RPM (REVOLUTIONS PER MURAL): LOWRIDER MURALS AND THE AMERICAN QUILT OF IDENTITIES

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This senior thesis examines lowrider muralism, specifically what roles Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata play in understanding the American quilt of identities. This thesis seeks to answer the following question: Using American cars as a canvas, what do lowrider murals depicting iconography from the Mexican Revolution reveal about or contribute to our understanding of American culture and identity? In this thesis, I will argue that lowrider murals depicting the figures of Zapata and Villa are contributing to the American quilt of identities by challenging the restrictive mythology through the contribution of new icons that are emblematic of the iconoclastic effect lowriders have had on the American cultural firmament. I explore the contradiction between fact and legend in historical figures by examining their history and their historical myth through three lowrider murals. Fact and legend combine to provide a concrete historical legacy to build on, and deep emotional investment in the way these figures modify our understanding of American-ness. Fact and legend also combine in new manifestations of the American self-made man and how muralist art can catalyze social change. Together, Villa and Zapata eradicate the American cultural hegemony into an American quilt of identities more representative of the nation that it is today.
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INTRODUCTION

In February of 1934, the Mexican painter Diego Rivera wrote,

I have always maintained that art in America . . . will be the product of a fusion between the marvelous
indigenous art which derives from the immemorial depths of time in the center and south of the continent
(Mexico, Central America, Bolivia, and Peru), and that of the industrial worker of the north.¹

In almost a century, the car has become absolutely intrinsic part of the United States—and
and most of the developed world. It is immediately accessible to nearly every American, with
256,234,375 privately-registered vehicles on U.S. roads as of 2014.² That is to say, at the end of
the 2014 calendar year, there were roughly 0.8 cars per American, according to the U.S.
population on December 31, 2014.³ Nowhere really is car culture evident than in the state of
California, a state iconic for its associations with car culture. “Aside from Detroit there’s no
American city more identified with the automobile than Los Angeles,” says Smithsonian
Magazine.⁴

But Los Angeles is also a highly diverse city that boasts, among other things, “. . . the
largest concentration of Americans of Mexican descent of any city in the United States. . .”⁵ The

¹ Diego Rivera, Portrait of America (New York: Covici, Friede, 1934), 19.
² Federal Highway Administration, U.S. Department of Transportation, Highway Statistics 2014, report,
popclock/; The website includes a tool that allows you to select a specific date and see the population on that date. According to that tool, the U.S. population on December 31, 2014, was 320,282,544 Americans.
the-rise-of-cars-and-the-monorails-that-never-were-43267593/?no-ist.
⁵ Charles M. Tatum, Lowriders in Chicano Culture: From Low to Slow to Show (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2011), 5.
layout of the city and its ethnic diversity provides a metaphor for the American quilt of identities that a car can reflect. A quilt is made up of different fabric swatches, sewn together to comprise a complete quilt. The quilt in its completed form is America, representative of the varied experiences, stories, and identities of Americans. Los Angeles is a microcosm of America that is reflective of this identity. Like a quilt, …the weave of a fabric is like grid of a road. It’s hard not to look at L.A. that way. L.A.’s held together by this weave, this textile that is the automobile, or the asphalt, on which cars ride.”

In a city where one wears their car like an item of fashionable clothing, to borrow an oft-used turn of phrase from Leslie Kendall, the Petersen Automotive Museum’s chief curator, a car is a hugely formative piece of an Angeleno’s visual identity. This identity is broadcast to all with whom the car owner came into contact through the daily use of the car as transportation. Los Angeles’ identity as a cultural center for American automotive culture also has given birth to a variety of American automotive subcultures, including hot rods, “. . . the custom car designed for exhibition at car shows. . .,” and lowriders, which evolved out of the custom show car. The city is so intrinsically enmeshed with the car that it was the perfect place for these automotive subcultures to arise.

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6 Leslie Kendall, interview by author, Los Angeles, March 10, 2016.

7 Ibid.

8 Charles M. Tatum, Lowriders in Chicano Culture: From Low to Slow to Show (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2011), 3.
The actual parameters necessary to define a lowrider—whether cultural or mechanical—are tenuous. But this tenuousness allows for a freedom of expression that many other automotive subcultures lack, due to a rigidly enforced repertoire of “signature elements” that include visual or mechanical modifications. Chavez explains that some of these include, “. . . for instance, big and powerful American engines for hot rodding, or stickers and trunk-mounted wings for imports, [whereas] the only notable mainstay that can be firmly attached to lowriding is its handcrafted modifications.” It is important to define the term “lowrider” in the context of this thesis. I am going by the definition laid out by Matthew Allan Ides in his 2009 dissertation on Los Angeles youth culture between 1910 and 1970. In his words, “For the most part . . . owriding [sic] refers to the stylistic customization of cars.”

Automotive subcultures treat the “car as [a] canvas” for “self-expression,” on which these subcultures build their unique visual identities. Sandoval writes that, “Yet, at the same time lowrider culture has maintained links to the dominant culture by its connection to the automobile

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10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.


industry.” The cars are united to Americanness and lowriders through the idea of American automobility: The car represents “manufactured and prepackaged freedom” for Americans. And these cars are not just any American cars—traditional lowriders are “Detroit iron,” which are large, heavy, American-made cars built in the 1960s, but also more broadly encompasses postwar American cars (through the late 1970s).

Despite the automobile’s prepackaged origins, each lowrider is a distinctive and unique objet d’art. As David E. Nye writes in *Technology and the Production of Difference*, “Mexican Americans in Los Angeles creatively appropriated the automobile [from mainstream American culture], as they developed elaborately painted and restyled ‘lowrider’ cars.” Lowriders show off the personal style and taste of their owners, reflected in “. . . the ethos that you should try to work on a car yourself.” The mixing of these “acts of consumption claim entry to the club of luxury consumers without leaving behind distinctive marks of barriological memory.” In a sense, this distinct sense of self left the barrio but maintained its most enduring and appealing...

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14 Denise Michelle Sandoval, “Bajito Y Suavecito/Low and Slow: Cruising Through Lowrider Culture” (PhD diss., Claremont Graduate University, 2003), 40, accessed September 13, 2015, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.


quality: its defiant pride in Chicano culture.\textsuperscript{20} This pride spoke and still speaks to a huge segment of the car customization culture.

Although a lowrider becomes a lowrider by virtue of a set of thirteen or fourteen inch wire wheels, as well as hydraulics, this free space for a unique interpretation functions as incentive for a highly individualized personal expression.\textsuperscript{21} Cars as personal expression is not a new idea, for the idea of cars as \textit{objets d’art} has been debated for half a century. However, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City, New York, legitimized the idea of cars as works of modern art in an exhibit said to be, “ . . . the first exhibition anywhere dealing with the esthetics [\textit{sic}] of automobile design.”\textsuperscript{22} In 1951, the MOMA presented the exhibit, titled “Eight Automobiles.” This exhibition marked the final stage in the automobile’s journey into a style of artistry that transcended industrial design. However, Chicano lowriders have only recently been recognized by major museums as legitimate forms of artistic expression in exhibits like Denise Sandoval’s \textit{Arte Y Estilo: The Lowriding Tradition} at the Petersen Automotive Museum in Los Angeles.\textsuperscript{23}

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\textsuperscript{20} Ides, “Cruising for Community: Youth Culture and Politics in Los Angeles, 1910-1970”, 104.


\textsuperscript{23} Denise Sandoval, \textit{Arte Y Estilo: The Lowriding Tradition} (Los Angeles, CA: Petersen Automotive Museum, 2000); Denise Michelle Sandoval, “Bajito Y Suavecito/Low and Slow: Cruising Through Lowrider Culture” (PhD diss., Claremont Graduate University, 2003), Accessed September 13, 2015. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.
\end{flushleft}
In a sense, American cars reflected the American optimism at their global economic power at the height of the postwar period in the homegrown cars of the 1950s and 1960s. These cars were reflective of homegrown American economic exceptionalism, as American manufacturers controlled “…a 95 percent share of the 7.9 million sales of new cars in 1955.” While the U.S. was rebuilding after World War II, Americans were in the “golden age of the American automobile.”

But while it was golden age for American cars, the Chicano muralist movement of the 1960s through the mid-1970s “…sought to redefine notions of universal culture and the idea of the American melting pot, which had historically promoted the blending of distinct cultures into a homogenous Eurocentric Protestant mainstream.” This Chicano muralist art drew from the high art of the Mexican Muralists, celebrated in the most revered artistic institutions worldwide, just as much as they engaged with their less recognized communal art styles including graffiti and local murals. The new visual lexicon of Chicano muralist art drew from “Barrio calligraphy,” which “…became an innovation developed by the Mexican American street youth culture to signal and monitor visually the social dynamics of power through coded symbology in

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26 Ibid., 200.


28 Sandoval, “Bajito Y Suavecito/Low and Slow: Cruising Through Lowrider Culture”, 66.
the economy of restricted public space." With the advent of lowrider murals, the lowrider became a new public space to visually signal social dynamics of power.

Instead of focusing on the shape of the car as art as MoMA did, lowriders generally focus on visual modifications that are surface-deep: the cars become a canvas, as opposed to sculptural modifications. The automotive canvases function much in the same way as wall murals. Wall murals were a “new kind of art” that was to be accessible to people “. . . in places they frequented in their daily life—post offices, schools, theaters, railroad stations, public buildings.” Like frescoes in their placement, murals had a “monumental and public” approach in spaces that were universally accessible. In these spaces, muralism would advance a Mexican nationalism free of colonial influences. This public art influenced Chicano artists, who sought to redefine the origin stories of Mexico for “the American melting pot” with murals “. . . in predominantly Mexican American barrios or working-class communities.” The muralism form then jumped from the walls of Chicano Park and off of Judy Baca’s *The Great Wall of Los* Marcos Sanchez-Tranquilino, “Space, Power, And Youth Culture: Mexican American Graffiti and Chicano Murals In East Los Angeles, 1972-1978,” *Looking High And Low: Art and Cultural Identity*, ed. Brenda Jo Bright and Lisa Bakewell, (Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 1995), 77.

30 Tatum, *Lowriders in Chicano Culture: From Low to Slow to Show*, 81.


33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., 75.
Angeles and onto the cars driving on the roads that passed by these Chicano muralist landmarks.\textsuperscript{35}

Although lowrider murals depict a variety of different subjects, “Most lowrider mural art includes images that depict Mexican Indian themes; Mexican revolutionary themes, Mexican and Chicana / o religious themes; gangsters, crime, and violence; cinematic, nightmarish themes; and women.”\textsuperscript{36} Of these themes, the presence of images that deal with the Mexican Revolution were the most interesting, as they speak to a broader Mexican American mythology that Chicano culture has built.

In the wake of great social and cultural change throughout the twentieth century U.S., American identity is no longer a singular entity. It is rife with contradictions and collisions. This is due in part to the role that public memory plays in American culture’s introspection process. Public memory is centered around the idea that,

\ldots that societies resemble families in that they remember the past collectively. Memories of major events are created, altered, sustained, and replaced to suit present needs through an ongoing process of group negotiation. Following the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945), scholars of public memory contend that all historical understandings are artifacts of social construction.\textsuperscript{37}

Similarly, lowriders represent this dynamicism through the evolution of the culture from its origins in 1940s Californian pachucos through to the multicultural entity that it is today. Social space has been a point of intersection between Chicanos and mainstream American culture. Ramón García points out that, \ldots the pachucos and pachucas transformed everyday culture and

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 84.

\textsuperscript{36} Tatum, \textit{Lowriders in Chicano Culture: From Low to Slow to Show}, 98.

social space in order to dispute and disrupt both the parent culture and North American values.”

A Chicano is a Mexican American in the term’s most simplistic definition, but Chicano means much more than that. The “porousness of that border” between the U.S. and Mexico incorporates the nuanced history of Native Americans, Spanish colonists, and, later, the cultural influence of the U.S. In light of this, Chicanos have “a kind of dual identity” that reflects being caught between two worlds, the United States and Mexico: “. . . we don’t identify with the Anglo-American cultural values and we don’t totally identify with the Mexican cultural values.”

Key to these Mexican cultural values are the figures of Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa. There is a contradiction between the history and the legends of Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa. Although the historical fact of Zapata’s agrarian reform is largely cohesive with the mythology surrounding him, Villa “. . . still evokes the most violent controversy and arouses the strongest feelings among historians. . .” This contradiction between fact and legend functions as a method of freeing these historical figures from their history in order to fulfill the


41 Ibid.


43 Ibid.
role of ideological icons for a new struggle for ethnic and cultural equality in the United States. These two figures combine to serve both aspects of historical mythology: a concrete historical legacy to build on, as well as deep emotional investment through a passionate following.

Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata are perfect examples of historical figures whose memory have transcended their actual historical accounts, in the sense that their myth is more important than the actual history for some lowriders. Their presence in lowrider murals, products of American capitalism, contradicts the historical record of their actions in the Mexican Revolution. In many cases, there is a dichotomy between the legend of these figures, opinions promulgated throughout popular culture, and the historical fact, which is steadfast and fixed. Perhaps this confusion between fact and legend is caused by the complexity of the Mexican Revolution, during which “. . . four distinct revolutions took place during that period [between 1910 and 1917].”

It was El Peak who first used the term icon in relation to these figures: “…they’re just icons,” he said, “and I wanted to include them [on his car].” In their most pure form, “Icons . . . are sacred images representing the saints, Christ, and the Virgin, as well as narrative scenes from Christ’s Crucifixion.” The key to an icon is the fact that it is a representative image that was

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46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.


supposed to allow “. . . the viewer direct communication with the sacred figure(s)
represented. . .”  

In a sense, when a figure becomes an icon, they lose their individual identity
and assume a representative identity that is less defined by who they were and what they did than
the ideas and attitudes they represent or the healing power they possess. It is symbolism on
steroids, moved from an exclusive visual lexicon privy to a select group to widespread
recognition, adoption, and meaning. Icons relate to people on a much broader basis because ideas
have many points of access, whereas history requires a specific entry point. For this reason, icons
tend to have a broader resonance than a simple portrait or historical figure.

All these disparate elements create a dramatic tension that is representative of the
constantly evolving American identity. In this thesis, I will argue that lowrider murals depicting
the figures of Zapata and Villa are contributing to the American quilt of identities by challenging
the restrictive mythology through the contribution of new icons that are emblematic of the
iconoclastic effect lowriders have had on the American cultural firmament. This contradiction
between fact and legend functions as a method of freeing these historical figures from their
history in order to fulfill the role of ideological icons for a new struggle for ethnic and cultural
equality in the United States. These two figures combine to serve both aspects of historical
mythology: a concrete historical legacy to build on, as well as deep emotional investment
through a passionate following. In this way, Mexican identity can be celebrated in oppositional
postures that did not meet [with American identity].  

51 Lorena Oropeza, *Raza Si! Guerra No!: Chicano Protest and Patriotism During the Viet Nam War Era*
(Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 2005), 44.

50 Ibid.
antiquated, exclusive, and often impermeable American hegemony into one that is more representative of the modern American quilt.

I begin my investigation of the iconoclastic effects of these Mexican figures with Panco Villa. Through his meritocratic rise to prominence because of “his extraordinary military capabilities,” Villa has come to embody the American ideal of the self-made man. This meritocratic rise to prominence combines with his subversive “plunderer” ability to mirror the exact icon the Chicano movement needed. These revolutionary figures instead have evolved into a method for Chicanos to reclaim a sense of agency in the tide of mainstream American culture, reflected in his depiction in lowrider murals. The contradiction of Villa’s utility in lowrider murals rests between his legend and the historical fact. I break down this contradiction through two cars, “El Dorado de Villa” and “Los Jefes.”

“El Dorado de Villa” is a 1953 Chevy 3100 pickup truck that provides a link that hints at a transformation from uniquely Chicano lowriders, adding hot rods into the mix to create the modern lowrider. The truck is named after famed Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa. Jose Luis Artega’s 1953 Chevrolet 3100 truck is entirely Chevrolet. This is not to say that Artega’s truck is entirely original. “El Dorado De Villa,” as the truck is called, is also a synthesis of new and old elements. The basis for “El Dorado De Villa” is a Chevrolet 3100, which, according to a 1953 report by the Engineering Department’s Technical Data Group at Chevrolet’s Central Office, qualifies the truck as a half-ton commercial vehicle, even though its wheelbase (i.e., the distance

\[\text{xii}\]


53 Ibid., 27.
between the wheels) was only one inch longer than the 1953 “Bel Air” Passenger sedan.\textsuperscript{54}

Although it is not a quintessential 1960s Chevrolet Impala-based lowrider, “El Dorado De Villa” fits into an established category of lowrider customization lexicon. By virtue of its physical attributes, this truck exemplifies what is called, in lowrider terminology, a bomber.\textsuperscript{55} Bombers is a term that refers to lowriders originally built between the late 1930s (roughly 1938) through 1954.\textsuperscript{56} The term originates with, literally, bombs of the World War II era, because bomber lowriders have a “teardrop bomb look.”\textsuperscript{57} Furthermore, this idea of a bomber is reinforced through the inclusion of “ ‘bomb [air raid] sirens,’ to let people know, ‘The bombers are here.’”\textsuperscript{58}

“Los Jefes Los,” the second lowrider in question, resides in Merced, California. It is owned by Mauri Mendoza, a member of the Merced chapter of Carnales Unidos, according to a July 21, 2014, write-up in \textit{Lowrider} magazine.\textsuperscript{59} The foundation of “Los Jefes Los” is a 1970 Chevrolet Impala convertible that Mendoza purchased mid-restoration.\textsuperscript{60} Like the other lowriders featured in this paper, “Los Jefes Los” represents a stylistic synthesis of multiple facets of

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\textsuperscript{54} \textit{1953 Chevrolet Truck} (Detroit, MI: General Motors Heritage Archive, 1953), 8.

\textsuperscript{55} Marcos “El Peak” Garcia, telephone interview by author, Washington, D.C., February 6, 2016

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
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American customized car subcultures that indicate a shift in the visual lexicon of lowrider murals.\footnote{Mauri Mendoza, telephone interview by author, Washington, D.C., February 6, 2016.}

Then I will examine the mythology and fact of Emiliano Zapata, which is largely cohesive. Zapata became an icon because he fought for the downtrodden, even though he was martyred in his assassination.\footnote{Frank Brandenburg, \textit{The Making of Modern Mexico}, Fifth ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 62.} The historical memory of Zapata creates an incentive to continue Zapata’s legacy of social justice. I look at the historical canon first established by Diego Rivera’s \textit{Agrarian Leader Zapata}.\footnote{Ibid., 9.; Katz, “Villa: Reform Governor of Chihuahua,” 40.; “Diego Rivera. Agrarian Leader Zapata. 1931 | MoMA,” The Museum of Modern Art, accessed April 20, 2016, http://www.moma.org/collection/works/80682.} Later, the lowrider depictions of Zapata build on this narrative to transform it into canonical truth, as I will examine through a lowrider mural.\footnote{Revolution Trunk Impala, Pinterest, accessed April 25, 2016, https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/736x/c6/b6/95/c6b695186853fae9a483fa2523bb957.jpg.} This lowrider mural “Revolution,” is on the trunk 1965 Chevrolet Impala.\footnote{Ibid.} Because I found this lowrider through a \textit{Lowrider} magazine event slideshow, I do not have any other information on it besides the fact that Alberto Herrera signed the mural.\footnote{Ibid.}
Methodology

As an outsider, I feel it is important to note that I struggled to find a point of entry for this thesis, including the fact that I did not know any lowriders when I began this project. As a result, the process of finding lowriders with whom I could speak was a fraught process.

I had been exploring online cultural communities in order to immerse myself in the conversations and images circulating around Chicano identity and lowriders online. In particular, the social media website Tumblr was an important source of lowrider images and culture. In this case, I have followed one San Diego Chicana’s Tumblr in particular, and her collection of images led me to one of the lowrider murals that I analyzed.

Although my initial research question was sufficiently specific for the scope of this thesis, it was also so specific as to assign identity to a cultural and ethnic community to which I do not and cannot claim membership. My advisor meetings have led me to completely re-evaluate how I was approaching the research I found. In my discussions with my thesis advisor, I


it became clear that my original research question’s wording was framing Chicano identity instead of discovering Chicano identity through research. It was an eye-opening moment to recognize that I was dictating identities for people, instead of allowing them to do so for themselves. This assignment of identity is especially inappropriate in the United States, a country whose census allows people to self-identify race.\(^{70}\)

For this reason, I took my advisor’s advice to heart and addressed the “Chicano identity” aspect of my original research question. Originally, it read: “Using American cars as a canvas, what do lowrider murals depicting iconography from the Mexican Revolution reveal about Chicano identity in contemporary American culture?” However, after recognizing the oppressiveness of the wording, I modified my question.

As a result, I shifted my research question to focus more on how the lowrider signifies a new understanding of American art and culture, as well as what it means to be American, as opposed to trying to fit Chicano identity into Americanness. My revised research question is as follows: “Using American cars as a canvas, what do lowrider murals depicting iconography from the Mexican Revolution reveal about or contribute to our understanding of American culture and identity?” In short, instead of taking a top-down approach, I worked my way upwards, from Chicano identity to how it redefines American identity.

To find these cars, I looked to one of the most important mouthpieces for lowrider culture, *Lowrider* magazine. The magazine’s founding “... in 1977 was a significant contributor

\(^{70}\) “Race - FAQ - People and Households - U.S. Census Bureau,” U.S. Census Bureau, accessed April 25, 2016, [https://www.census.gov/population/race/about/faq.html](https://www.census.gov/population/race/about/faq.html).
to this renewed interest in lowriding.” I searched the magazine’s online archive, accessible in the top search bar at lowrider.com, for the key words “Pancho Villa” and “Zapata,” and then zeroed in on four automobiles that highlighted these figures in their murals. One car I stumbled across on Tumblr, on Tinyx619’s page, although the post was deleted before I recognized its importance. I used my chosen cars as compasses to research the broader themes of Mexican muralist art and American mythology that I observed on these cars. This allowed me to contextualize the images I was seeing on the cars into the broader American cultural mosaic, a term that came up in my American studies coursework but which seems to have originated in John Berthrong’s The Divine Deli: Religious Identity in the North American Cultural Mosaic.

I also focus on Chevrolet, as Chevys tend to be the top choice for Hispanic-Americans. In fact, according to a 2003 report titled Market Trends: Hispanic Americans and the Automobile Industry, as quoted in Arellano’s “Why Do Mexicans Like Chevys?”, Chevrolet’s automobiles are among the top choice for Hispanic “first-time, used-car and general buyers.” This strong preference for the brand is primarily “an economic consideration” dating as far back as the 1930s, when Chevrolet automobiles were “‘cheaper and more plentiful’ than other brands.”

In order to contextualize the history and culture of the lowrider, I turned to books like

71 Tatum, Lowriders in Chicano Culture: From Low to Slow to Show, 20.


75 Ibid.
Charles Tatum’s *Lowriders in Chicano Culture: From Low to Slow to Show* and Ben Chappell’s *Lowrider Space: Aesthetics and Politics of Mexican American Custom Cars*.  
Tatum’s work in particular pointed me to the particular subject matter of Mexican revolutionary figures being depicted in mural form.  
I expanded my research of lowrider murals through Dr. Denise Sandoval’s oeuvre of lowrider scholarship, including her guest curation of *Arte Y Estilo: The Lowriding Tradition* at the Petersen Automotive Museum in Los Angeles and her doctoral dissertation.

Whereas automotive individualization was historically rooted in unique, customer-ordered fabrications, the lowrider grew out of mass production, so it made more sense for me to look at how customers were transforming mass-produced automobiles into signifiers of individual identity. For this reason, I am approaching the automobiles as *objets d’art*. Arthur Drexler’s 1951 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York set a precedent for considering automobiles as artistic works. This exhibit has been particularly useful in establishing a foundation upon which to build my understanding of the visual impact that lowriders invoke.

To understand the lowrider murals’ history and visual lexicon, I consulted a number of sources:

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77 Tatum, *Lowriders in Chicano Culture: From Low to Slow to Show*, 100-1.

78 Sandoval, *Arte Y Estilo: The Lowriding Tradition*.; Sandoval, “Bajito Y Suavecito/Low and Slow: Cruising Through Lowrider Culture”.

secondary texts on the Mexican Revolution. These sources gave me the biographical and sociohistorical elements of the figures depicted in these murals, and, in particular, of Villa and Zapata.

I looked into the history of these images and figures in the Mexican Revolution. These images of Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa depict men who emerged as folk heroes after the end of the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1917. To illustrate how these figures are at odds with the lowrider as a representation of American culture and identity, I got a solid grounding in the history of the Mexican Revolution. For this, I will use Stuart Easterling’s *The Mexican Revolution: A Short History, 1910-1920* for general historical context. I used John Britton’s *Revolution and Ideology: Images of the Mexican Revolution in the United States* to understand the myth of Emiliano Zapata and then deconstruct it in historical fact. I also built on Britton’s construction of the Zapata myth with Frank Brandenburg’s *The Making of Modern Mexico*. Finally, I used Friedrich Katz’s essay “Villa: Reform Governor of Chihuahua” as a way to find the mythology of Villa and then deconstruct it through historical fact. These books worked together in order to assist in my understanding of the complexities, mythology, and actual events of the Mexican Revolution.


83 Brandenburg, *The Making of Modern Mexico*.

I also consulted a number of works to understand the lexicon of the Mexican Muralists and Chicano art. I got a grounding of the history and lore of the Mexican Muralists through Diego Rivera’s autobiographical works, as well as writings on his exhibitions at the MoMA. In *Portrait of America*, Rivera puts himself in conversation with automobiles, supporting Arthur Drexler’s work at MoMA by championing the artistry of the automobile.

To interpret Chicano art, I looked into a number of texts. *Tradition and Transformation: Chicana/o Art from the 1970s through the 1990s* helped contextualize the artistic movements of Chicano artistry. Carlos Francisco Jackson’s *Chicana and Chicano Art: ProtestArte* helped me understand the cultural forces that Chicanos were highlighting or critiquing in their art. Finally, the history of muralism in Chicano culture, and the different ways it was expressed, was explained in George Vargas’ *Contemporary Chican@ Art: Color & Culture for a New America*.

I imagined I would be doing much more interviewing and garage visiting. However, I found it difficult to get people to respond to me. My repeated calls and emails were largely ignored. Furthermore, I imagined Los Angeles was a hotbed for lowriders, even though I could find almost no garages that create them—due in part to my location in Washington, D.C.

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88 Jackson, *Chicana and Chicano Art: ProtestArte*.

89 George Vargas, *Contemporary Chican@ Art: Color & Culture for a New America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010).
However, this may have been a blessing in disguise. I conducted interviews with one lowrider, Marcos Garcia, nicknamed “El Peak,” whom I met over the summer in Greenwich Village in Manhattan.\(^{90}\) He now lives in El Paso, Texas. He actually has both Zapata and Pancho Villa in mural form on his car, a 1964 Chevrolet Impala.

I also had the most success reaching out to people via direct messaging on Instagram.\(^{91}\) I searched hashtags by the name of the car (not model, but chosen name), and then reached out to car club Instagram accounts as well as anyone who had hashtagged the name. The only person who responded to me was an Instagram user who was a user of the Carnales Unidos car club in Merced by the username “1YEPYEP1.”\(^{92}\) He put me in touch with Mauri Mendoza, the owner of the 1970 Chevrolet Impala “Los Jefes,” which I originally discovered on the Lowrider magazine online archives.\(^{93}\)

By shifting away from interviews, I was forced to rely more heavily the images with which I was confronted through my three selected lowrider murals. Generally, I relied on close visual analysis of the images I was looking at. The readings of the vehicles themselves put me in direct conversation with the mythology that was depicted and perpetuated in lowrider culture. I ended up analyzing these cars not through context given to me by their owners and locations, but instead by removing them from their context and picking apart the visual representations I saw.


\(^{92}\) Ibid.

\(^{93}\) “1970 Chevrolet Impala Convertible – Los Jefes.”
Because of the Chicano diaspora, the visual lexicon of these automobiles is largely in the same dialect, even across geographic distances.\(^{94}\)

I also relied on experiential research, which took several different forms. As I mentioned earlier, just walking around the streets of New York City during the summer of 2015 put me in touch with Marcos “El Peak” Garcia. More recently, I visited the Petersen Automotive Museum in Los Angeles, where I stumbled across the 1971 and 1975 America’s Most Beautiful Roadster (AMBR) award winner “Candy Root Beer” during a Vault tour on March 10, 2016 [FIGURE 1 & 2].\(^{95}\)

**Literature Review**

The idea of focusing on Mexican revolutionary mythology came to me originally after reading Tatum’s *Lowriders in Chicano Culture: From Low to Slow to Show*.\(^{96}\) Tatum’s work in particular pointed me to the particular subject matter of Mexican revolutionary figures being depicted in mural form.\(^{97}\) Although he mentions that revolutionary scenes have been “popular lowrider mural subjects since the mid-1960s,” Tatum discusses the figures of Villa and Zapata only briefly.\(^{98}\) Similarly, discussion of revolutionary figures in lowrider art appears only briefly

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\(^{94}\) Tatum, *Lowriders in Chicano Culture: From Low to Slow to Show*, 17.


\(^{96}\) Tatum, *Lowriders in Chicano Culture: From Low to Slow to Show*.

\(^{97}\) Ibid., 100-1.

\(^{98}\) Ibid., 100.
in Sandoval’s dissertation—and she neglects to mention Pancho Villa at all in relation to Zapata.99

It appeared as though these figures were not being examined enough within the context of lowrider art, which seemed oddly dissonant to me. These figures have similar legacies of cultural crusading that seem quite prevalent in Chicano history broadly and in lowrider murals specifically.100 As a result, my thesis seeks to expand the scholarship on Villa and Zapata in the context of lowrider muralist art as well as to examine the work that these figures do on the car.

It was Marcos “El Peak” Garcia who first used the term icon in relation to these figures, spurring the approach used in this paper: “Obviously they were icons in the [sic] Mexican history. But it also represents, for me, like just, Mexican heritage in general,” he said.101 For him, the focus was the bigger picture of Mexican history, not the historical nuance. And his approach to the icons on his car is one that emphasizes the importance of their iconography rather than their history. “…they’re just icons,” he said, “and I wanted to include them [on his car].”102

Dr. Denise Sandoval asserts in her doctoral dissertation that, “Chicano art mirrored some of themes [sic] of the Mexican murals, yet the art spoke in a language that Chicano communities could understand.”103 Yet, it appears as though these murals were already in a language that Chicanos could understand, even without translation. Muralism was supposed to be “…a

99 Sandoval, “Bajito Y Suavecito/Low and Slow: Cruising Through Lowrider Culture,” 68.

100 Brandenburg, The Making of Modern Mexico, 53.


103 Denise Sandoval, “Bajito y Suavecito/Low and Slow: Cruising through Lowrider Culture,” 68.
fighting educative art for all.”\textsuperscript{104} It was supposed to bring about social change by educating the public about ideology on public property.\textsuperscript{105} In short, muralism made high art accessible to the average person because it was monumental and often on public property.\textsuperscript{106} Muralism’s aim was to be accessible to all people without needing a translation.

Rivera did use “…the Indian as a symbol of Mexico,” and his themes were “…social commentary on the Mexican bourgeoisie,” as Sandoval writes.\textsuperscript{107} Similarly, Chicano lowrider art “… used Mexican symbols like \textit{Virgen de Guadalupe}, Emiliano Zapata, and the Aztecs to create a historical lineage of cultural pride.”\textsuperscript{108} Furthermore, Chicanos had firsthand access to works by the Mexican Muralists littered throughout the United States. In the eastern U.S., Orozco’s work at Dartmouth College made Muralist art accessible.\textsuperscript{109} There were also Rivera’s multiple works across the U.S., from the Museum of Modern Art in New York to the Detroit Institute of Art’s Rivera Court to the Rivera mural at the City Club of San Francisco.\textsuperscript{110} This revolutionary past


\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{107} Sandoval, “Bajito Y Suavecito/Low and Slow: Cruising Through Lowrider Culture”, 68.

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{109} “Dartmouth Digital Orozco,” Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, accessed April 18, 2016, \url{http://www.dartmouth.edu/digitalorozco/app/}.

included the work of Orozco, who “…did a series of murals based on the Mexican Revolution…” in San Francisco, which demonstrates the accessibility of his work to Chicanos.\textsuperscript{111} An interesting corollary is that \textit{Lowrider} magazine was founded in San José, in the San Francisco Bay Area.\textsuperscript{112}

Whereas Dr. Sandoval asserts this idea that there was a translation effect between the Muralists and the Chicano people, it does the Chicano people a disservice to say that any translation or interpretation is needed.\textsuperscript{113} It was the Muralists themselves who brought their work to the United States and used their mural form to create a visual language that Chicanos could understand and make use of.\textsuperscript{114} Lowriders, like Muralism, are an art of the people, for display to the people, and often by the people. Lowriders reflected “. . . the ‘idea that the ultimate destination of a material object of artistic creativity should be in the public domain and not in some secluded gallery or private collection.’ (Gradante 1985, 74).”\textsuperscript{115} If the visual lexicon of the Muralists was immediately accessible to the Mexican people, it seems as though this idea of a translation effect through Chicano artists is superfluous.

I first investigated the origins of lowrider murals, which could have originated in two

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{112} Tatum, \textit{Lowriders in Chicano Culture: From Low to Slow to Show}, 61.
  \item \textsuperscript{113} Sandoval, “Bajito Y Suavecito/Low and Slow: Cruising Through Lowrider Culture”, 68.
  \item \textsuperscript{114} Tatum, \textit{Lowriders in Chicano Culture: From Low to Slow to Show}, 98.
\end{itemize}
places—or, just as likely, are the result of a synthesis of the two instances I found of moving murals. In a *Contemporary Chican@ Art: Color & Culture*, I read about a Chicano art collective, ASCO, that pioneered the concept of “walking murals” in 1972. The book enumerates on the history of the Chicano art movement from its genesis in the 1960s through the modern age. In particular, this collective called ASCO’s murals were not installations, but instead performance art, because the murals moved through and interacted with space. ASCO was lauded as “...original, inventive, and explosive: original because the artists created some of the first Chicano installations and performances.”

At first, it seemed as though it was ASCO who pioneered this moving form of muralist art. However, in my experiential research, I found the idea of mural mobility had been pioneered a year earlier. The AMBR award winner also had a primitive sort of muralist art on its body that could have influenced the style in which lowrider murals are depicted.

Although lowrider murals have a storied history in the Mexican and Chicano muralist movements, one of the earlier incidences of murals on a modified car that I found was a past winner of the America’s Most Beautiful Roadster (AMBR) award. The prestigious AMBR Award is awarded to the best custom car shown at the annual Grand National Roadster Show (GNRS), the longest-running indoor car show in the world. The car in question was the 1971 and 1975

116 Vargas, *Contemporary Chican@ Art: Color & Culture for a New America*, 30. It’s also interesting to note that the ASCO group appropriated the Spanish term for “nausea” or “disgust,” *asco*, pointing to a larger cultural critique outside of their art (Vargas 29).

117 Vargas, *Contemporary Chican@ Art: Color & Culture for a New America*, 30.

118 “Candy Root Beer: AMBR Cars From the Vault 4 of 9.”

AMBR competition winner made by Lonnie Gilbertson, called “Candy Root Beer” for the 1975 AMBR competition [FIGURES 1 AND 2]. The car is based on a 1923 Ford Model T. Its 1975 (second) iteration features a mural in a “. . . brown and orange color scheme and psychedelic murals. . .” which were reportedly “the height of fashion” at the time. The “brand new updated landscape mural paint job” that “Candy Root Beer” acquired between 1971 and 1975 “. . just shouts Oregon all the way,” depicting a spooky looking sunset landscape with gnarled trees and tree branches in a valley.

This style of mural bears little resemblance to the lowriders—or murals—discussed in this thesis in terms of its subject matter. “Candy Root Beer” is depicting an inanimate landscape that lacks human or clear animal figures. However, the coloring of the mural, done in gradients of the roadster’s main color, mirrors the style of murals on “El Dorado De Villa,” as well as “Los Jefes” and “Revolution.” Although I cannot make a direct connection outside of the general cultural intersection of hot rodding and lowriding, there does seem to be some cross-cultural


122 “Candy Root Beer: AMBR Cars From the Vault 4 of 9.”


currents that influenced both styles of murals. Also of note is the fact that “Candy Root Beer” rests on “Zenith wire wheels,” which echo the wire wheels of a classic lowrider. Although “Candy Root Beer” echoes the lowriders included in this thesis stylistically, they differ dramatically in subject matter depicted. It was ASCO who brought the moving mural to the lexicon of Chicano artistic expression.

Most essential to the study of the lowrider is an understanding of Chicano culture, through which the lowrider was born. One of the most illustrative of Chicano identity, and an essay which sparked my awareness of Chicano culture, is Gloria Anzaldúa’s *How to Tame a Wild Tongue*. This essay both makes a case for and elaborates on the Chicano identity and language, as a mixture of American and Mexican as well as English and Spanish. In her words, “…for a people who cannot entirely identify with either standard (formal, Castilian) Spanish nor standard English, what recourse is left to them but to create their own language?”

While Anzaldúa’s essay illustrates the Chicano mindset and linguistic identity, she repeatedly makes references to the history of the Chicano people without explaining it. As such, an exploration of this history is necessary. In particular, *Los Angeles in the 1930s: The WPA Guide to the City of Angels* is particularly illustrative of the origins of Los Angeles, the genesis of lowrider culture and a hotspot for Chicano culture.


126 Anzaldúa, 46.

Much has been said about lowriders and their role in Chicano culture. Denise Sandoval’s dissertation *Bajito y Suavecito/Low and Slow: Cruising through Lowrider Culture* focuses on the murals depicted on lowriders. Matthew Ides’s dissertation on *Cruising for Community: Youth Culture and Politics in Los Angeles, 1910-1970* and Brenda Jo Bright’s anthropological study of lowriders in *Looking High and Low: Art and Cultural Identity* explore their place in popular culture. However, while these focus on Chicano culture, lowriders, and the art of lowriders, there is very little focus on images of the Mexican Revolution.

Tatum’s section on lowrider murals briefly mentions my chosen study topic, images of the Mexican Revolution, without offering any explanation or rationalization for why these images exist. He simply states that lowriders use this imagery, and began to do so when “…the Chicano movement’s political agenda included a reevaluation and re-appropriation of Mexico’s revolutionary past.” Accompanying “the seductively dressed revolucionaria (a female revolutionary)” are images of Zapata and Villa. Almost none of my other sources mention this tie, let alone explain it. It is a fascinating and bizarre set of images to appropriate, considering that lowriders represent a set of values diametrically opposed to the communistic and proletarian aims of Zapata and Villa. Lowriders are emblematic of material culture, wealth, individual identity, and the American cultural basis of lowriders.

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128 Sandoval, “Bajito Y Suavecito/Low and Slow: Cruising Through Lowrider Culture”.


130 Tatum, *Lowrider in Chicano Culture: From Low to Slow to Show*, 100.
Although this thesis attempts to prove the multiculturalism and inclusivity of the lowrider community and its narrative, lowriders—no matter their ethnic identity—adhere to a similar visual aesthetic. This visual aesthetic is a visual tribute to the visual etymology of the lowrider, rooted in the “pachuco cars” whose history Sandoval explains in great detail (and is explained in this thesis, as well).\(^\text{131}\)

Sandoval focuses on the uniquely Chicano aspect of lowriding, however, which omits many of the participants in lowrider culture. Despite the identity mosaic of lowriders’ identities, there is still a relatively strict adherence to pachuco style. Ben Chappell speaks to this in his 2012 interview with *Motherboard*:

> One of the things that definitely interested me, though, was the fact that although anybody with a nice ride is welcome, there is an idea that Mexican-American culture and experience are authoritative in this style. That’s part of the value of it [lowrider culture].\(^\text{132}\)

This idea of uniqueness is further emphasized in the highly individualized nature of the lowrider and is reflected in the unique evolutionary process in the lowrider’s creation. Because they have grown up between American culture and Mexican heritage, “Chicanos constantly switch from one dominant culture to the other almost seamlessly,” possessing both languages and cultures.\(^\text{133}\)

\(^{131}\) Sandoval, “Bajito Y Suavecito/Low and Slow: Cruising Through Lowrider Culture,” 44.


\(^{133}\) Vargas, 55.
Chapter 1: Pancho Villa and the Self-Made Man

Villa’s mythological status as a “single-minded bandit and plunderer” is controversial and at odds with the work his mythology does in functioning as an icon for Chicanos.134 However, when combined with a fact-based account of Villa’s life, his social expedience as a crusader begins to make more sense. Villa embodies the American ideal of the self-made man who had a meritocratic rise to prominence because of “his extraordinary military capabilities.”135 This meritocratic rise to prominence combines with his subversive “plunderer” ability to mirror the exact icon the Chicano movement needed. These revolutionary figures instead have evolved into a method for Chicanos to reclaim a sense of agency in the tide of mainstream American culture. Villa’s “. . . legacy is a legend or, more accurately, a series of legends that have contributed to obscuring the man and his movement.”136 Thus, it is necessary to break them down into both myth and the man, or historical fact.

In historical memory, Villa has become a figure that “. . . symbolize[s] mindless violence and rapacious banditry for many in the United States.”137 This reductive power of mythology is representative of the way in which a deep emotional investment via a passionate following can change or transform historical record to suit the following’s purpose. Villa’s status as an icon allows him to tear down archaic American mythology by installing him as a force of change in

134 Katz, "Villa: Reform Governor of Chihuahua," 42.

135 Ibid., 32.

136 Ibid., 27.

American memory. However, this force of change manifests in two ways: a simplistic reduction of history to tear down the mythology, and a more nuanced memory which more accurately reflects his achievements. Whereas the former points to the work he does as an icon, the latter style of depiction points to the way in which his legacy can empower lowriders into a sense of cultural legitimacy.

The simplistic reduction of history tears down outdated American mythology by highlighting the culturally violent act of asserting lowriders as a cultural force. Villa rose from humble origins. Villa was “. . . at first just a local leader of the insurgent movement . . . [and] a man with a wide-ranging background—hacienda peon, miner, bandit, merchant—much of it shrouded in legend.”\textsuperscript{138} It is this shrouded legend that allows for the most simplistic interpretation of Villa’s life in mural form, as well as being the Villa least rooted in fact. In contrast, Villa’s “. . . legacy is a legend or, more accurately, a series of legends that have contributed to obscuring the man and his movement.”\textsuperscript{139}

Villa’s identity as a “semi-literate former peon” is emphasized in the depictions of him as a bandit.\textsuperscript{140} This reductive power of mythology is reflected in the simplistic depiction of Villa on “El Dorado de Villa.”\textsuperscript{141} On the truck, owner Jos Luis Artega chose to depict Villa in mural form

\textsuperscript{138} Katz, "Villa: Reform Governor of Chihuahua," 31.

\textsuperscript{139} Ibid., 27.

\textsuperscript{140} Ibid., 34.

in “House of Kolor Aztec Gold” paint. The murals on the car are done in a monochrome gold and brown or black style, painted by “. . . Alberto Zalazar, a painter from San Diego who worked his magic. . .” on the car.

On “El Dorado de Villa,” Villa appears on both the rear wheel wells of the truck [FIGURES 3 & 4] as well as under the hood of the truck [FIGURE 5]. The truck highlights this banditry while still recognizing some of Villa’s better qualities:

The truck . . . is a tribute to the Mexican revolutionary leader who advocated for the poor and pushed for agrarian reform. Though he was a killer, a bandit, and a revolutionary leader; [sic] he is still revered as many remember him as a folk hero.

The depiction of Villa on the truck’s right wheel well seems to show Villa holding a gun that has recently been fired, which can be gleaned by what seems to be chrome-colored smoke coming out of the darkened barrel of a gun. On the left wheel well, Villa appears as a man melting into a skeleton while he frowns against a mountainous desert backdrop which shows a figure on a horse. These two wheel well depictions are synthesized into a cohesive motif under the hood, where Villa is a skeleton holding two smoking revolvers with his skeletal hands.
These gun-slinging depictions of Villa on “El Dorado De Villa” point to his counterrevolutionary role in the Chihuahua oligarchy. His December 1913 decree “. . . ordered the confiscation of the land and other properties belonging to the wealthiest and most powerful Mexican landowners in Chihuahua,” which is his primary historical legacy insofar as it pertains to his “bandit” identity. In this aspect of his history, he is remembered as a crusader against the moneyed upper class entrenched in power.

By working against the upper class, he contributes to an underdog narrative that lowriders identified with. Villa was reviled by the U.S. press after a 1916 raid across the American border on the New Mexico town of Columbus, in which he killed 18 U.S. citizens. After this raid, Villa was “. . . relegated to the stereotypical category of bloodthirsty bandit and border ruffian. . .” This, in a sense, is a sort of delinquency towards the hegemony of American culture, as he was actively warring against the U.S. on multiple fronts: First, he was crossing the U.S.-Mexico border, a line on which Chicanos are divided. Second, he was shattering the American ivory tower by literally attacking American lives. In a sense, he was creating a sense of nationwide attention—and therefore relevance—in the weakness of the cultural and literal barrier between the U.S. and Mexico. Pancho Villa in particular received lots of attention from American media, as Stuart Easterling mentions in *The Mexican Revolution: A Short History, 1910-1920*. During the fighting of the Mexican Revolution, “He [Villa] even allowed a film crew

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149 Ibid.


151 Ibid., 26.
—from the Mutual Film Company—to come south of the border to record his battles, in order to make a movie starring Villa himself.”\(^{152}\)

The presence of the border in the consciousness of Chicanos looms large. As Chicano feminist scholar Gloria Anzaldúa writes of the Chicano identity, “Yet the struggle of identities continues, the struggle of borders is our reality still.”\(^{153}\) Like the Chicano identity, the lowrider identity exists past Native history, and Spanish colonization, at the intersection of the U.S. and Mexico.\(^{154}\) The lowrider identity is a fluid and ever-changing mix of all of these elements.

This smoking gun of Villa’s attack on American lives firmly aligns his American legacy with banditry. This bandit identity of Villa’s is reflected in the literal smoking guns throughout the truck’s murals. The smoking gun rests in the foreground of all of these murals, and yet Villa’s likeness always stands behind it. Because he stands behind the smoking gun, it appears as though the murals acknowledge the impact of his actions. To attack the U.S. was a tactical mistake of Villa’s in the ideological war, for the state of Chihuahua had “huge North American investments,” signifying the importance of “. . . maintain[ing] a precarious equilibrium. . .” between the U.S. and the anti-U.S. stance of its populace.\(^{155}\)

While each depiction of Zapata has a smoking gun in front, his face degenerates from left to right to under the hood as the number of guns multiplies to a skull. It seems as though the

\(^{152}\) Easterling, 78.

\(^{153}\) Anzaldúa, 56.

\(^{154}\) Vargas, 55.

\(^{155}\) Katz, “Villa: Reform Governor of Chihuahua,” 34.
physical complexity of his face is a stand-in for the complexity of his historical legacy. Thus, when his face gets increasingly more skeletal, it could symbolize the reductive power of myth. Myth strips away the complexity and accuracy of a historical figure, the way losing skin on one’s face reduces him to a skull that is a shell of the original person. With the increasing number of guns as Villa becomes increasingly skeletal, the murals seem to be pointing at the way in which his legacy is tied more and more with the militant banditry of his myth, thus reducing the power of his achievements while governor of Chihuahua.156

However, the reduction of his gubernatorial achievements do not necessarily diminish the power of his bandit-legacy. The mural under the hood of “El Dorado De Villa” depicts him with two smoking guns and a one eye face contorted in an expression of rage.157 Its placement under the hood is essential, as the engine is the core of the automobile—its heart, if you will. The engine dictates all purpose for the car, as it is the source of its utility as a piece of transportation. By placing the mural under the hood, Zalazar seems to be pointing to the positive work that a reductionist history can have. The truck is a lowrider, and the truck was photographed at Chicano Park, which can be seen in a variety of the images.158 Thus, the truck’s identity as a Chicano truck is clear. For that reason, it would not be a stretch to say that the reductionist myth of Villa is next to the hearts of the Chicano people, the way that the reductionist mural is next to the engine or heart of the truck. The myth of Villa as a bandit who tears down the American border

156 Ibid.

157 “1953 Chevrolet 3100 Truck — El Dorado De Villa.”

158 “1953 Chevrolet 3100 Truck – El Dorado De Villa.”

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and precarious equilibrium of dependence on American ideology may in fact provide strength to Chicanos who are facing the oppressiveness of the American white hegemony.159

This depiction of these figures in lowrider murals demonstrates how memory evolves and transforms when put into the context of the Mexican diaspora. Throughout the 1950s, many Mexican Americans moved to the Los Angeles area to find work in the booming automotive industry, which gave rise to lowrider culture.160 Later, when the auto industry largely left Los Angeles, many of these Chicanos spread throughout the Southwest and throughout the U.S.161 Along with the movement of people, lowrider culture spread throughout the U.S.162

The spread of Chicanos throughout the U.S. incentivized a need for representations depicting Mexican and Chicano history.163 However, the symbols of the American canon did not suffice. Chicano Americans had a fraught relationship with the American canon of the time. Events like (but not limited to) the Delano Grape Boycott were shaping Chicano dialogue at the time.164 The Delano Grape Boycott, was concurrent with a number of other Chicano protests in the Southwestern United States, including the March 1968 walkout of more than one thousand

159 Katz, "Villa: Reform Governor of Chihuahua," 34.

160 Tatum, Lowriders in Chicano Culture: From Low to Slow to Show, 9.

161 Ibid.

162 Ibid.


164 Jackson, Chicana and Chicano Art: ProtestArte, 73.
Mexican students in East Los Angeles’s Lincoln High School.\textsuperscript{165} This walkout protested “second-rate facilities, insensitive and even racist faculty, and a curriculum that consistently overlooked their experiences as people of Mexican origin.”\textsuperscript{166} Events such as this demonstrated the extent to which American imagery was no longer working for Chicanos, because the American bureaucracy was at odds with the frustrations of the Chicano community.

Although American culture was at odds with Chicanos, the automobile transcended its association with American culture through its essential utility. A working car enabled Chicano workers the ability to drive from job to job in cities and, as César Chávez emphasized in a 1980 \textit{Lowrider} magazine interview, from one agricultural field to the next.\textsuperscript{167}

In this way, Mexican identity can be celebrated in oppositional postures that did not meet [with American identity].\textsuperscript{168} The oppositional postures tear down this antiquated, exclusive, and often impermeable American hegemony through by demonstrating the essential place the automobile held in achieving the American dream, for which Chávez provides just one example.\textsuperscript{169}

This shared history was at odds with the cultural disconnect between the Mexican American experience and their legal and economic subjugation by legislators. The American

\textsuperscript{165} Oropeza, 73.

\textsuperscript{166} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{167} Tatum, 8.

\textsuperscript{168} Oropeza, 44.

\textsuperscript{169} Oropeza, 44.

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mythology was not working anymore: its rights were not accessible for Chicanos under the slew of lowrider-targeted legislation, the broader racial targeting of Chicanos for military service abroad, and the treatment of Chicanos at home. This 20th century oppression of Chicanos was mirrored in:

The large foreign—predominately United States—investments in Chihuahua [that] fueled nationalist resentment and discontent [on the part of the Mexican revolutionaries], and this feeling was compounded by the close ties foreign firms developed with the oligarchy.171

As a result, it was necessary to create new myths with figureheads who both looked like Chicanos and who represented their struggles against an oppressive hegemony. The historical fact needed to be at once familiar and relevant for a new generation.172 The familiarity made it accessible, and the relevance made it meaningful. Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata are, according to “El Peak,” “Big icons, people that are highlighted in the Mexican culture.”173

The ethnic targeting of the Chicano lowriders by American legislators can be seen in California Vehicle Code 24008. In effect, California Vehicle Code 24008 banned any car wherein the car’s body rested below the bottom of the wheel rim, a core piece of the lowrider style.174 As a result, lowered cars became delinquent in the eyes of the general population, much like Villa did after attacking the American notion of the border. Lowriders were “validated” as “authentically anti-authoritarian” by “California Vehicle Code §24008, commonly referred to as


174 Sandoval, “Bajito Y Suavecito/Low and Slow: Cruising Through Lowrider Culture,” 44.
the law against the lows.”175 This led to the addition of hydraulics on cars, “so they [lowriders] could choose to raise or lower their car depending on the presence of the police.”176

Hydraulics first entered the mechanical repertoire of lowriders in 1956, when Ron Aguirre installed a primitive hydraulic system on his 1956 convertible, “which consisted of ‘hydro air pumps and dumps,’ [that] were surplus parts from World War II fighter planes that assisted in the lowering and raising of the wing flaps on airplanes.”177 Because of this shared sense of legal delinquency, the reductionist idea of Villa actually serves to align him with the plight of the lowrider. By sharing this sense of delinquency, the lowrider can invoke some of the power of the Villa legacy in the lowrider’s crusade against the American legal hegemony that oppresses lowrider expression.

Mr. Mendoza is quick to highlight the difference between fact and myth in the narratives he chose to portray on his lowrider. “Here, Pancho Villa came and broke the law a bunch of times,” he said. “So Mexico looked at him like a Robin Hood, and he used to rob from the rich and give to the poor. They gave their life back in those days to make their country better.”178 In this case, although these men did literally lose the Mexican Revolution, their memory has proliferated to the point where memory overpowers fact—which also aids in their transition from figure to icon. Together, the myth of Villa gives strength to the lowrider to overcome adversity.


176 Ibid.

177 Sandoval, “Bajito Y Suavecito/Low and Slow: Cruising Through Lowrider Culture,” 43.

This idea of the self-made man has been in the American mythological canon since the genesis of this nation. As Samuel Huntington wrote, “…America’s religion [from the beginning] has been the religion of work. In other societies, heredity, class, social status, ethnicity, and family are the principal sources of status and legitimacy.”179 Although Huntington says that ethnicity is not a source of status and legitimacy, the legislation that targeted Chicano lowriders as well as the hegemony’s resistance to movements like Raza Unida demonstrate the fact that this system was somewhat broken.180 With a broken legal system that does not protect all those under its purview, the mythology associated with that legal system falls apart as well. For that reason, a non-white self-made man was needed to replace John Smith. That man came in the form of Pancho Villa.

With a new mythology, the lowrider is able to pursue his American dream, a piece of American mythology that is available to everyone, regardless of his or her identity.181 Similarly, Villa embodies the American idea of the self-made man who rose to prominence in a meritocracy through his military prowess.182 It would seem as though the more nuanced depictions of Villa are more rooted in the historical fact of his life. These nuanced depictions are more representative of the historical fact of his political and military achievements than in the

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180 Oropeza, 79.

181 Huntington, 71.

reductionist mythology of Villa the bandit. The nuanced portrayal of Villa is more empowering
to the Chicano lowrider culture, because it highlights Villa’s success through the hard work and
excellent administering of his political career. Packaged on the American canvas of a lowrider,
Villa becomes emblematic of the potential for Chicanos to succeed in the U.S. using the tools
provided to all Americans. In particular, this totemization of Villa as the self-made man who
“made it” through a meritocratic venue is reflected in the murals on Mauri Mendoza’s 1970
Chevrolet Impala “Los Jefes.”

“The murals on my car are basically a history of Mexico, Mexico’s history,” Mr.
Mendoza said in an interview. “And a mixture of my father and my son who passed away a few
years back.” The murals themselves appear throughout the car, utilizing all aspects of the
metal canvas that the 1970 Impala provides: it makes use of the expansive flat hood space to
incorporate the lowrider mural. On the gently sloping, concave slab of side bodywork the Impala
provides, Mr. Mendoza has an engraved beltline that, alongside the sub-beltline pinstriping,
distinguishes that reorients viewer’s eyes to the car’s wheels. Above the trim, the rear fenders
carry narrow but elongated murals on either side that make explicit visual references to
Christopher Columbus’s ships, the Aztecs, the Mexican revolutionaries, and César Chávez, as
well as other elements of Mexican history in conjunction with his family’s history.

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184 "1970 Chevrolet Impala Convertible – Los Jefes."
186 Ibid.
For the painting of “Los Jefes Los,” Mr. Mendoza looked within his community. “There’s a good friend of mine,” said Mr. Mendoza. “I met him back in ’95….He never done [airbrushing] on a car but he wanted to do it.” The airbrushing process is one that requires lots of practice, because, as Mr. Mendoza says, “It’s all freehand.” The source material is car paint, which can be mixed to look as though it’s blended into your paint or to stand out from the car’s base color. “It’s a few steps,” said Mr. Mendoza, “but that’s all he does.”

The name says quite a lot about which Pancho Villa was chosen to be portrayed on Mendoza’s car. “So Los Jefes means the bosses, somebody with authority back in those days,” Mendoza said. “And they used to call them that.” This depiction of Villa appears in three different murals on “Los Jefes.” The first is on the hood of the car, which depicts Villa and Zapata intertwined with the Mexican flag. The second appearance of Villa is on the rear quarter panel on the passenger-side, and it depicts Villa next to elements of Mexican Native American life and the Spanish colonization. Finally, Villa appears again on top of the trunk of the car, again depicted with Zapata but separated from him with the emblem-shield from the Mexican flag, which depicts “. . . an eagle. . . devouring a serpent.”

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187 Ibid.
188 Ibid.
189 Ibid.
190 Ibid.
Mr. Mendoza was born in Mexico, but later immigrated to the United States. “I was lived over there [in Mexico] for 10 years,” he said. “When I was 10, we moved to Arizona and from there to California. So basically the history of them is because I was born over there.” Mr. Mendoza is an excellent personal example of the varied American identities that even fall under the Mexican American, although not necessarily Chicano, umbrella. Yet, like the Chicano intellectual community, his identity rests somewhere between the United States and Mexico. However, Mr. Mendoza is quick to draw an important distinction: “I’m not Chicano, because I’m not born here,” he said. Despite that, “I consider myself more Mexican than American, but my wife says I’m more American than Mexican.”

More than anything, he could be considered emblematic of the synthesizing power of the lowriding community to draw from many places, people, and styles. He incorporates both Mexican and American history on his American canvas, synthesizing these cohesive and contradictory elements into a representation of the cross-cultural currents that swirl around lowriding. “They used to call, you know, Pancho Villa and Zapata ‘Los Jefes’ of the Mexican revolution. There’s a different history that’s Mexican history and American history,” said Mr. Mendoza.

The mural of Zapata and Villa on the hood of the 1970 Impala [FIGURE 6] depicts them against a backdrop of the green stripe of the Mexican flag. In contrast to Zapata’s downcast

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193 Ibid.

194 Ibid.

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eyes (yet twinkling) and lower positioning, Villa sits at the top of the mural, his face calm and his eyes glinting in what appears to be good humor.

Villa gazes calmly at the viewer, meeting him directly in the eyes. Zapata’s downcast eyes seem to highlight the the social status of those who comprised his revolt, as Zapata’s revolt was “. . . essentially a peasant revolt.” In contrast, Villa’s revolution “. . . was not led by peasants.” Instead, Villa’s revolution was made up of Mexicans whose “. . . most vocal supporters were members of the rapidly expanding urban and rural middle class in the state [of Chihuahua].” This depiction of Villa in mural form hints at the class make-up of his middle-class supporters. Whereas Zapata gazes at his peasants, Villa meets his middle-class supporters eye-to-eye.

The position of the mural on the hood of the car could also indicate that Villa is looking into the future. When contrasted with the Mexican flag in the background, the image is incredible patriotic. Because he is both at the top of the image and he is looking forward at the viewer, he embodies the strength and fortitude that one would expect from a “boss.” Throughout the car, he is depicted in a manner befitting a leader, which highlights the historical fact of Villa’s life.

However, there is another element of layered symbolism. Villa and Zapata are depicted against the green stripe, which represents the Independence movement of Mexico from Spain in the early 19th century. Thus, the mural establishes a distinct connection between the

196 Katz, "Villa: Reform Governor of Chihuahua," 27.

197 Ibid., 28.

198 Ibid.

199 "The Price of Freedom: Mexican Flag."
Independence movement and Villa’s role in the Mexican Revolution in the 20th century. Cast against the billowing green stripe, Villa steps into the role of liberator for the middle classes. It is worth noting that the murals throughout entire car are a shade of green, as though the car itself is the physical embodiment of a sentiment of independence and overcoming oppression.

Villa’s credibility as a lowrider icon mirrors his middle-class supporters. Whereas Zapata’s peasant-centric land redistribution was politically too controversial for Americans, Villa’s more nuanced historical record as a decent administrator allows him to be a figure that middle-class Chicanos can invoke through a sense of narrative similarity. Although Villa began as a cattle-rustler of little importance, he quickly grew to prominence. He was such a brilliant military strategist that he went from an army of eight men to controlling the entire state of Chihuahua and being elected governor of the state by military commanders. Villa’s upward trajectory mirrors the life path of John Smith, except that Villa’s story is accessible to ethnic minorities in the United States. Like Villa’s election to governor, Smith’s academic study of war and his mastery of its actions landed him “…a kind of discharge paper from the Transylvanian prince, Zsigmond Báthory…[that] proved his position as a Captain in the Imperial Army and referred to its owner as a gentleman.” Whereas John Smith became a gentleman, Villa

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200 Katz, "Villa: Reform Governor of Chihuahua," 35.

201 Ibid., 31-2.

202 "Ibid., 34.

embodied a more meritocratic take on nobility through his election to the governorship of Chihuahua.

The second mural depicting Villa on the car is the rear quarter panel (behind the rear wheel well) on the passenger-side [FIGURE 7]. In this mural, Villa is depicted to the left of a ship that has crosses on the sails, and, further to the right, there is a figure who could depict an element of Native American mythology. Through the direct juxtaposition of these figures within the mural, Villa is being aligned with the conflict that is happening between the Native American figure—who is possibly Aztec—and the Spanish colonial ship that appears to be the ship of Christopher Columbus. The identity of the ship is unclear to an untrained eye like mine. However, if it was any of the Spanish colonists who came to the New World, it would be a poignant statement on the Euro-centric hegemony that has established itself in America. The ship of the colonists faces an angry Native American figure which seems to be pointing to the threat of European values overshadowing the Native Mexican values.

This depiction of Native Americans speaks to the origins of Mexican Los Angeles in the 28 Native American villages that existed in the L.A. Basin—and the countless other villages spread throughout the American Southwest. Although “Los Jefes” is in Merced, California, the history of Los Angeles is reflective of a larger part of California’s colonial history. The Los Angeles-based Native Americans mostly spoke Shoshonean, an Uto-Aztecan language until the

204 “1970 Chevrolet Impala Convertible – Los Jefes.”

Spanish colonizers arrived.  From the beginning of the San Gabriel Mission in early September of 1771 through the Gold Rush of 1848 and the first railway link in 1869, Los Angeles blossomed from a plantation-style farm to a Mexican Pueblo. The Los Angeles colonial history has direct ties to all of California’s history, especially after the 1869 railway link. The train functioned like the car to spread information, goods, and settlers from the East Coast. Even today, California is still a remarkably progressive microcosm of American society. It is second-most diverse state in United States.

In light of this modern diversity, Villa’s presence next to the warring origin stories points to the modern Mexican identity—and perhaps, Mendoza’s understanding of his identity. With the Native American figure angrily glaring at the winds bringing the colonial ship to shore, it seems to indicate the contentious relationship that Spanish colonialism has with Native American heritage. This seems to be an acknowledgement of the checkered past of Mexican history.

When these pieces are put into conversation, Villa is separated from this Colonist-Native American conflict by a silver gleam, and he is backlit by another silver lining. Villa’s placement in the mural is more in the foreground than the other images. Combined with the silver lining, the mural may be acknowledging the synthesis of these warring identities in modern Mexico under Villa’s gubernatorial term. While in office as governor, Villa waged a counterrevolution

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206 Ibid.

207 Ibid, 40-41.


that “... destroyed the power bases of the traditional oligarchy. ...” This deconstruction of the élite from within the power structure they established points to the silver lining—and genius—of Villa’s historical legacy upon Mexican memory.

The final mural that depicts Villa on “Los Jefes” is on the Impala’s trunk [FIGURE 8]. Villa is again depicted with Zapata but separated from him with the emblem-shield from the Mexican flag, which depicts “... an eagle... devouring a serpent.” Villa’s nuanced portrayal in this trunk mural creates him as a leader and an national crusader by invoking the American idea of the self-made man. This mural links him with Mexican patriotism to cast him as the modern day John Smith, rising to mythological status as an icon who succeeded in a meritocracy through his military prowess.

The final mural, done entirely in shades of green, shows the Mexican emblem-shield set in the V of two revolvers trailing smoke. On either side are Villa and Zapata: Villa is on the far left, and Zapata is on the far right. At first glance, this mural seems to perpetuate the idea of Zapata and Villa as bandits. However, the portrayal of these two men, and of Villa in particular, is far too nuanced to be as reductive as a bandit-genre mural.

Here, Villa is depicted to the left of the eagle from the viewer’s perspective, with the eagle’s head turned towards him as it grips the snake. However, Villa is on the eagle’s right hand. The importance of this positioning establishes a pseudo religious narrative that invokes the


211 "The Price of Freedom: Mexican Flag."


213 "1970 Chevrolet Impala Convertible – Los Jefes."
Christian canon of Jesus resting to God’s right hand.\textsuperscript{214} The eagle eating the serpent was, in Mexican mythology, a sign from the gods to the Aztecs about where the Aztec people should establish Mexico City.\textsuperscript{215} Effectively, because the eagle is a sign from the gods, it is treated as a sort of minor deity itself in this mural.

The eagle, as it faces Villa, is deferring to him by bowing its head. This deference can be observed in both the size and the height of Villa and the eagle’s heads, for Villa’s is far higher than the eagle. The combination of Villa’s placement on the favored side of the eagle with the eagle’s deference to him points to Villa’s status as the favored son in Mexican mythology. He is, in a sense, the chosen one who both placates the Americans as well as providing tangible and meaningful benefits to the Chihuahuan people.\textsuperscript{216}

Ideologically, he seemed radical, but, outside of his land seizure from the élite, most of his implemented policies were broadly beneficial. This beneficial rule is reflected in Villa’s gaze on the trunk mural of “Los Jefes.” He gazes out above the eagle, into a setting sun. Villa is caught between his Mexican patriotism, reflected in the eagle, and his military duties, reflected in the revolver that functions as a point of intersection between he and Zapata. His stoicism is reflected in this classical portrayal genre of a military leader, echoed in American mythology in cases like the Lansdowne Portrait.\textsuperscript{217}

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\textsuperscript{214} "Catechism of the Catholic Church - "He Ascended Ino Heaven and Is Seated at the Right Hand of the Father"" Catechism of the Catholic Church - "He Ascended Ino Heaven and Is Seated at the Right Hand of the Father", accessed April 26, 2016, \url{http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p1s2c2a6.htm}.
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\textsuperscript{215} "The Price of Freedom: Mexican Flag."
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\textsuperscript{216} Katz, "Villa: Reform Governor of Chihuahua," 37-8.
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However, while Villa was a leader in a revolution like George Washington, his ruling style reflects that of John Smith. During Smith’s administration in Jamestowne, “…it is clear that Smith respected performance rather than rank and privilege.”\textsuperscript{218} When food became scarce, Captain Smith enforced a policy of “those who did not work did not eat.”\textsuperscript{219} Similarly, Villa managed to use the land he seized from the “traditional oligarchy” and nationalize them for the public treasury during his time as governor of Chihuahua.\textsuperscript{220} Through this new nationalized source of wealth, he was able to fund a variety of measures to placate Mexican citizens. In the state of Chihuahua, he reduced unemployment by expanding the army, while he cheapened the price of meat, and fed the unemployed rations.\textsuperscript{221} At the same time, Villa never aggravated foreign investments, because he never got around to carrying out the land redistribution policy he promised to the poor of Mexico.\textsuperscript{222}

In these murals, the specific mythology of Villa that is represented is indicated by the name of the lowrider itself: “Los Jefes,” the bosses, just as Villa was during his time as governor.\textsuperscript{223} Ultimately, through his history’s parallels with the American myth of the self-made man, Villa casts the Mexican Revolution in ideological language that Americans can follow. This

\textsuperscript{218} Smith and Lankford, foreword, xvi.

\textsuperscript{219} Smith and Lankford, foreword, xix.

\textsuperscript{220} Katz, 35-6.

\textsuperscript{221} Ibid., 37.

\textsuperscript{222} Ibid., 36.

\textsuperscript{223} Mauri Mendoza, telephone interview by author, Washington, D.C., February 6, 2016.
newfound complexity in the depiction of Panco Villa mirrors the complexity of the transnational identity of the Chicano people, who exist at the intersection of being American, Mexican, and a new whole synthesized as a result of that dual identity.²²⁴

²²⁴ Sandoval, “Bajito Y Suavecito/Low and Slow: Cruising Through Lowrider Culture,” 47.
Chapter 2: Emiliano Zapata and the Legacy of Social Justice

In his introduction to *Portraits of America*, Rivera builds a bridge between artistry and the automotive sector. He calls the “dynamic productive sculptures which are the mechanical masterpieces of the factories . . . active works of art,” thereby elevating automobiles to a form of artistic expression.225 Rivera also creates a tangible link between Detroit iron and Chicano art: In 1932, Rivera and Kahlo went to Detroit to meet with Edsel Ford about a planned mural.226 The mural was “. . . to have a full tableau of the industrial life of Detroit,” which Ford stressed that Rivera “. . . should not limit to steel and automobiles.”227 Despite this direction, Rivera’s work focused largely on two major aspects of building a Ford car: the construction of its iconic V8 engine, as well as the exterior body panels.228

The stamping presses and engine spindles Rivera eventually depicted in the North Wall have been linked to sculptural depictions of Aztec goddesses and Toltec guardian figures.229 However, it is not just these depictions that connected Chicano people and Detroit iron. It was also that Rivera believed the “industrial worker of the north” was worth honoring. His respectful portrayal of these scenes connects muralist expression and Mexican American history with the


227 Ibid., 182.


229 “Diego Rivera *Detroit Industry,*” *Detroit Institute of Arts*, http://www.dia.org/diego/walls.html#.
autoworker. The Mexican *campesino* thus becomes fused with the American proletariat through the Detroit murals, opening a new intersection for Chicanos.

The cars that are considered “traditional” lowriders are generally much larger than Euros or even modern cars, as I will demonstrate. For example, a 1964 Chevrolet Impala measured 205.8 inches long.\(^{230}\) In contrast, the 2016 Toyota Camry (America’s best-selling non-truck vehicle) has an overall length of 190.9 inches—more than a foot less than the Impala.\(^ {231}\) This extra length naturally allows for more space for murals.

Whereas Pancho Villa’s history is “controversial” and “... still evokes the most violent controversy,” Emiliano Zapata’s legacy has a general consensus: he is a peasant revolutionary.\(^ {232}\) The American public had been exposed to “... political cartoons vilifying Zapata [that] were still fresh in the minds of the public...” during the Mexican Revolution.\(^ {233}\) Zapata was able to fill the void for a deified figure rebelling against the hegemonic military leadership of Carranza.\(^ {234}\)

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\(^{232}\) Katz, 26.


\(^{234}\) Easterling, 86.
Zapata embodied this ideal of rebellion through his independent operation against the authority of Carranza, by “. . . carrying out land reform on the spot, without delay.”  

Although Zapata’s identity as a peasant—and his radical land redistribution policies—make him unappealing to the American capitalist mindset, he is still a “mythic figure” for the “common people of Morelos,” the state in Mexico where Zapata supported “. . . the cause of the downtrodden.” Zapata is “. . . the sincere, sad, yet single-minded champion of the landless and of agrarian reform, who was murdered in 1919 by a ‘treasonous’ turncoat. . .” Whereas Pancho Villa casts the Mexican Revolution in ideological language that Americans can follow, Zapata is a martyr and a crusader. His place in historical memory serves as an incentive for continuing his legacy of social justice for the downtrodden for lowriders to regain a sense of control over their agency as Americans. He was chosen as an icon to represent and fight oppressive ideology for the downtrodden because he martyred by his assassination. This narrative cohesion of Zapata as the “single-minded champion” of the downtrodden (which I will use throughout this section) is first established by Diego Rivera’s *Agrarian Leader Zapata.* Later, the lowrider depictions of Zapata build on this narrative to transform it into canonical truth. Even so, this canonical truth is largely cohesive with Zapata’s history.

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235 Ibid., 87.
236 Katz, 40.; Britton, 114.
237 Brandenburg, 9.
238 Ibid., 62.
239 Ibid., 9.; Katz, 40.; “Diego Rivera. Agrarian Leader Zapata. 1931 | MoMA.”
*Agrarian Leader Zapata* [FIGURE 9] has been in the MoMA collections since Rivera’s “One-Man Show in the Museum of Modern Art,” as Rivera himself called it, in 1931. To have a “One-Man Show in the Museum of Modern Art” was massive for Rivera’s career. “To every modern artist, this is the pinnacle of professional success,” Rivera wrote. It got Rivera and his work lots of press coverage. After the opening of his MoMA show, Rivera was said to be “…the most talked about artist in this side of the Atlantic.”

In this exhibit, Rivera presented (among other works) five fresco images, including *Agrarian Leader Zapata* (Plate 4 of 5). Although it has been posited that Abby Rockefeller—wife of John D.—suggested this subject to Rivera, the depiction of a Mexican revolutionary figure in one of the arguably the most “high” art establishments for contemporary art in the United States is remarkable for the degree to which it made the Mexican American community visible in a mainstream U.S. cultural establishment. Depictions like Rivera’s *Agrarian Leader Zapata* depict a mythologized Zapata in peasant garb as a leader for the downtrodden, which is backed up in historical fact by the Plan de Ayala that was a “rallying point” for his supporters.

This depiction of Zapata, in such a prominent setting, set the tone for the transformation of Zapata from a “treacherous bandit,” as Indych-López writes, to a champion of the

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241 Rivera and March, 179-80.

242 Ibid., 180.

243 Dickerman and Indych-López, 22.

244 Ibid., 28.

245 Ibid.

marginalized people of Mexico. Rivera’s artistic depiction enabled Zapata to take on a broader meaning than the literal consequences of his actions, or his land redistribution policy. The rebellious nature of his actions resonated in Mexican myth, allowing Zapata’s image to be distilled into a revolutionary figure. This distillation enables him to become an emblem for all of the marginalized people, including the indigenous people of the American Southwest uprooted by Spanish colonists. By virtue of this work’s inclusion in Rivera’s one-man show, this press attention parlayed into myth of Zapata becoming more accessible to Americans. In the American cultural canon, this work demonstrates a historical memory of Zapata that is largely congruous with the myth of his crusade for the peasantry through its portrayal of him as both a crusader and a martyr.

The Agrarian Leader Zapata highlights a Zapata who is a crusader through his strong leadership of the campesinos, peasant farm workers who are the downtrodden depicted in Rivera’s work. The pictorial representation of Zapata in Plate 4 interprets him as a leader. Zapata stands in the foreground of the work, positioned in front of the campesinos. Zapata marches ahead of them as their leader. He also leads a horse by its halter. Zapata’s positioning in the foreground places him directly in front of the viewer, and forces the view to engage with him before interacting with the rest of the work. This placement could be a metaphorical embodiment

247 Dickerman and Indych-López, 28.


249 "Diego Rivera. Agrarian Leader Zapata. 1931 | MoMA."

250 Dickerman and Indych-López, 28.

251 "Diego Rivera. Agrarian Leader Zapata. 1931 | MoMA."
of a Zapata’s role as a leader. His role in the foreground, the front of the painting, is to grant the viewer access to the rest of the painting. In order to see the rest of the campesinos, or the figure at his feet, one must go through Zapata. He is leading the viewer into Rivera’s work.

This foreground placement of Zapata in the work could also point to Zapata being the mouthpiece for the campesinos, a position reiterated in history through Zapata’s “championing” of the landless.252 He is the mouthpiece for these people because he grants access to them for the viewer. But, this idea holds true the other way around: Zapata is also granting access for the people to the viewer. Because of this important role, he grows from a leader to a crusader. As the mouthpiece for the campesinos, his leadership evolves from leading to leading into political change. Zapata’s identity as a crusader is supported in history by the “revolutionary movement in Morelos” he led that “. . . was essentially a peasant movement. . . [whose] rallying cry was a demand for profound agrarian reforms.”253

Zapata’s identity as a leader was made all the more crucial by global events at play in 1931. The relevance of Zapata’s relevance in the American narrative was at an all-time high, while Rivera exhibiting at MoMA and painting at the Detroit Art Institute, Americans were still struggling to bear the full force of the Great Depression.254 People were looking for leaders because the understanding of American economic stability had been shattered, a mood that is

252 Brandenburg, 9.
253 Katz, 27.
represented in the film *It's a Wonderful Life*.\(^{255}\) This mood is also reflected in Rivera’s public crusading for communism in painting Lenin into the RCA Building at Rockefeller Center.\(^{256}\) To see Rivera publically crusading for the promulgation of Communist symbolism and ideology, like the inclusion of Lenin’s face in the RCA Building at Rockefeller Center, provided downtrodden Americans with a sense of hope.\(^{257}\) Indeed, according to a *New York Times* article from May 10, 1933, there was even a parade of “about 100 art students and other admirers,” billed as “sympathizers” in the headline, outside the RCA Building.\(^{258}\) Thus, the prominent availability of Zapata’s mythology to Americans at this time, especially by a communist painter, was hugely influential for Americans after the collapse of the global economy and many people’s dreams. Rivera was an avowed communist, and continued to consider himself as such despite his expulsion from the Mexican Communist Party in 1929.\(^{259}\)

In *Agrarian Leader Zapata*, Rivera depicts a Zapata who is a martyr that died for his cause. Rivera builds this idea up by referencing the imagery of Zapata’s assignation while clearly

\(^{255}\) *It's a Wonderful Life*, dir. Frank Capra, screenplay by Frances Goodrich, Frank Capra, and Albert Hackett, perf. James Stewart, Donna Reed, and Lionel Barrymore (New York: RKO Radio Pictures, 1946), DVD.

\(^{256}\) Rivera and March, 206.


\(^{258}\) Ibid.

\(^{259}\) Rivera and March, 166.
alluding to Zapata’s commitment to the plight of the campesinos. Rivera’s pictorial representation of Zapata in Plate 4 also interprets him in light of his martyrdom.

In a very literal sense, Rivera puts Zapata into dialogue with mortality in Plate 4. In Agrarian Leader Zapata, Zapata confronts the viewer as he steps over what is either a fallen opposing soldier or hacienda owner. Interestingly, both Zapata and the dead body have a similar shape to them. Zapata’s shoulders are hunched forward and his neck protrudes past his body. This curvature extends throughout his spine and into the C-shape of his body. The dead body echoes this shape, resting in a half-achieved fetal position. This stark juxtaposition of the forceful bent of Zapata’s body language and the curved dead body on the ground seems to remind the viewer of the similarities between the dead body’s fate and the fate that awaits Zapata in 1919.

Furthermore, the dead man on the ground may represent the “turncoat” who murdered Zapata. Zapata is in further conversation with this body through the touching of Zapata’s feet to the dead body’s wrist. Zapata stands in the lifeless embrace of the dead man’s outstretched arms. The outstretched arms function as a foreboding metaphor for their shared future, for the dead body is embracing Zapata as a brother in death. The embrace could also represent the future

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260 Brandenburg, 9.
261 Dickerman and Indych-López, 28.
262 "Diego Rivera. Agrarian Leader Zapata. 1931 | MoMA."
263 Brandenburg, 9.
264 Ibid.
assassination of Zapata by the “turncoat,” as though it was an embrace of death. It also seems as though Zapata is being dragged out of the world of the living and into the world of the dead through this embrace.

But to return one’s gaze back to the center of the work, it is easy to notice that Zapata and the campesinos are dressed in matching shades of white. These garments are the local costume of the Cuernavaca region, a part of the state of Morelos.²⁶⁵ Dressing in the costume of the campesinos is a metaphor for the fact that Zapata is quite literally walking in their shoes. By walking in their shoes, Zapata is experiencing life as it is for the campesinos. By dressing in the campesino costume, Zapata is shown as too humble to make pretensions even though he was a formidable force in the Mexican Revolution. This military force is reflected in Zapata’s weapon. The weapons that Zapata and the campesinos carry also point to their humble origins, like Zapata’s sugarcane-cutting machete.²⁶⁶

The symbols of the peasantry work in unison to establish a glorification narrative for campesinos. Zapata is at a lower horizontal plane than the campesinos behind him. This lower positioning in the painting could demonstrate a sense of humility and deference to the viewer. Instead, his ferocious expression and stance in the forefront places him in competition with the foreground. Furthermore, Zapata is located lower than the people in the foreground, which could be demonstrative of Zapata’s humility and his respect for the campesinos. This sense of equility is reinforced by the fact that Zapata is literally not on his high horse. He chooses instead to remain on their level, and to walk with them.

²⁶⁵ "Diego Rivera. Agrarian Leader Zapata. 1931 | MoMA."

²⁶⁶ Ibid.
By uniting behind this strong leader, Zapaa’s army is also reclaiming Mexico using the trappings of the peasantry, a triumph of the working class. By restoring the focus to the Mexican heritage, Rivera invokes a principle he established in an earlier composition with Zapata at the Agricultural College at Chapingo: “Here it is taught to exploit the land but not the man.”267 The armaments carried by the campesinos demonstrate a reckoning for those who have exploited men as well. Rivera’s depiction of Zapata points the viewer towards the checkered legacy of abusing the peasantry by the elite. The outsider status of the peasantry still lurked at the base of Mexican history.

In his depiction of Zapata, Rivera is giving the Mexican-American population a savior that can relate to their struggle to for recognition and respect. Rivera is also providing a figure that Mexican-Americans can claim as theirs. For this reason, he works quite well as a revolutionary figure, as he was “. . . determined to fight the growing abuses perpetuated by the local sugar haciendas.”268 Zapata became sort of an outlaw prince, leading Robin Hood-esque armies that would seize sugar plantations from their owners and administrators.269 His status as a Robin Hood-like figure allows him to take on a broader resonance than simply a communist revolutionary. He becomes emblematic of all marginalized people. By shedding his specific historical context and assuming the identity of a sort of stock character, Zapata becomes much more accessible to those who lack the historical or familial proximity to the Mexican Revolution.

267 Rivera and March, 138.

268 Easterling, 51.

269 Ibid., 54.
Through his critiques of capitalism in public venues like MoMA’s *Agrarian Leader* Zapata, Rivera constructed a narrative of conscious disapproval of the American upper class. However, because of his status as a public figure, he was still allowed to partake in this culture, ensuring further media exposure. By choosing Zapata as one of the primary figures in his MoMA show, Rivera was raising the profile of Zapata and his agrarian reform to the American public. It was a recognition that there was something wrong with American treatment of racial minorities in a public, upper-class venue.

As a result, to overcome this predominately white cultural domination, figures with a history of radical responses to the existing cultural hegemony enabled lowriders later in the 20th century to regain a sense of control over their agency as Americans. In so doing, adapting the image and historical resonance of Zapata’s crusade helps lowriders to cast themselves in the image of Zapata to achieve social good.

As a result of their ethnic identity, lowriders often had to overcome this predominately white cultural domination which could be seen in legislation or the American automotive press. During the 1960s and 1970s, lowriders were faced with “law enforcement authorities, particularly the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department, [who] were openly hostile towards lowriders.” As if that was not enough, the American automotive press was exclusionary. When Robert E. Petersen launched *Hot Rod* in 1948, “Petersen chose to promote the image of the hot rodder as a model white middle-class male teen,” as a method of protecting “his financial

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270 Brandenburg, 9.

271 Tatum, 54.
interest and the growing publishing business.”

Hot Rod was creating hot rod culture by gearing the editorial content to appeal to and sell the image of “a model white middle-class male teen,” as Ides wrote. Robert Petersen’s editorial spin was literally to whitewash the culture and socially alienate those who did not conform to this ethnic identity.

As these types of hegemonic treatment of lowriders exemplify, lowriders were a marginalized cultural group who were downtrodden just as Zapata’s campesinos were. Thus, the need of an icon like Zapata was paramount. Zapata was the “... the sincere, sad, yet single-minded champion of the landless and of agrarian reform,” and many of these terms could be applied to lowriders as well. The invocation of Zapata’s historical memory continues the legacy of social justice he left after his demise. Zapata’s historical legacy of social justice enables lowriders to build on this narrative of social reform to transform it into canonical truth. Zapata’s image in icon form takes shape in two lowriders, the 1965 Chevrolet Impala called “Revolution” [FIGURE 10] as well as Mauri Mendoza’s “Los Jefes,” mentioned earlier. Even so, this canonical truth is largely cohesive with Zapata’s history. Zapata fulfills the lowrider’s need for a new mythology of inclusiveness that pushes for a more inclusive American fabric.

The first mural that exemplifies the consistency of Zapata’s history and mythology depicts Zapata’s narrative of social reform is “Revolution,” on the trunk 1965 Chevrolet

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273 Ibid.

274 Brandenburg, 9.

275 Ibid.
Impala.276 Against a light, metallic periwinkle base, this mural depicts Villa and Zapata on the left and right extremities, respectively, with Villa on a horse in the center. There is also “. . . a sexy and seductively dressed revolucionaria (a female revolutionary)” in opposite the Mexican emblem-shield and two snakes, as well as “Wanted” posters and piles of American currency.277

The first part of the “Revolution” mural that stands out is the clear depiction of the land in the center of the mural, on which the horse rides. The land is a rocky, desert terrain. The distinct presence of the land is curious. In other instances of mural form that I have encountered, the presence of ground has been an afterthought, necessitated only by the constraints of human reality. However, this depiction of the land begins in the foreground and runs almost two-thirds of the way up the center of the mural.

The reverence with which the land is depicted seems to point to the presence of geography in the Chicano consciousness. The reverence in the depiction of the land seems to indicate the geographic distances across which the Chicano diaspora exists.278 By virtue of the national divide in between Mexico and American lowriders, Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata seem to have evolved a part of a symbolic lexicon of Chicano transnational history that are united across borders.279 Chicanos are “cultural hybrids” of a “border culture” between the U.S. and Mexico.280 The iconographizing began with representations of historical figures in American

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276 Revolution Trunk Impala.
277 Tatum, 100.; Revolution Trunk Impala.
278 Tatum, 17.
279 Sandoval, “Bajito Y Suavecito/Low and Slow: Cruising Through Lowrider Culture”, 68.
280 Ibid., 47.
art, but this process of becoming an icon experienced a diaspora much in the same way the Chicano people did.\textsuperscript{281} As Sandoval writes, “The lowrider became part of the iconographic language of the barrio sensibility—‘a sense of self worth that is defiant, proud, and rooted in resistance.’”\textsuperscript{282} The importance of that border culture rests within the land, and its geographical divides. Thus, this reverent attention to detail in the portrayal of the land seems to indicate the desire for grounding, for something that lowriders can claim as their own in the context of their own identity.

The next element of the mural though which Zapata fulfills the lowrider’s need for inclusiveness through social reform is the wanted posters that are next to both Zapata and Villa, as well as the piles of American currency that surround them. Although Villa’s mythology as a bandit has been explained earlier, Zapata’s legacy as the champion of the downtrodden is just half the tale. The mural references Zapata’s checkered relationship with the ruling hegemony through the presence of these wanted posters. Zapata’s agrarian reform placed him in direct contest with Venustiano Carranza, who was a candidate for president in 1917.\textsuperscript{283} Zapata was “. . . One of Carranza’s major problems . . .” because the followers of Zapata “. . . persisted in revolt . . .”\textsuperscript{284} As a result, Carranza eventually put a fifty thousand peso bounty on Zapata’s head.\textsuperscript{285}

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{281} Tatum, 17.
\item \textsuperscript{282} Ybarra-Frausto “Arte Chicano: Images of a Community in \textit{Signs from the Heart: California Chicano Murals}, 55, as quoted in Sandoval, “Bajito Y Suavecito/Low and Slow: Cruising Through Lowrider Culture”, 64.
\item \textsuperscript{283} Brandenburg, 56-7.
\item \textsuperscript{284} Ibid., 57.
\item \textsuperscript{285} Ibid.
\end{itemize}

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This bounty is referenced in the mural, although the mural lists the bounty as 65,00- (the final number is obscured by his head) pesos. The bounty, in the form of stacks of U.S. $100 bills, rests in front of Zapata. The wanted poster and the bounty reflect a consistency with the myth of Zapata. The only inaccuracy is the figure, 65,00-, which was most likely a deliberate choice considering that the mural’s car canvas is a 1965 Impala. Although this mural depiction seeks to mythologize Zapata’s life and his achievements by virtue of the choice of subject, there begins to be a presence of American capitalist iconography like money contrasted with these figures who were pushing agrarian reform to redistribute land—and thus livelihood—from Mexico’s élite to the landless peasants. Thus, although the exact numerical figures of Zapata’s bounty is misrepresented, there is a logical reason for that. The historical record of the bounty and then its depiction in the mural point to a narrative cohesion between the mythology and the historical facts of Zapata’s life.

Zapata stares straight out at the viewer as though challenging him to either take the cash or to turn him in, although he is depicted as a militant crusader. In the mural, one can observe Zapata holding a shotgun as he wears cartridge belts in an x-shape across his chest. This militant depiction highlights the more radical aspect of Zapata’s legacy. In so doing, it enables him to tear down the restrictive American mythology.

This depiction of Zapata is dramatically more militant than the depiction of Zapata in “Los Jefes.” On the “Los Jefes” trunk, Zapata is depicted more as a martyr than in a manner

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286 Revolution Trunk Impala.

287 Katz, 26.

288 “1970 Chevrolet Impala Convertible – Los Jefes.”

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consistent with the Zapata mythology. On “Los Jefes,” Zapata was depicted more as the former part of the “. . . the sincere, sad, yet single-minded champion of the landless and of agrarian reform. . .” Zapata has no weapons held in his hands, nor are there cartridge belts draped across his chest. This Zapata is far more respectable, an embarrassed acknowledgement of the ground-level barrier breaking needed to be done in order to infiltrate the middle-class hoops for legitimacy, like Villa’s election to governorship.

In this more respectable depiction on “Los Jefes,” Zapata has tears glistening in his eyes that address to the “sad” aspect of Zapata’s identity. Zapata’s wet eyes combine with an earnest frown to create a feeling of sincerity in his expression. However, this earnestness actually falls short in converting the viewer to Zapata’s cause, especially because the mural’s focus is on Villa. The focus on Villa can be seen in the direction of the eagle’s face and Villa’s upward gaze, drawing the viewer into the passenger compartment—the nucleus—of the car. Zapata is an accessory included to complete the trope of these two men being included together in lowrider murals. He takes a literal backseat to the action of the car.

This accessory status that Zapata inhabits on the trunk of “Los Jefes” diminishes the revolutionary credibility of Zapata in favor of the legitimacy of Villa’s reign. This sad, sincere Zapata that “Los Jefes” depicts a historically accurate but mythologically diminishing portrayal of Zapata. Zapata is needed to do the hard legwork in transforming the American mythology

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289 Brandenburg, 9.
290 Katz, 34.
291 Brandenburg, 9.
into one that is more inclusive and has a revolutionary equivalent that is not George Washington. The militant depiction of Zapata on “Revolution” does just that: he causes a revolution by attacking the American perception of Zapata as a “sad and sincere” revolutionary. Zapata moves into the realm of respected crusader because he is established as just that—a leader and a crusader.

The transformation of lowrider culture towards a more inclusive environment can be seen in the three major periods in Chicano art. However, it is the first stage that lays the important groundwork for interpreting Zapata in muralist depictions. Chicano artists were first militant cultural nationalists that challenged the Euro-centric hegemony in the 1960s. This initial stage of Chicano art functions like depictions of Zapata in that it tore into close-minded mythologies and ideologies in order to lay the groundwork for future generations of Americans, who would consequently be more open to reforming their American identities.

In between the end of the Mexican Revolution in 1917, through the deaths of Zapata, and the current era, a “categorical slippage,” as Gunckel quotes Ketter, has taken place. This slippage is indicative of a major cultural transformation. This art represents a clear departure from the stylistic and topical norms of its predecessors, “a persistent characteristic of modern art created during moments of historical crisis and change.”

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292 Vargas, 95.


294 Gunckel, 4-6.
this case, the change in history is reflected between the “Los Jefes” and the “Revolution” mural, which depicts the transformation in depictions of Zapata, from the a more radicalized view that attacks the hegemony, to the Zapata that is reflective of a more open-minded culture.

This crusading identity is more essential to the push for mythological reform in American identity, the ideological—and therefore identity—canon of which is the New England settlers that is the cornerstone of Samuel Huntington’s understanding of the modern America. For this reason, stressing Zapata’s identity as a crusading figure is crucial, because it catalyzes a discussion through the violent imagery. Whereas Villa has earned his place in American mythology by virtue of his coherence to the American idea of the self-made man, as outlined by Huntington, Zapata earns his place by blatantly challenging our idea of how to force change. Zapata is needed to be the “single-minded champion” for “reform.” This reform can only be achieved through stressing the more radical elements of Zapata’s past. In so doing, lowriders are emboldened to continue challenging the restrictive hegemony that surrounds American custom car culture and therefore American culture in general.

This cry for reform is mirrored in the Chicano movement, who were rebelling against another revolution “. . . fought primarily to carry out political changes but not social changes.” Like the revolutionaries in Mexico, it was the social environment that the Chicanos were
attempting to change, for the legislation was doing nothing to protect Mexican Americans from the social attitudes of the hegemony.\textsuperscript{299}

\textbf{Conclusion:}

The lowrider is a whole lifestyle, but it does represent an externalized sense of pride in one’s self. As El Peak puts it, “You don’t have to be a cholo [\textit{s/í/c}] [to be a lowrider]. Just living, knowing the lifestyle, and being proud of what you are and who you are [is what counts].”\textsuperscript{300} But at its heart, the Chicano lowrider has moved beyond a Mexican-American piece of art. Instead, it has come to represent the vast amount of identities that comprise the American quilt of identities.

Although lowriders are deeply tied and hugely important to Los Angeles local history and Chicano history, the lowrider has risen beyond these confined places and identities (pun

\textsuperscript{299} Oropeza, 73.

\textsuperscript{300} Marcos “El Peak” Garcia, telephone interview by author, February 6, 2016.

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intended). While these histories were and are still deeply intertwined, they have experienced a diaspora throughout the United States and the world.\textsuperscript{301} Throughout the process of this thesis, the lowrider has left Los Angeles.\textsuperscript{302} Now, lowriders can be found everywhere from Brazil to Japan to Times Square in Manhattan.\textsuperscript{303}

Despite this diaspora of culture, people, and the cars themselves, the lowrider still has one primary focal point, a rare occurrence in a community so globalized. In his interview with Motherboard, Chappell points to the uniting force of the lowriding hobby: “I think people who get together around lowriding tend to share certain things in common . . . A lot of people end up in the same club because they grew up in the same area, went to the same school, or something like that.”\textsuperscript{304}

One aspect of the American quilt is certain, however: there will be major themes and ideas that are as universally accessible as the icons of the Mexican Revolution have been inside Chicano muralist art and outside of it, on lowrider murals driving throughout cities and in New York’s Museum of Modern Art. Like the mere idea of communist figures on American capitalist productions, lowrider culture is representative of the cultural iconoclasm that the once-monolithic American identity is poised to be massively affected by.

\textsuperscript{301} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{302} Tatum, \textit{Lowriders in Chicano Culture: From Low to Slow to Show}, 17.

\textsuperscript{303} Marcos “El Peak” Garcia, telephone interview by author, February 6, 2016.

During this thesis, I highlighted the ways in which lowrider murals depicting the figures of Zapata and Villa have contributed to the American quilt of identities by challenging (and at times attacking) the restrictive mythology of the American mythology according to Huntington. Muralism transformed Zapata and Villa from historical figures to crusaders in mythology. The mural depictions of Zapata and Villa on lowriders are tearing open American identities by attacking the restrictive hegemonic interpretations of our shared identity. These murals make American identity—itself constructed through the stories and mythology of its people—open to all Americans. Lowrider murals have used the revolutionary mythology of Villa and Zapata to alter the American myths of both the self-made man and the extent to which social justice is applied in one’s community. However, this process is ongoing and still in a state of flux. While “El Dorado De Villa” highlights the power of a ground swell to topple a cultural or political hegemony, the inclusion of those figures on “Los Jefes” highlights the narrative cohesion between the Mexican Revolution and the work Villa’s mythology does in making the social upheaval of the Mexican Revolution accessible to Americans. In contrast, “Revolution” demonstrates the violent power of Zapata’s myth in tearing down the restrictive American ideological approach to identity.

305 Huntington.


307 Ibid.

308 “1970 Chevrolet Impala Convertible – Los Jefes Los.”
When synthesized with the potential for performance that automobiles enable, automotive murals create a new form of uniquely American artistic expression. It is remarkable that American lowriders choose American cars as the default for their “rolling metal canvases.” By choosing American cars to customize, Chicanos are acknowledging the American half of the Chicano sum of Mexican and American. The aftermarket customization transforms American cars into lowriders by synthesizing the anonymous and mass-produced car with the aftermarket modifications that make up lowrider. While lowriders are said to embody “the spirit of rasquachismo,” the creation process of a lowrider melds both American capitalism with the expressive language of a distinctively American cultural group, as Chicano is a fusion of Mexican and American identities. The combination thereof reinforces the American-ness of the lowrider by fully embodying the idea of the American mosaic through the lowrider’s aesthetic cultural fusion. The lowrider moves from American canvas with aesthetically Chicano modifications into a super-American end result. It is super-American because it is a tangible synthesis of two aspects of seemingly incongruous American culture. However, by uniting American capitalism and homegrown artistic expression, it becomes a form of material culture that is uniquely American.


310 Goldman et al., 12.


By opening up this mythology to all Americans, the American identity becomes a collective of American identities that is reflective of the diversity and dynamicism of the American people. This gives not just Chicanos but all Americans, regardless of their personal identities, a more prominent voice in the ongoing construction on modern American identities and origin stories.

In a more tangible way, the success of the ways in which lowriders have transformed the automotive industry through muralism can be seen in the demand for lowrider artistry at home and abroad. The visual opulence of a lowrider has come to be reflected in the prices for prefabricated lowriders (i.e., already customized) as lowriders began to be recognized and accepted parts of American popular culture:

“Rappers wanted them for videos and the Japanese began to buy them too. And for a lowrider that you put $15,000 or $20,000 into - and then had to scrape off the paint and try to sell it for $4,000 or $5,000 - the Japanese began offering $40,000. It became not only a hobby but a business,” he [Joe Ray Camarena, editor of Lowrider magazine] said.313

This inclusivity speaks to the ongoing evolution and intense dynamicism with which the lowrider community has expanded. Today, says El Peak, “It’s become something global.”314 Lowriders were “created here in the west coast by Mexican Americans,” he says. And yet, lowriding has spread globally, signaling a sense of inclusivity and shared excitement over these beautifully baroque cultural productions.315

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313 Armando Varela, "Lowrider Cars Fetch Big Bucks from Collectors," EFE News Service (Madrid), April 28, 2009, accessed September 13, 2015, ProQuest Multiple Databases [ProQuest].


315 Ibid.
Future Projects:

In my research for this project, I encountered the idea that there are vast differences between pre-New Millennium lowriders and those that came after it. It would be interesting to explore the technical and aesthetic influences and modifications on pre- and post-2000 engine bays and mechanical make-ups.

Another subject that warrants its own study is the transfer of murals from walls to cars. When did this happen? Furthermore, the mobility of murals is a fascinating space for exploration. My cursory look reveals that there may be some validity to these statements. However, they indubitably would require further research on mural and lowrider art’s evolution over the course of these periods—perhaps beginning with Lowrider Arte magazine, a Lowrider subsidiary, which is often lumped into a larger whole overshadowed by Lowrider magazine.

Finally, another project worth pursuing would be a comparison of the editor’s letters in Lowrider magazine and Hot Rod magazine, evaluating for inclusive and exclusive language. This could give insight into the long term potential for these respective automotive communities to grow and evolve with a membership, or die. I suspect that lowriders are a dynamic and inclusive space, whereas the exclusivity—racial and age-wise—may have already foretold the culture’s extinction.

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APPENDIX

FIGURE 1: 1971 VERSION OF THE AMBR WINNER


FIGURE 2: 1975 VERSION OF THE AMBR WINNER
FIGURE 3: “El Dorado De Villa” Mural 1


FIGURE 4: “El Dorado De Villa” Mural 2

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FIGURE 6: “Los Jefes” Mural

FIGURE 8: “Los Jefes” Mural 3

FIGURE 9: *Agrarian Leader Zapata Mural*


Figure 10: “Revolution” Mural