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STYLE AND IDENTITY: HOUSTON LOW RIDERS

by

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IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE
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ABSTRACT

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Mexican-American low riders have used the customized car to express identity and create community in the fragmented suburban city of Houston. Their cars challenge hegemonic notions of work and leisure.

The low rider's synthesis of work and culture is made of everyday practices, yet results in placing him in a new relation to his world. This transformation is achieved as the low rider engages in a series of performative roles. The Collector works on the world by systemized action performed on material objects. The Craftsman produces work through a system of knowledge. Finally, the Dandy, as a character of modernity, confronts the problems of his era and signifies historical change.

This study examines cultural style and personal history. As the low riders elaborately demonstrate, superficial signs are capable of presenting a profound search for meaning in our modern life.
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INTRODUCTION

Ethnicity, Subculture and the Meaning of Style

"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, she says, the church and sex, death and family congeal and American capitalism collides head-on with long centuries of Hispanic tradition.

(Meridel Rubenstein quoted by Jim Sagel)

This is a study of low riders. It is an investigation into the relations of ethnicity, subculture and the meaning of style in post-modern America. The re-creations of the low riders express deeply rooted emotional components of identity contained in material culture.

Studies in ethnicity have always focused upon groups and their boundaries. Ethnicity has been used historically to designate one cultural unit in relation to others, usually a division within a society. Thus, ethnicity has served to define political and cultural specificity. Anthropology as well as sociology have used it as a unit term of cultural difference, constructing their ethnic subject as a cultural "other." This insistence on cultural units has not generally taken into account the social, economic and cultural antagonisms evidenced in relations between groups. Hence, ethnicity has been presented as
a unit of identity rather than a process of identity.

In contrast, studies of subculture have tended to focus on taste and cultural power, assuming a correspondence between social class and aesthetic disposition. Importantly, subcultural studies have emphasized the clash of cultures as symbolic negotiations of identity and difference focusing on dominant meanings.

These (stylistic) preferences were used to mark out identity and difference from competing subcultures and the parent culture. Each subculture represented an attempt to win 'space,' both real space – street corners, neighborhoods, etc. – and symbolic space: areas in which new forms of identity could be developed beyond the cultural and ideological parameters. Subculture was interpreted as a response to real problems and contradictions affecting the whole community: changes in the composition, ecology and culture of the urban working class, the erosion of prewar communal and kinship obligations, the changing organization and status of industrial work, and the conflict between the ideology of affluence and the experience of persistent (relative) deprivation.

(Dick Hebdige, "Travelling Light: One Route Into Material Culture." p. 11)

The Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, for one, has worked to problematize the seemingly apparent relations between social class and taste, focusing less on subcultural identities than the actual process of meaning construction and symbol manipulation.

In the United States, ethnic distinctions usually have designated racial differences while subculture has been used to make distinct differences of taste and class. These
distinctions are problematic. In fact, as we can see in the case of the low riders, ethnicity and subculture tend to merge, perhaps as a reflection of the social, economic and cultural particularities of our time.

In contemporary ethnic re-creations, insistence on cultural pluralism emerges in generational searches for identity. The low riders are a portrayal of this. They often express a concern for creating a positive image for Mexican-Americans. Coming from middle, lower-middle and lower income backgrounds, many of them 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. Many young Chicanos aspire to be low riders. For them, it is a path to both luxury and respectability.

In many ways, the issues presented by the low riders replicate the concerns noted in subcultural studies. The meanings contained in the low riders' searches, as evidenced in their cultural productions, tell of the contradictions affecting their community, particularly the conflict between the "ideology of affluence and the experience of (relative) deprivation." They are also indicative of changes effecting the urban working class and the status of industrial work. In working on themselves and their cars, low riders attempt to forge a union between their spirit and their image.
Ethnicity is in this instance a process of identity that is both personal and communal. Claims of craftsmanship and familial concerns are culturally specific as are the connections to the past evoked by the cars and the resurrected zoot suit. Meanings extracted from the cultural past are thus joined with strengths of character to provide an ethic that is workable for the future.

The low riders' practices contest the meanings of work and leisure, calling our attention to the nature of struggles for status and reputation in the modern world. These struggles are cultural, economic and political. Through their leisure practices, low riders seek to critique hegemonic ideals of work and respectability, hoping to break open the crystallizations and enlarge the breadth of our community while 'preserving rather than effacing differences.'

The following is an analysis of Houston low riders and the meanings of their style. It is based upon my fieldwork in Houston from January 1984 through September 1985. I became interested in low riders after seeing them for the first time in New Mexico in the fall of 1983. At that time, I was curious about their designs and surface expressions, recognizing that they represented a culture, that as a Texan, I had grown up with, yet did not know. I understood that cars, while common enough in everyday experience, were
used to represent values and aspirations. Even so, the extent of personalization and attention that low rider cars received was surprising and appeared to me to be intentionally expressive.

In Houston, I found people amenable to helping me with my study. I spent many week-ends in the first half of 1984 at low rider functions such as car shows and club meetings. Los Magnificos graciously allowed me to become an honorary club member and I spent most of my time with them.

Yet, for all my attempts at empathetic understanding, I remain an outsider to the culture I am describing because, although I am an interested person (white, female and Anglo) working on a research project, I am not a low rider. Therefore, I have to talk to people about their understanding of what they do and what they value.

In creating this ethnography, I have drawn upon a variety of sources in order that I might portray some of the richness of the lived experience without making it appear too self-contained. In addition to spending time with low riders, I interviewed people such as Richard Reyes (a local playwright), and Joe Coleman (the zoot suit tailor) for their understandings and impressions of low rider culture. Newspaper articles, videos and movies all represent people’s attempts to construct meaning out of this rich and important cultural phenomenon and I have referred to them as well.

Low riders are called upon quite often to explain what
they do. They want people to know what they do. Newspapers carry articles about them frequently. They are asked to participate in benefits and other community functions. In accordance with this attention, they have developed a rhetoric of reputation, things they say about what they do and how they want to be perceived. This is a distinctive feature of this group and one of the reasons that I insist on their self-conscious critique of dominant culture.

This study considers culture as product, praxis and representation. It consists of four sections: 1) "Persona" introduces the idea of low riding activities as a series of performative roles which mark out constellations of experience and relations; 2) "The Collector" describes the system of material objects; 3) "The Craftsman" performs the actual work of creating the car; and 4) "The Dandy" confronts the problems of his age and signifies historical change. Finally, I conclude by discussing the importance of low riding by contrasting the expressive uses of the car in American culture.
I.
PERSONA

The "class struggle", instead of operating at the level of history, is operating at the level of workaday life and its opposition to culture. In place of the division Marx foresaw is an arrangement wherein workers are displayed, and other workers on the other side of the culture barrier watch them for their enjoyment. Modernity is breaking up the "leisure class," capturing its fragments and distributing them to everyone. Work in the modern world does not turn class against class so much as it turns man against himself, fundamentally dividing his existence. The modern individual, if he is to appear human, is forced to forge his own synthesis between his work and his culture.
(Dean MacCannell, THE TOURIST. p.37)

The low rider is a modern individual. The synthesis he develops between work and culture proceeds from the desire to attain, to possess and to be. These desires are symbolically denied by the world in which the low rider lives. As a result, he expresses his desire by fashioning "objects" of his body and his automobile. In these ways, he can imbue the clothes of society with his colors, which become the traces of his experience and identity.

Resistance occurs at the unhappy intersection of two bodies. Here, dominant Anglo-American culture acts to make the Mexican-American invisible and utilitarian. He is of another culture and language. He is conscribed in the body of "the worker" and in this body his culture and his language can be denied. In opposing this denial characterized by silence, the low rider acts to transcribe
the body of the worker and endow it with the colors and strokes of his culture. He hopes in a language that will fill in the silences.

He hopes by deeds rather than words that he may "show" his worth and thereby puncture the separating screen. In his car he becomes visible. He takes charge of the street in a carnavalesque manner. He fills in the silences with new connections. He makes his work his own. He restores his culture. Through low riding he attempts the synthesis that MacCannell describes.

This cultural-political work is endemic to the modern world. Objects speak for us. They are part of our constitution as persons, as private citizens in a public system, and they can be rightful reward, or bondage.

"The good life" is what our society promises, but its promise is made according to a narrowly defined system of values that idealizes monetary reward. The pursuit of happiness has been largely intended and interpreted as the pursuit of property. Society's promise is the citizen's "right", but herein lays the contradiction of the system. Not all citizens are equal. For some there are rewards, for others frustration, and for still others, denial and punishment. The workings of this system are complex, to be sure, separating people according to language and race, gender, income and religion, to name a few important categories. But, the variety of cultures that exist in
this country means that there is not just one good life. Rather, it means that there are the historical experiences of many cultures, creating a range of evaluations as to the merits and accessibility of the promise.

This understanding is contrary to the representation of the media. By holding up the commercial ideal, it proliferates the image of leisure as both the means to "make it" and the reward for work.

Detergents and household appliances, such as dishwashers, shortcut work and provide the right appearance for social acceptance. Clothes place one fashionably in the world, indicating conventionality, trustworthiness, and enviability. Cars make personal statements while moving through public space. Sex appeal, signified as liquor, perfume or jewelry, means he or she whom has it is young, exciting and desirable. All of these representations point to an idealized creation of selfhood through objects and products.

The commercial representation of the creation of selfhood is in most cases only tangentially related to the reality of the process. People do not participate in the market system as idealized consumers, wanting to belong to "the world". Rather, products and objects play strategic roles in the practice of everyday life, practices that are largely determined by culture, gender, politics, economic conditions and opportunity.
Everyday practices reveal the ways in which "the world" is made, not bought into. The study of such practices, or ways of doing things, leads one to understand,

the relationship that links everyday pursuits to particular circumstances. And only in the local network of labor and recreation can one grasp how, within a grid of socio-economic constraints, these pursuits unfailingly establish relational tactics (a struggle for life), artistic creations (an aesthetic), and autonomous initiatives (an ethic).
(Michel de Certeau, p.ix)

The world made from particular circumstances is a specific cultural constellation formed according to experiences of ethnicity, status and class. It frames the interpretations made of the promises and representations of the media and the political system, casting them in relation to a person’s life, thereby underlining values and inconsistencies.

For Mexican-Americans, the promises of this system are not the products of Hispanic culture. They have an Anglo-American history with definitions of order and "rights" which often have been mythically understood to structure opportunity. Mexican-American life promises something else. At the very least, it is a hyphenated experience, one that juxtaposes personalized Mexican culture with institutionalized Anglo culture. The playful processional performances of the low riders are intended to express and affirm their Hispanic culture in an American
way. They have no desire to play back their alienation onto themselves. They make cultural assertions out of two important roles in American life, the man and the car.

In his personal network of labor and recreation, the low rider seeks to forge his synthesis. His car presents a style of leisure and opposition, unique in its movement and finishes. The handcrafting of details serves to identify the car with its owner. All marks of the industry which produced the car are removed. This includes make and model names, door handles, pinstriping and side moldings. The exterior is elaborately finished, receiving a multi-layered paint job. The interior is reupholstered in the style of plush living room furniture. The interior light is often a chandelier. All of this work is intended to remove the marks of institutions and invest the car with an image pertinent to its owner's experience. His desire is replaced with pleasure. His leisure becomes invested with signs of his work.

The details of these cars are fragments of leisure. The chandelier, the lush upholstery and the movement are all bits from the world of personal pleasure. One might read them as attempting to signify, by short cut or by bricolage, a successful man. But, a fuller interpretation can be realized by analyzing the process of production of low riding, which is constituted in its elements, the car,
the man and the performance.

In the introduction of this section, Persona, I care to ascribe a general consciousness of desire to low riders, a desire that spurs on transformation. This desire is explicitly formulated by one of the men I talked with. In Houston, the low rider movement began in 1978, when Teo Doria started the first low rider club there, after experiencing low rider happenings in San Diego. He wanted "that" to happen in Houston. He desired a new realm of social and personal autonomy for Chicanos in Houston.

For others, low riding has a different history. Shorty, originally from California but now living in Houston, grew up in the presence of low riders. He began exercising his interest as a teenager working on low rider bikes. The system seems natural to him.

My ascription of desire to the low rider thus addresses three kinds of experience. The first is the experience of participating within the system of activities and constraints for modifying cars that is low riding. It is by the collective practice that cultural identity is forged and communicated, both within its community and to its outside world. The second is the personal experience of the man constructing the car. Construction requires, after desire, skill and knowledge, which are socially organized and form the realm of action for the man. The third experience is the practice of cultural criticism that requires the system
to operate in "democratic" space, the public space of
dialogue.

The low rider's synthesis of work and culture is
made of everyday practices, yet as a result of his produc-
tion, he is placed in a new relation to his world. This
section, Persona, considers low riding activities as a
series of performative roles. Three Persona, the Collector,
the Craftsman and the Dandy, constitute the system of
performance. The Collector works on the world by systemized
action performed on material objects. The Craftsman
produces the work through a system of knowledge. Finally,
the Dandy as a character of modernity confronts the problems
of his age and signifies historical changes. Each role is
an example of a way in which doing something works in meta-
phorical relation to the world. Each role marks out a
constellation of experience and relations.

For this analysis, I will draw from sources that
combined serve to illumine the ways in which things in the
world and the practices associated with them have social
meaning. For general reference, Dick Hebdige's study of
punks, *Subculture: the Meaning of Style*, is an excellent
study of working-class youth subculture. Susan Stewart's
*On Longing* discusses the collection as a way in which the
world is created by, and ultimately for, its owner.
Walter Benjamin's essay, "Unpacking My Library: a Talk
About Book Collecting" provides a delightful complement to
Stewart, highlighting the personal pleasures of collecting. For the Craftsman, Carla Needleman’s *The Work of Craft* philosophizes the function of craft in a craftsman’s life. Finally, the literature on the nineteenth century French dandy, including Nicole Ward Jouve’s *Fire to Conquer Darkness* and Domna Stanton’s *The Aristocrat as Art*, detail the attributes of this modern character who enacts cultural criticism through style.

Low riding is an important phenomenon in the drama of contemporary life in the United States and I hope by attending to it ethnographically to exhibit the retrospective and creative hope that works within it. I want not to create a text out of lived experience, but rather to indicate social action as a source of critique against rhetorics of domination. This is not the only way. A low rider’s presentation of his project speaks directly in a voice which identifies the ways in which he acts for himself and against constraint. I want to replay the voices as I have heard them.
II.

THE COLLECTOR

Thus there is in the life of a collector a
dialectical tension between the poles of disorder
and order. Naturally, his existence is tied to
many other things as well: to a mysterious
relationship to objects which does not emphasize
their functional, utilitarian value— that is,
their usefulness— but studies and loves them as
the scene, the stage of their fate.
(Walter Benjamin, ILLUMINATIONS, p.60)

The Collector lives intimately in the life of his
possessions. The acquisition of an old object is its
rebirth. In becoming property, it becomes part of the
creation of a new world— the world of memory and absorption
where the owner lives in his objects.

According to Susan Stewart, the collection is

a form of art as play, a form involving the
reframing of objects within a world of attention
and manipulation of context. Like other forms of
art, its function is not the restoration of
context, but rather the creation of a new context,
a context standing in metaphorical rather than
contiguous relation to the world of everyday
life. (ON LONGING, p.151)

Several points are important to this discussion of
the Collector as a Persona of the low rider. First, the
man and the car are intimately aligned. In short, the
creation of the car constitutes the creation of the man.
As a car goes through its sequential adornments, it becomes
more valuable to its owner. His pride becomes invested with
it. When a car is sold, it still retains the identity of
its original owner until such time as his marks are replaced by those of its new owner. When a car dies, as did Robert Garcia’s in flames on the highway, so metaphysically does he. These cars are each man’s pleasure. They become the source of his pride and the material evidence of his reputation. They endorse his capability to perform work requiring time, money and skill, the work of transforming a “bomb” into a “nice ride”.

Second, this system of transfiguration serves to redress the history of the car in accord with male Hispanic experience as represented by their aesthetic criteria. In so far as low rider cars of all year models go through a customary series of modifications evoking the 1930’s emphasis on low, slow, luxurious design, and insofar as these cars often appear in public show settings, they enact an interpretation of the automobile as it has meaning for this strata of Mexican-American.

Third, the cars are the nexus of a constellation of social activities. These include car clubs, car shows, cruises, parades and benefits. Car clubs often serve as the locus for the organization of these activities.

1. This understanding of the design emphasis of low riders as evoking 1930’s design is not made by them. It is based upon my research of car design and the history of car customizing.
People show their cars as club members, often displaying the club name plaque in their rear window. They share a network of information and support in which socializing is an important component. The combination of activities and networks make a new "place" for the Chicano within his community. This new place is one of the most important outcomes of this system of transfiguration—through the work on the car and related activities, the man has a new context for action and relationships. He has a new community.

Fourth, the use of historic figures for mural images and dressing styles represents an attempt to salvage from the past an enabling history that is symbolic of the racism faced, identity embraced, and asserted. These images are often exhibited at the car shows, which are a forum for performances of certain roles that have developed in the low rider movement. These roles, seen in the zoot suit and bad girl contests, have arisen from the ancestral figure of the pachuco, who was the victim of race wars in 1943 Los Angeles. He is a man, once persecuted, now dancing in pictures on car tops.

These aspects are the threads of the web, the social relations organized around creating cars, performances and good times that, as a web, constitute a community. The low rider movement, as it is often called, has the political
and cultural objective of promoting the identity and reputation of the Mexican-Americans.

1. **Oppositions**

   Explaining low riding's beginnings in Houston, Teo Doria says that the prevailing custom style in 1976 was the hot rod. The modifications that make a low rider are inversions of hot rod style.

   When I got out of the service, I came to Houston and I told my brother about it, low riding, what I had seen over there (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 with it: I started dropping it, small tires, rims... I had to order parts from California.

   The features of the hot rod (referred to by some as a rake or road-sniffer) that the low rider inverts are (1) the high rear, low front look, (2) the oversized wheels, and (3) the movement (fast and directed). To quote Tom Wolfe, hot rods "are freedom, style, sex, power, motion, color - everything is right there."2 It is right there

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2. "The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby" in the book by the same title. p.64. 1969
with the low rider too, but in a Mexican-American expres-
sion. A few inversions create meaningful differences in
cultural perceptions of these ideas. Freedom does not
mean to move with unrestrained speed, but rather to move
at a luxurious pace or in a disruptive way (hopping).
Style means luxury not sport. Sex requires seduction, not
muscle flexing. Power comes from asserting control and
mastery rather than mere horsepower. Motion is important
to take over space, not break lose from it. And, colors
are mostly the colors of festivity and luxury, rather than
the colors of revolution against "good taste" (i.e. the
Anglo use of blues, beiges and greys).

It is important to note that both the hot rod and low
rider styles stem from the beginnings of car customizing
in the 1940’s. George Barris is reputed to be the early
California customizer. He opened a shop in Los Angeles in
1945.

Most of the work he was doing then was modifying
Detroit cars - chopping and channeling. Chopping
is lowering the top of the car, bringing it nearer
the hood line. Channeling is lowering the body
itself down between the wheels. Also, they’d
usually strip off all the chrome and the door
handles and cover up the wheel openings in the
back. At that time, the look the kids liked was
to have the body lowered in the back and slightly
jacked up in the front, although today it’s just
the opposite... This diverted everybody from what
Barris and others were really doing. Hot rodders
had a terrible reputation at that time, and no
line was ever drawn between hot rodders and
custom-car owners, because, in truth, they were
speed maniacs too.
This was Barris' chopped-and-channeled Mercury period. What he was really doing, in a formal sense, was trying to achieve the kind of streamlining that Detroit, for all intents and purposes, had abandoned.3

At that time, the car forms for speed versus custom streamlining had not yet separated. From this recounting, we can see their common roots.

Currently this system arranges and reclassifies the cars according to Hispanic aesthetic terms. Cars from the 1930's and 1940's are considered classics. Other than occasional channeling, they receive little customizing beyond new paint and upholstery. Their designs are comfortably expressive of the criteria of "low and slow". They were originally designed with the luxury theme in mind, encouraging the bourgeois use of pleasure.

Advertisements from this era show the car runners at curb height for graceful entry and exit. The wheel wells are articulated on the body, emphasizing the width of the vehicle. Other ads portray the family outing and place Father happily in the center of his family and his car. These are social pleasures in the private realm and private pleasures in the social realm.

These concerns are replicated by the low riders. Low riding, as a system of activities, is consistently referred to as a family thing. Husbands, wives and children are all

3. ibid. p.73
involved. Photographs often show the man and his family, the man and his girl, or simply his girl, with his car. Thus, the cars of the 30's and 40's are most in accord with the social and aesthetic concerns of the low riders.

After the 1940's, luxury, as defined through long low lines and accessories aimed at gentility, was replaced by sportiness. Cars became smaller and lighter. The low riders modify most all car models after 1950 by lowering their chassis (removing up to half of their springs) and adding "tru-classic" wheels (which being deeper than normal, emphasize the low profile and width of the cars).

Not all cars are created equal when it comes to availability and adaptability. Favorite models are 60's Chevrolets, Monte Carlos and Grand Prixs. These cars are designed long and relatively low, and are good for both street cars and show cars. Recently, late model Cadillacs, Lincolns and trucks have been appearing at car shows and seem to be considered as innately luxurious, in that they are less baroquely customized than other models. This development hints that low riding, in its most conservative and conspicuous practice, tends toward assimilation. Simultaneously, as the street car remains stripped down and refuses to participate in the luxury aesthetic, it retains its revolutionary message.

Not all cars are modified the same way. They are however all molded according to the concerns of an Hispanic
cultural value image that has its roots in the luxurious oppositional pace that is historically Latin and in the luxury aesthetic that is endemic to the designs of the 1930's and 1940's automobiles.

2. The System of Customizing

The Collector is the agent responsible for operating this system. It may be commonly assumed that each car is the outcome of one man's work. My research in Houston indicates that most owners do only part of the work themselves and commission the skilled work, such as exterior painting, body work and interior upholstery, from qualified craftspeople. This system then 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 is significant. A low rider car is not a simple form of folk art accomplished by a folk artist. It is a cultural form that, in contrast, is made up of conventionalized modifications that are achieved through a system of social relations. In so far as this is a form proper, it requires the car owner to devise strategies for actualizing his modifications, for making his "ride."
There is a basic series of steps taken to turn a car into a low rider. Today, the process a low rider follows goes something like this. 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 Riviera on it is tantamount to having Buick Riviera tattooed on your chest.4

The next important step is to evoke the streamline design. The car is lowered by removing approximately one half of each suspension coil. Then the low rider replaces his old wheels 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 come next. They enhance the car’s movement. Now it can hop, move side to side, dance. If it drops one side, the hood and trunk can be seen. 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 acquaint-

stances. On some occasions, the hydraulics are professionally installed. Often, the work is undertaken at someone's garage or shop.

Body work, that not-so plastic surgery, idealizes the car body, correcting those unsightly details Detroit produces. 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." Other little "tucks" are taken here and there, removing door handles, recessing French antennae, and adding rear wheel skirts, all in the interest of streamlining 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. This surgery is undertaken to emphasize the love and luxury of the car, not its functionality.

Once the body is improved, it is finished with custom paint and pinstriping, another expert's job. 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. The colors are bright, for example, white or black in a usage that is reminiscent of the public domain of festivities that is peculiarly Mexican.
Last come 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. Allan Rodwald's designs are the present rave in Houston. His characters are not real, but they are life-like and his scenes have visual depth. These pieces are commissioned. The owner presents his idea to the artist for execution. When completed, the car is dressed and ready for the last but important details.

The last touches are the "jewels." Such additions as a small chain steering wheel, chandelier, television or bar and of course the famous fuzzy dice, give just the right flair. The emphasis of these cars is on beauty and luxury, not function.

3. "Living in the Thing"

I was in California. I told my friend, "I've never seen nothing like this in Houston. I heard there were some in El Paso, but I aint seen nothing in Houston. Down south, I aint seen nothing. This is the first time in my life I've seen a car going up and down, a paint job like this!"

I used to have a hot rod. I was a mechanic. I did my own motors and everything. It had to be something strong to shake me from that because I still like that. It had to be something stronger to change me to low riders.

I think it was the hydraulics. That was the main thing. And the way they paint them. Of course you could paint a regular car too, but I like to have hydraulics. I think what really got me started on it was the hydraulics. That really kicked it off for everybody. It came out
on "Believe-It-Or-Not". At first, nobody could believe it!

I'd be laughing everytime I'd do it (hop). I used to do it alot at stop lights. Now everybody knows about it. Everybody knows you've got hydraulics. They tell you, "Pick it up! Drop it down!"

A lot of people don't want to do it. I do it. I do it for the fun of it. They want to see it. I enjoy it. They enjoy seeing it go up and down, which I did too when I first saw it. (Teo Doria, personal conversation, 8-23-85)

The way low riders talk about their rides reveal the different important ways they live in them. These cars have their own social-historical life, but this life can only be initialized by their personal owners. Like characters in a play, they must be brought to life by the desires of the actor. Low riding depends upon this psychological kernel. What follows is a recounting of the ways low riders live in their rides.

I talked with Shorty in September 1985. He grew up in Selma, California, then moved to Houston in 1977 at the age of sixteen. He is in the process of making his first low rider car, for the second time. His initial car was wrecked. He grew up thinking that he wanted to have a low rider. His familiarity with the system makes it seem natural.

Everybody (in California) has low riders. They might not be custom, (they might be) just a street car to go riding around. You see all them cars up there. You start out with your bike. You can't wait til you start working to
get a car. You get a car and you start working on it. (personal conversation)

Shorty's experiences with his two cars indicate two different processes of producing a rider. His first car was a Mercury Cougar. He and a friend installed the rear hydraulics. They looked at another car to find out how to do it, then they went to a friend's shop and cut the necessary holes. Chris, one of the first low riders in town, who happened to also come from Selma, helped Shorty to hook the hydraulics up. Later, Shorty and yet another friend installed the front hydraulics by essentially the same process. Then the car was wrecked and never finished.

Now Shorty is working on second car, a 1974 Chevrolet Caprice Classic Convertible. He has already installed the hydraulics and tru-classics, and is planning to take the car to Mexico to have the major custom work done there. He is planning on having body work (including suicide doors, trunk and hood), custom paint (he must deliver his own for good quality), and custom interiors. He is again using personal connections, this time for references, not expertise.

According to Shorty, low riding is a hobby that sticks with you.

When I wrecked my car, I couldn't wait to get it running again. I just...I don't know. I like hydraulics. That's what it is.
Indeed, hydraulics are the central pleasure, but having a car represents the ability to make significant attachments to people. In telling of how he joined Los Magnificos Car Club, Shorty hints at the isolation that can occur without a "ride."

One of my friends was in the bike club. I already knew a lot of them, but I didn’t know they were in the club. Most of them I already had met before. But, after I wrecked the Cougar, I didn’t go out hardly.

And later on, when I got the convertible, I started hanging around again. And when I went to one of their meetings, I knew almost all of them.

A man who has a "ride" can carry himself. His car gives him mobility and identity. Robert Garcia’s story is an example of the loss of identity that can befall one who loses his car.

I first heard of Robert in early 1984 when I contacted Richard Reyes for help learning about low riders. Richard is a playwright and social worker. He told me I should find out what happened to Robert Garcia, a member of the Latin Attractions. At one time, Robert had had a car he called Puro Uro, or Pure Gold. Puro Uro was the star car of “Por Un Amor” (For A Love), a film about Houston Low Riders. It burned up on the highway when Robert was returning from a car show in San Antonio. After that, it was rumored that Robert disappeared, perhaps
to San Antonio. He had lost his job. Gotten into drugs. I should talk to Robert, Richard said, ask how he had reacted to losing his car.

I met Robert shortly after that at a car show. I asked about his car, but all he would really confide to me was that he found it a difficult situation. After this first meeting, I saw him often at car shows. He was still without a car, but he regularly competed in the zoot suit contests.

This past spring, a woman from one of the car clubs mentioned Robert again. He had gotten into trouble again. Gotten into drugs again. Gotten mean with his wife. She left him. He started stealing. Ended up in the Huntsville prison. Seven years to go.

Robert's story reveals, as the worst case, the thin lanes of identity that low riders often travel. It tells of a man's decline and the depths he can fall to without the vehicle for his pride. Drugs are for the most part against car club rules. To fall prey to them goes against the identity that the clubs form to construct. But, the car becomes an important part of a man's life and without it, the threshold between being in, or down and out, is a very thin line.

Robert's story also points to tensions seen in the clubs. Marriages often suffer the strains, emotional and financial, of putting a car together. The close relation
between the man and his car coupled with the large amounts of time and money required for making and upkeep of the car cause much of family life and finances to focus on them, creating tensions between husbands and wives.

These tensions can be ameliorated to some extent in that most public activities associated with the cars are family oriented. Wives and children can and do attend. The outings are afternoons in the park, barbeques and car shows to benefit social and political organizations, such as Little League and LULAC, and dances. But, these activities do not resolve private conflicts.

In most cases, the man's involvement with his ride continues. When divorce splits the family, the man maintains his ride. Many men expect that they will stick with it for a long time. According to Joel Carmona who is married, "Once you get into it (low riding), it's hard to get out."

Joel is the President of Los Magnificos Car Club. He has owned a Chevrolet Nova for three years. He is pretty much finished working on it and has now started on a truck.

I'm through with whatever I'm going to do (on my car). I'm not going to do too much. Helen thought, "Oh, all right. That's it. We're through."

Now, I've bought me an old truck and started working on it, little by little. It's a '58, a little old. I wouldn't mind going older, but it's hard to find an old car that looks good, that's cheap. I got a good deal on it.
I like it. I like driving it. It's fun to drive, big old army tank...

Joel is an example of one of the ways involvement continues. He enjoys the work of putting the car together and so has started a second. Some men are content to fix the car up, then they relax and go to shows, only doing the work necessary to maintain the car. Los Magnificos accepts primer cars and the process of renewal is continuous in Joel's club.

The Houston City Cruisers were formed by several ex-members of Los Magnificos who had tired of the renewal process. They wanted to be together, to show and to relax, but their club runs the risk of atrophying. Rodney has moved on to another hobby. Paul and Naomi have moved to San Antonio, and Jessie and Lucia are considering it.

Likewise, the Latin Attractions are still around, although they are not showing the strength of numbers they had last year. In 1984 they were one of the oldest and strongest clubs in Houston. In 1985, their members still showed, but without the club solidarity of the past.

Teo Doria was a member of the Latin Attractions until he dropped out two years ago. Personal problems, he says. I think by this he means personality problems because in our August conversation, he alludes to conflicts over
competition fairness. He thinks people drop out of clubs because of conflicts.

So, a lot of people say, "Forget it! I don’t have to show my car. I’ll just drive it on Sunday." I think that really slowed down a lot of people from showing their cars.

Although Teo no longer shows, he still works on his car, a 1964 Chevrolet. It lives at his paint and body shop, which he calls Doria’s Low Rider Shop. He has recently given his car a "hollywood top", removing a two foot wide panel from the roof, a detail that can be seen on the 1938 Packard. He plans to repaint it for the fifth time, and to drive the streets again. He sees low riding as containing the seeds for its ongoing longevity. The following is an excerpt from a conversation we had in August.

BB  Do people ever just get tired of it?
TD  Well, I don’t think so. I aint gotten tired of it yet and I’ve been low riding for about nine years.
BB  So you think most people stop when things get complicated, for some reason or another?
TD  Yeah. There are still people out there that started low riding with me a long time ago that aint low rider now, but still got their cars, like me. They might be working on them or something. They still aint gave up, they aint been attending shows or nothing like that, but they’ve still got that low rider in them. They say, "Man, I see a low rider and it makes me want to bring mine back out again!" They never leave it for good. They always come back. They’ve always got it back down in their minds that they want it, they like that and that they want to do that, for a lot of reasons.
Like I said, they'll lay back for a year or two. Then, they'll come back. The same rider or another ride. Car show for a year or two, then slack down. You see every once in a while. I've seen two low riders pass by already while I've been talking.

Later in our conversation, he came back to these issues:

Remember you asked me if it (low riding) was going back? I think it's going back a little. It's not like it used to be. I don't think it will ever be like it used to be. It's never going to be.

I don't think it will ever be like it used to be, but I don't think it ever died. People know here in Houston what low rider is all about now. Even if there's only one riding around, and a guy that's left low riders for four or five years, he sees that. He's going to want to get back in it.

Later on, like I say, one year's bad. Another year's good. And then, maybe two years later, after that, it's bad again. And then another year it comes out booming again.

It comes and goes strong, but it never leaves.

These stories of Shorty, Robert, Joel and Teo indicate the ways the man can live "in" his car. Shorty and Teo tell of their exposure and subsequent desire to low ride. Joel tells of continuing the process, going on to produce a second ride. Robert tells of the disastrous consequences that can befall a man whose car dies before his desire does. Finally, Teo tells how a ride continues to be relevant to a man's life, even after interest wanes.

The desires of these men are examples of a man's identification with his car, his hopes to be connected to people and to be seen. Wobbling, hopping, jerking cars cause one to notice, once past the novelty of the hydrau-
lics, the trappings of the low rider's world. He takes his private world outside. He performs in the public realm of private property.

Most other forms of collections appear in the public spaces of private places. Consider for example, plates, books, stamps or jewelry. In most cases, they reference the outside world as it is relevant to the owner. By contrast, the case of the low rider is most interesting. His production references his private world, in public. Ultimately, his ability to participate in the exchange economy is being indicated through his understanding of acquiring and organizing objects. So is his desire to retain his difference.

Susan Stewart claims that the fetishized object must have a reference point within the exchange economy. If the function of the collection is to create a new context, as she also claims, then the owner must have a place within the exchange economy as well. The process is twofold. Even as the Collector "lives in the thing", the thing describes him and ascribes his place in the world.

The low rider, from Hispanic culture, lives away from economic power. His understanding of his position as determined by race, language, gender and culture is different from that of a biker or hot rodder. A biker thinks that the corporatization of America has demeaned the world of work and the value of man, that in the work place he is no
longer free to be himself. Through his bike, he lives a world that rebels against bourgeois constraints of place and propriety. The low rider understands that as a Hispanic, he has been subject to racial discrimination. The United States has an otherness that he must assert himself into. He chooses to try to order his travels under the rubric of style rather than freedom. It is one means he has for controlling his world.
III.
CRAFTSMAN

Craftsmanship begins with disillusion. Disillusion is an extraordinarily interesting state of being, having immediate and far reaching effects. It is a sacred state, a state that has power. It acts at once to still the voices of mere discontent. It is an active, not a reactive state, and if the craftsman can bear to stay there, not to turn away, he begins to detect an opening in himself through which he can learn... Disillusion, the recognition that I am not what I thought I was, that I don't know what I thought I knew, that I can't do what I wish to do, is the payment that opens us to creative dialogue. It renders the craftsman, strains him through a very fine cloth to rid him of impurities so that he, like the material substance of his craft, can be available to be worked upon. (Needleman, Carla. THE WORK OF CRAFT. p. 49)

While the Collector negotiates the possibilities for order and identity in his life, the Craftsman is the actual laborer in the process of creating that order and identity. His is the personal experience of the man constructing his car, in the socially organized and historically shifting realms of action. He works to produce his performance as a low rider, fashioning objects of himself and his automobile. This fashioning, this form giving, is the Craftsman's ingenious participation in the systems described previously in "The Collector."

Craftsmanship is an important cultural component in this process. It is a term I will use here to mean personal facility for making things. As Needleman notes, craftsman-
ship requires patience and persistence. Most low riders have experience working on machines of some sort. Hands-on experience with machines and repairs forms much of their relationships with "things in the world." These relationships are conscribed by economics and thereby influenced by class, but, importantly, modified by cultural experience. Familiarity with working on things has been conducive to the rise of low riding as a form of popular culture.

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. It's to show what our race can do. (Fidel of Latin Image Car Club, quoted from POR UN AMOR, a film by Carlos Cabillo, 1983.)

In THE PRACTICE OF EVERYDAY LIFE, Michel de Certeau identifies two ways of operating, one proper and one opportunistic: the first "strategic," the second "tactical." While it is by strategies (plans toward goals) that one conceives a low rider, it is by craft (piece by piece by opportunity) that a low rider takes shape. Websters defines craft as "skill in planning, making or executing," as well as "skill in deceiving to gain an end." This definition is closely related to deCerteau's notion of "tactical" practices, which he characterizes as
"ways of operating": victories of the "weak" over the "strong," clever tricks, knowing how to get away with things, "hunter's cunning," maneuvers, polymorphic simulations, joyful discoveries, poetic as well as warlike...(POEL, p.xix)

More specifically, he calls a "tactic"

a calculus which cannot count on a "proper" (a spatial or institutional localization), nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality... The "proper" is a victory of space over time. On the contrary, because it does not have a place, a tactic depends upon time - it is always on the watch for opportunities that must be seized "on the wing." Whatever it wins it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into opportunities. (POEL, p.xix)

Personal tactics operate in socially organized realms of action. For the low rider, hands-on experience with machines and repairs forms a propensity for making and remaking things that differs from a consumer orientation that favors buying, discarding and replacing things.

Over the brief history of low riding in Houston, the ways in which knowledge concerning style and technique is passed on have undergone considerable shifts. In the late 1970's, there were no local experts of car customizing, low rider style. Therefore, initially much of the custom work was done communally, by men working together on each other's cars, trying to solve problems of technique and detailing, in the search for style. Today, many men get the work done by commissioning it from people practiced at
the necessary craft. Shorty's way of getting his car customized exemplifies a departure from the communal shop setting in which Teo originally worked out the problems of body work and painting, although both men show the necessity of everyday tactics for seizing opportunity throughout the life of the car.

CONSTRUCTION OF CARS AND COMMUNITIES OF KNOWLEDGE

1. Teo and the Early Days of the Finest Few

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. Other people liked the idea and wanted to make their cars into low riders. The following is Teo'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 but 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 aint using. I’d like to sponsor ya’ll." I used that shop before I had this shop here.

"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. Victor’s shop became the first place where people got together to work. Teo says that Victor wanted people to get together, although the reasons are not clear. Teo suggests that perhaps Victor saw a way to make some money. It could
also be that being older, he saw the political need for people to be organized. His interest is a question that bears investigation, although his recent death makes direct questioning impossible. It is important to note that the men had a desire to organize as low riders, and Victor saw this as important. The rise of the low rider movement came on the political of the late 1960’s and the rise of the Chicano movement. It is paralleled by the release of several movies about Mexican-Americans and the development of the Chicano theatre. 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 1978.

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" is passed on as "where to."

In the early days of the Finest Few, the work was financed partially by pooled dues and pooled earnings from shows. Work was done by pooling efforts, working on one car at a time as the "club's car." The techniques were worked out in a collective setting (Victor's shop), and socializing was more egalitarian.
We went as far as having softball teams, softball tournaments. Everybody was low rider. They'd belong to a club and have your colors. We played the Low Masters. It was fun, really. Not only just to take the car, we would take the cars and everything. (We'd) line them up, then we'd get into a picnic or party. It wasn't cars, cars all the time. We (would) drive them with other members and everything, but we had other things to do.

But, now they don't do that no more. They don't have that extra, what can I all it, "extra-entertainment", for the people. Even the women were involved in it pretty good, you know. The wives and the girlfriends, because even then, they used to play ball. Now all they're worried about is just "my car, my car," (and) taking it to the show.

One of the catalysts of low riders' popularity was the addition of hydraulics to enhance the car's capacity for motion.

Then hydraulics came out (1978). We got them out of California. We got the Low Rider Magazine. We ordered them. (the hydraulics). 5

When people started seeing hydraulics on cars, 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. I took about 3 or 4 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 time and money on their cars. You know, jobs were better too. That's when it really hit root real good.

In 1984, Teo quit low riding. He continues his paint and body business. He also continues, slowly, to work on

5. Low Rider Magazine carries advertisements for firms such as LOWRIDERS Hydraulics, which sell hydraulics and custom accessories through mail order catalogs.
his car, intending to bring it out again. Mostly, he works as an expert now, someone who takes commissioned paint and body work, and someone who is familiar with the history of low riding in Houston.

At one point in 1979 the Finest Few had 42 members and was still the only low rider car club in Houston. It had grown from the original eight cars in 1977 to 42 in 1979 when it factionalized and splintered into two clubs. Victor Carreon was elected the new president and the club shifted focus from bringing people together to work on cars to organizing as a club to concentrate on showing.

By 1983 there were 20 car clubs in Houston of various sizes and membership requirements. In 1984, when I did my field work, the number of active clubs had dropped to eleven. The Latin Attractions were the oldest and most competitive club, followed closely by Los Magnificos, a club that was then only one year old. Latin Image and Low Masters were also fairly visible at this time.

2. Shorty and the New Organization of Work

Los Magnificos, a club both young and successful, provides an interesting example for its shifts in organization of men and customizing work. Los Magnificos (The
Magnificients) differs from most clubs in that they customarily accept new members whose cars are not yet ready for show. In these early stages, the cars are often called primer cars, referring to the grey primer coat they sport prior to customizing. While most other clubs have older, more stable memberships, Los Magnificos prides itself on its openness and competitiveness. A look at the way some of its members customize their cars shows marked differences from the early days of the Finest Few in Victor's shop.

Shorty joined Los Magnificos in late 1984 after getting his second car, a '74 Caprice Classic convertible. He is now in the slow first stages of customizing. He is having the most costly and labor intensive work done in Mexico. The following are excerpts from a conversation we had in late August 1985.

There's a friend of mine down there (Monterrey, Mexico). His father does upholstery...My brother knows somebody that knows how to do body work and paint...The interior of my car, (done) here, what I want is $1800. Down there, (it) is about $300 for the same work. The paint here is going to cost me at least $1000. Down there (it) is going to be about $200. That's a lot of difference!

The thing is...if you go down there, take your car down there, you gotta make sure they use your paint (that) you take down there, 'cause the paint down there aint as a good as here...or the materials. But, like the guy who's going to do my interior - they know me and stuff - and they go get the material in Laredo, so it's material from here.

BB Do you have to stay down there while they're doing it?

Well, not with them. Not the ones doing the interiors. Now the guy who's doing to do the
paint – he’s going to do everything (else) first, all the body work, just fix it all up. And before they paint it, I’m going to go down there... make sure they use that paint, ’cause I don’t want to get ripped off. But, they guarantee their work, you know just like here. If it cracks, they repaint it (for) free, (even) if it chips or fades or whatever. So it’s a lot better down there, as long as they do the work right.

E3 So how much longer before you’re through?

Well, you know my brother’s down there now. He’s checking out prices and stuff. And if he’s all right, (arranging) work and stuff, I might take it down there in about two weeks. And if it’s not working, I’m not going to rush them. Whatever, they’ll work slow.

It will take at least a month or more because the paint is going to be custom paint. You’ve got to spray and let it dry, respray and let it dry before they’re finished.

On the paint it will be at least two or three weeks, on the interior about the same. I’m going to try to get it painted before the interior (work is done) so they don’t have to worry about overspraying. It will be a month, month and a half before it’s all done.

On suicide doors, it takes a while to do them. It’s a lot of measuring on suicide doors. They open backwards. Same with the trunk...The murals, I’ll probably save the money (for them) for next summer. There’s not many things to do during the winter, so (by) next summer I should have enough money.

Shorty’s story tells how, ten years after low riders began coming out of Victor’s shop, one can get a low rider made. It is a process of bits and pieces, of seizing opportunities, of utilizing friends and relatives, and of being active in the process. Apart from the work described above, there is work Shorty performs himself. He knows a little body work, such cutting metal with a torch and welding. He used this knowledge in installing the
hydraulics on his defunct Mustang and the Caprice he is now driving. He installed the Tru-Classic wheels. In addition, he knows how to spray primer paint, although he has never sprayed finish coats.

Yeah, I put them (hydraulics) in my own. When did the first one, my Cougar, we did it in the back (installed the hydraulics for the rear of the car). We just looked at another car and found out how to do it, so I went to this guy’s shop (Victor’s) and cut out the holes.

Same with the front. They used to tell me it was a lot of trouble, but once we looked at it, (we found that) it ain’t no trouble. All you got to do is take your arms apart, catch the springs, cut out the holes and that’s it.

Some of my friends helped me do most of this stuff. One guy...helped me do most of the stuff. He was a Finest Few a while back. He was the one who helped me hook up everything. And then, (when) I don’t know what to do, he just showed me how to hook them up. I already know how to take them off, put them on. There ain’t really much to it.

Shorty’s method, of doing some work himself and commissioning the paint, body work and interiors, is representative of the process of customizing, although it varies some, based upon the skills, time and resources of the car owner. In many cases, people do commission the paint, body work and interiors from local crafts people in Houston, such as Teo Doria.

According to Joel Carmona (President of the Los Magnificos), at least a couple of Los Magnificos’ members have had their paint and upholstery work done in Mexico. Joey’s car had the upholstery and paint done in Mexico for
$500, total. The painting would have easily cost $1000, had it
been painted in Houston, and the interior seven or eight
hundred. However the work is accomplished, it requires
saving money over a period of time.

But, the thing a lot of people look at, they say, "Oh, we’ve got money," because all of a
sudden we come out with a paint job, or come out
with an interior, but they don’t know that we save all that time.
They see your car one day, and the next day
you (have) got an interior, and they go, "Man, they must have money!" But people save that
money for a while, to come out all of a sudden.
We’ve got cars that don’t look like anything, and the next week (when) they come out, they’re ready for a show.

Like Robert’s car, that blue Monte Carlo. Nobody even thought about it being in a show,
but when he did bring it out, he came out ready for the show, and like Joe’s car, he sent it to Mexico for two or three weeks. He came back ready for shows.

It’s pretty neat to watch ‘em change. We’ve gotten cars they say "Aw, you’re letting that sorry car in the club?!" That’s all right as long as they work on it. They work on it and they’re better than half the cars that have been out on the street before they got out.

BB Your club changed this year, didn’t it?

Members? What happened (was) a couple of members got out, started their own club, and they started trying to knock our club down, trying to push out of the way and everything. They couldn’t do it and now they’re down to three or four cars.

We’ve still got over twenty cars in the club. We don’t have them all here. They’ll be at the next car show. We’ve had an average of twelve to fourteen cars (at shows), but like on benefits and everything, we don’t bring everybody out. Like my car’s not here and a couple of others’ aren’t here. Whoever can make it comes to the benefits.

The car shows are what we go for. That’s the main thing. But we still hit anything that comes up, to be there, representing the club.
As the cooperation seen in the early days of the Finest Few declines, individualism and competition seem to increase. The practice of pooling knowledge in order to work out problems of technique and style is now shadowed by a more widespread process that necessitates commissioning experts. The current emphasis of club participation is on competition. The question we might here ask is how are these people connected with each other? They are precariously related, yet somehow stable because they do not rely on each other for too many things. In the case of the Los Magnificos, the club provides organization and information as well as a place to belong and socialize, in a setting that is not too controversial.
V.

THE DANDY

The flaneur is still on the threshold, of the city as of the bourgeois class. Neither has yet engulfed him; in neither is he at home. He seeks refuge in the crowd.
(Walter Benjamin, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," in REFLECTIONS. p. 158)

If a man becomes frightened in the presence of nature, it is because he feels that he has been trapped in an immense amorphous, gratuitous existence which completely freezes him by its gratuitousness. He no longer has his place anywhere; he is planted on the earth without any goal, without a raison d'être, like heather or a clump of broom. On the other hand, in the middle of town he feels reassured because he is surrounded by precise objects whose existence is determined by the part they play and which have a value or price attached to them like a halo. They show him the reflection of the thing he wants to be – a justified reality.
(Jean-Paul Sartre, BAUDELAIRE. p. 106)

The low rider appears, in parks, boulevards, and shopping centers. He is driving low and slow, mean and clean. He is in procession, in possession of the roadway, converting public "space" into his "place." He is behind those "shades", under that Fedora, in those shiny Stacy Adams shoes, draped in his zoot suit.

The low rider shares with the French Dandy leisurely movement, aristocratic adornment, and stylized rather than fashionable dress. The nineteenth French Dandy's place was on the street, and in the arcade. He was a stroller. His slow, leisurely gait and his meticulous dress distinguished him from the crowd. In the halls of the arcade,
the precursor of the shopping mall, he displayed himself as style, not fashion, while observing the city as 'curieux.'

A mobile mirror at the vortex of the crowd, the flaneur provides the perfect perspective from which the city may be seized as a spectacle which surrounds its observer like a diorama, its images ranged around a vacant center like so many items in a shopping window beckoning the observer into reverie.
(Richard Sieburth, "Same Difference: The French Physiologies, 1840-1842" in NOTEBOOKS IN CULTURAL ANALYSIS. p. 187)

For the low rider, as for the French Dandy, style is composed of elemental expressions of meaningful "difference." In this section, I would like to illuminate the content expressed by the low rider's style. The persona of the Dandy calls us to look at his style, then beyond his 'thingness' to his reality in order to understand the necessity of his poetic expression.

Webster's defines a "dandy" as "a man who gives exaggerated attention to dress", and "dandyism" as "a literary and artistic style of the latter part of the nineteenth century marked by artificiality and excessive refinement." What I prefer to note, rather than the authenticity suggested above, is the existence of style removed from the conventions of fashion, style which questions the uniformity and conformity contained in fashion. Such is the example set by the Dandy throughout
history. Hence, we can understand the Dandy as a persona constructed as a counter-discourse.

The Dandy embodied and espoused by Charles Baudelaire as well as the flaneur of bourgeois society both share characteristics with the low rider. Baudelaire lived as the beautiful repressed. He wrote against the coarseness of the grain of the swelling, compelling power of the bourgeoisie. He was rejected power, rejecting as well dominant values. And, he wrote in favor of the Dandy as a 'moral character.'

In a different context than Baudelaire, the counter-discourse of the low riders is not based on rejecting power, but on the disenfranchisement from the promise of power, or said another way, it is based on the recognition that the ways into mainstream American culture, the inroads which should have been paved after the early 1970's, are not open to direct access. Currently, the low rider subculture is creating its own road. It is expressing multi-cultural experience through the creation of enabling histories and contemporary interpretations of cultural symbols. Low rider experience, if interpreted as composed of autobiographical acts, shares with contemporary ethnic autobiographies the struggle for self-definition in the hopes of influencing a pluralistic universalism.

The recreation of ethnicity in each generation accomplished through dream- and transference-like processes, as much as through cognitive
language, leads to efforts to recover, fill-in, act out, unravel, and reveal. Though the compulsions, repressions, and searches are individual, the resolution (finding peace, strength, purpose, vision) is a revelation of cultural artifice. Not only does this revelation help delegitimize, and place in perspective, the hegemonic power of repressive political or majority discourses, but it sensitizes us to important wider cultural dynamics in the post-religious, post-immigrant, technological and secular societies of the late twentieth century.

(Michael M.J. Fischer, "Ethnicity and the Post-modern Arts of Memory." Unpublished paper, Rice University, 1985)

The characteristics I am drawing attention to by personifying the Dandy are those that emphasize seeing and being seen, and expressing difference. The constellation of low rider activities includes several showing roles which valorize personal style. The themes of looking and being aware of the image indicate this particular public's desire to see itself dominate the space of representation, at least for a while.

The low rider has a style of performance that enacts leisure and opposition. His style challenges prevailing notions of work and respectability. In this section, I want to portray the elements of cultural criticism that the low riders voice, based upon their language of style and their use of space and time. In what follows, I will concentrate first on the historical representation of the zoot suit in the Mexican-American community in an effort to portray the history of its meanings and the meaning of its contemporary usage. Then I will discuss the low
riders’ use of space and time as a means for insinuating themselves into the system imposed upon them.

1. "ZOOT SUIT"

The zoot suit was originally worn as leisure dressing by many working class and ethnic groups in the 1940’s, including Blacks and Mexicans. Its distinguishing characteristics are its baggy pants with narrow ankles, and long sportcoat with padded shoulders and finger-tip sleeves. It was usually accompanied by a pork-pie hat, a long watch chain and pointed, shiny Stacy Adams shoes. At the time of its first appearance, it was an exaggeration of dominant suit styles. Since the late 1970’s, it has been resurrected by Mexican-Americans as emblematic of their ethnic identity and heritage. Low riders have figured prominently in this resurrection. Most low rider shows feature zoot suit contests. In addition, the zoot suit is now being worn on special occasions by some Chicanos in place of more conventional suits.

In August 1978, the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles produced a play called "Zoot Suit". The play was commissioned from El Teatro Campesino’s Luis Valdez for its New Theatre for Now Series. Director Gordon Davidson is reported to have wanted a play about Los Angeles, "something indigenous." What he got was a play that reconstituted the figure of the pachuco and the history of the
1940's in Los Angeles. Valdez's play synthesizes two important events from that period, the Sleepy Lagoon Incident of August 2, 1942, and the Zoot Suit Riots of June 1943 and replays them for later generations. The play was a commercial success in Los Angeles and later made into a film by Universal Studios. While the play has been criticized for its portrayal of history, it is most noteworthy for its dramatic portrayal of the dialectical inner and outer life of a young Mexican-American man. It is important in this analysis because it is representative of the interpretation the historical figure of the pachuco receives today.

The play concentrates on the fictional life of Henry Reyna, a pachuco, in the late 1930's, early 1940's. The story is, briefly, as follows: At the opening scene, Henry is dressing in his zoot suit to go out dancing. He is a second generation Mexican. His parents sit together in the kitchen. He goes out to the dance and later to Sleepy Lagoon where he and his friends get into a fight with another group.

Somehow, one of the other group dies of a knife wound. Henry and his friends are brought to mass trial. The judge does not allow them to alter their appearance - throughout the trial they must appear as they did when

6. The story of "Zoot Suit" as I tell it here is taken from the movie production of the play.
they were arrested—thereby emphasizing their 'difference' from Anglos and highlighting their dangerousness. They are of course convicted. Later, the guilty verdict is overturned and Henry and his friends are released.

In the final, most painful scene of the story, Henry and a couple of friends are out one night in their zoot suits. They are found by some sailors, who beat them and then strip them. It is a heart-wrenching moment when these that have already suffered on account of their difference are made to suffer such extreme indignity. Yet, Henry rises to render a proud, dignified assertion of himself and his race, intent not to be broken by the racism he experiences.

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

Valdez conceives of pachuquismo as "that proud way of life of the pachucos, (which) was the direct antecedent of

what has come to be termed 'Chicano consciousness',

such that the play valorizes its hero and places him

proudly in the midst of so much blind racism and public

resentment. For Valdez, the pachuco by his contrived

style was the first Mexican-American to take pride in the

complexity of his origins.

In my play, "Zoot Suit," I have sought to dra-

matize the time of the pachucos and, at least by

implication, to make them relate to the present.

My inspiration in writing it was the pachuco

experience when many young men like Billy

(Valdez's cousin) died tragically, and others like

Cesar Chavez became national political leaders.

They and countless other pachucos have fired the

ambitions of their heirs, the Chicanos of today,

and they continue to inspire a movement of

equality that has yet to achieve its full flower-

ing.

(Luis Valdez, "Once Again, Meet the Zoot Suiters"

in LOS ANGELES TIMES, August 13, 1978. Part V,

p. 3)

The pachuco, for Valdez and many others, is the

precursor to the low rider, exhibiting a similar flair and

restlessness, but the conditions of experience for the

pachuco were different. He was the first of the second-gen-
eration Mexican-Americans, coming of age in the troubled

times of World War II.

A nation at war is capable both of ignoring

domestic issues, and of exhibiting intolerance

toward nontraditional behavior. Such was the

case in East Los Angeles, where a quiet rebel-
on against American values and life styles.

8. Luis Valdez, "Once Again, Meet the Zoot Suiters" in

surfaced during the late 1930’s and early 1940’s. Youthful members of the second generation, the principle figures in this rebellion, expressed their estrangement from American society by forming cliques or gangs. Carey McWilliams, noted author and attorney, remarked that these individuals, "rebuffed in the schools and in the community," have "been made to feel that they do not belong, that they are Mexicans, not Americans, and that they will never be accepted as equals." Poor schooling and problems with the law kept many of them out of the armed forces, and prejudice denied them equal opportunity in the work sector. The early gang members from this era were recognizable by their dress styles, use of English and Spanish slang words or a combination of both, and tattoo marks on their hands and arms. In the early 1940’s they began to sport zoot suits, long ducktail haircuts and gathered on weekends at local dance halls. They called themselves "Chucos," short for the word Pachuco. The police and press preferred to call them hoodlums or "zoot suiters."
(Ricardo Romo, EAST LOS ANGELES. p. 166)

These were the conditions under which the pachuco appeared, difficult times of difficult relations between the Mexican-American community and its outside, and in particular, between Mexican-American youths and the police.

The Sleepy Lagoon Incident began on 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, an sad and unusual event in U.S. judicial history.9 The court found three

9. While not unprecedented, the trial was highly unusual. The trial was preceded by the Scottsboroug Boys Case, in which 28 black men were prosecuted for the rape of a white woman. Also in this vein were several trials of confederate expatriots. All of these cases show an intolerance for groups of men symbolizing
guilty of first degree murder, nine guilty of second-degree murder and two counts of assault. Five were convicted of lesser offenses, and some of these served time in the Los Angeles County Jail. Five were acquitted on all counts. Yet, in October 1944, the District Court of Appeals reversed all of the guilty verdicts, finding the trial judge biased against the defendants. These incidents are central events in the play.

The Zoot Suit Riots referred to in the last scene 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.

Rumors that Mexican hoodlums had started the fight brought hundreds of marines and sailors into the barrio and downtown section of Los Angeles that evening. Over the next few days, more fights followed. Mexican Americans wearing zoot suits were stripped of their clothing and beaten. The mob, which grew larger every night, marched through the downtown area in search of Mexican zoot suiters, but blacks and Filipinos were also attacked...The riots stopped when the commanding officers of the local bases placed the downtown section and the barrio off limits. This
was done only after the Mexican government put pressure on officials in Washington to quell the disturbances, and the State Department, which was aware of the negative international attention that the riots were receiving, ordered the Navy and Marine Corps to act since it appeared that local Los Angeles officials would not.
(Ricardo Romo, EAST LOS ANGELES. p.167)

Valdez condenses these two historical incidents in the single, fictional life of Henry Reyna. However, they did not both occur in the life of any one person. The Zoot Suit Riots occurred before the Sleepy Lagoon acquittals. Valdez collapses them in order to portray blatant racism that must be faced with dignity. The pachuco emerges from the film as a figure endowed with the power, from his soul and pride in his appearance, to overcome his obstacles.

In what ways is this interpretation of the pachuco significant? Why is it commercially popular in the 1970’s and 1980’s? We have seen above that Valdez’s interpretation of the pachuco is a heuristic one. He wants to portray the pachuco as an enabling historical figure that is alive to his cultural and political conditions.

The pachuco has not always been represented thus. Only in the late 1970’s has he come to be valorized. Pachucos were the precursors to gangs in many places and the Mexican-American communities have been very sensitive to the damaging effect the pachucos’ reputation did, and
can, have on them. Even now, the figure of the pachuco is not considered favorably in all sectors. However received, the **pachuco** is the figure upon which today’s zoot suiter has been modeled and extensively popularized by media representations such as “Zoot Suit” (both the play and the movie) and LOW RIDER MAGAZINE. Luis Plascensia asserts that LOW RIDER began projecting the “zoot-suit-equals-low-rider image soon after the premiere of the play and has continued this tradition up to the present” (1983, p. 149).

The LOW RIDER image has indeed become a pervasive one, influencing both the dispersion of the low rider subculture and its memory. For many people today, the **pachuco** is a figure, faded into the past, who has left his suit in the present. Many who wear the zoot suit consider it a sign of being a Chicano rather than of being a **pachuco**, or even descended from the pachucos. The most prevalent memories of Houston club members are of elder family members, such as fathers or uncles, who made their cars into low riders in the late 1940’s and early 1950’s. Most of these people do not remember their relatives as **pachucos**. The **pachuco** is considered by many in Houston car clubs to be a part of Mexican-American history, only he is as far removed from them as Houston is from Los Angeles, or at least El Paso. To dress in a zoot suit then is to differentiate oneself as belonging to, or being in sympathy with, popular Chicano subculture.
2. ZOOT SUITS IN HOUSTON

The zoot suit has a history in Houston. As in many other places, it was worn in the war years, by Blacks, Mexicans and others, and then abandoned. Today, it is 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.

Joe Coleman is an important figure in this movement. His shop, Coleman's Men's Wear in North Houston, makes most of the zoot suits and is the source for most of the low rider fashions in Houston. "Coleman's" is heavily involved in the low rider community and its activities. The shop sells, in addition to clothing, Low Rider Magazine. It also sets 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 become involved with peoples' 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, POR UN AMOR. 1983)

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

People who cannot 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 has become 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 or 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, POR UN AMOR. 1983)

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 3, similar to Stacy Adams, and that took two years to do. It's just what we do. If they tell us, give us an idea of what they want, they we go about seeing what we can get it made or how we can get it done, even if we have to
make it ourselves. No problem.
(Joe Coleman, POR UN AMOR. 1983)

The recent 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 Richard Reyes, a local playwright, who try to use the zoot suit and low riders to portray positive qualities. Coleman considers 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. I tried to find out about low rider in L.A., which in L.A., from my talking to the 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, POR UN AMOR. 1983)

Who wears a zoot suit? According to Joe, a zoot suit is an important purchase. Quite often it is a gift,
especially in the case of teenagers. Parents will 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 want their children to know how hard they have worked to get the suit, so it is an important event for all. This represents a marked difference from the conditions that generated the zoot-suited pachucos of the 1940's.

While teenagers are important wearers of zoot suits, there are also others. Some older men buy them as do important members of the community such as Coleman, Willie Sanchu (a KNUZ radio disc-jockey), and Richard Reyes. Some smaller children have zoot suits in order to compete in zoot suit contests. Mostly these are children of car club members. Denise Llamas, whose father Roland is a member of Latin Attractions, has been competing for a couple of years. The same is true of Michael Villareal, whose father, Eddie Villareal, belongs to Latin Attractions, and Mandy Carmona, whose father Joel Carmona of Los Magnificos also competes 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 vary from the standard suit worn by the others. Teenage girls often wear the suit slacks or suit skirts with suspenders and shirts with ruffles. Young women often transgress the most, wearing outfits that range
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, are important to a wider variety of people than was the dress of the pachuco. Wearing a zoot suit today is a sign of inclusion in a much broader group—both in numbers and in generations—than it was for the pachuco.

The above analysis 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. 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.

3. THE MEANING OF ROLES AND THE ROLE OF SHOWING Expression of a Family Way
One of the most common, yet perplexing statements I regularly heard when interviewing people in Houston low rider clubs was,

"It's a family thing."

The counter-claim that accompanies this assertion is that families are very important in Hispanic culture. While this appears to be true, it is important here to understand the role that families play in the organization of low rider life and how the different components of families are represented. Indeed, the claim, "It's a family thing," calls attention to how family members are, and are not, represented.

Low rider car shows and benefits have a fairly standard set of activities. First, there is the car show itself. It is the organizing element. Every family brings its car, makes sure it is clean, gives it a final wax, and sets up its display accoutrements which often include such things as trophies, a list of work credits, and a scattering of plastic roses.

There are two outfit contests, the "zoot suit contest" and the "bad girl contest." Each is conducted for both children and adults. There is a "zoot suit contest" for men and one for boys, ages two to twelve. There is a "bad girl contest" for women and one for girls ages two to twelve also. 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.

The other up-and-coming contest is the "break-dancing contest." Break dancing is a popularized form of ghetto dancing, the essence of which is 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.

One contest that is professionally oriented, aside from the judging of the show cars, is the hopping contest where cars are hopped up and down in an attempt to achieve the greatest distance from the ground, usually in the range of twenty-four inches. While the zoot suit contests and the dance contests can be judged by the crowd, the hopping contest requires measurement by a judge with witnesses.

The final event of any car show is the awards ceremony. Here, the awards are given for the winners of the different categories of show cars. The awards are received by a wide assortment of people related to the winning cars, including men, wives, daughters and sons.

These are the events that constitute a car show. They deliver the "expression of roles." These expressions take place according to categories of appropriate activities for specific groups which are constituted by gender and age distinctions. As roles, they are functional relationships between forms of social organization and
social identity. The roles evidence the transformation of a family member to a social figure and it is this transformation that contains one of the keys to low riding's popularity within the Chicano culture.

The social structure that actualizes low rider life is constituted largely by family groups. When they say, "It's a family thing," one of the things they mean is that the whole family is involved. A great deal of work is put into the cars, primarily by the men. But, if these men have sons, then the sons are brought up with the cars as mechanical assistants. Eddie Villarreal, who owns a winning hopper, has a son who works closely with him in the upkeep and performance of the car. Paul's son helps him with the maintenance of his classic '54 Chevrolet.

Wives act as organizers and often participate in club life, as the decisions and activities directly effect them. When it comes to organizing activities, coordinating money and schedules, and having fun, the women are there.

Smaller children often just hang around. While they are not usually actively involved in the upkeep and organizing activities, they are always present. A number of them participate in zoot suit contests and they enjoy their association with the clubs. Mandy Carmona insists on wearing her Los Magnificos tee-shirt on the day school pictures are taken.
Teenagers are usually around, trying to find things to do. Often they practice break-dancing while the club is meeting. At other times, they visit together or help with the kids or cars.

These activities, constituting "behind the scenes" work, organize the different categories of people and allow interaction between groups. The effect is a two-generation integration that is a most important feature of this "family thing." Men and women cooperate with each other, teenagers stay together although they often separate by gender, and the children move between all groups, differentiated by their age and their need for at least casual supervision.

These people are bound together by their enjoyment of being together, the availability of activities and a community for all to share, and finally a sense that the formal activities, the shows and contests, achieved through the group are important to them as individuals. This combination of factors is important. Without any one of them, clubs do not stay together.

Club low riding is not strictly a family experience although it is largely a family experience within a Hispanic subculture. The "roles" of the events noted above are expressive of this subculture, appropriate to its social structure. The zoot suit contests provide the most illuminating example.
As described earlier, men, women and children participate in the zoot suit contests. Take for example the men. The beginning of the contest is announced. The contestants always wear 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. 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.

This same procedure is 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" is usually different. The women who enter are usually single, or married to a club member and without any children. Women's outfits usually depart from the regular zoot suit. Most often, they wear skirt suits with suspenders, an appealing blouse and high heels. Sometimes, they wear elaborate, seductive and beautiful dresses. And sometimes, the performance is problematic.

Men and children of either sex are able to evoke a reading that they are cool and disinterested. They are judged on these standards alone. Women are usually not able to evoke this image. They have the problem of trans-
mitting contradictory messages that lie uncomfortably close to the truth. The idea of being a zoot suiter is to be good at being "bad." While men and children can achieve this, it is difficult for women. Men, boys and girls can all appear in a non-sexual image that is disjointed from their personality. Women cannot. If they appear "bad", they can be interpreted as being promiscuous. This creates difficulties for a contest that is intended to show a positive ethnic image. For this reason, the "bad girl" contest has been dropped in some car shows and replaced with a "most beautiful" contest.

In 1985, at the height of Madonna's popularity, it was sometimes replaced with a "Madonna-look-alike" contest. This contest, differently from the "bad girl" contest, allows women to perform with irony disinterested beauty and sexuality. Madonna is after all ironically beautiful, enacting a parody of men's desire with her girlish use of socks, lace and women's lingerie. This performance seems less problematic, because in it, a woman can ironically present herself as "cool," sexy and in control.

From this analysis, we see that family is a term of organization and roles. When low riders say, "It's a family thing," they mean not just that the whole family is involved, but that the whole family is represented in its social relationships and aspirations. The men are evidenced as professional and "bad." The children are
seen as decorative and "bad." The women are problematic and, while they often remain behind the scenes as part of the production, they continue to negotiate their performances and participation. In this way the roles are expressed. The family is represented in its social relationships and aspirations. For a moment, family members make the transformation into social figure, although it appears that the zoot suit culture has difficulty encompassing the identity of women.

4. SPATIAL PRACTICES
Memorial Park

Memorial Park is the most "public" place in Houston frequented by low riders. On nice week-ends from spring to fall, they make the trek from their homes on the North, East and other sides of town to the park. They usually drive the circular park road once, then park and position themselves for an afternoon of relaxing and "hanging out." The traffic moves slowly on the park road, providing a wonderful opportunity to see and be seen.

Most every low rider city has a place of public display. It is always a visible place which low riders informally but consistently frequent. In Houston, it is Memorial Park. In Austin, it is Sixth Street. In Santa Fe, it is the plaza, and in Los Angeles, it is Wilshire
Boulevard. These promenades are the last of the public practices of the low riders that I will examine in this essay.

The practice of promenading is a way of using the city. It is an activity that aims to mark out boundaries and to create a theater of actions. The park becomes a setting for the low riders, where they can introject their narrative of belief and memory into the city. For the low rider, as for the Dandy, movement is a trajectory, a meaningful path across space. Both Benjamin and Sartre understood the city to present important opportunities for self-assertion and manipulation. Importantly here, Michel de Certeau identifies 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. On 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. (PRACTICE OF EVERYDAY LIFE, 1984, p. 117)

This is the kind of transformation accomplished by the low riders. 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 carnavalesque creations. It becomes, 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," the space immediately in front of our line of perception rather than the space above us, occupied by an authoritative and transcendent architecture; or the space at our feet to which we condescend; or the space directly behind us, invisible and threatening. 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. (Susan Stewart, ON LONGING. p.107)

Thus, it is a place where the panopticism of the city may be thwarted for a moment.
The participant in carnival is swept up in the events carnival presents and her or she thereby experiences the possibility of misrule and can thereby envision it as a new order. (Susan Stewart, ON LONGING. p. 108)

CONCLUSION

In the persona of the Dandy, we can understand the ambiguity and ambivalence contained in ethnic cultural expression in post-modern America. The low riders do not voice merely bourgeois aspiration or a discourse of resistance to dominant culture. Rather, their words, actions and style express a complex constellation of meaning garnered from the dilemmas of lived experience. They push at the bounds of legitimacy, asking us to accept difference.

That subculture arises from these relations, the kernels and expressions embedded in gang experience, points to the ways of dreaming, of metaphorically expressing identity and experience in our post-industrial society. For the low riders, the ambiguity of class experience in the United States, coupled with the specificities of ethnicity as operative differentiating factors, has led to the formation of an expressive culture in which the contradictions experienced by the community are displayed at the surface level, through style.
CONCLUSION

This has been a study of low riders, an examination of the meaning of style in the landscape of American culture. As a study in ethnicity and subculture, it exemplifies the production of cultural characteristics and the ways in which meanings are assigned to them, dependent upon the conditions of society.

The work of the low riders has been to create a personal yet cultural identity, an identity that is grounded in the past, extracting meaning from it and making it into an ethic workable for the future. This has resulted in a visible community that is not neighborhood based.

The low riders are concerned with their image, but their counter-discourse is metaphorical, it is composed of experiences, activities, sets of statements. It is lived, not expressed as a function of literature. Low riders show us the ways in which doing something works in metaphorical relation to the world, thereby creating a new place and a new identity for the actors.

Dean MacCannell said, "Modernity is breaking up the leisure class, capturing its fragments and distributing them to everyone." In the American cultural landscape, we see these fragments speaking differently for different subcultures, dependent upon their experience and aspirations.
Since its beginning, the automobile has been a statement of consumptive values and aspirations. Middle-class Anglos have used the standard American car as an index of success and appropriateness. Mexican-American low riders have used the customized car to express identity and create community in the fragmented suburban city. Ghetto blacks have used luxury cars to indicate their resistance to the denigrations of poverty, in a world that valorizes consumption. The appropriation of the automobile is one way in which all of these people interpret their relation to the ideology of affluence, which has been the most persuasive and constraining construction of the post-War period.

In SUBCULTURE: THE MEANING OF STYLE, Dick Hebdige states,

...the challenge to hegemony which subcultures represent is not issued directly by them. Rather, it is expressed obliquely in style. The objections are lodged, the contradictions displayed at the profoundly superficial level of appearance: that is, at the level of signs.

Yet, as the low riders so elaborately demonstrate, superficial signs are capable of presenting a profound search for meaning in our modern life.
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