

THE LOW RIDER RITUAL: SOCIAL MOBILITY ON WHEELS

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During the course of the Second World War, America was confronted by the social evolution of a subcultural phenomenon emanating from the depths of the inner city, and characterized by highly distinctive modes of dress, behavior, and speech. "Pachuquismo," as known among Mexican-American youth "gangs" of the Los Angeles area of southern California, was described by George C. Barker (1950:8) as being characterized by highly discreet social variables, of which age, sex, and socio-economic factors were considered of particular relevance. Accordingly, Barker (1950:15) noted that "there is a strong trend among the younger Mexican-Americans to glamorize the pachucos -- or to see them as a type of beloved vagabond or Robin Hood," and furthermore "the jargon borrowed by the pachucos from the El Paso-Juarez underworld has become an important part of colloquial slang or jive talk, and thus has come to symbolize the ways and attitudes of the pachucos and of Mexican-American youth in general."

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate that the trend alluded to by Barker (1950) has been perpetuated among the members of Mexican-American youth groups in southern California. In essence, it is herein suggested that "Pachuquismo" has been perpetuated and revitalized in the context of Low Rider automobile clubs throughout the American Southwest. Any attempt to provide a thorough ethnographic account of the Low Rider phenomenon would necessitate an appraisal of variables outside the objective of this study.¹ Nevertheless, the following discussion is intended to provide a preliminary analysis of linguistic data obtained during the course of fieldwork in the Spring of 1977. The investigation entailed the use of

participant observation, supplemented by the use of data obtained in the context of informal conversations with members of various Low Rider "fraternities." The principal objective of the study was to obtain a "cultural text" amenable to linguistic analysis. Ultimately, the investigation was narrowed in scope so as to provide a more focused analysis of a single cultural domain.

The principal cover-term and cultural domain to be defined derives from the central social activity of Low Riders in general. The term has been selected on the basis of its predominance in the linguistic repertoire of the Low Rider, as well as its social relevance in the context of the cultural scene. As defined in the literature, "a cultural scene is the information shared by two or more people that defines some aspect of their experience" (Spradley & McCurdy 1972:24).

The cover term, in this context, is a highly variable term for defining the dynamic, or active aspect of the Low Rider reality. The term cruisin, as defined by those informants confronted during the course of these investigations, refers to the action of riding (or cruising) about in a customized automobile, and "flashing one's colors" or "making the scene" (i.e., making one's self obvious, or socially visible). "Cruisin" may take place in the social context of group activity, or on an individual basis as in the case of "solitaire."

If we are to interpret the foci of Low Rider activity from the standpoint of social ritual, what we are concerned with (at least in a rather superficial sense) is "any practice done or regularly repeated in a set precise manner so as to satisfy one's sense of fitness [i.e., social solidarity] and often felt to have a symbolic or quasi-symbolic significance."² Accordingly, those informants questioned about the overall significance of

the act of "cruisin" generally responded with indications suggesting that the maintenance of group solidarity was the underlying theme.

In an overall sense, the cultural domain which subsumes the act of "cruisin" necessarily entails a plurality of actions and/or individuals involved in the highly ritualized context of such activity. In this instance, the principal object of ritualized veneration is the customized automobile. Interestingly, the Low Rider automobile is a highly valued status symbol among the members of the groups in question.

As illustrated in Figures 1 and 2, a number of relevant terms fall within the cultural domain of "cruisin." The sub-themes indicated in the taxonomic hierarchy are references employed in discussing a specifiable type of activity falling under the category indicated by the cover term (i.e., "cruisin"). The principal distinctions obtaining between the types of activity indicated, are 1) the nature of group structure, 2) the number of individuals involved, and 3) the duration of the event. Likewise, the formality of the event is indicated to a greater or lesser degree by the use of such terms in the context of phrases. For example, whereas to "throw a caravan" indicates the procession of at least five automobiles in a rather formalized context, the use of the phrase "shoot a cruise" is generally a contextually specific reference to a rather informal, and limited event. Furthermore, the terms and phrases employed in designating the act of "cruisin" are further reduced to activities such as "blastin," "snatching," "pancaking," "scraping," "lowered," "lifted," "hooked-up," "juiced-up," "dancing," "humping," "layed," etc. Overall, most such terms tend to be mutually exclusive means of specifying the elements of action that may be observed in the context of "cruisin." It should be noted that although such terms may be mutually exclusive, they may nevertheless tend to connote similar activities falling under the cover term in question.

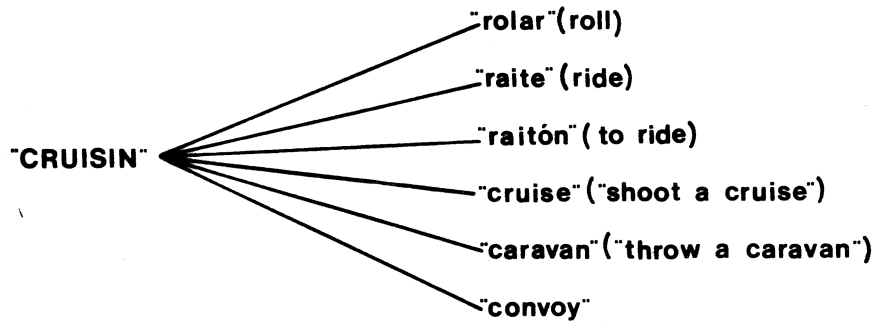


Figure 1. The "Action" Domain of "Cruisin" (Jargon).

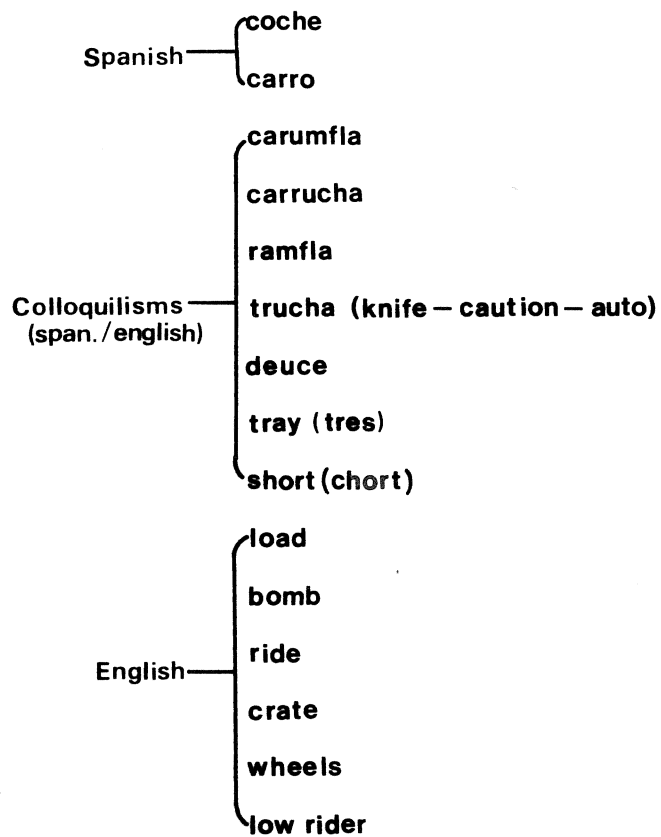


Figure 2. The "Low Rider" Automobile (Jargon).

Via the use of hydraulic "lifters" (see Fig. 3) controlled by the toggle-switch, on the auto's instruments panel, the driver of the Low Rider automobile initiates the socially mediated ritual performance of "cruisin." The toggle-switch, when manually engaged, electrically activates the hydraulic system by means of storage batteries, voltage regulators, and hydraulic pumps housed in the automobile's trunk. Furthermore, the auto's original springs and shock absorbers are removed in order to accommodate the hydraulic "lifters," or "caga palos" as they are known in the "jive talk" of the groups studied.

Interestingly, the Low Rider has developed a jargon to accommodate the positional states of those automobiles engaged in hydraulic maneuvers. In other words, terms such as "snatching" are indicative of a particular hydraulically assisted automobile maneuver. Those terms specifying particular actions may be sub-divided into four distinct categories, based on the activation of particular hydraulic "lifts." A "dual pump" hydraulic system is illustrated in Figure 3, and provides a schematic depiction of the set of "lifts" involved in producing a particular maneuver. The activation of the auto's front-end (see Fig. 3; lifts 1 & 2) to the upward position is known by several terms, of which "lifted," "juiced up," "cocked up," and "fork-lifted" describe the upward thrust of the auto's front-end. The activation of the auto's rear-end (Fig. 3; lifts 3 & 4) is indicated by the use of the terms "juiced up," and "lifted." Similarly, the raising of both the front- and rear-ends of the automobile in a single upward thrust (Fig. 3, lifts 1,2,3, & 4, simultaneously) is indicated by the use of the term "hooked-up," or "lifted." On the other hand, the repetitive activation of the auto's front-end (Fig. 3; lifts 1 & 2) in a series of rapidly executed thrusts, is known by the use of the terms "snatching," and "humping"

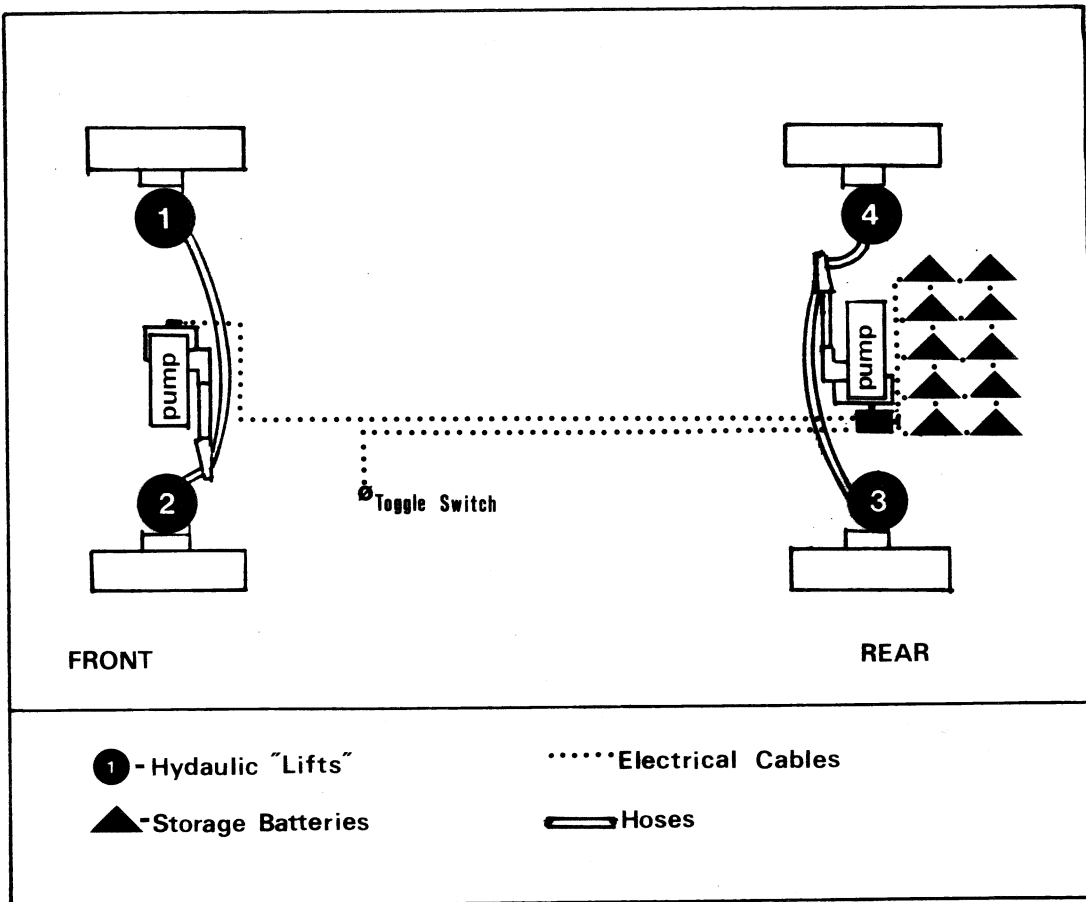


Figure 3. Low Rider "Hydraulics."

(both of which serve as sexual metaphors). The alternate activation of the auto's front and rear-end (Fig. 3; 1 & 2, alternating with 3 & 4) is signified by the use of the terms "dancing," and "bailando." Lastly, the dropping or deactivation of the hydraulic "lifters" is known by the terms "lowered," "dropped," and "layed" (also a sexual metaphor). The act of "snatching" or "humping" the auto's front-end is heavily emphasized in the context of "cruisin."³

"Cruisin" and the Formation of the "Caravan"

The following discussion is derived from the cultural domain of "cruisin," and attempts to articulate conceptually the cultural scene pertaining to the "caravan." As previously suggested, the "caravan" is a rite of intensification and a reaffirmation of group solidarity and identity. For purposes of illustration, the phrase to "throw a caravan" has been broken down to include those activities which engage the concept or domain of "cruisin" in general, and "caravan" in specific. Those activities observed in the context of the "caravan" are not exclusively restricted to such a performance, and may well be observed in various other contexts.

The "caravan" generally involves a minimum of five vehicles in procession enacting an array of maneuvers. In such a context, a single automobile may range through the actions of "snatching," "pancaking," "dancing," and so-forth, in a series of premeditated and deftly executed maneuvers.

In one such instance, the leader initiated a series of actions, the first of which involved "dancing" the automobile's front and rear-end by means of an electrically activated hydraulic system. Soon afterwards, the entire procession of automobiles was engaged in mimicking the leader's initial actions. After several such series of actions, the drivers proceeded hydraulically to lower their automobiles, thereby taking it "low and slow."

It should be noted that the California Vehicle Code (Section 24008) places restrictions on how low an automobile frame may be adjusted, and hence Low Riders employing hydraulics for the purposes of "cruisin" may be in violation of such a code.

As suggested by one informant, "if a hawk [policeman] wants to hassle you, the first thing he does is make you open the trunk." In the course of these investigations, one such incident was observed wherein a "black & white" (i.e., policeman's squad car) caught a Low Rider "snatching" (i.e., using hydraulics to bounce the auto's front-end), and subsequently "canned the auto" (cited and/or arrested the driver of the Low Rider). In essence, the hydraulic system of the Low Rider automobile sets the stage for the performance of the Low Rider ritual, yet presents an obstacle as well as a social challenge to the maintenance of group solidarity and identity.

In the context of the Low Rider "caravan," the process of "flashing one's colors" (or becoming socially conspicuous), initially involves the organization of the "caravan" procession in terms of membership status. The group leader initiates the event by positioning his automobile at the forefront of the "caravan," with his "Sargeant of Arms" (organizing leader) close at hand. The automobiles are organized in single file, as in the case of a military convoy or funerary procession, and as in the case of the nocturnal "caravan," systematically begin to activate "show lights" on both the interior and exterior of the automobile. In general, "show lights" on the automobile's exterior are to be encountered on the front and rear axles, as well as beneath the corresponding fenders. Aside from those lights with which the automobile originally comes equipped, exterior "show lights" often include the addition of lights strategically placed so as to highlight otherwise sterile features. With regard to the auto's interior, "show lights"

generally involve the use of stereo "color bars" and "color marks," sometimes referred to as musicolor (after the manufacturer).

The musicolor system of lighting is often electrically synchronized with the stereo music arrangement (i.e., cassette, eight-track tape deck, or radio) in such a manner that the tone and degree of the music's intensity (as in "blasting" the stereo) activates alterations in the intensity of the light emitted by the "color bars" and "marks." Overall, the "caravan" is a spectacle of light and sound which produces the ritualized atmosphere by which social differentiation is accomplished. Ultimately, the use of automobile "murals," "light shows," and "placas," (bronzed name plates designating the particular group), all serve as social marking mechanisms by which one car group may instantaneously identify potential rivals. In an atmosphere where territories are delimited by social markers, as in the use of stylized graffiti and dress styles in the area of east Los Angeles, diagnostics serve as vehicles of the cultural code in the varrio (or barrio, specifically the Mexican-American neighborhood).⁴

Ultimately, what may appear from an outsider's perspective as openly hostile and abusive language and behavior is a social statement of camaraderie among carnales (comrades). Of course, inter-group rivalries and factionalism continue to plague elements of the Low Rider fraternity. Unfortunately, and quite typically, it is precisely these more idiosyncratic features that the media have chosen to sensationalize with regard to the Low Rider lifestyle. Likewise, the recent revitalization of Pachuquismo has created a deepening of the social schism which prevents the Low Rider or Chuco (pachuco) from submitting his identity to the likes of the larger social world (i.e., the Mexican-American or Anglo communities).⁵ In sum, Low Rider culture has been characterized by an increasing tendency toward

the establishment of social boundary mechanisms delimiting and distinguishing the Low Rider reality from that of the larger system.⁶

Notes

- ¹ These investigations were conducted for the purpose of obtaining data pertinent to an "urban ethnography," in partial fulfillment of requirements for an undergraduate Anthropology seminar at the California State College, Bakersfield. I would like to acknowledge the support and encouragement of Dr. George Guilemet, as well as the assistance and information provided by Joe Champion, Irene Torres, and members of the "Low Masters." Ultimately, all errors of interpretation are the sole responsibility of the author.
- ² As defined by the unabridged version of Websters Third New International Dictionary (1968:1961).
- ³ "Snatching," according to various informants, is intended to mimic the "sexual" act. Interestingly, "cruisers" attempting to attract the attention of young women on the street were observed to employ such a maneuver. Accordingly, it should be noted that the "metaphor" is contextually relevant, and may serve to intimidate other "cruisers."
- ⁴ The term "barrio" is of Precolumbian origin, and designates a ward or precinct. Commonly used to signify the Mexican-American community, especially if in a suburban context.
- ⁵ For a more extensive analysis of the "Pachuco" subculture, see George C. Barker (1950) for a contemporary account.
- ⁶ The increasing popular interest in the Low Rider phenomenon has resulted in the initiation of a monthly magazine produced and published by, and for, Low Riders. For those interested in the Low Rider "world view," the Low Rider Magazine (P.O. Box 28365, San Jose, CA 95159) provides a basis for the analysis of the material culture, linguistics, and related social behaviors.

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