

Lowrider Cruising Spaces
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Lowriders are cars customized and driven in U.S. cities mostly by Mexican Americans in the southwest. In this paper I will argue that lowriding is a space-making practice, and interpretation that draws attention to several aspects of the car as a focus for cultural activity and social relations. First, it becomes clear that a car is a “space” or a site itself, a kind of mobile room which can be occupied by human bodies, yet with the help of internal combustion, moved easily from one location to another. In this way, one field of spatial production engaged by lowriders is the customization and decoration of the interior of the car as a luxurious pleasure zone, a small home for the owner and a place to entertain guests, perhaps friends who join the owner in cruising, or who they meet along the way. Moving outward from the space of the car itself, we can also view lowriders as mechanical bodies which move in space. This is the issue I will address in what follows.¹

Lowriders are recognizable by certain distinct and characteristic modifications. In addition to being lowered by mechanical modification to the car’s suspension system, a lowrider might have a custom paint job, extensive stereo system, wire-spoke custom wheel rims, and chrome- or gold-plated accessories that make it highly visible in traffic. Perhaps lowriding’s most notorious contribution to custom car technique has been the hydraulic suspension, which allows a driver to raise or lower the car by means of hydraulic lifts over each wheel. Manipulated skillfully, hydraulics can also cause the car to bounce off the ground, lending lowriders a distinctive style of movement.²

These elements of lowrider style form a genre of car modification that is most widely associated with urban, working class Mexican Americans (though the wider lowrider community is diverse). Thus a lowrider is an icon of a barrio identity. Lowrider style— whether expressed in the iconography of murals painted on the car’s body, in accessories added to the interior, or in the clothing of those who drive lowrider cars— draws on and invokes specific memories and histories that associate it with the segregation, surveillance, and policing of Mexican Americans in U.S. cities. When a lowrider drives down a particular street, that identity is mapped onto the site and a particular social space is produced. This can cause a rupture with received spatial identities, leading

to crisis and confrontation: for example, the lowrider cruising in an all-white suburb is quickly pulled over by police (Chappell 1999). Alternately, spatial identity can serve as the reinscription of a “character” that is already in place. During my research, lowriders on the streets of East Austin, Texas were part of the barrio landscape.

These examples illustrate not only why lowriders in particular or cars in general provide the material for spatial interventions, but how performances of everyday life, to the extent that they happen somewhere, are part of the production of space, which as Henri Lefebvre stressed is always a social process (1991:26). Like any aspect of social life, the production of space relates to the ongoing emergence of social relations as manifested in encounters between material bodies moving in and through physical sites. Looking at lowriding as spatial activity both clarifies the processes of spatial production on the level of everyday life, and illuminates the social dynamics of lowriding— including the relations which produce and determine lowriding as a semiotic field, as well as those which are produced by it in a form of social action.

In this paper, I want to begin to chart a trajectory for research and theory which accounts for the materiality of cultural practices and their mutually constituted and constituting relationship to socio-spatial formation. By relating the dynamics of spatial contestation that emerged in my field work, I will argue in favor of Lefebvre's dialectical understanding of the production of space as wavering between determination by capital and the state and revision through use by people. Viewing the production of space in this way underscores the spatial politics of cultural practice in everyday life.

Spatial Theory

Scholarly concern for space in the English-language academy has grown considerably with the translation in the early 1990s of certain key works by Lefebvre, who forcefully argued for the consideration of space within dialectical marxism and the critique of everyday life (see McCann, Merrifield and Soja). For scholars in the so-called “spatial sciences” such as urban sociology, planning, and geography, this renewed attention to Lefebvre has energized discussion of the political import of spatial matters. However, the spatial scholars seem to have some trouble accounting for cultural practice— in short, political economy and kindred approaches often have

little to say about the everyday practices of individuals or groups within the social situations they macroscopically describe, tending instead toward deterministic accounts that view space as a production only of “macro” processes and “top-down” interventions like architecture, public policy, and the real estate industry (see Gottdiener).

While such approaches respond to Lefebvre's call to integrate spatial matters into critical social analysis, they neglect the key issue of everyday life. For Lefebvre, the materialism demanded by marxism implies not only attention to space, but to the material processes by which social space is constituted at any moment. This posture is also implied by Lefebvre's dismissal of the rigid delineation of an economic base and a cultural, ideological superstructure as too simple and therefore reductionist, in favor of an integrated notion of socioeconomic formation (Lefebvre 1992:52). The challenge for spatial analysis is to avoid reproducing an oversimplistic base-superstructure binary which might define issues like public policy and the built environment as primary (basic), while the cultural practices of those who occupy built sites would be considered superstructural due to their cultural nature (dealing with issues such as representation). A key contribution of Lefebvre's theory of the production of space is that representation is always part of this productive process (cf. Shields 227).

In his book *Barrio Logos*, Raúl Homero Villa attempts an integrated approach, arguing that spatial matters have played a crucial cultural and political role in the history of Mexican Americans. Focusing on southern California but asserting the relevance of his argument to barrios around the U.S., Villa describes the practices of 'barrioization,' or the segregation and marginalization of Mexican American communities by capital and the state, and 'barriology,' the spatially-grounded forms of representation and knowledge that emerge in communities as resistance to barrioization. Villa's history is useful, and his terms often came to mind during my research. Yet his distinction between barrioization and barriology can at times slide uncomfortably close to the binarism which Lefebvre cautions against. In particular, the trap that becomes possible when using Villa's schema is that analysis will stop at the point of categorizing which things are barrioizing and which are barriological. Like Walter Benjamin, I consider it more important to understand how social practices function within the current historical situation (Benjamin 1978:222). My research suggests that barriology and barrioization are not always clearly distinguishable sets of practices,

but rather they represent contrasting possibilities that are perpetually at stake in social interaction. Barriology and barrioization describe forces and processes that emerge in confrontation on an everyday basis, often within the same site, even within the same group or person.

These issues come to bear on lowriders because lowrider style is a nexus for the articulation of several categories of social identity, including race, class, gender, and location. Just as an economic marxism might view the production of space as principally a matter of real estate markets or the needs of industry, a deterministic marxism might define class as primary and other fields of identification as epiphenomenal. As Lefebvre put it, however, theory is thus impoverished (1992:52). In contrast, a materialist analysis of social processes as they engage with space and the race-class-gender nexus of lowriding in practice must engage real bodies in real sites, tracking the movement of culture in traffic, and the emergence of social structure as social formation, rather than as a prior given. In the words of Benjamin, it means seeking to capture historical knowledge that flashes up in a moment of danger (1968:255). This is not the taken-for-granted danger of social categories that are defined in opposition to one another, but the kind of danger that accompanies a confrontation between bodies, when people meet in a site of social conflict, when their paths cross and converge almost like hot-rods playing chicken, speeding toward one another so that in the end one must swerve, and sometimes both do. This is the danger and thrill that occurs when lowrider clubs meet and compete with others for the abstract space of reputation and prestige, or the material space of streets and parking lots. It is the danger and thrill of courting potential sexual partners on the cruising boulevard late on a Sunday night. It is the danger and thrill of a ton-and-a-half of big American car juiced with hydraulics flying off the ground. Perhaps most of all, it is the danger and thrill of lowriders being pulled over by police. To chart a narrative of the spatial politics of culture as it flashes up in such moments of danger leads away from analytical frames that ascribe the production of space exclusively to large-scale, political economic and architectural means, and the occupation of space by individual bodies to a secondary process of cultural interpretation. As I hope becomes clear in the narrative which follows, it leads toward an understanding of the production of space as partly a matter of cultural practice in everyday life.

Cruising Space

Saturday night, 11:30. The cruising scene was just getting started on Riverside Drive. Following their weekly meeting at a carwash, the 'Regal Rollerz Custom Car Club' had cruised to the parking lot of a pizza restaurant.³ 'Daniel,' the club president, parked his 1973 Monte Carlo near the front of the lot, facing the traffic on Riverside, and lifted one side of his front hydraulics, so the car tilted onto three wheels. Other members of the club polished chrome trim on their own cars, switched on the blue flashing lightbulbs they had custom-installed inside their headlights, or played their stereo systems so that the low boom of bass speakers pulsed across the lot. Nearly every car boasted gleaming wire-spoke wheels. We hung out in the parking lot and watched traffic go by, commenting on the other custom cars as they passed, with metal plaques in the windows claiming rival or allied club allegiances. Someone beside me said softly "*chota...*" and I turned in time to see an Austin Police Department patrol car pull into the driveway of the parking lot. The red and blue strobe lights on the roof came on. The officer did not leave the car, but spoke over his loudspeaker: "Everybody clear the parking lot," he said. We all walked to our respective cars, calling over our shoulders to each other to establish the next meeting place.

"Want to go to the pawn shop?"

"What about the Bingo?"

"Alright, the Bingo."

We formed a caravan of four or five cars, rolled slowly out of the parking lot, cruised a quarter mile or so down the street to a closed bingo parlor, and took up positions in the empty parking lot.

We hung out at the Bingo for a while. We had only been there a few minutes when another police car pulled into the lot. Two club members were busy trying to read the small print on a sign that said "towing enforced." 'Mando' put his finger in the air to indicate 'we're rolling.' Several people got in their cars and started them up, when the officer, a black woman, got out of the car. "Where ya'll going?" she said. A couple of people laughed nervously and paused in the process of leaving.

"How much do those lights cost?" she asked, pointing to 'Mando's blue strobes. No one responded, but everyone seemed to be wondering the same thing: how long before she ran us off?

"Y'all aren't doing nothing. Just hanging out here. That's cool."

She stayed a minute, chatting. She was calm and friendly, and when she stated what we were doing, it was like a subtle negotiation: what she said we were doing— just hanging out, having a good time— was what we needed to do to stay out of trouble. Soon she said "Y'all be careful now" and climbed back into her car. As she pulled away, someone behind me called softly "Couldn't she give us a letter that says we're allowed to be here?" A few people laughed.

Spatial Governmentality

Any city with a substantial lowrider community probably also has an active lowrider cruising scene, and often such scenes have a tense relationship to the police. In Austin, Texas during my fieldwork, cruising on weekends was a permanent game of cat and mouse between lowriders and the police. Much of the cruising time was spent actually in place, 'posted up' as some of the lowriders said, in parking lots along the main cruising boulevard, Riverside Drive. From their position in parking lots along Riverside, lowriders would scan the traffic for cars belonging to people they knew, noting the latest custom part or modification that the driver was 'coming out with' that weekend. Owners of cars with hydraulics would demonstrate the powers of their suspension setups, and sometimes 'hop on' each other in a head-to-head duel to see whose hydraulics could bounce higher. More than anything else, lowriders would socialize in the parking lots, catching up on the latest "word on the street," making plans for coming car shows, asking for and giving mechanical advice, or just talking. Crowds that gathered alongside elaborately customized cars made the situation highly noticeable to all passersby. When this drew the attention of police patrols, it generally meant that lowriders were "run off" from the parking lot, which usually belonged to a private business.

The regulation of urban space by police in the Austin cruising scene resembled what some readers of Michel Foucault call 'spatial governmentality' (e.g.. Merry). Governmentality is a term coined by Foucault in some of his later lectures to describe a neoliberal form of social control which enlists citizens and populations in the project of self-governance (see Foucault 1991). Unlike discipline, in which individual bodies that varied from a dominant norm were confined and 'corrected' in penitentiaries or clinics, spatial governmentality works by reserving particular spaces

for those citizens deemed capable and worthy of self-regulation (Merry 17). Those populations who fail this test (or are expected to fail) are "moved on" rather than subjected to disciplinary practices to remake them as docile subjects. The moving-on operation of regulation under a regime of spatial governmentality reproduces on a very local scale patterns of dislocation and migration which increasingly characterize the relationship of people to place around the world. With this increasing mobility in social life, operations of power shift from the matter of securing rigid boundaries to that of regulating flows of people and resources. It results in what José David Saldívar called a "border-controlled state" within the limits of a city. While the experience of forced mobility through dislocation can be traumatic, it also can be turned back on the regime as mobility is claimed as a resource in something like what Rafael Pérez-Torres calls a "migratory mode" of social action (183).

As Sally Engle Merry notes in her anthropological application of governmentality theory, this kind of spatial regime is associated with the trend of 'community policing' embraced by most city police departments in the U.S., including Austin. At its best, community policing includes greater involvement of officers in the communities they patrol, and can produce interactions like that with the 'nice' officer in the anecdote above. But community policing strategies also often operate on spaces in a governmental manner. In Austin, this took the form of identifying 'hot spots' where crime was expected to occur. In such sites, which included Riverside, after a certain time of night, anyone in on the street was considered suspect. Thus despite protestations by the Austin police that racial profiling was not to be tolerated, a certain spatial profiling was standard procedure. Inasmuch as this approach to spatial regulation identified populations as suspect or not, and controlled access to public spaces accordingly, it coincided with a regime of spatial governmentality. As Merry argues, such a regime also coexists with repressive measures, such as arrests, and the two mutually support one another.

Almost all the lowriders I met had personal experience with unwanted attention from police, which they attributed to racism or stereotyping by which the police characterized all lowriders as gang members or criminals. Yet my research indicated that the spatial practices of police not only responded to already-perceived identities (lowrider, Chicano, gang member), but in the process of regulating public space, actually produced criminal identities. This was most

obvious in the issuing of tickets for traffic violations, an often arbitrary process which was difficult, costly, and time-consuming for lowriders to contest. Many times, traffic tickets accumulated and became arrest warrants, which made the ticketed driver a de facto criminal and fugitive from the law, subject to arrest and jailing. Thus the issue of whether one had "got any warrants" was a subject of constant concern for lowriders who could count on regular interactions with police and being pulled over.

Warrants

When I pulled into the carwash for the weekly car club meeting, the first person to greet me was 'Miguel,' the son of the club president. "Somebody got arrested at the car show," he said, announcing the main news of the week.

The club had traveled that day to a small, predominately white town outside of Austin for a custom car show. The Anglo organizer of the show had strongly encouraged them to come, saying he wanted lowriders represented. In previous club meetings, a flier for the show had been passed around, and members particularly took note of the slogan "We don't discriminate; we appreciate."

"I don't know, Williamson County..." said a club member, shaking his head. His apprehension referenced the reputation of this county as a conservative place, where police were quick to target those who did not "fit the context." Daniel nevertheless announced his intention to go, to "represent" and support the welcoming gestures made by the show organizer. The club's newest member, 'Jared,' also went. Jared was Anglo and had just moved to town from west Texas. He had found the club by cruising by the carwash when a meeting was going on and was quickly accepted on the basis of his impressive lowrider minitruck, which featured an expensive graphics paint job and body modifications. At the show, however, a former friend accused Jared of stealing his truck. In the course of the dispute an officer checked Jared's drivers license on the computer and found warrants. He was arrested.

While the police were holding Jared in a patrol car, Daniel and the other club members approached to find out what was happening. The Williamson County officer ordered them to step back. "You're threatening me by standing so close," he told Daniel. "I don't know what you're going to do while I'm arresting your friend here. You're putting my life at risk. I'll take you all

downtown. You have any warrants? I'll shut this show down." Daniel and the club members withdrew and left Jared to spend the weekend in the county lockup.

Though Jared was white, being working-class, 'warranted,' and a lowrider was enough to place him in an adversarial position to the law and mark him as a target for police inquiry. Yet Jared's experience was replicated in numerous cases every week when police pulled over lowriders. Since lowrider style is a racially-marked expression, lowriders are particularly subject to pullovers, during which police often run a routine check on the driver's license for warrants. Not every citizen's license is checked for warrants. The regulating attention from police is compounded when directed at a 'minority' body, invoking the imagined connections to a criminal nature and the specter of gangs.

When police pull over lowriders, they often issue tickets for moving violations, unsanctioned modifications to the car, not having insurance, hitting hydraulics in traffic, playing loud stereos, and other charges. When citizens receive traffic tickets, according to the contract of governmentality, they govern themselves by paying the fine. There are plenty of reasons not to pay a ticket, however. Many of the lowriders in Austin worked for an hourly wage in an 'at will,' neoliberal business environment that demanded 'flexibility' from its workforce. This translated as an unstable relationship to work and to the pay check. It was easy to quit a job and easier to be fired. Turnover in most wage workplaces was high. Being a wage worker also meant that the only way to acquire expensive commodities was through credit. Many of the lowriders I met were making regular payments on something: their car; a paint job; a hydraulics setup; jewelry; tiny television screens set into the dashboard, etc. In this credit system, paying traffic tickets sometimes gets demoted in the list of priorities: you accept the chance of getting arrested over the certainty of having your cell phone service canceled for nonpayment of the bill.

This is one way that governmentality not only organizes space by moving some bodies on and reserving space for others, but rather, in the process of such regulating practices, the regime produces the very identities it needs to proceed with these operations. It quite literally criminalizes the ticketed driver as a fugitive from the law. While it is not at once physically evident who has warrants and is thus 'undesirable' in a governmental sense— unwilling or unable to fulfill the contract of spatial governmentality— police operate on logics of probability and profiling that

subject Mexican American lowriders to a greater degree of surveillance and regulation than other citizens. Thus spatial policing is a means by which the racist imaginaries that construe minority bodies as “probably deviant” (see Moore, cf. Butler and Nichols) are given form as a self-fulfilling prophecy. This is not, however, a production solely from the top down, and this is where the intersection of Lefebvre and Foucault is particularly useful (Soja 15, cf. Foucault 1977 and 1990). Spatial governmentality is not merely a matter of repression, but also of production—the production through everyday discourses and practices of subjective and spatial identities. For built into the regulatory practices which police urban space is an expectation and indeed a requirement that decent citizens will police themselves. The process of criminalization is also one of recruitment: it is in the failure or refusal to toe the governmental line that unruly bodies become targets of being 'run off.' It is no simple matter of personal choice, however, as a person's inclination and capacity to participate in the governmental regime is overdetermined by race, class, gender and other historical factors. In particular, the relationship between lowriders and police is mediated by a web of entangled social relations and narratives, including the history of Mexicans in Texas and historical discourses of hygiene, responsibility, religion, racial character, criminality, and citizenship (see Montejano).

Conclusion: Contestation and the Production of Space

As Lefebvre argued, space must be conceived of as embodying dialectical relations in an integrated social formation, for "(social) space is a (social) product" (1991:26). Among these dialectics are constantly unsynthesized tensions between the state and individuals or populations, between regulatory practices (policing) and representational ones (identification). Although the police sometimes succeeded in 'running off' lowriders from particular places, the process of spatial contestation was ongoing: the lowriders would be back another week, or in another lot; there would always be another car show somewhere. To avoid oversimplifying these relationships in social analysis, it is necessary to attend to space as a practice. Its mode of operation is not planning and design but use and contestation. Its raw materials are not only architecture, real estate boundaries, and zoning plans, but the bodies of those who occupy sites, the bodies of their cars, and relationships of time, motion and force to other bodies and to sites. As a process of bodies in

motion, spatial production is constant— spatial identities must be constantly reproduced. It is in this need for reinscription that lies the potential to perform new spatialities, to refigure spatially-performed identities and thus alter— perhaps temporarily— social relations.

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² As will become clear in the course of my paper, “lowrider” can also refer to the human owner/driver of a lowrider car. For more scholarly work on lowriders, see Bright 1994, 1995, 1997, 1998; Chappell 1998, 1999, 2000, 2002; Gradante 1982, 1985; Griffith; Mendoza; Plascencia; Rojas; Stone; and Vigil. Also see Parsons, Padilla and Arellano; Trillin; and Paige Penland's forthcoming *Lowrider History Book* to be published by *Lowrider Magazine*. The latter has been serialized in *Lowrider Magazine*, which is among the holdings of the Benson Latin American Collection at The University of Texas at Austin.

³ The names of the club and of all members have been changed.