured in these symbolic landscapes are the terms of identity formation. As Flores and Yúdice insist,

> Latino affirmation is first of all a fending off of schizophrenia, of that pathological duality born of contending cultural worlds, and perhaps more significantly, of the conflicting pressures toward both exclusion and forced incorporation. (1990:60)

Affirmation figures into the images of popular culture not only in the portrayal of realms of pleasure but, as George Lipsitz points out,

> the desire to connect to history, the impulse to pose present problems in historical terms, and the assertion of a temporal and spatial reality beyond one's immediate

experience pervade popular culture in significant ways. (1991:36)

In Lujan's images of Aztlán, the landscape enjoins iconic and ironic features of the "lost land" with the contemporary skyline, there for specular pleasures of the family outing. Low riders' own "landscapes" appear in murals painted on the trunks and hoods of cars that feature scenes of urban pleasure, scenic nature, cultural warriors (Aztec Indians), and scenes from popular culture. Increasingly, mural characters are drawn from popular culture's nightmares and outlaws are used to depict the metropolis as a site of contestation. Ultimately, they depict metropolitan processes as responsible for alienated cultural states.

The Los Angeles Times has a long history of portraying Chicanos as associated with drug, gang and criminal activity (Davis 1990, McWilliams 1946, Moore 1991). In this, the paper is positioned as part of the metropolitan power bloc, along with city and state governments and the police. The traces of these portrayals and interactions on low riders' self-promotion are varied. Some claim their group histories and use their cars as evidence of their good behavior, noting the time, money and effort required to make a lowrider makes them less likely to be engaged in gang or criminal activity. Others no longer claim the low rider label. While still having low rider cars, they ask to be known simply as "guys with customized cars". One place where media portrayals are taken up and visually contested is on murals that appear on the cars. Just as the landscapes of memory detailed earlier were registered in clothing styles, so also are discourses of identity manifest in customizing aesthetics, especially murals. During the 1970s, many murals incorporated themes of the Chicano movement through the use of images of the

Virgin of Guadalupe, Aztec mythology and Mexican Catholicism [Figure 2.3] Today, these figures compete with others which depict metropolitan conflicts throught the use of popular media figures.

In many murals, the car functions as a stand-in for the hopes and desires of the owner. In Figure 2.4, the image of the car appears as a character in a scene invoking both religious and civic themes. The beautiful car is parked in a liquor store parking lot amidst drug dealers, gamblers, and cholos, depicting "the wickedness of contemporary life," or *la vida loca*. Integrated into the liquor store wall is a mural of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, with Jesus looking down beneficently upon the scene. In deploying the signs of *la vida loca* under the purvey of the *corazon sangrante*, the mural incorporates two gazes - that of Jesus and that of the public. The image is an appeal for God's love and a sympathetic public audience. The presence of Jesus has the iconographic effect of interpretating the scene of decadence, pleasure and hopelessness, all experiences born of the ghetto, as one of pain and suffering, in which people seek the release of their sufferings in unfulfilling addictive and "impure" substances. The offering of Jesus's own bleeding heart, a sign of suffering, love and purification, embodies the owner's hope of the healing possibility of tradition.[15] In its juxtaposition of "pure and impure" substances, the mural casts the scene as the sacrifice of humanity and "replaces the violence of sacrifice with the ritual of purification" (Kristeva 1982:82).

Negotiated in the image is the boundary between good and evil, especially metropolitan based boundaries such as are created through the de facto segregation of reindustrialization and the constant media and police attention on drugs and poverty in
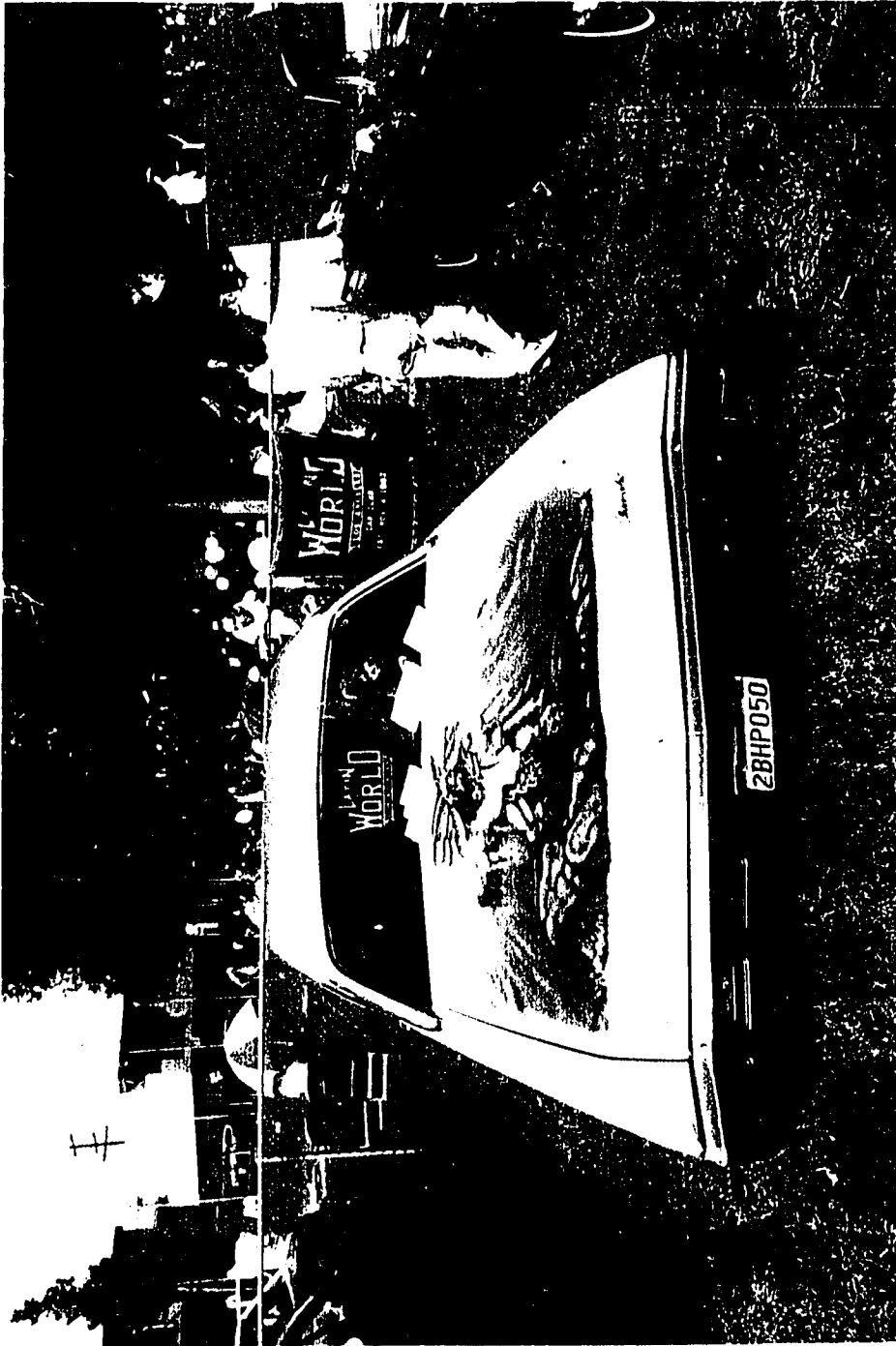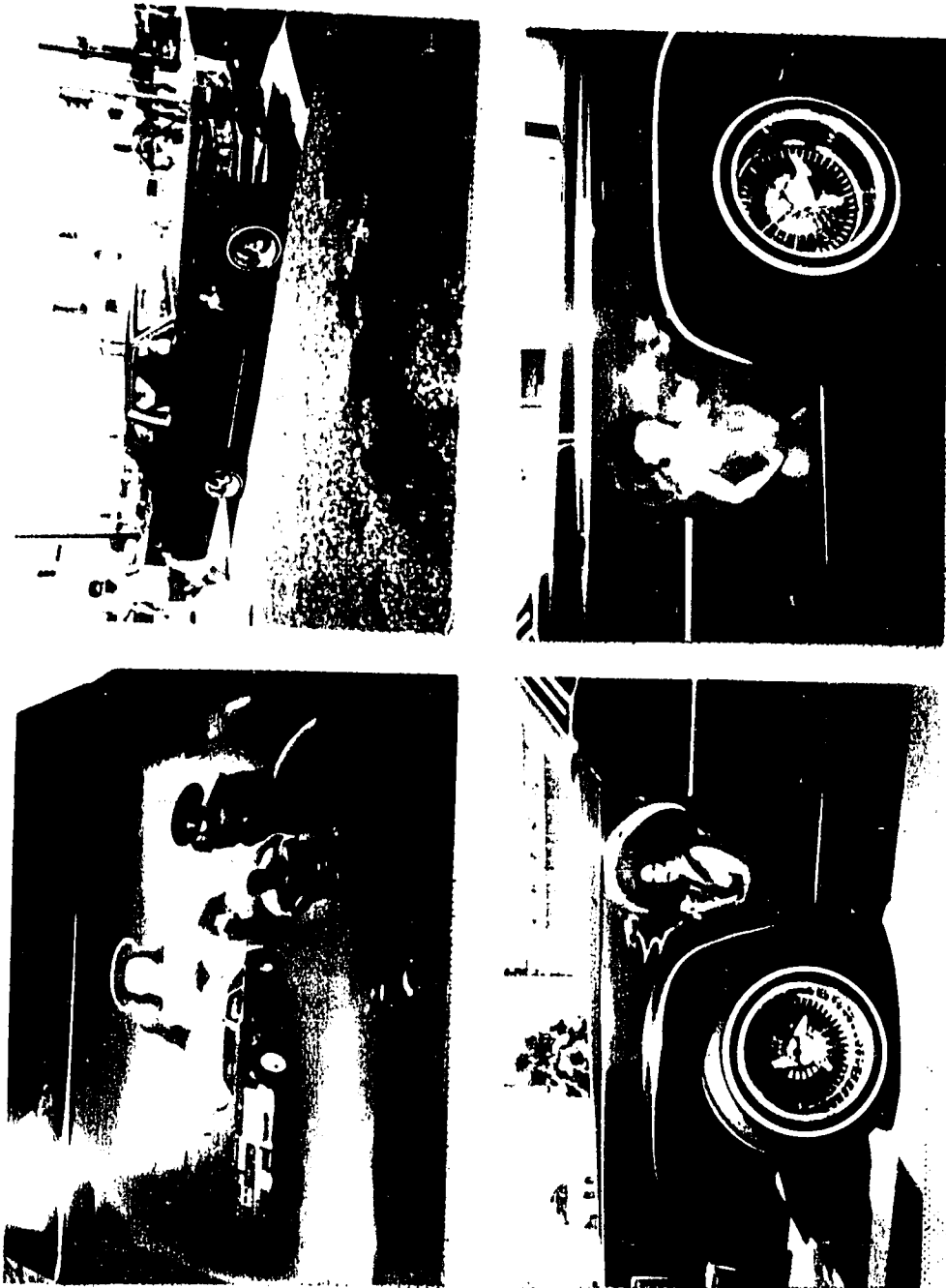
Figure 2.3   "Latin World"

Figure 2.4   *La Vida Loca*

central Los Angeles. In the media and police bureaucracy, poor people of color are portrayed as evil, lazy, child-like and sub-human. They exhibit improper "individuality" and social behaviors. Their "color" or "culture" is conflated with their poverty, behaviors and part of town. This mural shifts the locus of the definitions of good and evil. In it, the characters are sinful, not evil. As sinners, they are entitled to the redemptive gift of Jesus's love. Likewise, the car as an object of skill and beauty is a secular object of transcendence. This is not a mural that glorifies or vilifies *la vida loca*, but presents it as a situational melodrama.

An alternate city is depicted in the murals on the '39 Chevrolet of Figure 2.5 (LRM 5/90:16-20). Called "The Gangster of Love," it is covered with murals on the trunk and hood, on the rear panels, on the front side panels, and under the hood. Each large mural portrays a gangster theme -- "Al Capone's Bank," "Dillinger's Saloon," " Old Memories Hotel and Casino," and a caravan of gangster cars cruising the Boulevard, in mythical Aztlán, past a movie theater playing "East Side Story." [16] One smaller panel depicts Moreno and his friends dressed up as gangsters. In another, they appear in zoot suits next to his car. On the hood are Moreno and a beautiful woman next to his car with the night city in the background. Each of the wheel wells is adorned with painting of a beautiful "doll." Themes of sex, money and guns predominate. But the main theme is the staging of the man belonging to a society with its own map -- a geography of place and desire -- of the city. In this mural, the culture of money has been re-envisioned in a Chicano city and *la vida loca* legitimated. Here the fantasy is of a hyper-reality, of a fantasy city, Aztlan, the spiritual Chicano homeland, as the

Figure 2.5   "Gangster of Love"
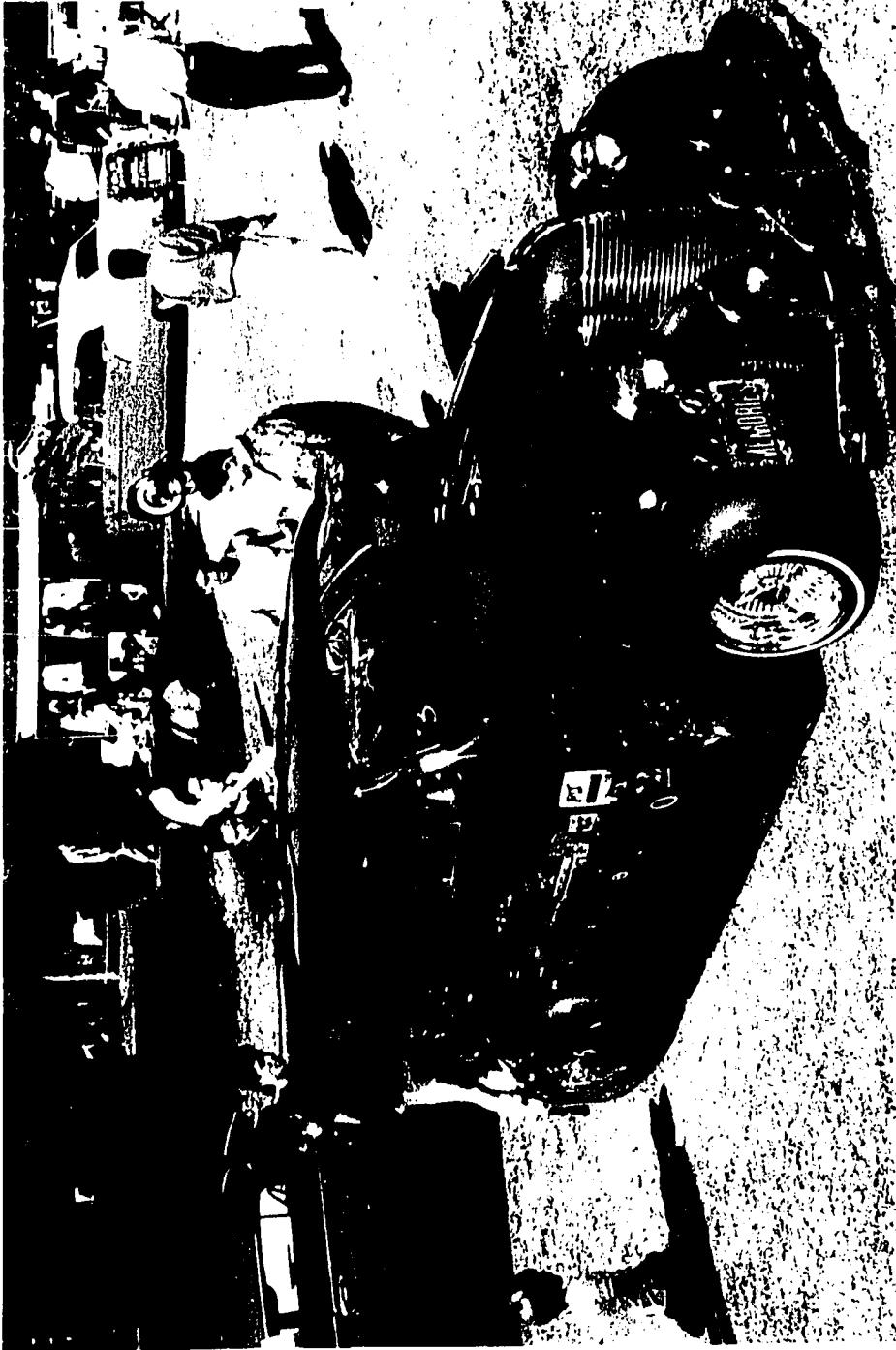
domain of the gangster life. The hallmark of gangster life is that, while it lies outside of the bounds of bourgeois rationality, it is nevertheless preoccupied with the theoretical rewards of the bourgeois all-American life. The gangster, in a truly American fashion, strives to achieve "many of the goals -- power, money, fame, status -- that are held out by society as symbols of success" (Gabree 1975:14). That the gangster film first appeared during Prohibition and the Depression has important resonances with the appearance of this mural in central Los Angeles in the late 1980s.

The "Joker's Revenge" (Figure 2.6), a gold-yellow Lincoln, has no mural on the car, but the credits board features a portrait of the Joker from the 1989 movie, "Batman." The Joker in Batman is a diabolical character who was "created" at the hands of vigilante justice. Originally just a two-bit hood, Jack Napier became the demented Joker as a result of being double-crossed by his boss, a chemical plant owner who set him up to be busted by the police. The encounter resulted in Napier's being dumped into a vat of chemicals by Batman. The Joker takes over the chemical plant and begins sabotaging the cosmetics. He calls himself an artist promoting a new aesthetic. In naming his car "Joker's Revenge," this low rider (an aerospace industry machinist) metaphorizes his ability as a product of the metropolitan and industrial system to thwart that same system by promoting a new aesthetic. In the concise fashion of iconic images, the Joker evokes the conflicts, experiences and visions inherent in the industrial metropolis. Through the use of this association, the owner stages his desire to operate powerfully from an experience of being "outside" the metropolitan powers that be. In this image, as in the other murals, aesthetics emerges as an important site of struggle.

Figure 2.6   "Joker's Revenge"
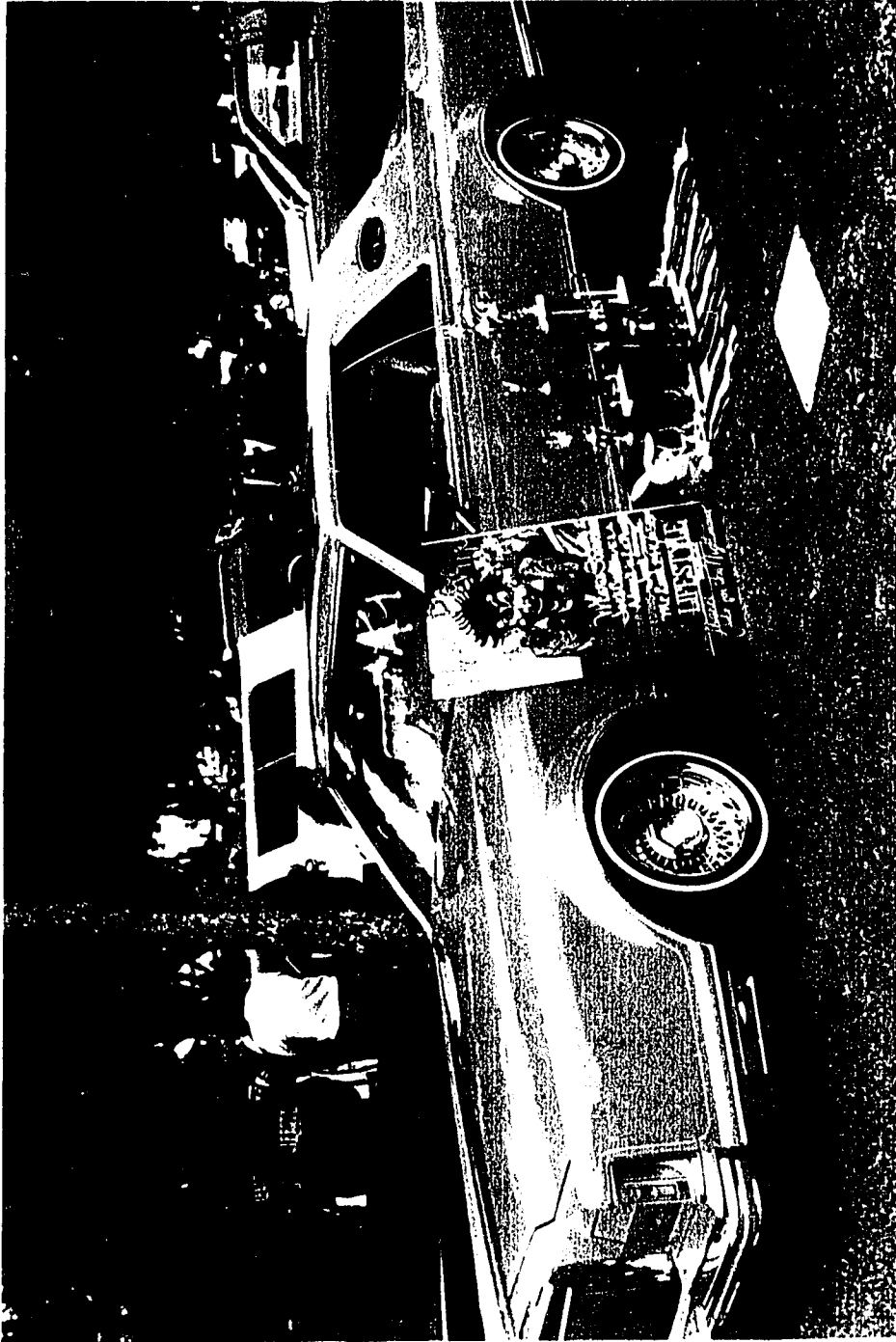
These murals were painted in the late 1980s and early 1990s, after ten years of Reaganomics and as the deindustrialization of Los Angeles begun in the early seventies becomes nearly complete. They are part of one current trend in low rider aesthetics toward the interpretation of experiences of alienation based upon metropolitan decline.[17] On the one hand, they are part of a long tradition within low riding of expressing oppositional identities through comic book and movie characters, rock and roll stars as well as the cultural national images of the Chicano movement. On the other hand, what appears as an important theme in these images is the metropolis, not simply as a site of pleasure, as depicted in so many low rider mural images of cruising and nightlife, but as a site of struggle.

IV.

Ethnographic Remapping

Current writings on ethnography (Marcus and Fischer 1986, Clifford and Marcus 1986, Marcus 1989, Thornton 1988) critique the ethnographic move of positing the ethnographic scene and subject as a "knowable, fully probed micro-world with reference to an encompassing macro world...which, presumably, is not knowable or describable in the same terms" (Marcus 1990:7). Jack Rollwagen calls this the 'tradition of "absolute relativism"' (1980:377) which assumes that "place is the most distinctive dimension of culture" (Marcus 1990a:21). What the tradition of absolute relativism fails to take into account are the ways in which transnational processes of global capitalism challenge the notion of identities as the products of strictly local processes. Not only must these be theorized to include the internationalization of the labor force and the community politics

set into play by global restructuring (Davis 1990, Mollenkopf 1983, Soja 1989), but the restructuring of metropolitan areas due to deindustrialization and reindustrialization as well as the influences of mass communication medias and the importance of commodified mass culture as resource (Watkins 1991, Abu-Lughod 1990). These processes indicate an important need for reconceptualizing social process, cultural systems, and the means of ethnographic exposition. These critiques point to the necessity of rethinking of the problem of holism in anthropology, especially as it concerns the macro-micro relationship. If what Nestór García-Canclini describes is true, that contemporary identity processes are becoming increasingly de-territorialized (1990), then the concerns of ethnographic projects need to be remapped since "place" is no longer a suitable frame for ethnography,.

Rollwagen advocates a world-systems approach through a focus on cities in as much as cities provide and perform functions necessary to keep the integrating and overarching world system functioning. He criticizes the term "subculture" as a unit of society, because it implies a relationship of equivalency between culture and society, which Rollwagen does not see. Instead, he argues that

> Accepting the perspective that culture is a process of cognitive elaboration and interpretation that human beings engage in continuously as individuals in all of their associations facilitates the comprehension of an infinite set of culture elaborating units different from socieites in form and function. The participation of individuals in the elaboration of interpretations and their agreement to participate in the application of these elaborations in some mutually understood

manner are the bases of the formation of a culture-evolving system. (1980:375)
He advocates a "holistic approach," suggesting that "any aspect of a cultural system that
is chosen for study be examined in terms of that which forms its pertinent or significant
contexts in the larger system of which it is a part" (376). This represents an important
shift in ethnographic focus.

> In terms of population, cities are very large. But the fact that they are composed
> of numerous kinds of cultural systems arranged into a hierarchy of power allows
> exploration of individual cultural systems through emic approaches on the nature
> of that cultural system itself, through exploring emically the nature of the view
> that participants hold of other cultural systems in a city (or of a city taken as a
> whole), and through etic approaches to all of a city's cultural systems.
> (1980:378)

Rollwagen's advocacy of emic approaches to views of the city parallels recent
research on urban consciousness. This work emphasizes two important processes. On
the one hand, radical geographers and cultural critics such as Mike Davis and David
Harvey are engaged in conceptualizing the politics of culture in relation to the
urbanization of capital and the urbanization of consciousness. Others (Abu-Lughod 1990,
Moorhouse 1991, Olalquiaga 1992, Ross 1989, Watkins 1991) are concerned with tying
mass media to cultural processes and the rise of particular cultural sensibilities. Both
processes are important here. Harvey's discussion of urban consciousness draws
attention to a very important aspect of urban processes, namely that,

> increasing urbanization makes the urban the primary level at which individuals

now experience, live out, and react to the totality of social transformations and structures in the world around them...It is out of the complexities and perplexities of this experience that we build an elementary consciousness of the meanings of space and time; of social power and its legitimations; of forms of domination and social interaction; of the relation to nature through production and consumption; and of human nature, civil society, and political life. (Harvey 1985:251)

He continues,

The tendency to produce a structured coherence in urban politics and economy is consequently paralleled by a tendency to produce unique configurations of consciousness in each urban context. This typically gives rise to distinctive urban traditions, an urban folklore and an urban folk culture, and even produces mythologies representing the qualities of life, thought and character of particular places in symbolic form. Yet here too, relatively autonomous processes of cultural development are constrained by spatial and interurban competition, the formation of hierarchies of cultural domination, and the ravages of cultural imperialism. (Harvey 1985:266)

Needed are new ways to think about cultural geography and new ways to expose symbolic landscapes. As George Lipsitz writes, "new technologies do lend themselves to new forms of exploitation and oppression, but they also have possible uses for fundamentally new forms of resistance and revolution" (1991:vii). These challenges are of particular importance to the study of contemporary popular culture, one of the key manifestations of the market-commodity mode of global capitalism. Automobile culture

provides one route to understanding to what extent place is an important dimension of culture. This essay on low rider car culture in Los Angeles is part of a larger project researching the local meanings of what is by now a national and international phenomenon facilitated largely by Low Rider Magazine and recent developments in automobile manufacturing (Watkins 1991). This project addresses the problem of doing research in urban communities not necessarily constituted "on the ground" and resistant to the kind of micro-world research traditionally practiced in anthropology and represented in ethnographies. This research suggests that local issues are not unimportant, but that subcultural practices "re-map" the local by using technology and communications media to create new cultural spaces. Juan Flores and George Yúdice utilize the idea of remapping in use in their article on languages of Latino self-formation. Discussing Tato Laviera's coining of the term "AmeRícan" ("I'm a Rícan"/American), they note

> The hallowed misnomer unleashes the art of brazen neologism. The arrogance
> of political geography backfires in the boundless defiance of cultural remapping.
> The imposed border emerges as the locus of re-definition and re-signification.
> (Flores and Yúdice, 1990:60)

My interest in this essay has been to trace the shifting geographies of Chicano car culture in Los Angeles through their configuration in symbolic landscapes. Here popular culture re-territorializes pleasure and visibility into practices of leisure. The promise of popular culture research lies in its challenge to conventionally conceived cultural boundaries and their concomitant identities. It may also serve to make us more culturally literate,

expanding our notions of the kind of cultural work that popular culture accomplishes, and with this awareness contribute to our understanding of the contingencies of cultural participation in the United States.

Notes: Chapter Two

1.   See Bright 1991, Vigil 1988 and Trillin 1978.

2.   See Soja 1989, Morales 1983, and Davis 1990 on the relationship of these developments.   In the Los Angeles area, many towns with predominantly Latino populations (averaging 30,000 to 50,000 residents) such as Montebello, El Monte, and Whittier are segregated by class.   Working-class, middle-class and upper class neighborhoods are usually separated by major streets and geographical features. Property values rise from the flatlands to the hills in each area. Melvin Oliver and J.H. Johnson, Jr. (1983) examine the factors leading to ethnic conflict between Blacks and Latinos in the inner city as a result of deindustrialization and Latino in-migration into a previously Black-dominated Watts. See Gregory 1992 for a discussion of further segregation of black communities according to class and the development of black homeowner associations after the Civil Rights movement. Wilkerson 1992 describes the development of Black upper class suburbs as an solution to the alienation associated with living in predominantly Anglo suburbs.

3.   I had come to Los Angeles with the names and numbers several people had given me -- anthropologist James Diego Vigil gave me the name of folklorist Deidre Evans-Pritchard as someone who had organized a car show for the city. He also gave me the name of Richard García who had served as a consultant for Vigil and Joan Moore's research on Los Angeles gangs. One of my classmates in a summer Spanish program used to work as a social worker in Los Angeles and gave me the name of his supervisor. Renato Rosaldo had given me Teresa McKenna's name as someone who shared my interest in Chicana/o poetry.

4.   Davis reports 75,000 jobs lost in Southern California between 1978 and 1982 (1990,304). For trends in industries remaining in Los Angeles' central manufacturing district, see Soja 1989 and Morales 1983, 1986.

5.   Los Angeles was once the largest automobile-tire-glass manufacturing center in the United States outside of Detroit. Five of the seven automobile plants were located in the central manufacturing zone just south of downtown in the cities of South Gate, Vernon, Maywood, Commerce and Pico Rivera. Production peaked in the mid- to late 1960s, coinciding with the post-war boom. Beginning in the 1970s, plant closings in the steel and automotive industries began the deindustrialization of central Los Angeles and ended an era of skilled, high-paying and unionized jobs. Reindustrialization occurred within aerospace and electronics industries, most often outside of the old industrial area. For the working class and poor living adjacent to the central manufacturing areas, the process of deindustrialization has meant two things: one, a decrease in both the quantity and quality of jobs; and two, some increase in available housing stock in areas previously

unavailable to them due to housing discrimination as whites moved out to other suburbs (Davis 1990, McWilliams 1946).

6.　　Interview with L. Cordova, February 1989.

7.　　ibid.

8.　　See Mauricio Mazón's <u>The Zoot Suit Riots</u> for a full account of the 1943 conflicts between pachucos and United States sailors.

9.　　Anglos who moved from Oklahoma to Los Angeles, especially during the Depression, were known as Okies. See McWilliams 1946.

10.　　See Moorhouse's <u>Driving Ambitions</u> for a detailed account of the relationship between leisure, masculinity, technology, media and professionalism manifested over the years in hot rod and car racing practices.

11.　　Interview, Mike Duran. 1/31/89:13.

12. While there were attempts to break out of territorial and racially defined identities, these ties were difficult to sever precisely because of their embodiment in discourses of status, technology and difference. The increased interaction of people from different areas sometimes resulted in violence when different clubs and cruisers got together. Even though clubs would have members from a variety of areas, at the same time, they might have six or seven members from a particular barrio such as Lopez or Geraghty. This often resulted in conflicts when clubs got together. In an attempt to remedy this problem and reduce the volatility of the cruising scene, in 1970 and 1971 the club presidents formed a car club federation and met once a month to iron out mutual problems. The federation encouraged increased cooperation between the clubs and organized competitions such as football games, etc.

13. Interview with Ralph Perez, 2/89:4.

14. See Wolfe 1965, Teen Angel 1978 for descriptions of early car customizing. See Moorhouse 1991 for a thoughtful treatment of hot rodding. My critique of Moorhouse is that he does not adequately treat the important relationships between racing, craft and fuel technologies, and industry in Southern California. See Morales 1986.

15. It is possible that some might interpret the customized car as a sign of improper substance addiction. This scene replicates the melodrama staged in the movie, "Boyz in the Hood." Here, life in South Central is presented as an ever present struggle for daily life against poverty, drugs and joblessness. The hope presented in the movie is embodied in the figure of the responsible, politically aware and street savvy father who is willing to guide his son to manhood through his teachings and discipline.

16. The fiction of Aztlán is here also suggests an alternate city, one that corresponds to the Chicano working class areas east of downtown Los Angeles known as the "East Side." This includes unincorporated East Los Angeles and the predominantly Chicano suburban cities of Montebello, Pico Rivera and El Monte. The boulevard suggests Whittier Boulevard in East Los Angeles, the famous cruising strip in the heart of the Chicano barrio. "East Side Story" is also the name of a collection of songs recorded over the years by artists from the East Side.

17. See Katherine Newman's Falling From Grace (1989) for a depiction of cultural discourses of success, failure and alienation in the current economic climate.

Chapter Three

RECONVERSIONS: LOW RIDER CARS AND "CULTURE"

IN NORTHERN NEW MEXICO

<u>"Heart Like a Car": Cars as Expressive Vehicles</u>

When interviewed at a car show in the summer of 1990 for a national television special on America's car mania, a New Mexico low rider from Chimayó explained low riding this way:

> It's my culture, man. It's like my inheritance. My family all low ride, so I just
>
> keep low riding myself. It's something that's traditional. I have a heart that's
>
> like a car, you know. My heart is in my wheels.[1] [Figure 3.1]

The subject of this chapter is low riders from the Española area of northern New Mexico. They are concentrated in the village of Chimayó seven miles east of Española, a largely Hispano town of 8,000 located along the Rio Grande River between the tourist towns of Santa Fe and Taos [Figure 3.2].

The above quote calls for an understanding of the important intimacy of low riding as a cultural practice and of low riders as representational objects. The major question this chapter addresses is how to understand low riding as "traditional." Reciprocally, it suggests how might we rethink the concept of "tradition" when considered in light of low riding practices. Why think of cars as traditional when they seem so quintessentially tied to conditions of modernity and postmodernity associated with the forces that displace forms of local culture?

Figure 3.1   Dennis Martinez's '70 Monte Carlo

Figure 3.2 (top)   Map of the Santa Fe - Española - Taos area

Figure 3.3 (bottom)   Map of Chimayó
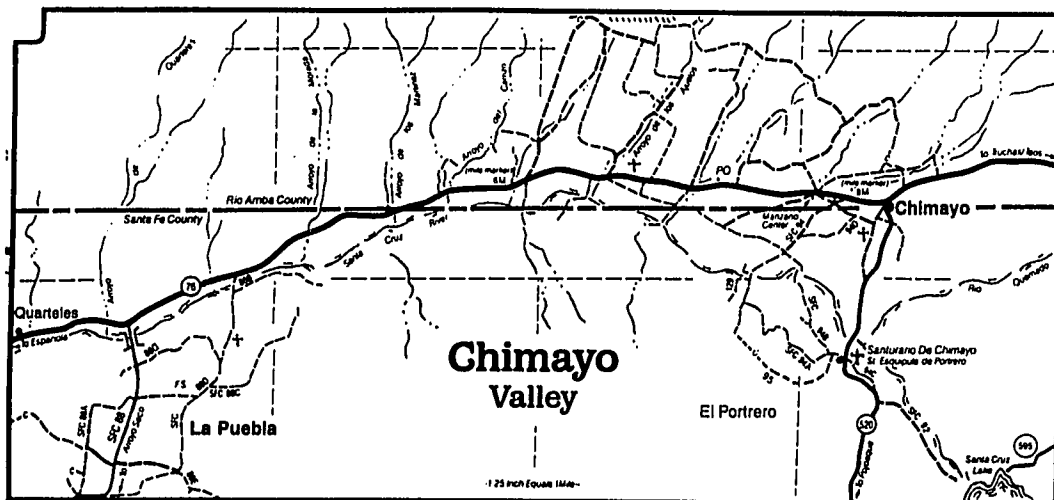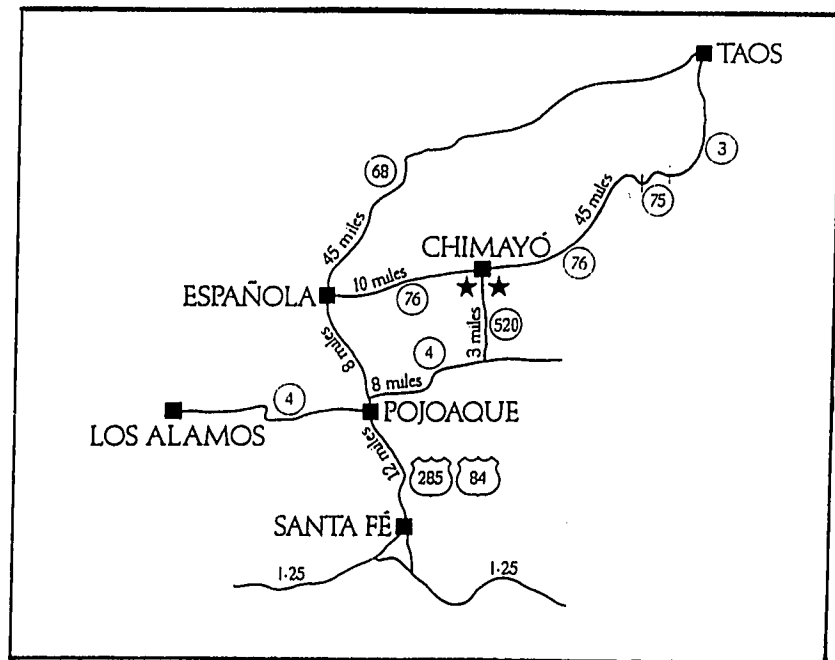
Martinez's statement links the historical importance of this practice to its affectivity and proclaims then the affective interaction of body and machine, of social reality and fiction. His proclamation suggests the need to think about the car as a textualization. In this vein, it is similar to the human body, another site of personal inscription, but customizing a car enlarges the screen of inscription and exhibition. Martinez's proclamation that he has a "heart that's like a car" suggests that we might also want to think about the ways in which the car is an embodiment, enhancing both bodily mobility and affectivity, and for many low riders, social relations.

Through the use of images on his pink '70 Monte Carlo, the owner has allied himself with two traditions. The images he uses are ghostly images. The mountains on the car are the Sangre de Cristos, referencing the local landscape [Figure 3.4]. For Hispanos in this area, land is often identified with culture, family, community, continuity, and importantly, conflict.[2] The rose is a metonymic symbol invoking the owner's dead mother and her garden. The use of the rose has both personal meaning and cultural meaning. The owner's mother instructed him in symbolic means to invoke and use his cultural tools, hence Martinez's use of the rose is a tribute in form to her love, instruction, and acts of creation. The rose also metonymically represents *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, a sign of God's acknowledgement in the Hispanic New World who provides her believers with a means to know God's love. In both cases, the rose functions as a symbol of empowerment and a tribute, just as he has been empowered by their love [Figure 3.5].

The other ghostly image is the Pachuco, an invocation of Chicano consciousness

Figure 3.4   Detail, Sangre de Cristo Mountains and ghostly pachuco

Figure 3.5   Detail, ghostly roses

that signifies racial awareness and integrity [Figure 3.4]. In the wake of the Chicano movement, the pachuco has received popular attribution as the first to embody Chicano consciousness, defiantly expressing - through style - his consciousness of the contradictions of being Mexican American, of not being Mexican yet suffering racism because of his racial difference. The pachuco refers directly to the Mexican American zoot suiters of the forties, who in Los Angeles were hunted down and beaten by American soldiers stationed there, simply for the fact of being zoot suiters.[3] The pachuco serves as a powerful metaphor, an analog, for the claims to difference made through style by low riders. Martinez uses it here as an emblem of empowerment, a topic he is very concerned with. He sees his car as an opportunity to express his culture so that others might appreciate it. A question important to us -- how do we understand and contextualize these acts of representation? What does tradition have to do with it?

Arthur Medina's white '75 Cadillac is called "Low rider Heaven." The front license plate says "little LA," a nickname of Española, tying local experiences to extra-local processes and larger identities. Los Angeles is the largest settlement of people of Mexican descent outside of Mexico city. Española is often the local destination city for people migrating from the area villages of northern New Mexico in order to participate in the cash economy. Its owner, who aspires to be known for his art work, has painted the head of Jesus on the trunk. Asked him if he was a religious man, he replied, "I believe in God a lot." When I pressed him to tell me why it was important to him to have Jesus on his car, he said, "Well, like he did a lot for us! Like, I could be putting knights or something on my car, but I feel better if I put him on it. I just feel better.

It's like he's guiding me." His explication, while seeming to posit a choice between popular culture and religious culture, actually indicates the extent to which religious iconography is a resource for local forms of popular culture. As both cases show, tradition becomes the popular culture of the area. The car for Arthur Medina is a place where he expresses his feelings. He says, "I put on it what I feel." As he considers his work 'art', he prefers that his car be hand-painted, which he interprets to be more conducive to expressing feeling. These two low riders indicate two symbolic trends among low riders from the Española area. One is the use of tradition as the popular culture of the area. In the second, local culture is tied to extra-local processes and identities.

Chimayó cars are distinguished to the extent that religious images are prevalent. For several low riders, the Santuario de Chimayó plays an important role in influencing which symbols they choose and circulate. The Santuario is an important regional landmark and local spiritual center. Originally a family chapel owned by the Chavez family and later sold to the Catholic church, the Santuario is well known as a site of healing due to properties of the dirt that it is built upon. The Santuario is the primary symbol of Chimayó and a major influence on symbols circulating among Chimayosos as well as people interested in the Santuario and Hispano folklore. It is the local image and image repository. The carving of Jesus over the altar in the Santuario is well known. The west wing of the Santuario where the healing dirt is located, contains many representations of Jesus, *La Virgen* and saints as well as appeals, *testimonios* and thanks for help received.

Victor Martinez's '50 Ford is customized in the style of a '50s customized car - complete with continental kit, flame paint job, and original option rims. But just above the continental kit is a mural depicting the sacred heart of Jesus, a symbol of suffering, sacrifice and love [Figure 3.6]. It serves as an invocation of cultural authority. With these two aesthetic devices - the replication of 'American' cultural style through the '50s motif, and the image of Jesus, the owner ties himself to an "american moment" while also invoking local and extra-local cultural authority. The skill with which he makes his vehicle is his claim to self-respect.

Victor Martinez and his family attend the Catholic Church in nearby Santa Cruz, but his wife's family owns a hamburger stand directly across from the Santuario, and both Victor and Barbara work there on the weekends. His car is often parked outside the stand, in full view of the Santuario and its visitors. Hence, Victor is aware of the symbolic significance of whatever image he puts on his car, and this awareness has influenced his choice of a religious image. Arthur Medina's family owns a food, folk art and souvenir stand. Arthur has not only made his car, the Cadillac described above, but is in the process of teaching himself wood carving and trying to define his own craft work, much of which also carries religious themes. This work is meant to be sold to tourists visiting the Santuario.

La Virgen de Guadalupe, symbol of catholicism in the New World but with important ties to old Spain,[4] adorns the hood of a '59 El Camino, once owned by Victor Martinez, now part of the Smithsonian's collection and exhibited in the American Encounters Exhibition. The mural depicts the Virgin 'protecting' the '59 as well as a

Figure 3.6   Detail, mural of Victor Martinez's '50 Mercury
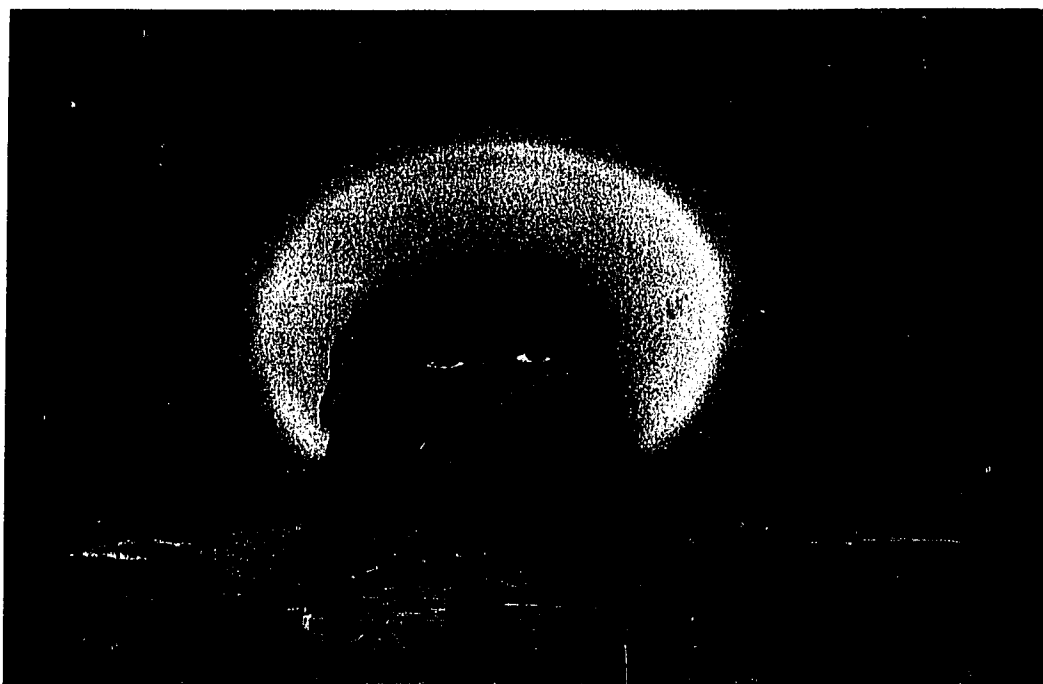
relative's car. Before the Smithsonian purchased it, it hung over the doors to Victor Martinez's shop.

These examples provide a sense of the narrative constructions enabled through customizing activities. Each car is not just an individual project, but also a family project and a local reference. Each requires structuring a 'vehicle' for family participation as well as personal and group narratives. Each low rider is a 'vehicle' for claiming an identity that is extra-local as well tied to its village roots.

In this sense, the car is a 'cultural vehicle' enabling one to adapt to the necessity of re-inventing culture as one goes along. It is in this creative sense that the low rider says, "It's my culture, man" while explaining that the best metaphor for the building of a low rider is of "giving new life to an old soul."[5]   In New Mexico, customizing aesthetics are influenced by a sense of cultural difference that is rooted in highly localized identities -- related to family, land and local cohorts -- but inflected by responses to economic and cultural appropriations in the area that necessitate appeals to a larger scale, extra-local identity. Julian Quintana's license plate declares the point of all this activity is "4U2SEE".

Land, Water and Culture

Chimayó is a village in the valley of the Santa Cruz River [Figure 3.6]. Water in northern New Mexico is more than a geographical landmark. It is an important resource. In this semi-arid region, irrigation water is diverted from nearby streams, or the Santa Cruz reservoir, and delivered through a system of hand-dug and cooperatively maintained ditches, called acequias, to individually owned plots of cropland used mostly

for subsistence farming. The area that an acequia serves becomes a self-identified resource domain coextensive with the arroyo, village or community that it serves and that maintains it.[6]

From Española to Chimayó, Route 76 runs along the Santa Cruz River. The river valley is bounded to the north by a sawtooth line of sand cliffs. On either side of 76, people live predominantly along arroyos, or dry creek beds, that drain from the sand cliffs into the river. Over the past fifteen years, a series of earthen dams have been built, to the north of and paralleling the river, between the sand cliffs to control flooding. Arroyos are the major residential roads and landmarks of the area.

The land itself is often identified with one family group or another, as family plots are often subdivided generation after generation. For example, when Victor Martinez was naming the owners of body shops for me, he was unsure of the last name of one by Ortega's Weavers and Gallery. "I think he's Trujillo because the Trujillos live more over there." In this way too, arroyos are often identified with the families settled along them. The arroyo where my family and I lived in the summer of 1990, Arroyo de los Martinez (also known as Daniel's Arroyo after the trailer park at its entrance off Route 76) is for most of its length two parallel arroyos. The western arroyo is settled largely by our landlady's family - her mother, aunts and uncles as well as her siblings. They had recently purchased the house and land we rented from an Texas-Anglo contractor who, along with some art school friends, bought it in the late sixties during what Rodriquez calls "the Great Hippie Invasion" (1987:350). They want to acquire nearby land so their children can settle near them. Most people live near some of their

relatives.

While a rural village, Chimayó is, as indicated earlier, the home of one of northern New Mexico's most famous Hispano landmarks, the Santuario de Chimayó. A chapel used by both locals and tourists, the Santuario is the site of many pilgrimages. In the Easter procession, perhaps the most well known, pilgrims walk the road from Santa Fe to the Santuario.[7] In the summer, the Fiesta de Oñate begins with a convocational Mass and blessing of the Fiesta's King and Queen at the Santuario, after which Fiesta runners carry the torch the seven miles from the Santuario to the fiesta grounds in Española. The village fiesta honoring patron saint Santiago, or St. James, begins with a procession of church auxiliary groups, locals, ex-residents and a handful of tourists that carry a small 'paso' of Santiago from the Santuario to the more recently built and much larger Sagra Familia Church a few miles away on Route 76. Tourist buses run regularly from Santa Fe to Taos, stopping in Chimayó at the Santuario, at Ortega's Weaving and Gallery, and at the Rancho de Chimayó Restaurant. Tourism has spawned a supplemental economy for this area. Many are involved in making arts and crafts to sell, both in the tradition of Spanish Colonial arts and in keeping with the latest souvenir fads, such as the wood carving of the howling coyote.

Recent cultural and economic trends in the area have given rise to an intensified symbolic representation of the area that has important effects and challenges for local residents, as is most fully represented in the now well known pervasiveness of "Santa Fe style".[8] To give one example of its important effects in the Española area, the city of Española[9] which lies in between the tourist centers of Santa Fe and Taos is badly in need

of more revenue dollars and has instituted an urban development program aimed at attracting what appears to be the area's last untapped resource, the tourist business. The residents are in the process of constructing a town 'plaza' and church. They are simultaneously enacting legislation creating an "Old Town" zone with building code restrictions similar to those in place in Santa Fe. This will have the effect of creating an "identifiable," albeit romanticized and "de-historicized/re-historicized" image of the town as the home of Spanish conqueror and colonizer, Don Juan de Oñate.

For area residents, tourist arts and ethnic arts are an important source of work and income. Craftsmen practice crafts based on either Spanish "arts" (santeros, weavings) or tourist art (eg. coyote art), often subsidizing incomes from working class jobs. Many families in the area have done "piece work" weaving for the Ortegas at one time or another. Local residents are also employed to construct the images of their homeland as conceived of by Anglo institutions. Several people participating in the creation of the low rider bicycle, "Chima II" for the Smithsonian, were employed to paint the interior of the La Fonda Hotel on the Plaza in Santa Fe, but they have also made their own low riders. In other words, they engage in creating their own art works, in representing themselves.

None of these symbolizing activities are innocent. They are all highly contested. From the making of santos and blankets for sale to the painting of hotel lobbies for tourists to the making of low rider cars for personal expression, these acts of representation and self-representation are all subject to dispute in the Española/Chimayó area. It is in this context that low riding, engaged in by working class Chicanos

throughout the Southwest, has the important effect of carving out a niche of pleasure, autonomy and self-controlled representation.

Local Practices and Contexts

Low rider cars belong to a social life based in part on bartering and tinkering. While participating in a cash economy, many households, especially in Chimayó, also rely on resources gained from trading, sharing, and bartering. The economy of Chimayó is based upon the waning practice of agriculture and income from mostly working class jobs. Agriculture, especially the growing of chiles, is practiced mainly by older men. Many local women work for the government, either in maintenance or administration for Los Alamos Laboratories or for the State government in Santa Fe. Some run fast food places in Española. Others take in children, a practice that enables them to stay home with their own. The men work construction in Santa Fe, as machinists or contractors for Los Alamos, or in businesses in Española. Prior to the late-1970s, many young men and their wives left the area to work in industries in California, in mines in Grants and Colorado, or to find work in Utah. Often they would return within ten years with savings to set up their own households. Because of the dangerousness of the work, many of them have been disabled at one time or another.

They trade their labor and expertise with each other - sheet rock repairing of ceilings, paint and body work on rusting cars, baling hay, cutting and hauling wood for the winter from government controlled forest stands, etc. Chimayó alone has twenty-three paint and body shops, all of which stay busy. This is an indication of a large second hand economy. Cars are used and reused. Dents are repaired. Rust is removed

and metal replaced. If they are beyond use, then they are used for parts, and sometimes their bodies are used as barriers for flood control in the sandy arroyos [Figure 3.7]. Parts of old cars are often sold at swap meets.

Many people are involved in the transformation of a car to a low rider. A car can be handed down or bought from a family member, bought new, bought used or salvaged. Junior Trujillo is buying his father's Impala and fixing it up. Anna Flores inherited her family's Monte Carlo, and with a little help from her father and her boyfriend, has renovated and customized it. Herman Herrera salvaged his parents' '37 Chevy from under a collapsed shed and restored it with the help of Eliseo and Milesio Martinez. Often, at least some portion of the work is done professionally. Julian Quintana has an upholstery business that reupholsters many of the local cars, hence his car is known as "Stitches" [Figure 3.8]. Vicky Gutierrez had her '77 Mustang's "girlish look" painted by Marshall Martinez and the upholstery done at Floyd's Upholstery [Figure 3.9]. Dennis Chavez bought his '73 Ford Ranger used and started customizing it in 1979 [Figure 3.10]. Now it belongs to his son who shows it. Victor Martinez's grandfather used to drive Victor's uncle's low rider and they called him the "oldest low rider around." from a used car, often inherited or bought from a family member, to shop to beautiful bomb. Many local low riders, like Dennis Martinez, trace their customizing practices back to their fathers and uncles. Martinez's father had a '50 Mercury with spinners, white walls and spinner skirts. His uncle had a '52 white Chevy, "down on the ground". Anna Flores's uncle was one of the first low riders in Española.

Many of Chimayó's older generation of low riders, born in the 1940s, moved to

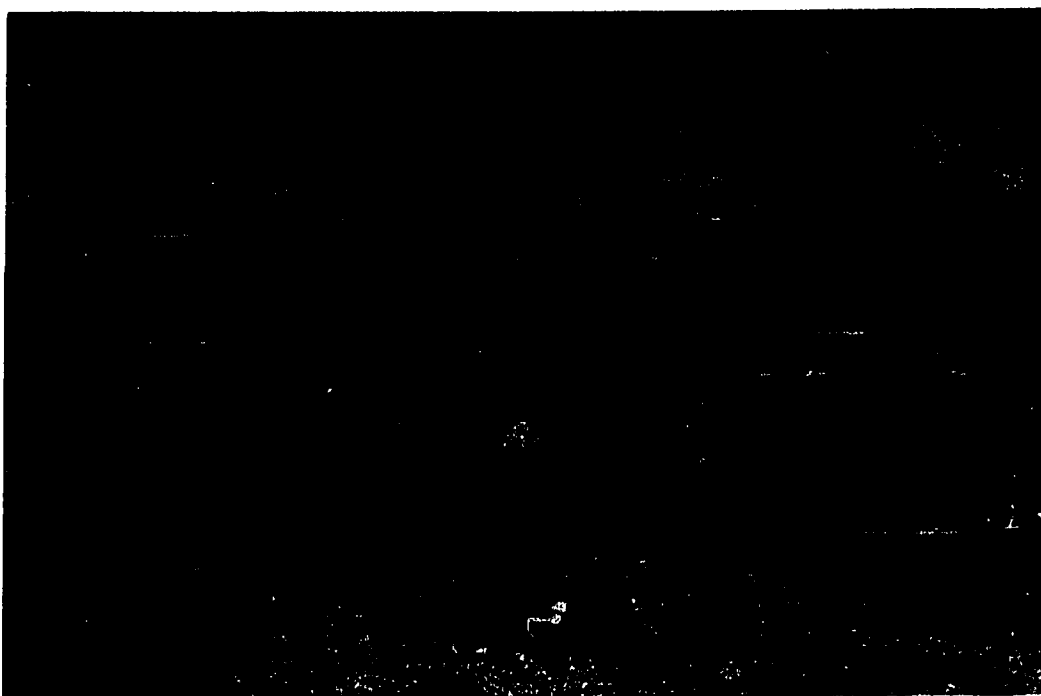Figure 3.7   Cars as flood control in an *arroyo*

Figure 3.8   Julian Quintana's "Stitches"

Figure 3.9   Vicky Gutierrez & family with her '77 Mustang

Figure 3.10   Dennis Chavez's Ford truck

California for industrial jobs in the 1960s and often brought cars back with them when they returned to set up their households. Eliseo and Milesio Martinez, who live near the western boundary of Chimayó, are brothers who married in the early 1960s and moved to California for work. Both were early members of Los Paisanos car club which began around 1976, becoming more official in 1981 when joined by Herman Herrera. Eliseo and his wife lived in Compton in the Los Angeles area for two years, returning to Chimayó in 1967. While there, he worked in an airplane factory and his wife worked assembly for TV Guide. In 1970, Eliseo began work on the truck he currently drives, a much modified '38 Ford truck. The truck rests on a '76 Grand Prix frame which has been shortened. The truck bed is from a '50/'51 and has been shortened and made thinner. It has been several colors in its long life, but is currently painted orange with red flames, black upholstery and an orange ceiling. Milesio has constructed several cars, among them a customized '55 Hillman van that he brought back from California in 1965. It lasted about ten years, then he installed a new engine and began customizing it. The two brothers have been instrumental in helping others make their cars, especially Herman Herrera ('37 Chevrolet), and their nieces Liz (Grand Prix) and Renee ('76 Monte Carlo).

Dennis Chavez lives near the Santuario on the eastern side of Chimayó. His family used to own the Santuario, his great-great grandfather sold it to the Archdiocese of Santa Fe in 1926. Chavez and his wife lived in Los Angeles from 1965 to 1966, in Germany from 1966 to 1968, and Los Angeles and Oakland from 1968 to 1971. During this time, Dennis had several customized automobiles, including a '47 Studebaker with suicide doors and baby moon rims, a '59 Ford and a '56 Mercury with tuck and roll

upholstery. From 1971 to 1979, he was informally involved with friends and family members who also had customized cars. They in turn used to "hang around" with guys from nearby Nambe who went on to form one of the valley's first car clubs, the Rod Angels, in 1978. Many of Chavez's group then formed the Chimayó Valley Cruisers in 1979.

Dave Jaramillo, owner of "Dave's Dream," conceived of his car as an object that would bring his family closer together (Brewer 1990). He worked for several years in the mines in Grants, NM, returning on weekends to work with his cousin Dennis Martinez on the car, a 1969 Ford LTD, for about a year and a half, beginning in 1976. Even though Dave died in a car accident in 1978, in a real but unexpected sense the car has fulfilled his expectations in several ways. At the time of his death, the car was unfinished. Martinez's wife, Irene, and his cousin, Dennis Martinez, undertook its completion. They commissioned a Santa Fe artist to paint a family portrait, featuring Dave, Irene, and Dave, Jr., on each side of the car. After its completion, Irene showed the car at car shows where it was known as "El Gran Chimayoso." The car was purchased in the summer of 1990 by the Smithsonian to be included in their transportation collection and exhibited simultaneously with their "American Encounters" exhibition. Its purchase was facilitated by Dennis and Irene, who were again active in conceiving and facilitating the car's restoration, which included having the family murals restored. The car, commonly known as "Dave's Dream" could also be known as "Dennis' Dream" or "Dennis, Irene and Dave, Jr.'s Dream."

Hence, cars in the Española/Chimayó area are quite often communal or familial

projects. Owners get help from friends and family for sanding, body work, painting and mechanical advise.[10] But the motivations for modifying the cars are often related to local trends in popular culture, which include magazines such as <u>Low Rider Magazine</u>. While Anna Flores had always loved her family's 1972 Monte Carlo, her interests in low riders were sparked in high school when she and another girlfriend, Yvonne Sanchez began reading <u>Low Rider Magazine</u>. "We were," she explains, "East L.A. this and low rider that!" Anna started working on her car, her family's 1972 Monte Carlo Super Sport given to her by her mother, after she was eighteen and began working at Los Alamos. Anna learned about cars, including engines, from her father, and was helped in customizing her car by her boyfriend. In the summer of 1990, Anna was a member of La Reina's court for the Fiesta de Oñate. Her high school friend Yvonne is now married to Chris and their car was featured in the cover photograph of the August 1990 volume of <u>Low Rider Magazine</u>.

Low riders are important carriers of customary practices <u>and</u> expressive vehicles for identity in the Española area. What often begins as a predominantly but not exclusively male adolescent interest in cars (style & personal identity) and mechanical skills (networks of resources) coupled with increased independence in work and familial relations frequently paves the way for men's important group/friend relationships after high school (for example, car clubs). Women's interests, as such, are similarly constituted, but tend to be initiated in high school and made manifest during their years of employment prior to marriage. The socio-economic context of these practices -- rural area, working class jobs, employment outmigration, heavy tourism and cultural

appropriations -- coupled with a history of marginalization from the land and independence, make the cars themselves an important surface, albeit one of many, for expressions and assertions of personal and cultural identity.

I would suggest then that we think of tradition relative to low riders as a process of improvisation, as a process of reconversion. García-Canclini defines reconversion as follows: "[t]o reconvert cultural capital means to transfer symbolic patrimony from one site to another in order to conserve it, increase its yield, and better the position of those who practice it" (1992:32).[11] A symbolic process akin to what García-Canclini describes can be seen at work in area low rider aesthetics. The cars are radically customized and frequently feature images of love -- religious, and heterosexual. Most striking about the aesthetics of these vehicles is the common practice of pairing an image with personal meaning, often drawn from local culture, with an image or other reference to extra-local identities and processes.

"The [Española] joke's on us"

Española is an important regional town. Grocery stores, drug stores, car dealerships, and the regional high school are all located there. The highway between Santa Fe and Taos passes right through town. Area residents must contend with tourist traffic as they go about their routines. Highway travelers must slow down as they traverse the local traffic on Riverside Drive. Española is subject of a series of jokes known as "Española jokes," similar to Texas Aggie jokes and Pollack jokes, which make fun of folks for their backwardness and lack of intelligence. These jokes ridicule Española as a rural, underdeveloped area populated by social undesirables. They are not

jokes that Española area residents tell.

In a short story about the origins of the Española joke, Jim Sagel writes about discovering the existence of the Española Joke Establishment (EJE), a top secret organization of Española citizens. These citizens came together to discuss the population boom in the area and their fears that the Española valley was in danger of being "santa feized." They were worried that the traditional, rural quality of life in Española was up on the block. In order to protect their way of life, the story goes, they created the jokes so as to tarnish Española's image to outsiders; hence they circulated the joke about the tornado that touched down in Española and did $3,000,000 in improvements.

Many Española jokes are about low riders: "Why do low riders have such small steering wheels? so they can drive with their handcuffs on." "why are low riders so low? so they can pick lettuce while they are driving," etc. "Do you know why they removed all the drive in windows in Española? because they were too high." Such jokes utilize stereotypes about Mexican Americans as criminals, migrant farm workers, and cultural misfits living in conditions of underdevelopment. They are blatantly and derisively about social types one should not want to cavort with. In these jokes, low riders serve as local culture.[12] At the end of the story, Sagel concludes that the EJE need not worry. Low riders have taken upon themselves the same responsibility as the Española joke: they spend their weekends scouting for out-of-town license plates, in route between "chic" Santa Fe and "artsy" Taos. As soon as they spot such a vehicle, "they pull up side by side and escort the car in a[n aggravating] five mile an hour procession from one end of town to the other (Sagel 1993:58). What the Española joke might not

be able to accomplish in terms of protecting the town, the low riders will with their wily frustrating ways.

The jokes and Sagel's story indicate the ways in which low riders are controversial in New Mexico culture. While they see themselves positively, this vision is not always shared by others. In 1990, the Smithsonian lobbied the New Mexico state government to contribute $1,000,000 to the creation of their "American Encounters" exhibition on the northern Rio Grande Valley to be on display for roughly ten years. New Mexico residents expressed their concern that they were going to be "represented" by a low rider car that the Smithsonian had just purchased. Editorials in the local papers were responded to by the Smithsonian with assurances that their exhibition was not focusing on low riders per se, but on the complexities of New Mexican cultures and inter-cultural relations (Miller 1991, Kennedy 1991). Hence, low riders are indeed part of a larger discussion of New Mexican "culture."

Reconversions

Low riding can be framed in two ways. First, it can be framed as a historically situated series of practices and social organizations. Second, it can be framed as form of Chicano culture. This was suggested early in the essay by Dennis Martinez's use of the pachuco. The second frame presents two dilemmas: one concerning the conditions of its adaptation among New Mexico Hispanos. The second concerns its status as a form of "tradition." The customizing techniques that characterize low riding have been employed since the '40s among Mexican Americans and Hispanos throughout most of the Southwest. This is true in the Rio Grande Valley area as well. But, low riding per

se and the car clubs associated with it have only been in the area since the 1970s. This later phenomenon is predicated upon the development of low riding in California, knowledge of it gained through workers migrating to jobs there, and finally through the publication and regional distribution of Low Rider Magazine begun in 1977, which stresses low riding as a uniquely "Chicano" form of customizing.

For low riding to be understood as a form of Chicano culture practiced by Northern New Mexican Hispanos, it is necessary to have a frame of elaboration for analyzing ethnic identity processes in Northern New Mexico. Issues of Hispano identity are most cogently addressed in Sylvia Rodriguez's excellent work on Taos Hispanos and the dynamics of identity processes in northern New Mexico examining "[h]ispano ethnicity and its relation to contemporary Mexicano-Chicano ethnopolitical identity and mobilization" (1992:96).[13] Rodriguez notes that constituencies for Chicano (national-political) and local Hispano forms of ethnopolitical and ethnocultural expression, especially as seen in ritual revivals, Danza Azteca, low riders and Cinco de Mayo celebrations, tend to overlap. Her own interest is in the "specific social, political, and cultural-symbolic ways in which local, small-scale identities articulate with larger, extra-local ones, and conversely, how different organizational foci compete for members under different conditions" (111).

In "The Hispano Homeland Debate Revisited," Rodriguez elaborates the contours of the recent debate about Hispano distinctiveness. Certain academics, key among them geographer Richard Nostrand, claim that a significant portion of Hispanos of all classes in northern New Mexico see themselves as related to but distinct from other Mexicanos

and Spanish-speaking people. The problem that concerns Rodriguez is that they assume "that any sense of Hispano distinctiveness, whether true or false, will impede the development of a broader, more progressive Chicano (or American or working class) political consciousness and therefore is undesirable or retrograde" (1992:104). But Rodriguez's work suggests that the two forms of identity are in fact not incompatible. The process, as argued by Michael Hannan, proceeds as follows:

> When modern centers penetrate the local community, they undermine the salience of small-scale identities... Sustained mobilization in opposition to further penetration by the center must be on a scale commensurate with that of the center. Therefore, successful penetration by the center alters the condition of competition among the various bases of collective action in a direction that favors large-scale identities. (Hannan quoted in Rodriguez 1992:105)

Extrapolating the significance of this argument for northern New Mexico, Rodriguez offers the following:

> "Rather than being an impediment to the emergence of a broad-based, extra-local Chicano identity, the traditional, small scale organization has become the medium through which a larger identity is realized. Rooted in the village community, Hispano identity has become 'Chicanoized' through modernization, outmigration and resistance. (Rodriguez 1992:105)

If Rodriguez is correct in her assertion that low riders are among the forms of ethnic cultural resurgence that indicate the "Chicanoizing" of Hispano identity, then the question I have raised here is what part do cars play in this process which she contends takes

place through modernization, outmigration and resistance? How can low rider cars be both traditional and a response to processes of development and modernization?

Donna Haraway's meditation on cyborgs, the relations of bodies and machines in the late twentieth century, what she calls the potential politics and myths of cyborgs is especially helpful formulation in this regard. Thinking cyborgs -- hybrids of machines and organisms -- enables us to transcend the dualisms that posit what seem to be more clearly bounded, somewhat autonomous relations between people and machines, dualisms that seem to promise some ideal state of man apart from machines. "Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and tools to ourselves" (1991:181). From thinking cyborgs, we can imagine scenes in which "[I]ntense pleasure in skill, machine skill, ceases to be a sin, but an aspect of embodiment. The machine is not an it to be animated, worshipped, and dominated. The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment" (1991,180). For Haraway, this meditation is necessary in order to for us to adequately understand, envision and participate in the ontology of the late twentieth century. She defines a cyborg as a creature of social reality, meaning lived social relations, and a creature of fiction.[14]

"I have a heart like a car" and "my heart is in my wheels" implies just such a dialectic between body and machine. We hear the extension of machine-like qualities (here emulating transportation) to the body as the heart becomes a vehicle of transport for loved ones. This is coupled with the extension of affectivity to the purpose of the machine itself. The particular problems raised by this person-machine hybrid concern the pleasures and purposes of skill, and the necessity of textualizing one's social reality

in the machine.

The end part of the quote, "My heart is in my wheels" is perhaps not so odd a statement. It stresses the personal dedication we expect from any car customizer. Similar to saying "I love my car", or "here in Española we love our cars." But indeed it is a more interesting assertion that. The saying "my heart is in my wheels," indicates that car can be one's purpose and one's empowerment, one's sacrifice and one's joy. It is the best that one has. To make it, one must draw upon and simultaneously create one's culture. A low rider is the execution of one's skill and vision. It can be the embodiment of one's hopes. In any case, these cars are pleasure, the sort that comes through the responsible mastery of potential and circumstance through skills both technological and cultural. These cars bring pleasure from performing "culture," disrupting boundaries and derailing expectations.

But in the saying "I have a heart like a car" lies the key to the most dramatic aspects of these cars. Namely, the car is seen as a repository and a carrier - for the low rider's "work", his family, his tradition. Each car is the product of a baroque sensibility. This we can see in the process. The making of a car requires one to have a vision of aesthetics and meaning. Said another way, it requires one to make a narrative that implicates oneself in the design of the car. It requires one to create one's own tradition. Can we then understand tradition not simply as practices that are passed on from one generation to the next, but as practices that enable cultural continuity? In this case, low riders intertwine history with personal vision. This work entails deploying cultural and personal symbols. In the aesthetic details then we see what Andrew Ross refers to as a

dialectical appeal to self-respect and cultural authority.[15] While this appeal is a common theme in many popular cultural creations where commodities are adapted to personal use and vision, it plays out in specific ways in New Mexico. Here, tradition becomes a form of improvisation and an important resource for popular culture productions.

In this chapter I have argued that while cars are a seemingly "natural" object of customizing practices simultaneously based in artisan-craft and mechanical tinkering skills as well as trade and barter networks, low riders are not solely manifestations of local traditional networks. Rather, they are highly inflected by the "horizontal co-existence" of a number of symbolic systems which are the products of modernization processes. These include economic development as well as innovations in transportation, communication and consumption, and set into motion new "cultural flows." As Néstor García-Canclini suggests, the separation of tradition from modernity no longer works, "the traditional and the modern are mixed together all the time." He writes,

> . . . modernization is not a matter of replacing traditional high and popular forms but of reformulating their function and meaning . . . Instead of the death of traditional cultural forms, we now discover that tradition is in transition, and articulated to modern processes. Reconversion prolongs their existence" (1992:30-31).[16]

NOTES

Chapter Three

1.   "Auto-Obsession," <u>American Chronicles</u>, The Fox Network.   Lynch-Frost Productions.   Aired 10-4-90.   At the same show, Vicky Gutierrez said, "Here in Española we love our cars!"

2.   See Sylvia Rodriguez, "The Hispano Homeland Debate Revisited." <u>Mexican American Studies</u>. University of Arizona, 1992.

3. See Mauricio Mazón, <u>Zoot Suit Riots</u>. University of Texas Press. 1984.

4.   See Ronald Grimes, <u>Symbol & Conquest: Public Ritual and Drama in Santa Fe, New Mexico</u>. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1976:237-44 for a discussion of the Virgin of Guadalupe's significance in New Mexico.

5.   The work of making a car can be productively compared with the work of making photo albums. The difference is of course that cars are here quintessentially paternal vehicles when compared to photo albums which are predominantly maternal projects.

6. See Sylvia Rodriquez, "The Hispano Homeland Debate," Working Paper Series No. 17, Stanford Center For Chicano Research.   1986.   See also Stanley Crawford's <u>Mayordomo: Chronicle of an Acequia in Northern New Mexico</u> for an account of the life of an acequia through those who tend it.

7. The annual Easter pilgrimage from Santa Fe to the Santuario was the focus of an Easter week-end news feature on National Public Radio, 4-9-93. See also <u>New York Times</u> Easter Sunday article, 4-11-93, A15.

8. "Inventing the Southwest," Special Issue of <u>Journal of the Southwest</u>. Vol. 32(4), Winter 1990. See especially B. Babcock, "By Way of Introduction," pp.383-399, and "'A New Mexican Rebecca': Imaging Pueblo Women," pp.400-437.

9. Española is located in Rio Arriba County, fifth largest county in New Mexico in terms of percentage of people with incomes below poverty level. (Jerry L. Williams, ed. <u>New Mexico in Maps</u>. Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press. 1986, p.174.) While located relatively near Los Alamos (15 miles) and Sante Fe (25) miles, Española has no industry of its own to speak of.

10.   The cars are detailed to have unique looks. One way is to add special tail lights from a '59 Cadillac to a '64 Chevrolet Impala. Special touches include adding an undersized steering wheel and dice knob to the gear shift. Other touches include double "frenched in" antennae. The addition that cinches the low rider's uniqueness among

customized cars, hydraulic lifts which allow the car to "hop" front, back, and side to side. This kind of work is done on almost any vehicle, for example, a '38 Ford truck with a '50 truck bed placed on a modified '76 Grand Prix frame and given a flame paint job and the double antennas.

11.   "Reconversion" in On Edge: The Crisis of Contemporary Latin American Culture, Jean Franco & J. Flores, editors. U. of Minnesota Press, 1992. See also Stonequist, The Marginal Man: A Study in Personality and Culture Conflict. Scribner's Sons (1937:174). He discusses "reviving" "modernizing" one's culture as a way to keep old issues alive and point out new ones. This prevents "accommodation on any particular level from becoming too fixed and crystallized, thereby helping to raise the ultimate status of . . . [the] group."

12.   Jim Sagel, "Lowdown Laughs: The Española Joke" in Dancing to Pay the Light Bill. Santa Fe, Red Crane Books, 1993:55-58.

13.   Sylvia Rodriguez, "The Hispano Homeland Debate Revisited." Mexican American Studies. University of Arizona Press. 1992.

14.   Donna Haraway, Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature. Routledge, 1991.

15.   Andrew Ross, No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture. Routledge, 1989.

16.   "Reconversion," op cit.

Conclusion

REFRACTIONS

In the last two decades, as the deterritorialization of persons, images, and ideas

has taken on new force, this weight [of the role of the imagination in social life]

has imperceptibly shifted. More persons throughout the world see their lives

through the prisms of the possible lives offered by mass media in all their

forms...The issue...[is] to figure out a way in which the role of the imagination

in social life can be described in a new sort of ethnography that is not so

resolutely localizing... [W]here lives are being imagined partly in and through

"realisms" that must be in one way or another official or large scale in their

inspiration, then the ethnographer needs to find new ways to represent the links

between the imagination and social life. (Appadurai 1991)

The twin concepts of "deterritorialization" and "transnationalization" are currently

being used in anthropology for theorizing culture as it is influenced by the processes of

global capitalism. Translocalization is then an appropriated term for the reproduction of

culture in multiple sites. Referring in the main to new ethnic circuits of people and

imaginaries created between countries and in the overlaps of border zones, the

epistemological force of these concepts comes in tracing out the internationalization of

the labor force, with its concomitant new circuits of ethnicities, commodities, media,

taste and social imaginaries (Appadurai 1991, Garcia Canclini 1990, Public Culture).

The element of consciousness and reflexivity is introduced in the idea of cosmopolitanism, defined by Rabinow as "an ethos of macro-interdependencies, with an acute consciousness (often forced upon people) of the inescapabilities and particularities of places, characters, historical trajectories, and fates." (1986:258). As Jules Rosette shows, when culture is deterritorialized from its previous geographical location with the movement of populations, it is often reterritorialized in the form of commodities and in people's "new" situations (1985).

How might we account for these processes within the United States? As Ortner contends, anthropologists have often been interested in ethnicized populations within the United States. Certainly the question also arises as to the medium of cultural representations and their relations to territory, both cultural and spatial.

In an article entitled "Global Ethnoscapes," Arjun Appadurai makes an important observation about the contemporary landscapes of group identity. He suggests that in the twentieth century, given large migrations of people and the development of media, the imagination has acquired a singular new power in social life and "many lives are now inextricably linked with representations" (1991:208). As a result of these developments, Appadurai calls for anthropologists to begin to incorporate the complexities of expressive representation into our ethnographies, to find ways to represent the links between the imagination and social life in ways that are not so resolutely local as has been the standard in anthropology.

The problems of representation, imagination, and locality appeared quite early in my research on Mexican American low riders. Before I ever spoke with a low rider, I

saw a documentary video on Houston lowriders entitled "Por un Amor," produced by Chicano film maker Carlos Cabillo, in 1983. Documented in the video were the ways in which low riding had come to Houston via California, both through migration of people, and through the regional distribution of Low Rider Magazine starting in 1978. That I was learning about low riding via media representations further testified to the links between group identity processes, media and ethnography that Appadurai has stressed. However, these links were not so apparent to me then as they are now. What drove me initially to make my research multi-local was the statement I often heard while conducting research in Houston, "We are not like Los Angeles low riders. We are not gang members." Rather, they asserted that they were, through the construction of their cars and their performances, exhibiting the qualities of skill, hard work, and ethical vision. Low riding, I was to discover, is considered to be a distinctly "Chicano" form - meaning that participating in low riding is seen to be a way of participating in a predominantly positive, politicized group identity that tries to actively challenge certain stereotypes about Mexican Americans. Showing, or engaging in public performance is conceived of as a way to challenge those stereotypes.

This is not to say that low riding and its claims to identity are not controversial. As many Latino scholars and scholars of Latino cultures have noted, Latino identity in the United States is not homogeneous. Rather, it is differentially influenced by gender, generation, and class as well as politics, race and ethnicity. As Michael Stone notes in "*Bajito y Suavecito*: Low Riding and the Class of Class," low riders themselves disagree among themselves as to the way in which their productions are meant to dissettle

dominant notions of ethnicity and class. In public discourse, lower class low riders often use style and difference as markers of the difficult lives they have led and the suffering they have experienced. Low riders who are more middle class in their experience or aspirations use style as a marker primarily of racial difference that simultaneously seeks to dissettle dominant notions about Mexican Americans.

The broad question that has formed the basis of this work is how to conceptualize the relations between socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and a particular aesthetic idiom. In what ways do macro-processes generate structural inequalities and how do those inequalities influence cultural productions and identity processes? In researching Mexican American low riders in three different communities, Houston, Los Angeles and Chimayó, New Mexico, I have attempted to address the specific question, "how do local cultures and political economies influence the process by which Mexican Americans adapt low rider styles, and often simultaneously, an "extra-local" identity? This is another way of asking the question, "how does popular culture travel?" When a particular cultural practice becomes popularized and transmitted at least in part through the media, to what extent is there agreement about its significance and the roles of its practice?

Low riding, popular among Mexican Americans across the Southwest is exactly such an instance of popular culture. To what extent is there agreement between low rider communities or between low riding communities and larger Mexican-American communities? To what extent is its practice conditioned by the contingencies of place? How are those contingencies structured? What are the relevant macro-processes as well

as regional/local processes that must be accounted for? How are mass culture and popular culture implicated in these processes? Finally, what *is* the significance of understanding low riding as a form of <u>Chicano</u> popular culture as opposed to a form of Mexican American culture?

My argument is that through the production of popular culture, boundaries of meaning and mobility that have taken on racialized meanings are reworked both in symbolic forms and in the forms of social organization that accompany them. This is indeed the major theme that emerges from all three sites. Often where people experience boundaries the imposed "border" emerges as the site of redefinition and resignification (Flores & Yúdice p.60). The ways in which borders are struggled over is highly inflected by cultural resources, material resources, the social positioning of the members, and the ways in which the borders are imposed and experienced. What emerges most forcefully in my research is the centrality of the mass media and popular culture productions as representations that constitute "social site[s] where meanings are constantly made and negotiated and where struggles over the terms and shape of the social world are waged (Gray 1993, 199)" (all 1978). In my research, themes developed in each place. In Houston, low riding was a "family thing." In New Mexico, it was a "tradition." In Los Angeles, where low riders come from a range of social class backgrounds, there were two main themes wherein low riders became part of a symbolic attempt to remap the bounds of mobility. For some, it was a "choice" that many felt had kept them out of gangs. For others, it became a vehicle for recasting the evils of urban life.

<u>Social Locations</u>

Low riding originated in the 1960s in California. It has a long history in Los Angeles, a center of industry, mass communications, <u>and</u> Mexican American culture in the United States. Low riders in Los Angeles were the most diverse in terms of their ages and economic positions. They were truck drivers, aerospace machinists, data processors, and auto body workers. They ranged in age from 14 to 40. Some were gang bangers, lived in poor neighborhoods and had limited prospects for economic security. Others were well employed, spent a lot of money on their cars, and were concerned that they not be thought of as gang bangers.

In Houston, low riding became popular in the late 1970s simultaneous with the oil industry boom and the regional distribution of <u>Low Rider Magazine</u>. Houston's Latino work force doubled in the 1970s from 212,444 to 424,903. Many who participated in creating Houston's low riding scene were recent residents, having come to Houston from other parts of Texas, especially San Antonio, as well as from California. Among those that I interviewed, one drove a potato chip delivery truck, one worked as a machinist, one as an auto body repairman, another had a trash hauling business with his brother. Many of them owned their own homes. Low riding in Houston served as a way for Mexican Americans dispersed throughout the city to create a community.

In Española, located between the art and tourist centers of Santa Fe and Taos, Chicano low riding is part of the regional intensification of ethnic identity that has been born from two trends: the potentially alienating experiences of labor out-migration to

California and other areas of the Southwest coupled with increased ethnic and recreational tourism in northern New Mexico. Given the lack of readily available industrial work, men and their families would sojourn to California for industry related employment or work in the mines in Grants. They were often employed as machinists and craftsmen at Los Alamos Laboratories. Hence their employment was similar to that of their counterparts in Houston and Los Angeles, but often marked by significant periods of outmigration followed by a return to their familial villages. While outmigration has decreased significantly with changes in industry and mining throughout the southwest, local economic opportunities have increased locally somewhat. The net effect, however, is that residents still feel that it is hard for them to find work.

Hence, the people who practice low riding occupy similar range of positions in socio-economic terms. They are low-skilled, semi-skilled *and* skilled workers engaged in blue collar work. They are machinists, aeronautics industry craftsmen, and industrial draftsmen. They drive delivery trucks, worked construction, and sometimes started small businesses that supported low riding itself.

At the times of my research, most low riders were gainfully employed. However, economic changes across the region have threatened and eliminated many jobs. Shifts in the economy effect the organization of low rider activities, although not largely the meanings. How specific economic environments influence popular cultures became clear over the ten years since my original research in Houston. Follow-up research on the ramifications of the decline in well-paying blue-collar jobs in southern California is an important job that remains to be done.

The Cases: the Imagination and Social Life

The major theme that emerges from all three sites is that through the production of popular culture, boundaries and differences take on racialized meanings that are reworked both in symbolic forms and in the forms of social organization. But the boundaries were experienced somewhat differently in each location. Hence, as I have indicated, the importance of low riding was expressed in a particular idiom in each place. Again, in Houston, it was a "family thing." In New Mexico, it was a "tradition," traced by many to the practices of their fathers and uncles even though car clubs and car shows began there, similarly to Houston, in the late '70s. In Los Angeles, it was a "choice" that many felt had kept them out of gangs. Below I will briefly describe each case, then go on to discuss them comparatively. I would then like to consider the importance of low riding as a "Chicano" popular culture. Finally, I will discuss the significance of popular culture in the formation of group identity.

While the imagination played an important part in social life in each site, it is possible to see that the relation between culture, representation and identity was configured differently. In New Mexico, tourism has been *the* major industry for much of this century. "Traditions," especially those of Native American cultures, have become a major tourist attraction and commodity. One effect of this arrangement, as MacCannell notes, is that under tourism, ethnic reconstruction occurs, involving "the maintenance and preservation of ethnic forms for the entertainment of ethnically different others" (1984:385). Here, tourism serves to intensify ethnicity not only externally in the forms of commodities and performances, but internally as sources of identity as well.

Tourism, the art market, and economic development have significantly determined the climate for cultural display. The coupling of the tourist industry with the threatened loss of land and local resources by tourist and real estate developments has let to varied attempts by Hispanos to "recenter" tradition. In New Mexico, as Grimes notes in his excellent study of the Santa Fe Fiesta (centered around a re-enactment of Don Diego de Vargas's "bloodless" reconquest of the Pueblo Indians in 1692), much of the indigenous interpretation of the events by Hispanos is historical (1976:61). In a documentary on Fiesta, "Gathering Up Again" by Jeanette DeBouzek and Diane Reyna, one supporter of Fiesta says that the Hispano meanings should be honored, because who controls history does matter. For Anglos to appropriate and change Fiesta and, by extension, history in his opinion amounts to a kind of cultural genocide. For Hispanos in New Mexico, history and "tradition," ritual and resources are the grounds of the struggle for autonomy and some form of self-determination. Customized cars which are often the products of a person's localized network have become a mobile site for displaying local culture, often through the use of religious imagery. Such imagery is often accompanied by low rider symbols from regional low rider popular culture, such as the pachuco who used to signify ethnic empowerment.

In Houston, low riding has been appropriated as a means of creating a mobile community by a relatively new group of people. "Families" became a central focus and organizational unit of low riding activity. In 1984, low rider car shows featured not only competitions for the cars and car hopping contests, but also contests in which all manner of family members could show and compete, including zoot suit contests for men, zoot

suit contests for boys, "bad girl" contests for girls and for women (mostly unmarried or not mothers) and "break dancing" contests for teenagers. Families would attend not just car shows, but car club meetings together. While the men and women considered formal club business, the teenagers would practice their break dancing. Low riders regularly drew their inspirations and performances from low rider popular culture. They often re-enacted popular characters and competitive performances promoted by Low Rider Magazine.

In both New Mexico and Houston, the low riding communities are small and engaged in common activities. Los Angeles on the other hand has a very large and diverse community of low riders. Half of all Low Rider Magazines are distributed in Los Angeles. Each neighborhood has its own "cruising loop". Each neighborhood also has its own histories of settlement that help produce particular landscapes of memory and visions of mobility. In East L.A. in the fifties the impetus that gave rise youth culture and car clubs also gave rise to early Chicano car clubs. Since then, history, as a foundation of group identity as well as of familial continuity, has pervaded low rider productions. Whether these trends will continue in the post-industrial "bust" cycle remains to be seen.

In as much as economic conditions are constricting rather than expanding as they were for youth in the 1950s, it is possible that low riding in areas such as Compton may be instructive. Among Mexican American youth in Compton, low riding is quite popular. However, the conditions of living in poverty place important constraints on low riding practices. Among young gangsters, cars are lowered, given paint jobs, rims and

a nice stereo. They do not often have hydraulics or fancy paint or murals, all of which require large investments of money. If teenagers are fortunate enough to find work after high school, then increased earnings coupled with a potentially mellower life give rise to further embellishments of the car. In the confluence of work life and decreased gang participation, the automobile becomes an increasingly important site for cultural production, peer interaction, and socializing. The cars of people from these conditions often feature murals that express an outsider aesthetic that is expressive of the conditions of the owner's life and creative of his identity.

Low riding practices and images served to *remap* the bounds of mobility to correspond to experienced limits and to express and facilitate preferred forms of sociality. First, the bounds of mobility were and are spatial, meaning that the city is still very segregated and policed in a way that reinforces spatial boundaries as racial boundaries. Secondly, they are also stereotypical in that Mexican Americans are expected to occupy a particular social class - meaning poor, criminal or working class. In central Los Angeles, images on low rider cars recast the "evils" of urban life in ways that are critical of dangers of metropolitan living for the circumstances under which they live are problems for them too. In dominant public discourse, poverty and social disorder are too often conflated with the people who experience them.

Similar experienced boundaries are contested in other places as well. Hence, I argue that low rider car culture has created an alternate cultural space for performance, participation and interpretation, one that allows for the reworking of the limitations of mobility placed on racialized cultures in the United States.

What remains desirable about low riding are its symbolic forms of pleasure that emphasize, to a great extent, masculinity and identity. It is a form that in its slow movement takes over public space. It allows its mostly working class practitioners to participate and present themselves in commodity culture. The baroque aesthetics signify and provide comfort and reputation. The cars ultimately facilitate a range of social connections, including those with family, clubs and cohorts and members of the opposite sex. They also enable cross-class and cross-racial communication.

What is the significance of the claims to Chicano identity among low riders? Michael Hannan has argued that modernization creates ethnic distinctions in a way that is somewhat paradoxical. Modernization, in reducing ethnic diversity, results in the elimination of smaller scale ethnic boundaries. Yet, the organizational potential of larger scale ethnic organizations is increased. I would add that if these conditions are experienced coterminous with racial discrimination, it enhances the importance of a large scale identity, such as Chicano identity. This then is the connection to Chicano identity that is expressed in all of the sites of my research. It is a large scale ethnic identity based on resistance to dominant notions about Mexican Americans that values empowerment. Low riding as a regional phenomena is facilitated by the circulation of people and media, most notably *Low Rider Magazine* but increasingly by other car magazines and low rider videos, and in some instances, the cars themselves. Low riding is also a cross-over phenomena, popular in Hawaii, Japan and Puerto Rico as well as in African American communities and some white southern communities. Low riding has developed historically as a Chicano form and this identification continues to be stressed

by low riders and through Low Rider Magazine. This identification has been important in the adaptation of low riding among Mexican Americans as a way of communicating positive group values. Its history is also seen as important as the form itself becomes popular among other groups.

In 1992, Low Rider Magazine began a series of features on the historical development of low rider technologies and important figures in low riding. This then is how low riding has become a translocal phenomenon, and how mass mediated popular culture is an important dimension and site of this on-going process.

The Conversations

Anthropologists have always been concerned with the insights that can be gained through cross-cultural perspectives. Increasingly they are interested not just in those insights, but in what produces "us." Some, such as Louise Lamphere, are interested in how diversity is "structured." Sherry Ortner argues that while class is central to American social life, it is rarely spoken in its own right. "It is represented through other categories of social difference: gender, ethnicity, race, and so forth" (1991:164). Anthropologists working on culture in contemporary state societies question racial categories and meanings, as well as the ways in which ideologies of race, class, gender and nation intersect in the construction of social identities and hierarchies.

There are important overlaps with these questions expressed by many contemporary sociologists. Their interests in culture include: what are "cultural formations" and how to link them to macro- processes, for example, as in Paul DiMaggio's studies of the relation between cultural boundaries, structural change, and

organizations, most notably the creation of high culture ideas and institutions in Boston (DiMaggio 1986). Important sociological interests include both how race "articulates" with structures of inequality (Hall 1980), and how race, as a category of difference and experience, operates as a social "construction" (Gray 1992) and as a set of concepts "formative" in structuring social life (Omi & Winant 1986).

For example, Steven Gregory is concerned with the ways non-elite and racialized groups selectively appropriate, contest and transform *racial meanings*, and in the process, form "oppositional identities and ideologies as well as local variations of racial ideologies in dominance" (1993). In a recent article on African American activism, he shows how apartment complex residents must first disrupt public discourse that conflates disorder and instability with them - young black males and welfare mothers. He examines the ways in which notions of disorder are racialized and hence, in public debates about safety and well being, they can come to silence people of color while also, often, maintaining spatial boundaries.

What is relevant in Gregory 1993 to my argument is the way in which youth (in his article, the young tenants of Lefrak City, a high-rise apartment project in Queens County, New York) are perceived as evidence of problems of (in)stability and (dis)order. that they are then policed, not allowed to use the park in the afternoon. He goes on to analyze the strategies the complex's African American women use to disrupt meanings of disorder, which are in fact highly racialized, so that they might begin to address and change the conditions that were troubling to them, including the harassment of African American youth by the complex's security. Had he gone on to examine the ways in

which the youth addressed the same issues, he would have necessarily examined their interactions with popular culture. But, I share his interest in examining the ways in which notions of disorder are racialized and hence come to silence people of color while also, often, maintaining spatial boundaries.

In my work, it is the reworking of boundaries in symbolic forms that is significant. In some cases, the boundary is openly contested, as it is by many LA low riders. For others, such as in New Mexico, it is represented through religious images as markers of cultural difference. In Houston, cultural and racial boundaries are underplayed in the interest of remaining active in the customized car scene. Recent Low Rider Magazine strategies downplay the explicit representation of race, while emphasizing low riding's cultural heritage. In the first phase of the magazine's publication from 1977-1985, it regularly featured photographs of the car owners. In its second phase, from 1988 to the present, it has ceased to feature photographs of the car owners and has gone to a more conventional "tits and ass" format featuring cars with women models of all races, except African American. Such a strategy serves two purposes. It enables Low Rider Magazine to appeal to a wide reading audience not limited by race or cultural background. But it also is a conservative strategy. By not representing the current diversity of low riders to its core Mexican American audience, it is able to maintain them as well.

Appendix

SITUATED ANXIETIES

On a Saturday night in April 1991, shortly after the video of the police beating of Rodney King was aired on national television, I was standing on Hollywood boulevard in Los Angeles having gone there to observe the cruising scene and to ask people for their interpretations of the King tape. I got involved in a conversation with a man in his early to mid-thirties who had grown up low riding in the San Fernando valley. I told him that I had recently given a talk about low riding at the Smithsonian museum.[1] He grinned at me and said, "And you told them the 'good' stuff?"[2] I smiled anxiously and said, well probably I had.

I had just heard through the grapevine a couple of days earlier that one criticism of my Smithsonian presentation was that I had not adequately taken the importance of "cruising" as a generative aspect of low riding into account. The truth of the matter is that I do think cruising is important in this way. I have researched and experienced it in each of the field sites. Yet as important as it is, it has never been the central focus of my work. My concern has been instead with the mediated nature of low riding, its contexts of communication, interpretation and circulation.

There is another important critique about which I continue to remain anxious, first voiced before I ever became interested in anthropology. In 1977, Americo Paredes, considered by many to be the "Don" of Mexican American cultural studies, critiqued the tendency of literature on Mexican and Mexican American culture to fail to take performance within the ethnographic encounter into account. He showed that "the

ethnographic encounter invites the display of communicative competence...just as the inequality that often characterizes the relationship between native "informant" and ethnographer may invite joking, leg pulling or playing to stereotypes."

Bauman and Briggs contend that "there is thus a predisposition toward performance and other expressive framings of communication in the contextualization of discourse within the ethnographic encounter" (1990:72). I think they are correct in their understandings of ethnographic encounters. In the "field," I experienced both the desires and pretensions of competence. I am less able to say descriptively what the "performances" of the people I talked with were, but they had to do mostly with trying to reframe dominant conceptions of class, race while my own (in)competence. They had an tremendous amount to do with what people wanted "reported" by me about lowriding since it is such a public practice, itself concerned with representation. It is often also a controversial practice because it plays with negative stereotypes often assigned to Mexican Americans.[3] I think that quite often, since I was a blonde woman doing academic research on male cultural practices, people were a bit perplexed, a bit suspicious (sometimes more than a bit), and often engaged in performances of competence of their own in explaining low riding's histories and practices to me. Conversely, I sometimes experienced the silence that unintended audiences and unwelcome, unfamiliar interlocutors (or interlocutors in unfamiliar positions) often receive.

As a researcher I was subject to these contingencies of competence and performance. Not only that, but my subject position necessarily changed, dependent

upon the "field" site. Unlike in single site research where it is possible for the anthropologist to have an evolving persona (however fragmentary) which enables both the researcher and the community to have some historically based familiarity, my multi-site research dictated disjunctions, both in familiarity and in receptions of my presence. Receptions of me as a researcher from dominant culture were greatly conditioned by local Mexican American or Hispano relations with dominant culture. I was also necessarily at a different life stage at each subsequent site. These situational factors color my understandings and findings respectively.

The stereotypes projected onto me have convinced me of the pervasiveness of racial boundaries and how they overlap with domains of power as well as how their respective domains are often spatialized. The costs to me for my crossing them have always been much less than they might have been for my interlocutors.[4] In Los Angeles, I was suspected of being either an undercover police woman, or interested in getting into the car show business. In New Mexico, I was taken to be someone come to repossess the family car. In Houston, as in the other places, many thought I must be writing for a magazine. People laugh at me now when I call them now with "just a few last questions", years after my first encounters with them. "It's going to be some book," one said with a disbelieving chuckle! I smiled anxiously.

Notes: Appendix

1. The presentation was an early draft of Chapter 3, entitled "Heart Like a Car": Low riding in Northern New Mexico." My invitation to speak was occasioned by the Smithsonian's purchase of a low rider from Española.

2. "Good" in his usage meant literally 'good' as in positive, not as in giving the Smithsonian people the "goods" on lowriding.

3. See Chapter 4, "Re-enactments: Houston Low Riders". See also my "Houston Low Riders: Style and Identity", 1988.

4. See Bonnie Urcioli's "the political topography of Spanish and English: the view from a New York Puerto Rican neighborhood," American Ethnologist (1991):295-310, for a compelling description of the boundaries of power, race, experience and language.

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