**Vatos in Space: The Lowrider as Science Fiction**

Jesse Ramirez

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San José is the Capital of Silicon Valley, the home of Cisco and the semiconductor. The digital present was born, in part, in San José, and the city remains a major source of the technological innovations and ideas that will “make the future,” to invoke our theme for Worldcon 2018. But San José was also one of the birthplaces of an electronic and mechanical technology that, in my opinion, receives too little attention in the popular narratives of Silicon Valley. In this talk, I want to think about how the meanings of   
“making the future” change if we decenter the big tech industry, the office parks of Mountain View, Menlo Park, and Cupertino, and our national mythology of entrepreneurial tech geniuses, and instead imagine the future from east San Jose and the east side’s sf, the lowrider.

A lowrider is basically a car that has been modified so that, as the name implies, it rides low—lower and closer to the ground than the car’s designers intended. This was initially done on the cheap by working-class and working-poor Chicanos by installing small wheels, clamping or cutting suspension coils, or placing sand bags or bricks in the trunk of the car. Since they are so low, lowriders must be driven slowly, leisurely, luxuriously. Whereas the muscle car—the Ford Mustang, the Chevy Camaro—is a “hot” machine, a machine of aggressive speed and power, the lowrider is *cool*. You don’t race a lowriding Fleetline or Impala, you cruise while “dreaming casually,” to quote a popular lowriding song by the Chicano rock band Thee Midniters. The point is not to dash by, but to be seen, to be on display, to flaunt your inefficient slow-motion, and to take pride in the beauty and craftsmanship of your creation.

Lowriding was born on the Chicano boulevards of California, New Mexico, Arizona, and Texas. Although exact historical origins are difficult to pin down, East LA was probably the first epicenter of lowrider culture. This culture grew out of the city’s older Pachuco and zoot suit youth cultures, custom car cultures, and hot rod clubs. In the 1930s, young Angelinos began to buy used Ford Model Ts, modify them, paint them with flames, and race them on the city’s dry lake beds. While hot rodding mostly died out during World War II, custom car cultures returned and surged in the postwar period, as used cars became more affordable for young people, and Mexican American veterans came back to East LA or moved to the region from other parts of the southwest to work in the automobile industry. Many of these veterans had acquired welding and iron working skills in the military, which they used to modify cars such as the 1939 Chevy Master Deluxe, the 1948 Fleetline, and the 1950 Mercury Eight. In contrast to the jacked-up hot rods of white Angelinos, the Chicano lowrider was customized to be “low and slow,” bajito y suavecito, low and smooth, as it cruised down streets like Whittier Boulevard, which runs alongside the LA river and through predominantly Mexican-American neighborhoods.

Although the term “lowrider” wasn’t yet common, lowriders and lowriding were well established in East LA by the late 1950s, prompting the California legislature to pass a new vehicle code that in effect prohibited lowriders, which the press portrayed as gangs on wheels and as a racialized threat to white neighborhoods. According to one origin story, it was this 1959 law that led to the invention of lowriders’ most sf element, hydraulics. Ron Aguirre of San Bernardino installed hydraulics salvaged from the wings of a B-52 bomber on his 1957 Corvette, an uncommon lowrider model to which Aguirre gave the sf name “X-Sonic.” (slide 9) When he was stopped by a police officer for violating the new vehicle code, Aguirre used the hydraulics to raise the X-Sonic several inches from the ground, bewildering the cop and allowing Aguirre to escape his ticket. Hydraulics would evolve to enable lowriders not only to move up and down, but to incline, jump, and drive on three wheels. Lowriders thus fuse together two opposite techniques and impulses. They ride low and they jump. They cruise and they fly. They’re slow and cool, but they’re also playful and exuberant, not unlike the “sense of wonder” or “estrangement” that fans and scholars have often invoked when defining sf. Indeed, it’s clear from the X-Sonic’s name and design that Aguirre imagined and customized the car as a kind of sf rocket ship.

In the 1970s, east San Jose emerged as the lowriding capital of northern California. The crux of the lowriding scene was the intersection of Story and King Roads, located in the Mayfair neighborhood that is home to one of the largest Mexican American populations in the county, and where the great civil rights leader Cesar Chavez began his organizing for the United Farm Workers. In 1977 three San Jose State students founded *Lowrider* magazine. Although the magazine would achieve wide circulation only after it began to feature sexualized female models on its cover—a marketing gimmick that is admittedly symptomatic of the highly masculine and even potentially sexist tendencies of lowriding—it initially had a closer connection to the Chicano movement on the east side, on the San Jose State campus, and across California more broadly. It was perhaps only after the publication of *Lowrider* that lowriding communities in California and the southwest could experience themselves as what nationalism scholar Benedict Anderson calls “imagined community,” or a community whose perceived commonality extends beyond face-to-face encounters.

Now, from an efficiency standpoint, there is no good reason to lower a car so much that it can easily scrape the ground. It’s equally absurd, from this perspective, to make a car jump. I’ve lived and worked in Germany and Switzerland for several years now, and in the opinion of one German with whom I’ve discussed the topic, lowriders are neither cool nor playful, they’re “verrückt,” which translates as “crazy,” but also connotes backwardness, being turned around. This German man couldn’t understand why anyone would modify a car in these ways. For him, a car is a finished product. You drive it, insure it, have it fixed when something goes wrong, and otherwise maintain it, but there is no need to change its basic functionality. That’s the business of car companies and their teams of expert designers. Indeed, I think this view unfortunately extends far beyond Germans and cars: it’s perhaps the dominant way that most people in the United States—and in other consumer societies—relate to technology as such. Most of us don’t understand our tremendously complex machines, some of which even appear to outsmart us and know us better than we know ourselves. We may become expert consumers of technology, but only on rare occasions, if at all, do we participate in its *design*.

It is against this background of general technological alienation that I want to present lowriding as a form of working-class Mexican American hacking. In the words of Americo Paredes, a pioneering scholar of Mexican-American studies, to add the word *Mexican* to a noun or activity “means doing [it] with wit and ingenuity rather than with much equipment and expense.” A tortilla is a “Mexican fork”; chile peppers are “Mexican vitamins.” For working-class and working-poor Chicanos who don’t have the means or concrete opportunities for advanced technical education, lowriding is hacking *a la mexicana*, a practice that speculates on the meanings and functions of the American automobile, transforming it into a Mexican spaceship.

A technology’s science-fictionality can be understood as (1) the ways in which the technology is *represented* *in sf*, or as (2) the *embodiment of sf in actual, material technologies*. Indeed, one of sf’s most important forms of social and cultural legitimation is the narrative that directly connects the first to the second, that links science fiction to science fact, Wells to the atomic bomb, or Gibson to the internet. Sf supplies the “dreams our stuff is made of,” as Thomas Disch puts it. But the meanings of a technology aren’t settled once and for all in a finished device. The life of a technology consists in its uses and resuses, misuses and abuses, in sum, in the user’s experimentation with affordances that are latent in a technology, but cannot be foreseen by its original designers. Thus, to conceptualize sf not only in terms of literature or comics, film or TV, games or music, but also as *technical objects* like lowriders, we need to understand science-fictionality as *always already latent in forms of everyday technical action that “estranges” and jailbreaks objects from their corporate-controlled design and official uses.*

Although people today continue to modify technologies in many ways, the automobile was unique because it embodied the most advanced technology, design, and production methods, but could still be understood, modified, and even improved by common people. I say “was” because the automobile is undergoing a great transformation. The self-driving car may eventually reduce accidents and traffic congestion, but it will also extend the mysteries of corporate digital algorithms to cars. Nothing could be further from the spirit of lowriding than a car that drives itself, that resists the comprehension of most users, and that is potentially able to surveille and curtail most attempts to estrange the machine’s intended functions.

To be sure, I’m nostalgic about lowriding because of my admiration for Mexican hacking, because of my nostalgia for the heyday of the Chicano movement in the 1970s, and because of my own personal relationship to the culture. (slide 21) Here I am as a boy in my father’s 1964 Impala Super Sport, parked at our home in the Mayfair neighborhood. You may occasionally see a lowrider during Cinco de Mayo celebrations or here on Santa Clara Street on a Saturday night, but its moment has passed as surely as my childhood. Yet if this talk is nostalgic, it isn’t for a past that cannot be restored. I would like to graft whatever is salvageable from lowriding onto the future. I would like to bend nostalgia toward a future that never fully was and that remains ours to invent—a future that reflects the full history of San Jose and the diversity of sf’s interpretive communities, a future in which all people can discover a sense of wonder through their own creative uses of technology.

Thank you.