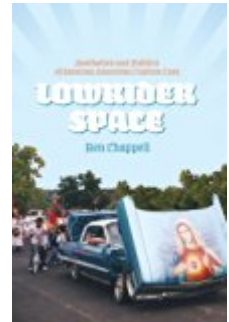


Ben Chappell. *Lowrider Space: Aesthetics and Politics of Mexican American Custom Cars*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012. xi + 239 pp. \$25.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-292-75424-9.



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Commissioned by Amy J. Johnson (Brown University)

While the topic of lowriders has been overly discussed and theorized by scholars and journalists, Ben Chappell's *Lowrider Space* penetrates this sociocultural tradition much deeper than the work of previous scholars. Chappell centralizes the voices of lowriders in his quest to understand their culture and politics. Skillfully carved into five enclaves including narrative, observation, and theory, *Lowrider Space* provides fertile ground for dialogue about intentionality, embodiment, spatiality, and performance.

Lowriding--understood as the people, the production, the act of riding, and the vehicles involved--enacts an "existence as resistance" mantra that subverts state-based aims to eradicate lowriders' place in public spaces. As Chappell aptly points out, lowriding has the ability to transform the spatial identities of the locations it enters and, in some cases, disrupts. The disruptions or entrances into various neighborhoods are noted as "counter-cartography that unmaps certain 'imagined cities' and renders others as visceral impacts on the sensorium" (p. 29). Lowrider spa-

ces become unbounded spaces that narrate the possibility of a liberating act of spatial decolonization. Thus, from the outset, Chappell defines lowriding as "a material, space-making practice" that highlights the personal and political historiography of lowriding as performance and identity (p. 3), challenging scholars to rethink how cultural theory approaches material culture, such as lowriding, from a purely representational or expressive perspective. He argues that by doing so we fundamentally limit our perspective of and ability to understand lowriding and other material forms that "people of color have developed [as] cultural vernaculars that engage the politics of their social and spatial locations" (p. 7). Thus, the ability of material objects both to affect and be affected by their environment are modes of inquiry somewhat absent from cultural theory.

This book challenges earlier scholarly works that limit lowriding as a politics of representation and reduce lowriding as either an act of ethnocultural representation or pure resistance to nonconformity. During a conversation with "Thomas of

the Kings," an Austinian lowrider, Chappell realizes that teaching a lowrider course to University of Texas at Austin students would not fully represent the totality of the lowrider experience. Lowriding, according to Thomas of the Kings, was about the production of, the performance tied to, and the political environment of lowrider culture. In essence, lowriding reveals a material embodiment between the creator and the created; "the materialized self of a customized lowrider therefore accrues a capacity to affect and to be affected ... it displays to the world, stands as the object of desire, and carries the vulnerability of a physical body" (p. 107).

While previous scholarship has largely been an academic *carte blanche*, this book is successful in weaving community perspectives into the fulcrum of the analysis. Chappell recognizes and challenges his positionality and varying privileges as an academic; a white, heterosexual cisgender man; and a non-Texas resident. Thus, he allows the reader to see the limitations of his perspective. By clarifying his position as an outsider who is observing and, to some degree, participating in lowriding communities, his scholarship and personal experience endow readers with a sense of authenticity in the author's observations.

Chappell attempts to delve deeper into the heteronormative, sexist/sexualized nature of lowriding by dedicating almost an entire chapter to historical accounts of women's roles as both producers of and actors/objects in lowriding. While he documents personal accounts of women who were leading figures in their own right, this section could have been strengthened by including difficult dialogues among male lowriders about the male gaze and objectification of women. Even though some women may "choose" to participate as models or objects of desire alongside lowriders, he concludes that car culture as a hetero-patriarchal capitalist system must be held under scrutiny by the men who dominate lowriding.

Chappell seeks to weave lowriders' personal narratives on embodiment, craft, and pride with theoreticians' focus on spatiality, cultural representation, and identity politics. At times, the reader may wonder who the author is writing for—institutional academics or lowrider community members. The coded academic/vernacular languages could get lost in translation to the opposite community. While the back and forth between the groups is at times abrupt, the intention to elevate lowrider perspectives alongside academics is rather well orchestrated. Chappell legitimizes lowrider members as theorists of their own trade and documents a cadre of vernacular subjugated knowledge that to some degree coauthors this text. Chappell's book represents a purposeful narrative that does not slight a community's voice for academic lingo but creates a rather balanced vantage point for examining lowriders.

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