

La Onda Bajita: Lowriding in the Borderlands

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The term “lowriders” refers to automobiles that have been lowered to within a few inches of the road in the expressive style of *la onda bajita*, “the low wave,” or “the low trend.” It also refers to the people who craft them and to those who own, drive or ride in them. On both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border and throughout the greater Southwest, lowriders and their elaborately crafted *carritos*, *carruchas*, or *ranflas* — other names for their vehicles — contribute their particular style to the rich discourse of regional Mexican-American identities. Paradoxically expressed in automotive design, lowriders’ sense of regional cultural continuity contributes a distinctive social sensibility to the emergent multicultural mosaic of late 20th-century North America (Gradante 1982, 1985; Plascencia 1983; Stone 1990).

A synthesis of creative imagination and technical mastery pushed to their limits, cars with state-of-the-art hydraulic technology perform stunt hopping, but raise their “ride” for driving clearance. Skid plates shower sparks into the night when dipped to drag over the pavement, while neon art illuminates windows, trunk, and underchassis. Cultural and religious icons decorate body and interior in bold murals and etched glass, as lowrider caravans move slowly across a complex southwestern social landscape.

Lowriding first drew widespread attention in the late 1970s, sensationalized in “cruising” films like *Boulevard Nights*, burlesqued in Cheech and Chong’s classic, *Up in Smoke*, and framed as cultural curiosity in print (King 1981; Trillen and Koren 1980). In a more serious vein, *Low Rider*

magazine, together with the music of bands like War, and the Luis Valdez film, *Zoot Suit*, evoked images of social and material realities of barrio life in shaping and broadcasting the *bajito* identity and style. As a public forum on Mexican-American identity, *Low Rider* magazine recast pejorative stereotypes — the culturally ambiguous *pocho-pachuco* (Paredes 1978; Valdez 1978; Villareal 1959), the dapper zoot-suiter (Mazón 1984), the street-wise *cholo* homeboy, the *pinto* or prison *veterano*, and the wild *vato loco* (Johansen 1978) — as affirmative cultural archetypes emerging from the long shadow of Anglo domination.

The style apparently arose in northern California in the late 1930s, but evolved in Los Angeles, where its innovators responded to Hollywood’s aesthetic and commercial demands. Yet lowriders also assume a critical stance. They distinguish “low-and-slow” style by asking, “Whose cars are high?” (Trillen and Koren 1980). They censure hot rodders, “who raise their cars, making all kinds of noise and pollution, racing down the streets killing themselves, if not others.” By contrast, lowriding expresses pride in hand craftsmanship learned through community apprenticeship and mechanical work in the military, auto detail shops, and garages, and pride in economy — the practical need to maintain one’s own vehicle inexpensively.

From southern California, migrants transported the style throughout the Southwest. César Chávez recalls that by the 1940s, farmworkers found cars essential to moving quickly from job to job. Cars also embodied social status: “We were traveling around. . . . You always wanted to go into the dance [looking] right . . . [to] come in with good cars — we were migrants and the cars meant quite a bit” (Gutiérrez 1980:43).

Migrants brought lowriding east into Texas. Innovator Richard Salazar says lowriders from Los Angeles founded an early El Paso club, the

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Gustavo "Sleepy" Grado, a Juárez muralist, etched his car window with traditional lowrider motifs — a figure of Christ and a chain. The steering wheel is welded chain. Photo by Lyle Rosbotham

Imperials. Don Américo Paredes recalls that postwar Crystal City, Texas, aficionados would convene at the Dairy Queen to see which car was low enough to knock over a cigarette pack. But lowriding was part of a broader "car culture" (Flink 1975) of antique and custom shows, hot rods, stock cars, drag racing, and demolition derbies. The Nevarez and Salazar brothers, early bajito creators, first exhibited in national custom shows that added El Paso to the circuit in the early 1970s.

Lowriding selects from the symbols of the dominant Anglo culture, and asserts counter meanings that express values in Mexican American experience. A San Antonio native recalls,

Culturally we lived in two worlds. Across the street from our house on Guadalupe Street, the jukebox from Julio's Cantina blared out Mexican *corridos* and *conjunto* music. We learned the words to Jorge Negrete's songs long before we ever heard of Frank Sinatra. The Malt House . . . was West San Antonio's most famous

hamburger and chicken fried steak drive-in. It had a bilingual jukebox [where] we first heard Little Richard and Elvis Presley. No one forced us to choose; we easily accepted both musical traditions (Romo 1986:57).

One veteran explains his nostalgia for "oldies" music, period clothing, and cruising drive-in movies and burger joints as reminders of "the best decade of life . . . [my] teen-aged years" (Gradante 1985:73). Another says, "Lowriding is the Chicano *American Graffiti*," referring to the popular Anglo "cruising" film. Lowriding redefines these prevailing cultural forms with the fluid, multiple, and often conflicting meanings of its bicultural world, celebrating a Mexicano heritage that is also irrevocably American. Lowriding also contests the conformity of mass youth culture, and softens the hard edge of industrial culture. As El Paso lowrider alumnus George Salazar (now a Justice Department attorney, drug rehabilitation activist, and Rio Grande Food Bank chairman) observes,

The Latin can express his flair for the romantic almost anywhere, even taking a product off a General Motors assembly line and giving it an identity. Maybe . . . as more Mexican Americans . . . enter the governing institutions of our country, the same warmth will infect the system. Why not? If we can make something as American as a car reflect our culture, we can probably do it with anything (Weisman 1986:101).

Lowriding is a declaration of cultural pride, a historically resonant expression of contemporary Mexican American identity. Rooted in working class experience, lowriders' hand-crafted improvisations upon industrial style are a self-affirming response to the homogenizing forces of mass production and Anglo cultural ideals.

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