God Almighty, It’s a Good Feeling:
Lowriding as Experience

Michael C. Taylor

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Approved by:
Glenn Hinson
Kathy Roberts
Rayna Green
David Cecelski
Abstract

Michael C. Taylor: *God Almighty, It's a Good Feeling: Lowriding as Experience*
(Under the direction of Glenn Hinson, Kathy Roberts, Rayna Green, and David Cecelski)

This thesis is an address of the experiential dimensions of lowriding among the Burlington, North Carolina-based Lowyalty Car Club. In this project, the words of these lowriders are employed to argue that *feeling* is a critical component of the practice of lowriding.
This project is dedicated to the Lowyalty Car Club, without whom it would not exist.
Blessings to my son Elijah Lee, who sped the plow from the womb.
My grateful thanks and respect to Glenn Hinson, David Cecelski, Rayna Green, Kathy Roberts, and Abigail Martin for their unerring devotion and support throughout this project.
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Spring 2008: The members of the Lowyalty Car Club are gathered in the sunny parking lot of Charlie’s Transmissions in Durham, North Carolina, and feeling good. The occasion—a group photo shoot arranged by Drop Jaw Magazine to commemorate the club’s trio of recent wins at the massive Lowrider Magazine car show in Tampa, Florida—is celebratory, infused with warmth and fellowship. Big Roy and Payaso spray down their vehicles, affectionately waxing their immaculate paint and chrome to a high gloss. Brothers Ruben and Johnny sip from bottles of golden Corona, speaking easily about modifications they plan to perform on their cars, greeting new arrivals with hugs and handshakes. Cedric pulls into the lot from Avondale Drive; at the bottom of the incline leading into Charlie’s repair bay, he flips a switch and the hydraulic pumps over his front wheels thrum into action. The car rears back, greeting the group with a heavy nod. A murmur of salutation rolls through the crowd.

The ladies of Lowyalty—wives, girlfriends, sisters, and mothers—find respite from the noonday sun in shaded lawn chairs; they laugh, take pictures, bounce babies on their knees. Children chase one another across the parking lot, shouting excitedly, bobbing and weaving between glimmering Cadillacs and Lincolns. Cook smoke wafts off a large barbecue set in the shade of the garage. Leon Haywood’s 1967 hit “It’s Got To Be Mellow” bumps softly in the background. Leon’s got a light touch; he sings like he’s got a smile on his face, and the burnished recording suits the mood of the gathering.
It’s got to be mellow
It’s got to be mellow
‘Cause my baby loves me
And I’m her only fella

Crazy about my baby
Crazy about my baby
And it’s a dream to see
She’s crazy about me
Crazy about me

Charlie Gomez—father of Lowyalty members Carlos, Edgar, and Marisol, and owner of the transmission shop—tends the grill, urging those in attendance towards freshly cooked hamburgers or hot dogs flanked by small mountains of potato salad and coleslaw.

With the arrival of Drop Jaw’s photographer, the group convenes in Charlie’s back lot. The club arranges their cars with precision: hoods are popped to expose glimmering chrome engines, hydraulic switches are flipped to raise front-ends in salute or lower them to their “knees,” doors are opened wide to reveal meticulous leather and cloth interiors, Dayton wire wheels are angled to catch the fire of the descending afternoon sun. Tan work shirts with the Lowyalty club name regally embroidered in gold and brown thread are donned proudly. Family members fill in the gaps between cars; men lean against women, cradling babies in their arms, perching kids on their shoulders. Children are situated prominently, joyously.

The photographer counts down. The shutter clicks (see fig. 15).

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This was a sensuous scene, one that spoke to the lush experience of lowriding in general, and to the experiences of the Lowyalty Car Club in particular. Many weeks later
I called Carlos Gomez (see fig. 5) to talk to him about the place that lowriding occupied in his life.

It’s the feeling. It all goes from getting a fresh pair of wire wheels and tires, having that look. That first cruise, going down the street, your car’s clean, it’s dipping, listening to a good song . . . it’s just that feeling. I guess you could say it’s like a crackhead getting a hit. I don’t think there’s anything better than that. Sunny day, not a cloud in the sky, you’re just cruising to a good song. You can’t beat it. (2008b)

This invocation of experience was, by the time of this conversation, not unexpected. Indeed, many of the discussions I have had with the members of the Lowloyalty Car Club have circled around experience—feeling—as critical to the practice of lowriding. Johnny Olmos once told me a story in which Carlos, stressed by long hours spent working on his car and under pressure from his wife and children to be at home, takes Ruben Olmos’ 1985 Chevy Caprice, known among lowriders as the Sunday Driver (see figs. 6, 40-43), out for a cruise. “You wouldn’t have believed his facial expression,” Johnny remembered, reflecting on Carlos’ return. “He was like, ‘Oh my god, this is what I needed. Just the feeling of it.’ Just the feeling of it.”

I pressed Johnny to elaborate on that feeling, and he suggested, “There are times that you need to come lay back and . . . go out for a spin, just take it easy.”

“So it relaxed him?” I asked.

“Oh, it took all the stress, the pain—it took it out. No more pain,” he replied (Olmos and Olmos 2008).

Highly reflective experiential testimonials like these have underlined for me the centrality of the experience of lowriding as felt by the members of the Lowloyalty Car Club. Through the foregrounding of these experiential discussions, this thesis works to locate experience as a critical component to the practice of lowriding.
I find the clear lack of experiential discourse in the extant scholarship on lowriding puzzling, particularly in light of the fact that the most outspoken scholars of lowriding—including Brenda Jo Bright (1995, 1998), Ruben Mendoza (2000), Luis Plascencia (1983), and Ben Chappell (2002)—have performed considerable ethnographic work within lowriding communities. In this work, experiential narratives frequently fall to the background in order to foreground analyses that focus on the ways that lowriding serves as an act of protest and challenge. Yet faced with Johnny, Carlos, and other Lowyalty members’ eloquence regarding feeling and the centrality of experience to the practice of lowriding, I can’t help but feel that rich community voices—voices that offer deep insight into the cultural and personal dimensions of lowriding—have been unduly eclipsed in order to position the practice of lowriding strictly as dissent. These voices are critical; my goal is to find a way to bring them to the fore.

There is little published lowrider scholarship to guide us through these realms. This lack requires us to look further afield—towards the work of writers dealing with other material cultures and experiences—in order to locate texts that can serve as models regarding the ways that objects—in this case, *firme ranflas*—in conversation with real life give rise to experiences that participants describe as almost spiritual. The problem is one of conveyance: how do we talk about these experiences, and where do we locate them in our texts?

Experiential testimony (as I have conceived it through many formal and informal interviews with Lowyalty Car Club members) includes not only talk about lowriding per se, but also talk about life that uses the motif of automobiles (both modified and stock) as
narrative anchors to highlight particular memories and emotions. In this work, I offer a model in which lowrider voices are central to the text, rather than hidden. These voices address experience in different ways, and are unpacked on different levels. This is a tricky realm; discussions of experience have historically caused academic retreat towards less subjective territory. Yet in order to deal fairly with lowriding, to represent it honestly, we must address experience. I hope my work answers David Hufford’s call to provide the “raw material” of “experience-centered” consultant voices (1982: xvii). This material is words, and through these prisms of words, emotions, ideas, and feelings. This type of testimony simply does not exist in current lowrider scholarship.

This thesis draws on interviews that I have conducted with Lowloyalty club members, many of whom discuss the experience of lowriding. I position these words centrally within my text in order to more fully uncover the types of experience to which riding low gives rise; when further theoretical unpacking has been needed, I have called on the expertise of the local lowriding community for interpretive help, as well as on that of scholars whose work addresses the complexities of experience. Moreover, through the use of detail-rich vignettes, I present my interactions as ethnographer and friend within the community; this writing, hopefully, serves to convey some of the nuances and thick description that lowriding entails. I don’t propose to easily resolve how lowriding translates as experience; I do hope this work addresses and celebrates the elusive, multifaceted joys of lowriding.

Lowriding: A Brief History

The term “lowrider” refers to elaborately customized cars lowered to near ground-scraping levels, and to those who build and drive them. Although the tradition of
lowriding emerged in the Southwest (a region known as *Aztlan* among lowriders) and West Coast, lowriding has long been a vibrant part of southern car culture.

Lowriding traces its roots to California in the late 1930s, where the work of master customizers signaled the rise of an automobile culture that foregrounded a highly personalized approach to owning and driving a car. Following the end of World War II, as Los Angeles resumed its position as an epicenter of automobile manufacturing, America’s burgeoning car cultures began to commingle with the Mexican American Pachuco movement. Together, they produced the first glimmering of the “low and slow, mean and clean” aesthetic that glorified vehicles that lay low and cruised slow, qualities that stood in marked contrast to the aggressive hotrod culture that was developing at the same time. Throughout the 1950s, ‘60s, and ‘70s, lowriding continued to evolve, and the criteria for what constituted *firme ranflas*—fine lowriders—began to crystallize. During this period, many lowriders began to form car clubs that gathered to exchange ideas, cruise, and enter car shows. (Gradante 1982; Stone 1990; Mendoza 2000; Sandoval 2003)

All lowriders must lay low, with the baddest rides no more than an inch or two above the ground. Intricate paint jobs—often rendered in hypnotic, rococo patterns, or depicting an epic Aztlan fantasy—adorn the most celebrated cars. These murals are frequently offset by elaborate chrome accents (particularly on the engine, suspension, grill, and door handles) that highlight the vehicle’s contours. Many lowriders also boast hydraulic suspensions, which allow drivers to raise or lower the car with the flip of a switch. Most dedicated lowriders also pay serious attention to their cars’ interiors and trunks, fastidiously upholstering them in leather, tweed, or velvet, and fitting them out
with elaborate steering wheels, stereo systems, and laser-cut plaques bearing the name of their car club. Lowriders choose their vehicles with a critical eye towards classic lines and designs; Chevy Impalas, Caprices, and Bel Airs; Lincoln Town Cars; and Cadillac Fleetwoods are all favored in lowriding circles.

The Lowloyalty Car Club was founded in 2003 by Ruben Olmos (see fig. 1), a Mexican American native of Burlington, North Carolina. Growing up in a family whose men were all skilled mechanics, Ruben learned to work on cars at an early age through an informal apprenticeship with his father and brothers. Following a move to Day City, Florida, Ruben discovered lowrider culture. His wife Suellen recalls, “He was into cars, [but] at the time I didn’t know about lowriders. His first car . . . he had to start it with a screwdriver; it was so hilarious. I knew he was into cars, [but] I didn’t know what was going to go on” (2008).

Upon his return to Alamance County, Ruben learned to lower his car—a Chevy Malibu given to him by his mother—by cutting the suspension springs; he worked long hours for meager wages, turning the entirety of his paycheck over to the body shop each week as payment on a new paint job. Once in possession of a bona fide lowrider, Ruben sought to associate with other practitioners of the art; this led him to join the North Carolina chapter of Techniques, a 36-year-old club established in Southern California. Although struck by the club’s attention to detail, Ruben was ultimately deterred by the two-and-a-half half hour drive to the club meetings in Fayetteville, and soon partnered with another former member of Techniques to create the Sanford-based Lowriding Times. However, his desire to establish a local identity and binding local ties soon led him to move away from that organization as well. “The club was known for that city,”
Ruben explains, “and I didn’t like that. If I’m cruising over there, I’m not helping my city.”

Following the dissolution of Lowriding Times, Ruben decided to establish his own club in his hometown of Burlington. “I heard in that old movie, ‘If you build it, they will come,’” he remembers. “I had a ’67 convertible Impala, and I started hanging around at the car washes, restaurants, and taco stands, and people were coming and asking questions” (2008a). Over the next several months, Ruben attracted a core group of lowriders, and established the informal headquarters of the club in his own town.

Through a democratic balloting process, the name “Lowyalty” was chosen for its nod towards the concept of loyalty, a core value within the group. The club, under Ruben’s leadership, places a premium on respect, loyalty, family, community, and hard work, and demands a dedication to the art of lowriding from its members.

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My own association with Lowyalty began in February of 2008. As a California native, and someone who spent the ten years prior to my move to North Carolina in the Bay Area (arguably one of the epicenters of lowriding), I was interested in whether or not the practice of lowriding existed in the Southeast. Moreover, with North Carolina boasting one of the largest growing Latino populations in the country, I was curious about the cultural traditions that these newcomers carried with them. Some online searching eventually led me to Lowyalty. When I contacted Ruben, he immediately grilled me on my political position regarding immigration. North Carolina’s rapidly growing Latino populations have recently experienced a nativist backlash that has given

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1 Throughout this project, all Olmos citations—unless otherwise attributed—belong to Ruben. Furthermore, many of my core consultants—including Ruben Olmos, Carlos Gomez, and Jessie Davis—are referred to throughout the text by first names only; these citations should be read accordingly.
rise to ICE factory raids, threats on pro-immigration advocates, and the establishment of sanctioned hate groups such as the Raleigh-based Americans for Legal Immigration.²

Once I had convinced Ruben of my decent intentions, he invited me to a Lowloyalty meeting, and I soon began to follow the club to various car shows and other lowrider-related events. While the club has experienced many changes since I first met them, I have come to consider Ruben, Carlos, Johnny, and many other Lowloyalty members my friends. It has become my duty to do right in my work with and about them.

**Literature Review**

I. *Lowrider Scholarship*

Although current academic work on lowriding mutes lowriding experiential testimony, it has much to offer in its analyses of lowriding as protest/challenge, performance, identity, and spatial production. One of the foremost scholars of lowriding is Brenda Jo Bright, whose work addresses the ways that “people experience and create mass-produced culture as a form of local culture” (1998: 584). Examining the local culture of Espanola, New Mexico, vis-a-vis mass culture, she interrogates the manner in which local culture is “constructed in the presence of mass-produced and mass–circulated commodities” (1998: 585).

Whereas some of Bright’s work maintains a tenuous connection to experience by virtue of the fact that it explores the ways lowriders in northern New Mexico construct community, in other writing she retreats entirely from these realms. (1995, 1998) In these analyses, she examines the ways in which Hollywood film imagery is incorporated into

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² According to a recent study conducted by the Pew Hispanic Center, North Carolina’s Latino populations increased by 394% between the years of 1990 and 2000. ICE is shorthand for Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Americans for Legal Immigration is also known as AKI-PAC. (Kochar, Suro, and Tafoya 2005)
lowrider iconography, in the process creating emergent new meanings and identities; and how “low rider car culture has created an alternate cultural space for performance, participation and interpretation.” Bright explains that “the presence of such a cultural alternative allows for the reworking of the limitations of mobility placed on racialized cultures in the United States, especially in a city such as Los Angeles with a legacy of surveillance and conflicts between racial minorities and the police” (1995:91).

Using lowriding as a lens to examine a variety of Latino experiences and cultural negotiations, Bright develops critical theories that speak to the creation and maintenance of identity and community, as well as to the process of dialogic messaging via modified vehicles. She examines the methods by which mass culture becomes local culture (and vice versa), and the ways in which lowriding has the potential to chip away at the literal and figurative walls of alterity and mobility. While Bright’s work offers theoretical insight into a host of conditions present in the lowrider lifestyle, she offers little in the way of consultant explication.

Ruben Mendoza’s “Cruising Art and Culture in Aztlan” (2000) offers valuable commentary on the construction, function, and representation of lowrider car clubs and shows, arguing that they adhere to the community-aid models of early Mexican American mutualistas and perpetuate traditions of pachuquismo that arose in Mexican American barrios prior to the Second World War. His descriptions of lowriders and hydraulic suspension systems serve as valuable primers on the subjects.

Offering an overview on the history and cultural implications of lowriding, Denise Sandoval (2003) positions the practice of lowriding as a traditional construction of identity and community, a political aesthetic, a means of literal and figurative border
crossing, and a method of commentary and advocacy. Sandoval seems to recognize the centrality of experience—flow, as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi might call it—amongst lowriders, and addresses it (albeit fleetingly) throughout her work in ways that Bright and Mendoza do not. As Julio Ruelas, a member of the seminal Los Angeles-based Dukes Car Club remarks, “A true lowrider comes from one’s heart.”

Sandoval appears to wrestle with this feel-based knowledge throughout her writing, and in so doing seems to ask: How do we write experience? Does experience exist to be fitted into a theoretical framework?

Ben Chappell (2002) is primarily concerned with the ways that lowriders are involved in the production of space, and how this activity “relates to the ongoing emergence of social relations as manifested in encounters between material bodies moving in and through physical sites” (2002: 2). Drawing on the work of Henri Lefebvre and Walter Benjamin, Chappell argues for the recognition of emergent social spaces that rise out of the negotiations between ideological power bases (i.e. the ‘elite,’ architecture, public policy, the real estate industry, and other ‘top down’ institutions) and those who inhabit them (i.e. lowriders, Latino and other minority communities) as representative of “contrasting possibilities that are perpetually at stake in social interaction” (2002: 4). It’s these possibilities, these opportunities for the creation, “rupture,” or “reinscription” of space, that drive Chappell’s work.

Chappell is well aware of the need for, and the difficulty in, addressing the experience of lowriding. His work seems to make clear—through his insertion of descriptive passages that attempt to convey the richness and subtlety of lowriding—that to talk about lowriding is to talk about experience and feeling. Yet his reliance on heavy
theory, and his dismantling of the practice of lowriding in linguistic terms, successfully skirts elusive experiential issues.

II. Experiential Scholarship

David Hufford’s work with folk belief (1982) offers a path towards positioning experience centrally within our texts. While Hufford recognizes the ways in which the narration of experience—understood in his work as second-order recounting—is the writing of experience (as opposed to actual experience) and thus subject to ‘errors’ of “faulty memories; the creative processes of oral tradition; [and] the very processes of perception, which are generally recognized to be influenced by expectation,” he understands these narratives as primary texts, insofar as they deliver experiential testimony directly from the experiencer’s mouth (1982: x). Moreover, Hufford argues that deep ethnographic research yields contextual clues that can serve to flesh out understandings about the place of experience within tradition. “Extensive work,” he remarks, “is first required to arrive at a thorough description of both the beliefs and the associated experiences” (1982: xiv).

While Hufford is concerned with the ways in which different systems of belief rationalize, explain, or dismiss experience, I’m interested in the manner in which experiential narratives—narratives that few listeners or readers would doubt as real—are situated in talk about lowriding. In a sense, I’m arguing to roll back my own theoretical voice—as Hufford does—to make way for those of my consultants and collaborators.

While Hufford approaches experience through narratives, Henry Glassie (1995) uses objects as a way towards understanding experience; his examination of the things that comprise Ballymenone gives rise to a “cultural picture” of this small community in
Northern Ireland (1995:376). Glassie is not interested in the study of disassociated objects, but rather in the ways people duet with them; he perceives and understands objects within context in order to “draw spirit from materials” (1995: 326).

Objects, multitudinous things, in communion with their users become a means towards understanding the experience of life and community. In Glassie’s study, these materials include turf and bog, hay pecks and hearth walls, delphware and thatch roofs and green fields; in my own, they are Chevy Impalas and Caprices and Lincoln Town Cars, Dayton wire wheels, hydraulic pumps, glimmering club plaques, and dizzying paint jobs. The objects are different, but the methodology is the same; experience is evoked through material culture. Remarking on the capability of objects, situated in context and memory, to convey deep experiential meaning, Glassie explains, “If ornaments themselves sometimes seem trivial, triviality is lost in the associations they contain” (1995:369). These associations—meanings and understandings and ideas—are a culmination of experiences.

Glassie’s work in Ballymenone is useful for the ways that it posits material culture as memory, aura, and mechanism for developing, curating, and expressing personal and community principles and aesthetics. In his writing, things become statements on use and art and the intersections of the two, and a demonstration of economies (gifting and otherwise) in which creative recycling and reuse are foregrounded. Objects are valuable insofar as they speak to us about life. Glassie’s writing offers a model that holds the representation of experience as the folklorist’s central duty. Understanding this, the differences between materials—his, for example,
and my own—begin to matter less; the relation of people to the things they own and they ways they talk about them are important, and frequently similar across cultural divides.

Just as Glassie sees the whitewashed homes of Ballymenone as “wondrous revelations of their creators’ minds,” I stand in awe of the lowriders built and driven by Carlos Gomez, Ruben Olmos, and other members of the Lowyalty Car Club (1995:372). This awe rises, I think, not from the cars themselves—although these vehicles truly are inspiring works of art—but rather from the ways that the cars speak about and for their owners’ experiences as men, husbands and fathers, members of minority communities, and obsessed car enthusiasts, and, in turn, the ways that these lowriders frame their discussions about experience with talk about cars. These cars, “discussed as alive,” provide commentary on agency, family, identity (1995:342). They are “their way of goin’ on” (1995:325).

Douglas Harper’s Working Knowledge (1987) answers David Hufford’s call for an experience-centered approach with a deeply collaborative ethnographic study of a mechanic and jack-of-all-trades named Willie. Like the work of Henry Glassie, Harper calls on a wide variety of methods—including extensive interviews, writerly vignettes, and photo elicitation—to address “the old problem of translating human experience into words” (1987:148). His stated mission is to address Willie’s work and life, his experiences and knowledge, in the same spirit that “Willie has explained to me”; this task is one that requires Harper to be present throughout, as it is only through his long term engagement that the reader begins to perceive the nuances and subtleties of Willie’s life and work (1987:14). Harper is forthcoming about the ethical dilemmas that the ethnographer is confronted with in selectively representing those with whom he or she is
working; it is the acknowledgement of these dilemmas, in a sense, that shape the book’s ultimate presentation and arrangement.

While there is much to be gained from Harper’s work, particularly in his invocation of Claude Levi-Strauss’s conception of the *bricoleur*, his discussion of the informal trade networks and economies that develop around specialized knowledge, his address of kinesthetic sense or “mechanic’s feel”, his Csikszentmihalyi-esque discourse on the fusion of work and time into a “steady flow,” and the traditional means by which Willie has developed his knowledge, I find Harper’s foregrounding of Willie’s words and his impressionistic passages that revolve around his experiences with Willie most valuable (1987:118, 126, 120). Fully half of *Working Knowledge* is given over to transcribed interviews between Harper and Willie; while the hasty (or strict academic) reader might wonder at the discursive nature of these sections, I find them invaluable in the ways they reveal Willie’s deep, nuanced expertise and experiential involvement with his craft. Moreover, Harper’s vignettes serve to locate him sensitively within his text; some scholars might object to ethnographic materials that “work as short stories,” but I feel that they convey Harper’s own experiences as ethnographer, budding mechanic, young father, and friend to Willie (1987:13). It’s important to remember that all ethnographies are, in a sense, a writing of culture; that is, materials, decontextualized from everyday life, are ordered on the page in such a way as to convey messages or meanings not originally intended. The best ethnographic work, then, deals with its materials in a spirit of fairness, openness, kindness, and generosity. Harper’s work succeeds on all of these levels, and offers valuable guidance in terms of how to effectively present experience.
Questions about experience are also fundamental to Kathy Neustadt’s *Clambake* (1992). “The western intellectual tradition that dichotomizes body and mind,” she argues, “has made dealing with the sensual world—particularly the sensual world of others—especially problematic for scholars, and they have largely tended to avoid it. In my own struggle to make sense of the clambake, I have found myself increasingly compelled to seek answers in the physical rather than the intellectual realm, as I have been powerfully drawn toward the *experience* of clam juice rather than its image or metaphoric reflection” (1992:135). This press towards experience through the positioning of her consultants’ words centrally throughout her text allows Neustadt to successfully toggle between these testimonies and theoretical discourse in a way that celebrates experience as something the community *knows as real*. Arguing in favor of this methodology, she explains, “The particulars of the Allen’s Neck Clambake—and the perspective of its participants—are too important to be permitted to drown in (or be totally excluded through) a preponderance of multisyllabic, ‘multivocal,’ and ‘polysemic’ jargon. . . . Although still nascent and rough, my own quasi-theoretical take on ethnographic truth is unequivocally body-oriented” (1992:135).

This is not to suggest that Neustadt doesn’t engage theoretically with her fieldwork; large sections *Clambake* are dedicated to the identity-making qualities of clambaking and the manner by which tradition changes, stays the same, and works as a method of metonymy, memory, and continuity within community. However, there is a methodological equity apparent in her work that offers raw experience—tempo and mood, the transport of psyche that creates its “own sense of flow”—as something as potentially *deep* as high theoretics (1992:185). Experience as something by which we
build meaning—whether through elaborate clambakes or tricked out cars—is a universal situation. Understood thus, it becomes a critical, unavoidable object of study.

III. Further Notes on Relevant Scholarship

Although the above-mentioned works serve as major touchstones in my analysis, a few other pieces bear mention. Foremost among these is Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s *Flow* (1990), which offers an important exploration of “optimal experience.” Flow, as his shorthand for this type of experience, “is the way people describe their state of mind when consciousness is harmoniously ordered, and they want to pursue whatever they are doing for its own sake” (1990:6). This type of experience marks the relationship that many members of Lowyalty have with their cars and the practice of lowriding.

The Smithsonian’s virtual exhibit on lowriding also offers a unique take on the low and slow tradition and aesthetic. In particular, Levi Romero’s ethnopoetic accounts of lowriding evocatively wind their ways into realms of nostalgia, experience, and memory, suggesting manners in which the experience of lowriding can be employed to look at much broader life issues.

Finally, Glenn Hinson’s *Fire in My Bones* (2000) and David Cecelski’s “Listening to History” (1998-2008) columns for the *Raleigh News & Observer* propose ways in which the words of our consultants might be foregrounded within our texts.

Methodology

*God Almighty, It’s a Good Feeling* is an ethnographic project that is both collaborative and reciprocal in nature. Thus, the bulk of my work deals with interviews conducted among the Lowyalty family over the course of the past year. Locating portions of interviews that I feel are germane to my topic has given rise to deeper questions about
experience that I have re-presented back to club members; these interview portions materialize in my work as conversations between myself and the members of the Lowalty Car Club regarding various types of lowrider feeling. These conversations form the basis of this project.

Portions of this thesis are dedicated to short vignettes that work to convey details not captured in the other chapters. These sections, which are written in such a way as to deliver rich nuance, are framed by the experiences of both Lowalty members and myself. I hope they will reveal some of the shortcomings and strengths inherent in this type of ethnographic work.

In 2005, John Updike wrote, “I seem most instinctively to believe in the human value of creative writing, whether in the form of verse or fiction, as a mode of truth-telling, self-expression and homage to the twin miracles of creation and consciousness.” I believe that Updike’s theory—understood broadly as the creative use of language to represent culture and emotion—can just as easily be applied to the truth-telling mission of ethnographic writing. In a recent discussion with lowriding scholar Ben Chappell, he commented on his increasing use of the vignette to convey experience, explaining,

A project like this is always going to be problematic and that’s part of the work, to deal with that problematic. One of its values is the way it exposes the limitations of what has counted as knowledge. The form that my dissertation took is almost like a montage; I wrote these scenes about specific events that happened. It’s not a just general description. It’s much more telling stories, then making a clean break and discussing these episodes. (2009)

Any project of this nature raises a host of ethical questions: how do we honor the words of our consultants and collaborators? What is the truth and how do we tell it? How do we account for the selectivity—the ‘writing’ of culture—that is inevitably a part of the arrangement of any ethnographic project? These questions have been on my mind
throughout the course of this project. I have made every attempt to honor the spirit of collaboration throughout my writing, presenting Lowyalty with my work as I have produced it in order to continually affirm that I am getting their stories right.

A Note on Arrangement

The goal of this thesis is to propose feeling as critical to the practice of lowriding. Throughout, I argue that many types of feelings are evoked through the building or driving of a lowrider, including nostalgia, pride, flow, and peace. These sensations are not mutually exclusive, and in communion they work to place the lowrider in an introspective mindstate that imbues the practice with deep emotion and sensation. Extant academic treatments frequently overlook or misinterpret this world of experience.

I have inserted writerly vignettes throughout this project that portray some of the members of the Lowyalty Car Club in fuller detail. Although I take certain narrative liberties in the vignettes in hopes of more fully plumbing the depths of lowrider feel, the words belong to the members of the Lowyalty Car Club, and I have attempted to treat them with respect.

These vignettes—and indeed, the whole of this thesis—are relatively free-ranging; they make no attempt to present an authoritative account of lowriding. Rather, I offer this work as one in progress; God Almighty, It’s a Good Feeling places me in conversation with the Lowyalty Car Club as we attempt, together, to figure out what feeling is, and how it relates to the practice of lowriding.

Each of the three main chapters in this thesis focuses on a specific emotion effected by the practice of building or driving a lowrider. These emotions are not
mutually exclusive; however, this parsing has enabled the analysis at the heart of this work.

The second chapter, “On Memory,” discusses the ways that lowriders—and cars in general—become vehicles for memory among those who ride low; these cars become symbolic reminders of the past, loaded with powerful sensory information. I believe my real work with Lowyalty began when we together realized that we all infuse objects with memory to instill them with meaning.3

The third chapter, “Peace and Devotion,” applies psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s theory of flow to lowriding, positioning the practice as one capable of transporting the most involved lowrider into an alternate, fully engaged reality. This chapter also unpacks the lowriding-as-pain-relief metaphor, suggesting that riding low has the potential to bring relief and respite. Finally, it discusses (albeit briefly) the various gradations of lowrider spirit.

The fourth chapter, “On Pride,” examines the ways that building and driving a clean car gives rise to pride, and addresses the complex, historically-rooted lowrider aesthetic, exploring the intimate connection between the way that lowriding feels and the way that a car looks.

The writerly vignettes that appear throughout this work discuss various members of the car club, as well as other aspects of lowriding that seemed to fall outside the purview of the chapters. The first, “On Jessie,” depicts Lowyalty member Jessie Davis’s relationship to lowriding, and also addresses the concept of vehicular lines. The second, “To Semora,” describes a trip I took with Lowyalty president Ruben Olmos to visit his

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3 While I don’t address the question of why cars are the memory-objects of choice among lowriders, I am aware that it is an important line of inquiry.
parents in Caswell County, North Carolina. Much of this section is dedicated to a conversation that we recorded in the living room of their trailer; I have included it because it conveys important life details about the Olmos family that escape other portions of this thesis. While this section is not about lowriding per se, it does address mobility and relationships, two aspects that are vital to the practice of riding low. The third vignette, “O Me,” is a final meditation on the ways that we surround ourselves with things in order to spur emotion.

The thesis concludes with “And So,” a short reflection on the process of examining feeling with the members of the Lowyalty Car Club.
Chapter Two: On Memory

Sing me back home with a song I used to hear
Make my old memories come alive
Take me away and turn back the years
Sing me back home before I die
—Merle Haggard

Again I drove highway 54 from my home in a Chapel Hill hollow to Burlington, North Carolina. Burlington is where Ruben Olmos lives with his family, where he builds his lowriders and conducts his business as the president of the Lowyalty Car Club. There are faster ways to get to Burlington but none so scenic. The weather was sharp and bright. I felt shaggy and my chest hurt. Past Carrboro, 54 becomes a two-lane road that rises and falls through expansive country stretching dry and desiccated under late January’s boot. I enjoy this drive. I was on my way to a club meeting.

I have a rich interior life. I connect sound and vision with memory and spin off inside myself. But then we all do this. I do it especially when I drive. Things are never just things, never static; they are methods towards memory. Memory is tinted in many ways (mine inclines towards nostalgic ache, melancholia, slapstick) and is capricious, deceitful, unreliable. But it is also wondrous, the way that it makes meaning, creates feeling, out of the cold and hard and fixed. At least I think so. Perhaps the mind’s proclivity for selectively rewriting history according to hidden desire is cause for concern, deserving of the quotes with which James Agee surrounds the phrase “honest
journalism” (1939: 5). Perhaps there is no such thing. Yet still, I’m mainly interested in this type of truthmaking.

A small example: with a bit of concentration, highway 54 offers many roads of mental travel, many ontological byways, many histories that are specific to my head. Here I pass the White Cross section of Orange County where June Sparrow once procured a jug of white lightning strong and pure enough to lay down a horse. There stands the ramshackle house that my wife and I nearly rented, sight-unseen, before being warned off it by an acquaintance, now a close friend; too close to the highway, he said, too dilapidated.

Through a torn stereo speaker, Little Joe sings “Ain’t No Big Thing” with his Latinaires, and this also works powerful spells.

Ain’t no big thing
Ain’t no big thing
Ain’t no big thing
Ain’t no big thing

Oh I’ve got a feeling
And I am losing you
But what’s the use, why worry
When there’s nothing I can do?

Though I was only recently introduced to the tune, it seems as though Little Joe may have written it for me. This is intriguing, the way we quickly build interior scaffolding to support new sensory experience, the way we fit even the most recent stimuli into deep memory. The group sings close together in a way that is heartbreaking and thick with innocence and some small grief, reminding me of that singular brand of sunlight that fell on the shore of Corona Del Mar—known colloquially as Mom’s Beach in honor of the Southern California matriarchs that packed their broods to the seaside for a day of sand,
surf, and sun—in July of 1982. Might I have heard this song, or one similar to it, when I
was a child? The Latinaires’ harmonic voicings map my childhood.

“Ain’t No Big Thing” also sings about my decade spent knocking around San
Francisco’s Mission District. It evokes the oldies that pulsed from old cars cruising
Mission, Harrison, Bryant—my boulevards, the streets of my neighborhood. These
golden twinklings of sound, often just a word or a line or a harmonized chorus heard
clearly, in communion with the jingling brass bells of the paleta vendors, the righteous
throb of Los Tigres Del Norte rattling from the jukebox of a corner taqueria, the soaring
mariachi airs that accompany the recently deceased from the steps of St. Peter’s to the
great beyond—these vibrations soundtracked my late youth, my time spent working and
playing and wasting time in The City. My body is gone from that place, but Little Joe can
sing my spirit back home. This is no new thing—Merle Haggard had a hit with the
concept in 1968—but it’s a wondrous event nevertheless.

Up ahead, a hand-painted shingle swings in the stiff breeze, advertising small
engine repair. Beyond lie the fields where bulls and heifers are fattened, and further on, a
herd of llamas sun themselves behind a split rail fence. Crossing the Alamance County
line, I pass the turnoff that leads to the bucolic mill village of Saxapahaw, and soon cross
the muddy Haw River. On my left stands the Southwick public golf course, grey and
abandoned on this winter afternoon. Here the TV repair shop, the wig and hair outlet, the
cold green fishponds; I’m cruising Burlington’s outer limits. A man walks the shoulder
towards town center, carrying a case of Natural Ice. Eventually, if he continues marching,
he will pass Children’s Chapel, the pointed brick church where Pastor Rodney Foxx tends
his flock.
Burlington materializes ahead, a former Piedmont textile town that sags like a middle-aged boxer struggling to gain traction after several rounds on the ropes; and yet another Burlington rises through the windshield, a booming hub of North Carolina’s growing Latino populations. It all depends on who you are. For those who live here, Burlington is home, with all the meanings their memories entail.

From my former home in California, I envisioned these things, or some version of them. P. M. H. Atwater might call this actualization of anticipatory emotions and images future memory (1999: 32). Through this process, present vision conforms to past anticipation, reconfiguring the psyche so as to fit object with expectation, creating memory and history from fantasy. I experience this as I drive, as I write, as I plant my garden and water it and finally eat what grows; the members of Lowyalty experience it as they buy their cars, build them, drive them, hop them. We hope and dream and finally realize, experience, feel. Desire produces premonition; premonition is actualized in present reality, becoming part of the fabric of the now, stoking dialogue with past and future.

Past memory, present memory, future memory.

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It’s important for me to offer this circuitous treatise, as memory and feeling is the webbing that has most effectively drawn me into accord with the members of the Lowyalty Car Club. On the surface it might seem an odd coupling, my association with this predominantly Latino and African American group of lowrider car enthusiasts. I know nothing about cars, and they seem somewhat entertained by my rickety musings on
the practice of lowriding. But come discussions about feeling, memory begins to flow, and we enter shared territory and huddle together. This is how we became friends.

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“. . . nostalgia gleams with the dull brilliance of a chrome airplane on the rusted hood of a ’56 Chevy

daydreams of walking barefoot on the soft grass down by the river
where dragonflies buzzed all day have now decayed
like the fallen cottonwoods along the gnarled paths of the Rio Embudo

where free-form poetry mixed with cheap beer on warm nights by the riverbanks

and stories of lowered ’49 Fleetlines with flamejobs and spinners were cast into the dark wind . . .” (2008: 71)
—Levi Romero

Feeling is inseparable from memory, rising as it does from deep consciousness. By asking after feeling, I am invoking a conversation that circles, at least in part, around memory. Through discussions about feeling and memory, my association with Lowyalty becomes less stilted, more fluid; our lives intersect at these places. I can understand the nostalgia evoked by objects, even if I don’t know the technology of installing valve dumps in the trunk of a ‘63 Impala.

Memory and feeling is also the way that the members of Lowyalty—Ruben, Johnny, Rocky, Jessie, and many others—become theoreticians of the highest order. They, too, understand that their practice of lowriding has much to do with their own
deep-rooted memories. I recently asked Carlos Gomez about his relationship to lowriding; in response, he recited this ode.

So I was about 15 or 16 and a friend of mine told me of this car. It was a '64 Impala out in a junkyard. I said, "What?" He said, "It's candy green, man, white interior. It's nice." I said, "Well take me out there!" So I went out there. And the car was . . . beautiful. It was bad. Somebody had taken the car and abused it a little bit, but it was still a good-looking car. The quarter panels had buckled. At the time I didn't know much, but the car was still—I mean, new interior, top. The car was nice. It even had original Daytons on there. . . .

So I got with the guy and I think he wanted $3500 for it. At the time I had dropped out of school and was working at this restaurant downtown. It was a pretty nice restaurant, and I was making money. So, shit, I went out there—boom. It's $3500. Drove the car home, almost crashed. I mean, I was shaking driving home. I didn't know what to do with myself. I drove it with no tags from Creedmoor out in the country somewhere back to the shop. . . .

And I always told my brother—and this is another thing that I remember a lot—I always told my little brother, I said, "If I ever get a car, I want you to drive with me." You know, me and my brother have never really been real close but man, I love the dude to death. I always told him, I said, "If I ever get a car like this, I want you to ride with me." And when I picked him up, I took him with me, and we drove it back. It was scary because the back end was broke so the car kind of fishtailed the whole way. It was scary as shit. But you can imagine, dude, a 16 year-old kid, I have my little brother at my side. At the time you feel like you made it, like there's nothing else—I mean, you could have slapped the shit out of me, I would have been like, "Thank you." That's how happy I was. It wouldn't have mattered. It was good. It was real good. I mean, that place is back in my mind a lot. (2009a)

In three deep breaths, Carlos traverses fifteen years of memorialized emotion; using the beauty of the Impala as a springboard, he spins off into realms of feeling in which fear, ecstasy, and the joy and indestructibility of youth commingle with meditations on familial ambivalence, fraternal love, and the transition from boyhood to manhood. To talk with Carlos about feeling, then, is to talk to him about memory, history. The Impala is, literally and figuratively, the vehicle in which we travel.

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Similarly, when I was talking recently to Lowyalty president Ruben Olmos about his involvement with the practice of lowriding, the conversation turned almost immediately towards memory. To talk with Ruben about lowriding is inevitably to talk about cars writ large, and to talk about cars is to talk about his father, Ruben Sr. During our discussion, the elder Ruben’s 1966 Mustang was the recurrent motif, the polestar around which our talk orbited. Recounting the place the Mustang inhabited in the life of the Olmos family, Ruben explained, “Well, growing up, my Dad had a ’66 Mustang. . . . That was his pride and joy.” He moved quickly from this surface address towards a much deeper—and harrowing—memory of his family’s life in relation to the Mustang.

We were in Georgia and my Dad finally wanted to get it painted. I think I was five years old, six years old. So he took it to the body shop. Well, the body shop messed it up. They painted it yellow, painted the windows, painted the chrome, painted the tires. And on one side they put a black pattern on it. And my Dad was so hot that he called the police. And I remember that night [the body shop owners] came and hit my Dad. My Dad opened the door and they hit him over the head with the shotgun. Because he told the police. And remember, this was in Georgia around the ‘80s, so you know how racial it was. I remember he was knocked out. My Mom took me and my two brothers out of there. . . .

And after that my Dad went to the police again and they told him it looked like they weren’t going to do anything about it. So we moved to North Carolina, and I remember seeing my Dad scraping the paint off the chrome, the windows, and just cleaning the car and scraping the paint off the car and just primering the whole car back to primer. (2009a)

Framed thus, Ruben’s own work on cars—his own scraping and primering and painting—becomes heavy with feeling. A process that might on the surface seem unremarkable becomes an act of remembrance, a historical enactment. Ruben later returned to the topic of his father’s Mustang, recalling,

I got memories. I got memories of a pig being back there. I got memories of sleeping. I still got memories of the back seat folding down, me and my brother laying there, looking at the stars. And saying, “Why the hell is that moon following us?” We’re
like, looking at it, closing our eyes, like, “Why is that moon following us?” I still got those memories right there. And I got those memories when my Dad got jumped, when it was painted. (2009a)

The Mustang’s role as a container of childhood memories and a catalyst of awakening consciousness—here’s where we traveled with our pig, here’s where we raced with the man in the moon, here’s where our father was attacked—believes its status as a high-value sports cars; sensation eclipses cost.

Ruben’s father eventually sold the body of the Mustang to relatives in Mexico after installing the engine in a more family-friendly 1977 Ford truck (see fig. 3). As with the Mustang, Ruben has significant memories of that blue truck, a vehicle that his father still drives regularly.

We got stories about that truck. My Dad didn’t believe in stopping at rest areas. So we decided to pee out of the back of the truck! Five boys, and my Mom in the front with the baby. Imagine going to Mexico in the wintertime with the truck, no heater back there. So we made a fire! (2009a)

If I talk with Ruben about lowriding for any length of time, these two vehicles—the Mustang and the blue Ford truck—are bound to come up. This recurrent remembrance and consideration is one way that he places himself in the world. And just as the cars served as bounded vessels that held a variety of childhood experiences, his memories of them situate him as son, father, mechanic, and lowrider.

Lowriding is about a personal relationship with a car; this relationship is often defined and nurtured through witnessing the ways that other automotively-inclined individuals—family members and friends—interact with their vehicles. Ruben’s father’s Mustang and blue Ford truck shaped his own relationship with his lowrider in very specific ways; whatever expertise he has gained since devoting himself to the practice of lowriding as a teenager, these particular vehicles taught Ruben early on that is was
possible for cold steel to become flesh and blood. Some learn this particular lesson; others do not. It bears mentioning that Ruben’s father sold the engine-less Mustang body across the border for $500. Ruben recently offered its owner $5000 for it. “I want that sucker,” he chuckled (2009a). I believe he will get it.

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Another frequent subject of conversation with Ruben is Juan, a close friend from Tampa, Florida, whom he credits with introducing him to the practice of lowriding, and whose family took Ruben in during his tumultuous teenage years. Ruben is currently in the process of restoring Juan’s 1969 Chevy Bel Air as a memorial to his friend, who was killed in a car wreck in 2004. Ruben’s earliest memories of lowriding involve Juan. Recounting his first cruise, he remembered being “in the back seat, smiling. Happy.”

Then, expanding on this, he explained

[Juan] was driving. His brother got the shotgun, me and his two cousins in the back, laughing, pinching each other’s titties. Just cruising and then people looking at us. . . . It’s just memories, so when I’m lowriding it’s memories of Juan. Memories of when I was a teenager going cruising, memories of just being myself. (2009a)

To Ruben, this ongoing process, instigated by Juan, of finding and being oneself is critical; it is the way that we express our fullest potential. To become fully present and engaged with life—a goal that Ruben strives for in his work, home, and car club—requires constant attention. Cars, as both ways of being in the moment and as portals of memory, serve as unique and powerful points of entry towards a fully realized life.

Ruben views his relationship with Juan as one that brought him success in more than lowriding; when Juan passed away, Ruben made plans to move from Burlington to Tampa in order to help Juan’s family through their mourning. When the company that he
works for learned of Ruben’s plans, they asked him to reconsider, eventually offering him significantly more money to stay in his position.

It’s like everything happened for a reason. My friend passed away. It took that for me to make good money. If he never passed away, I would have been an average person. And so, I mean, I told his wife too, man. I said, “They offered me some money. I got to take care of my family, and that money will help me out.” (2009a)

For Ruben, the memory of Juan is a powerful presence; it has guided him, often with an imperceptible hand, through many realms, ultimately leading him towards a more successful life. Seen thus, Ruben’s restoration of Juan’s Bel Air is far more than reviving a vintage car; it is his way of offering gratitude and memorial to his friend. “All of his friends got tattoos of his name with a cross,” explains Ruben. “When I went down there last year, they said, ‘When are you going to get yours?’ I said, ‘I don’t need a tattoo to remember Juan’” (2009a).

Ruben’s eloquence intertwines object with emotion, imbuing cold metal with living memory and giving rise to feeling. I know he enjoys these conversations and appreciates the opportunity to talk about lowriding as one possible culmination of his own multitude of life experiences. For Ruben, firme ranflas, the exquisitely modified cars of the Lowyalty Car Club, offer a method of remembrance. He understands how memory works, and is articulate when speaking about the way that objects invoke feeling. During a recent conversation, he asked me, “You got memories of a special car you had?” When I replied that my first car was a Plymouth Duster given to me by my grandmother, he speculated, “So if you had that Plymouth Duster, you’d think you were a teenager again” (2009a). I think he may be right.

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Earlier, I riffed on anticipation and the realm of remembrance that melds new sensation with past imaginary to create a present consciousness that is at once new and ancient. Lowalty member Jessie Davis is well acquainted with this type of memory; he began lowriding when he was a little boy, long before he was even old enough to sit behind the wheel of a car. This lowrider mindstate, precipitated and cultivated by toy cars, a variety of lowrider publications, and popular music and film, blossomed as Jessie grew older, learned to drive, and bought his first car. He carried his future memories with him as he moved towards adulthood and assumed the mantle of lowrider.

Jessie recalls that he got his first copy of Lowrider Magazine at the age of 10. “I could tell you anything about the cars featured in the magazine,” he remembers. “And in the back of the magazine, they’d always have catalogs that you could order car parts out of. And I ordered . . . Impala Bob’s catalog. I mean, I didn’t even have the money to buy an Impala. But I bought the catalog anyway.” Through meticulous concentration on the catalog, Jessie began to develop technical skills as well as understandings about what it meant to be a lowrider.

I was probably like 11 or 12 by that time. And I would just look through the catalogs. All day, all day. And I actually picked up on the all the differences in all the Impalas. You know, ’58 all the way to the ’70s. And then I was that into it, I can tell you anything about the trim or, you know, just by looking at it tell you what car it came from. And I used to always plan out, like, “Oh yeah, I can buy this car, and I can build it using this part, and I’m going to need this.” And I always wanted one. I used to see them a lot in peoples’ backyards, because in the South you see them a lot.

(2009b)

Although already fully devoted to lowriding, a powerful turning point in Jessie’s life arrived with the release of director John Singleton’s film Boyz n the Hood and the issue of albums by artists such as Dre. Dre and Snoop Dogg.
I seen *Boyz n the Hood* and Ice Cube was driving a ’63 [Impala] convertible. After I seen that, man, I was like, “That’s it. That’s it there, man. I got to have that. I got to have that. I don’t want anything else. No Lambo, nothing like that. No. I want that.” And you see today, I end up with a ’63.

Then you got the Dr. Dre, the Snoop Dogg videos. And it was just fuel to the fire, man. I could look at those videos over and over and over and over. Just looking at the cars. And then it got to the point, I got so into it that my grandma used to think that I used to be into the lowriders because the magazines had the girls and stuff like that. But it was never about the girls, it was about the cars. Like, seriously. (2009b)

Thus steeped in lowriding, Jessie was devoted body and soul to the practice by the time he acquired his first lowrider, a 1963 Impala; his past and present fused to created a fully complete lowrider experience. “Everything pretty much snowballed up until that point,” Jessie remembers. “And once it got to the point that I could actually touch it, man, it was . . . I can’t really explain it, as far as like, just putting it into words.”

I guess it’s the feeling for a person that’s flying for their first time. You know, some people are really excited about flying and being able to look down and see the world. It’s like that, man, it’s like—it’s totally different from anything else. It was exciting, man. I can just remember really smiling. . . . And just feeling that bounce, that jerk from the car, and hearing the hydraulics and stuff. Man, that was it. It was exciting, man. It’s exciting. Really, it really is. (2009b)

Jessie continues to reckon with his potent childhood memories of lowriding, to actualize them in practice, to transfigure dreams into reality. When we last spoke, we sat in front of Jessie’s Impala; although it was primer grey, the interior stripped, it was clear that Jessie was looking at a finished car, walking a path of future memory. “This is the car a lot of people said I would never have,” he told me. “So I’m really building this car to say that, ‘Yeah, I got it. My dreams came true’” (2009b).

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And what of memories that we claim as our own, though they originate in the heads of others? What of memories that we nurture, keeping them vital through
impassioned retelling, despite the fact that they happened to someone else? I suggest that these types of communal memories are as effective as any others at producing a very real feel.

Having a clean car is important to Jessie; to him, driving a lowrider that has been thoroughly fussed over is one of life’s great joys. And while Jessie has many first-hand memories that intersect with lowriding to produce feel, he recently related a story his grandmother told about his grandfather, a dedicated car customizer, driving South Carolina’s backroads as a young man. This tale worked to explain Jessie’s own reverence for clean cars.

My granddad was real big on having a clean car. Back then in South Carolina, there were a lot of dirt roads. Say a group of friends got a couple cars. He would come down the road. And say he’s the last car? The time he turned down the road—it’s a dirt road—so there’s dust. He would actually wait until all the dust settled from all the other cars driving down the road. After the dust settled, then he would start driving down the road. So, I mean, he was real big on having a clean car that goes fast. So, you put that with lowriders and—you know—lowriders are clean cars. (2009b)

This story was one that Jessie’s grandmother often told him, and one that Jessie frequently alludes to when discussing clean cars. The pleasures of clean cars, it seems to suggest, are ancient. What produces the joyous feeling of lowriding for Jessie? To hear him tell it, it has much to do with the cleanliness of the car; this quality is grounded, at least in part, by his grandmother’s memories of a dusty road in South Carolina. This memory also belongs to Jessie.

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I can recall as a young boy seeing these individuals parked in their lowered rides under the shade down by the river, or along roadside turnarounds, or cruising slowly through some dirt road weaving through the village, their slow rides bouncing rhythmically to the grooves spilling out from their car radios. (2008: 74)

—Levi Romero
Carlos and Jessie are struck speechless or moved to poetic reflection by the sight of a clean Impala. Ruben’s heart pounds at the thought of a 1966 Mustang or a blue Ford truck of a 1977 vintage. I get dewy eyed in the vicinity of dreadnought guitars manufactured by C.F. Martin in Nazareth, Pennsylvania, or the scent of plum blossoms.

Are things beautiful just because they are? Do they feel good just because they do? I say no. I say memory makes them that way.

When we talk about feeling, part of what we’re talking about is memory. Why am I so preternaturally obsessed with how the members of Lowyalty talk about feeling? At one time, I would have said it was because this tack offered an antidote to the ways that theory obscures the rich incandescence of human emotion. I’ve come to realize that there is more to it than that. When I riff on memory with the members of Lowoyalty, we become fellow travelers on a common journey. Even if we don’t understand the complexities of the objects that give rise to feeling, it feels good knowing that we all share the quality of having memories. We draw on our pasts to infuse present things with feeling. And we are not so alien to one another.
On Jessie

Jessie sits folded into a derelict wooden chair in Ruben’s piebald back yard. He fusses with a lighter, snapping the lid open and shut, open and shut. I hear this on playback, his nerves, his deliberation. To talk about lowriding with Jessie is to talk about life; one shouldn’t take life lightly. We talk about it seriously, and with care.

Jessie is a tall, thin, quiet man, given—it seems—to meditation and internal wrangling (see fig. 18). He is telling me about his 1963 Impala, the car that the folks with whom he grew up in South Carolina told him he would never have. Too expensive, they said, too impractical. And yet there it sleeps in the grass behind us, awaiting suspension, interior, paint. Awaiting work.

I know enough now to see a car with possibilities. But Jessie, Ruben, and Carlos have the gift of sight. Inspired by a car’s classic lines, able to assess potential on first glance, these men see finished cars where others see only primer and smoke. They clothe bone with flesh where none yet exists. Their vision of the spectacularly finished car calls to mind Rumi’s ruminations on the matter of second sight.

Immediate intuition to them is the simplest act
Of consciousness, what to others would be epiphany.
Much of our thought is of the past, or the future.
They’re free of those. Before a mine is dug,
They judge coins. Before vineyards,
They know the excitements to come.
In July, they feel December.
In unbroken sunlight, they find shade. (1997: 249)

Is it hyperbolic to apply the poet’s praise of Sufi sheikhs to North Carolina lowriders? I think not. Rumi acknowledged the ways in which 13th century mystics became so fully involved in their devotional practices that they saw perfection in advance
of its advent. This process of foresight-inducing engagement is one with which Jessie, Ruben, and Carlos are well acquainted. Carlos recently explained the ability to notice a vehicle’s subtle, nuanced lines as “something that’s got to come to you” (2009b). The subtext of this statement is that not all of us are necessarily equipped to recognize the vehicular personalities that these lines convey. This cognition is critical to the practice of lowriding.

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A Note on Lines

Lowriders like old cars. But although the ways that riders lust after vintage Chevys and Cadillacs might suggest the date of manufacture as the deciding factor of a potential lowrider, this isn’t entirely so. What lowriders really like are lines. And lines—the lush contours of a car that Johnny Olmos likens to “a river on the rocks”—are much more prevalent on older vehicles (2008). The gradual flattening and boxing of cars—consider a Scion xB or a Honda Element as contemporary examples—by automobile manufacturers is a condition that many car enthusiasts have lamented through the years. In the title story from The Kandy Kolored Tangerine Flake Streamline Baby, essayist Tom Wolfe wrote about heralded car customizer George Barris—incidentally one of the driving technical forces behind Southern California’s early low and slow aesthetic—as the savior of the streamline.

They call Detroit automobiles streamlined, but they’re not. If you don’t believe it, look down from an airplane at all the cars parked on a shopping-center apron, and except that all the colors are pastel instead of primary, what have you got? A Mondrian painting. The Mondrian principle, those straight edges, is very tight, very Apollonian. The streamline principle, which really has no function, which curves around and swoops and flows just for the thrill of it, is very free Dionysian. . . . And since Detroit blew the thing, the Dionysian principle in cars was left to people like George Barris. (1965: 70)
Wolfe’s suggestion that cars without streamlines are less pleasing to the eye is echoed by Carlos, who recently stated, “Newer cars don’t have the style—no lines.” Expanding on the notion that some cars are endowed with the right lines while others aren’t, regardless of vintage, he continued,

A ‘67 Fastback’s got bad-ass lines. You take a regular ‘67, it doesn’t have the same lines. The Fastback has a smooth back that runs from the roof to the back of the car. You lay it down, man, that shit’s bad. Or a Monte Carlo, now that car has some side humps. You accent that with a pinstripe, it’s bad. It’s like looking at a woman. Some women got the right lines. You look at some like, “Damn, that’s some nice lines.” Some cars just got it, others don’t. (2009b)

And what constitutes the “right lines”? Carlos and Jessie are both clear that, in their estimation, a 1959 ragtop Chevy Impala (see fig. 24) is the holy grail of lowriders largely due to its contours. “That car’s got lines that go on forever,” said Carlos. “It’s put together right. It looks beautiful, especially when it’s all done. . . . Man, I sat in one, and just sitting in it was unreal. It’s sexy” (2009b). Jessie’s discussion also pointed to this transcendental effect that the lines on a ’59 can have on someone with the gift of lowrider perception.

That’s the big boy. It looks so different from any other car. . . . The ‘59 had the cat eyes in the back that made it look like the Batmobile. The features just stand out. It has flat fins that curve outwards. If you saw the tail end, you’d know exactly what I’m talking about. (2009c)

Jessie’s suggestion that I would be able to spot the merits of a ’59 on my own—an assertion I found dubious considering my untrained eye—led me back to a consideration of Carlos’s statement that seeing lines is “something that’s got to come to you.” While many can see the broad strokes—the flared fins, for example, or the cat eye taillights—a gifted few can decipher the nuanced filigree of a potential lowrider.
A Discussion of Contour

The love of lines explains lowriders’ clear preference for two-door models. This partiality revolves, in part, around contour. “Four door have no lines,” Carlos explained. “They’re like a box. They look overextended” (2009b). Johnny likewise suggests that four doors disrupt a car’s elegant flow. “Let’s say you have a two-door, and the quarter panel has it’s own thing going on, it’s own curve and wing,” he recently said. “A four-door will break that up when you open it” (2008).

But Johnny and Ruben also suggested that a four-door carried social connotations that a two-door did not. “To me, a two-door looks like you’re a single man,” offered Ruben. “A four-door looks like you’re a family man.”

“Groceries only,” added Johnny jokingly.

“Maybe that’s what it is,” Ruben mused. “A four-door is a family car.”

“Right,” concluded Johnny with a wry smile. “[In a two door], you’re actually in your own world. Even if you’re not actually a solo man, in a two-door you’re a solo man. A straight-up man” (Olmos and Olmos 2008).

And so we sit in the backyard, surrounded by spare car parts under a balmy late-winter sun. Jessie sees his finished car in his mind’s eye, and he runs it down.

The body’s going to be black. I’m going to have a silver top, maybe black patterns on the silver top and silver patterns on the black body. And I’m going to have an all black interior. I’m getting the engine completely rebuilt. . . . Anything that I can take off the car that’s going to be visible, I’m trying to have it chromed. I’m just trying to go that far out with it.
Right now I have some special wheels that I ordered. They were completely custom-made, one-of-a-kind wheels. I had them made out in California. It took almost a month and a half or so to make, and they’re black, silver, and chrome.

[I’m going with] black and silver because . . . I just like the color, you know? It just looks—I guess you could say bad-ass. And I was once told that you can’t go wrong with black and chrome. So, being that silver is so close to chrome, it just all goes together. I feel as if I can’t lose with those colors. (2009b)

Jessie is working towards his dream car with care and diligence. There’s no rush. He’s painstakingly considered his plans, and has deciphered the most auspicious design possible. “I feel as if I can’t lose with those colors.” He’s not just putting the car together for the sake of owning a beautiful vehicle (although that will be a happy byproduct of his work). Rather, he’s building the Impala to conjure a sense of accomplishment in himself, to disprove the naysayers that said he would never own an Impala. It’s internal, purpose-driven goals such as these that mark Jessie’s relationship with lowriding, making his relationship to his car, as Carlos suggests, “totally different.”

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To talk about lowriding with Jessie is to talk about life, and to talk about life is to talk about his grandma, the woman who raised him when his mother could not, the teacher who schooled him in the virtues of determination, hard work, and self-reliance. I recently asked Jessie who the first person to see the finished Impala would be. “Definitely my grandma,” he replied. “Because, like I said, my grandma was there, and she would always say, ‘Yeah, you’re going to have [a car] like that. My grandma, she’s got dibs on the first ride. I’m definitely going to take her for a ride” (2009b).

Jessie Davis chooses his words carefully because he knows that he’s talking about something sacred, knows that our talk is being recorded, an act which threatens
permanence. He speaks wisely, for to do otherwise would be sacrilege. He is a serious young man. By the end of our conversation, a conversation that was ostensibly about cars but in actuality was about life writ large, Jessie is thinking about his grandmother. “I think I might go down to South Carolina to see my grandma,” he says. “I haven’t seen her in a while.” And then he walks out of Ruben’s backyard and drives softly south.
Chapter Three: Peace & Devotion

When we are in touch with the refreshing, peaceful, and healing elements within ourselves and around us, we learn how cherish and protect these things and make them grow. These elements of peace are available to us anytime.
—Thich Nhat Hanh  (2004:12)

Popular portrayals of lowriding—presenting it as a monochromatic instrument of the Brown Pride movement, or as a confrontational practice inextricably linked to gang and drug culture—at best offer outsiders an incomplete understanding of the practice; at worst, they paint a deeply disparaging portrait of a vibrant cultural tradition and of the actual experience of lowriding. To be sure, lowriding has the ability to speak pointedly to conditions of alterity that continue to characterize the minority experience; any student of lowriding would be remiss in not recognizing the ways a car that is low, slow, mean, and clean might serve as both social record and social protest, challenging understandings of both automobiles and ethnicity. Yet lowriding is experienced in many ways; for those who ride low, the practice entails more than confrontation and affirmation of social identity. Conversations with Lowyalty tend to foreground the peaceful, calming, and personally enlightening aspects of lowriding, invoking the ways that the practice gives rise to a flowing, deeply introspective mindstate that carries over into other realms of life.

In 1990, psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi published Flow, the culmination of 25 years of research on optimal experience, which he describes as “a sense of exhilaration, a deep sense of enjoyment that is long cherished and that becomes a landmark in memory for what life should be like” (1990: 3). He explains
Contrary to what we usually believe, moments like these, the best moments in our lives, are not the passive, receptive, relaxing times—although such experiences can also be enjoyable, if we have worked hard to attain them. . . . Optimal experience is thus something that we make happen. . . . But in the long run optimal experiences add up to a sense of mastery—or perhaps better, a sense of participation in determining the content of life—that comes as close to what is usually meant by happiness as anything else we can conceivably imagine. (1990: 3-4)

Making a distinction between *pleasure* (an evanescent, fleeting sensation) and *enjoyment* (a feeling rising from full engagement and commitment), Csikszentmihalyi describes flow as the “state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it” (1990: 4). Flow pushes us to, and often past, our boundaries, forcing us to utilize our full range of skills to successfully complete the act in which we are engaged. Flow often takes us into uncharted territory, areas in which, by exerting ourselves on the situation, we are able to determine the extent to which we control our own lives.

Csikszentmihalyi’s work suggests flow as a state available to everyone, with many culturally grounded means of achieving it; as an internal process, it has little to do with one’s social or fiscal standing. This method of meaning-making—a triangulation of purpose, resolution, and harmony—is one with which the most devoted lowriders of the Lowloyalty Car Club are well-acquainted. These members often talk about the flow of building and driving their cars, describing lowriding as a good feeling and a release from pain. At the same time that a specific vehicle or modification might serve as a path of remembrance (as discussed in the section on memory) that gives rise to feeling, the physical sensations of lowriding offer calming (and sometimes ineffable) respite from life’s constant demands.
Lowalty member Johnny Olmos (see fig. 21) is articulate regarding the ways that riding low brings peace and ease. The youngest of the Olmos siblings, he is an irrepresible and eloquent orator, a talker capable of breaking up, or silencing, a room with his cutting wit. His head is shaved, and a silver crucifix hangs outside his jersey. He wears his tan chinos starched and cuffed over black Nike running shoes. Johnny brooks no foolishness, and is quick to laugh at himself. One gets the sense—both from his woe-is-me anecdotes dropped casually into conversation, and the head-shaking that mere mention of his name garners amongst other members of Lowalty—that he gets up to shenanigans on a regular basis. But when Johnny gets serious, it’s wise to listen closely.

Johnny, Ruben, and I were sitting in the back office of Charlie’s Transmissions in Durham, talking about lowriding. This was early in my work with Lowalty, and I was still attempting to puzzle out exactly what lowriding meant to them. In retrospect, Johnny and Ruben were being very patient with me; each time that I attempted to steer the conversation towards lowriding as protest, they pulled me back towards the realm of personal experience. “It’s an interesting choice,” I remarked, “To lower a car. I feel like some people would say, ‘Well, why not make it higher, so you’re above everybody else?’” Johnny glanced at Ruben, and then leaned forward in his chair and looked at me squarely.

“Well, actually it’s the opposite. When you’re lowered, you are above everybody else.”

The style, the criteria—everything. When you’re in a car that’s low, just the feeling of it is beyond what you felt before. Let’s say, like, back then, we might just lower it just a little, but you could still feel it. You did something different and you actually can tell it. It just flows with you. You know, it’s like what you’re feeling, man—God Almighty, it’s a good feeling. It doesn’t matter if you just lower your car one inch,
you can tell it’s a big difference, like you did a whole mile of it. (Olmos and Olmos 2008)

Johnny’s description of a lowered car as a means towards entering a flowing, peaceful mindstate is one that marks many Loyalty members’ portrayals of lowriding. At the time, though, his description perplexed me. (I’ve since come to realize that club members commune with their cars in ways that are sensuous, personal, and deeply engaged—qualities that often manifest themselves as calming forces against life’s buffeting storms). Johnny and Ruben could tell; they smiled at each other, and Johnny drew closer to offer an explanatory anecdote.

We just need to lay back. There are times that you need to come lay back and, you know, go out for a spin, just take it easy. There’s no need for causing trouble. We have nothing but respect and we want to show the artwork we have that we’re building. You know, the heart and pride we put into it. (Olmos and Olmos 2008)

Moved, perhaps, by Johnny’s positing of lowriding as a way to take things easy, Ruben interjected, “I’ll tell you—that just happened this week. Carlos stole my car!” And in the blink of an eye, the brothers began excitedly speaking—as much to each other as to me—about the way that lowriding delivers riders from pain. It was clear that Carlos used Ruben’s Chevy Caprice—known as the Sunday Driver—as a calming agent in the face of overwhelming responsibilities at home and at work, and that this soothing effect was something to which they could both relate. “You would not have believed his facial expression,” Johnny remarked. “He was like, ‘Oh my God, this is what I needed. Just the feeling of it.’ Just the feeling of it. Oh, it took all the stress, the pain—it took it out.”

As though satisfied with his explanation of lowriding as pain relief, Johnny leaned back, his eyes half-lidded. We sat in silence for several moments. Then Johnny leaned forward again and quietly offered a final postscript on lowriding’s curative properties.
Let’s say it relieves stress. Let’s say you and the old lady might have problems, but when you get in your ride, you put in the music you want to hear, and you’re just flowing with it. The music, the sound, your ride, it becomes one, and you’re just feeling it. No need to be in a hurry. It relieves your stress, actually. You got nice, cruising, slow-sounding music, and you’re just out there glossing or flossing your car. (Olmos and Olmos 2008)

Johnny and Ruben, like Carlos, know what it means to climb into a lowrider, cue up some oldies, hit the switch, and exist so perfectly in the moment that pain and stress evaporate. They become one with their cars. They know flow.

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The lowriding-as-pain-relief metaphor is one that arises frequently. As Ruben recently reiterated, “It’s relaxing. If you get a headache, you take a Tylenol. [If you’re a lowrider and] you have a bad day at work, bad day at home, you go cruising” (2009b). Lowloyalty members often discuss lowriding as a method of coping with pain and stress, of dwelling in the present in such a way that life becomes something to savor, rather than to trudge through. The object is not to obliterate pain and stress forever—an unrealistic goal—but to find peace and joy through engagement. Carlos invokes this type of engagement when he explains

It’s the feeling. It all goes from getting a fresh pair of wire wheels and tires, having that look. That first cruise—going down the street, your car’s clean, it’s dipping, listening to a good song. It’s just that feeling. It’s a good feeling. It’s hard to describe. It’s just a feeling. I don’t think there’s anything better than that. Sunny day, not a cloud, you’re just cruising to a good song. You can’t beat it. (2008b)

Carlos positions feeling as of the utmost importance in the lowrider experience, recognizing that the stuff of lowriding—wire wheels, new tires, a good song—is merely a means to an end, rather than an end in and of itself. And while it’s important to acknowledge that Carlos’s “good feeling” is not the same as his flow, he is clear that these sensations, discrete though they may be, are closely interrelated; his flow is quite
often invoked and enlivened by the pleasurable sensation of lowriding. Carlos is aware that the feeling of lowriding makes him happy; he works to produce this good feeling through meticulous care of his car, and in so doing, moves towards flow.

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Thus introduced to this manner of thinking about lowriding, I asked Jessie to tell me about the feeling of cruising, how it might serve as a balm. He reiterated the cruising as pain relief metaphor, and then considered his own reasons for riding low.

There are times I'm thinking about a lot of stuff, or a lot of stuff is going on, and I'll just go out for a cruise, man. It helps me, you know what I'm saying? It's hard to explain. It's like a medication. It's like a medication to you. It does a lot of different things. Some people do it to be flashy and everything else, but I got a real love for it. And a lot of real good things happened to me because I started lowriding. So it definitely gets your mind on other things, helps you through things at times. (2009a)

The “real love” that Jessie mentions is an important component for the most devoted lowriders. While difficult to articulate in words, this love works to draw him nearer the heart of lowriding—feeling—while simultaneously pointing towards the varying degrees of emotional engagement that exist among lowriders. This is a notion that emerged again during a discussion between Carlos and me regarding the indescribable feeling of lowriding. Speaking on personal involvement with the practice, he remarked

See, some guys, I think they’re a little fake because a lot of people around here would just kind of follow, you know? “I got some wheels on my car.” But they don’t really know. They don’t know—like me, when I was young, 15 or 16—having that dream and then finally getting your first pair of wheels, whitewalls, and then, man, you get your first hydraulics and man—you graduate to getting bigger things. But man, every time it's a different thing. And some guys, they think, “I like lowriding, I got some wheels on my car now.” But you can tell. (2009a)

Carlos’ foregrounding of process over product seems to indicate that, for lowriders such as himself, the practice is about more than clean cars; it’s a method of charting a safe course over life’s rocky paths, a way of winnowing the important from the
inconsequential and plumbing the depths of one’s psyche to locate fulfillment. Moreover, his deep involvement with lowriding allows him to discern the emotional engagement of other lowriders.

Jessie, Carlos, Ruben, and many other dedicated lowriders frequently reckon with what it means to ride low; their words often suggest that the flashiest car may indicate a deep pocketbook more than a deep emotional attachment to lowriding. This is not to suggest that lowriders don’t value a beautiful car; it is important that a lowrider is clean, waxed, and properly shod. But a flashy car doesn’t always attest to full emotional engagement.

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This type of discourse about subjective feeling, commitment, internal knowledge, and vision, about the relationship between flash and devotion—about belief—has the potential to take us into realms far from the interior of a ’63 Impala. In his book *Fire In My Bones*, folklorist Glenn Hinson addresses African American Christian beliefs through the lens of a gospel performance. Discussing the ways that excessive “form” and “fashion”—“clowning” at feeling the spirit through leaping, shouting, and crying out—can mislead a congregation into thinking a singer is sanctified, he cites Reverend Z.D. Harris, who explains, “When you’re saved, the whole thing changes. See, you’re not going over what you used to do. [Then] it’s not performing. It’s not acting. It’s being sincere” (2000: 230; 241; 237). This dichotomy between performance and sincerity has its parallel in the language of lowriding, as evidenced by the invocation of the “real love” that enables Jessie and Carlos to discern levels of emotional engagement among those who ride low. Moreover, Rev. Harris’s suggestion that total engagement—in his case, as
a sanctified member of his congregation—can result in an expansion of vision in which
“the whole thing changes” is echoed by Johnny Olmos, who explains

Well, it’s like when you’re driving a stock car, right? It’s just stock. You take it to
another level . . . and the experience, the feeling of it, and the point of view [that] you
see changes. You’re lower to the ground and everything gets closer.

But let’s say you got hydraulics, right? You lift up the back and the front is all the
way dropped low, right? The road expands. You can see more clearly, you’re like,
“Oh man.” I mean, it’s a nice feeling, the images that you see. The scenery. It’s
something different. When you’re driving it’s not just like regular stock, everybody
eye-to-eye. Everything changes at a different angle, no matter the height of it. It’s just
the replicate of what you see, you know? (2008)

In the same way that Harris’s sanctified status allows him to discern the real from the
false and exist on a transparent plane of consciousness, Johnny’s juiced Lincoln Cartier
provides him with a clarity of vision and sense of rich engagement that he feels other
drivers lack.

Though some in the hard sciences may debate this type of feel-based knowledge
as scientifically unprovable, as too subjective, there is, in my opinion, copious evidence
to suggest that this type of knowing exists in a very real way. It abides in the quiet
eloquence of Jessie’s words, in the impassioned work that Carlos conducts on his Lincoln
Town Car in the dead of night, in the way that Johnny and Ruben enter the realm of flow
when discussing the curative properties of cruising.

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Though you may not drive a great big Cadillac
Gangsta whitewalls, TV antennas in the back
You may not have a car at all
But remember brothers and sisters
You can still stand tall
Just be thankful for what you've got

Diamond in the back, sunroof top
Diggin’ the scene
This discussion, of course, begs the question of whether one can be a lowrider—a truly devoted, pura onda rider—without having a show quality car. Poet Levi Romero argues

For any low rider, his car may be the ultimate form of expression and representation of how he views himself and wants to be seen, but the story would be incomplete if one were to showcase the low rider only through the marvelous and beautiful creation of the customized car. I believe . . . that the last thing in poetry is the poem, as I also believe that the last thing in lowriding is a lowered ride. The defining essence of what makes someone a low rider is something that cannot be relegated down to a material possession. In many instances, individuals who did not own a car or have a driver’s license or the means to earn the wages that were required to possess and maintain a cool ride were those who best upheld the ideal image of what it was to be a “low rider” . . . . (2008: 75)

Carlos concurs; when I asked him whether lowrider soul depended on the flashiness of the car, he replied by invoking Dustin, a 16-year-old Lowyalty member who doesn’t yet own a vehicle.

I could tell you about that kid Dustin. Dammit, he loves lowriding. I mean, you can tell. I mean, he loves this shit. If he keeps on, he’s going to have something bad. I believe it . . . You can talk to him and, I mean, he loves this shit. He has the same love that I got. (2009a)

Carlos’ acknowledgement of Dustin as a true lowrider illustrates his belief in the transcendental qualities of the practice and the ways one can participate in lowriding without actually possessing a vehicle.

Similarly, in conversation about his own history and connection with lowriding, Jessie makes clear that his first car was not his beloved 1963 Impala, but a Honda Accord. “The only reason I didn’t get a lowrider first off was because it was me and my Grandma,” he explains. “I was the only person that could drive, so I was smart and realized that you can’t get one of these cars to drive every single day” (2009a). During
this time, Jessie’s deep feel for lowriding—his knowledge that he was a true, bona fide lowrider regardless of whether or not he owned a car—sustained him until he bought his Impala. This spiritual connection with the practice of lowriding, a bond that places serious emphasis on clean cars while simultaneously moving the individual into a realm beyond the physical, seems to mark the experiences of the most dedicated lowriders.

Sitting in Ruben’s backyard one late winter afternoon, Jessie touched on this feel-based existential knowledge. “A lot of guys think mainly about the car. The car, the car, the car,” he began.

And it’s not all about the car. I really don’t have a car on the street [right now], but I’m always here, I’m always at the shows. So if somebody’s in the club and they see it that way, then . . . they’re in the club for the wrong reasons . . . . You can’t put the car first. If you’re really into it, it will come. It will definitely come. (2009a)

Ruben has also endured times without a lowrider; one particularly tumultuous period found him driving a Ford Tempo. “When I had the Tempo, I was struggling,” he remembers. “I didn’t have a phone for like a year. I was struggling.” His lowrider mindstate, the deep feel for lowriding, helped him to carry on, ultimately leading him to a job, a home, and his 1985 Chevy Caprice. “What if you lose your car?” Ruben asks.

What if you have a problem? What is the economy gets so bad that you lose your job? You’re no longer in the car club because your car ain’t up there, your car ain’t fixed enough? Right now, if you got a nice car, you’re blessed . . . . To me, lowriding is just chilling. What I got doesn’t mean anything to me. I would sell the Sunday Driver, you know? Anything happens, I lose my job—the Sunday Driver’s out of here. (2009a)

Having a clean car is important. A car that is well taken care of is a demonstration of a lowrider’s devotion to his craft. But, as Carlos, Jessie, and Ruben suggest, there is more to lowriding than a nice, expensive vehicle; for them and many others, the spirit of riding low, the ability to access the cruising plane with or without a car, resides at the heart of the practice. The dedicated lowrider’s feel for lowriding goes beyond the physical. It
sustains him in times of drought. Indeed, some serious lowriders don’t own a car at all.

Early in our relationship, Carlos described lowriding as a practice that shaped his worldview. “I wake up and I’m lowriding,” he explained.

I go to sleep and I’m lowriding. . . . When you get in your car and you hit the switch, cruising, dipping down the road—there’s no better feeling. It’s you and your car. When I get a fresh pair of Daytons and put them on, you can’t feel the same feeling I feel. (2008a)

Jessie recently echoed this sentiment, suggesting lowriding not as a hobby, but a deeply introspective practice that occurs both inside and outside of his car. “You live and sleep this,” he remarked. “Daily.” (2009a)

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_The Smile_

*If a child smiles, if an adult smiles, that is very important. If in our daily lives we can smile, if we can be peaceful and happy, not only we, but everyone will profit from it. If we really know how to live, what better way to start the day than with a smile? Our smile affirms our awareness and determination to live in peace and joy. The source of a true smile is an awakened mind.*

—_Thich Nhat Hanh_ (2004: 6)

Lowriders frequently talk about their practice as one capable of invoking flow and contentment, both of which find regular physical expression in smiling. While the aesthetic presentation of lowriding often includes looking poker-faced at the camera, many narratives of cruising feature a smile. How many of us remember a specific smile? The members of Lowloyalty do. At a recent club meeting, Oscar remembered an early cruise, explaining

Well, the first time I got in a car with hydros, it was back like three years ago in the ’67. And it felt real good. ’Cause I remember everyone was just looking; we were cruising down that road right there. Church Street. We were coming to this old house on Haw River I think, where we used to live. I was just smiling, everybody was just looking. It felt good. (2009)
Jessie has similar recollections of his first drive in a lowrider in South Carolina: “[I was] maybe in junior high. I was just so excited, you know? So we finally get in the car and I was just smiling. I can remember just smiling, smiling, smiling. Like, 'I'm actually in a lowrider’” (2009b).

When I asked Ruben to describe his first cruise for me, his face took on a look that suggested he was time traveling. We were sitting at his kitchen table. It was after midnight, and his family had gone to bed. Several moments passed. “In the back seat,” he said. “Smiling. Happy.” (2009a)

Experiential testimony, as a recounting of feeling, has the potential to reveal profound detail in the most innocent of references; while the smiles in these narratives convey joy and contentment, their ubiquity also suggests one way Lowyalty memorializes the act of lowriding that speaks to the good feeling that the practice can produce. In turn, these smiles evoke community.

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*On Quietude*

For many lowriders, cruising in a fully engaged *now* is an activity that places them squarely in the present moment while simultaneously conjuring a host of powerful memories; this dual contemplation requires serious concentration and, for many, absolute focus. For example, at the same time that driving a lowrider invokes Carlos’ memories of his first cruise with his brother, he explains that he often prefers conversation to be kept to a minimum when he drives. “I like to ride by myself,” he explains. “For some reason everybody wants to talk, I don't know why. And I hate talking.” Pressed to elaborate on how talk disrupts feeling, Carlos continued
Dude, you get focused. You know? It kind of takes the feeling away. I told one of my friends, ". . . I don't want to talk to you no more. You're messing me up." You know? Because you sit back, man, and it could be cold. It don't matter. You just ride. Everything is perfect. Really, man, you have no worries, nothing bothers you. Really. I mean...you're off from work, ain't nothing going on. You're just riding. Nowhere to go. If feels good. Since the first time I did it, man, it's always been the same. (2009a)

Carlos’ suggestion that talk can potentially wreck a cruise by shattering the intense concentration needed to enter the pure lowrider mindstate, the place where “everything is perfect,” is echoed by Ruben, who states that limiting talk can enhance a good cruise. “You drive, you don’t think about anything,” he explains. “Just drive. It’s like going to see the Wizard of Oz.” He continues by suggesting that, when possible, the road should mirror the calmness of the mind.

I like to go on Church Street because it’s a perfect street. The road isn’t bumpy. People smile, they take pictures, they wave. They say stuff. They do a lot of smiling. I ignore people, I don’t really like to wave back. I just focus on the road, that’s all I do. (2009b)

It’s important to note that while talk is frequently prohibited by Carlos and Ruben, music is seen as an important ingredient of cruising, a way of complementing a clean car and a clear mind. A favorite tune can serve as a mental soundtrack, enlivening the drive and conjuring a feeling of familiarity. Carlos explains, “I always listen to a Temptations song. . . . I always picture it, and I imagine myself” (2009a).

Nurturing the lowriding feel is an intricate and involved feat; it frequently has the driver coexisting in the realm of memory and a fully focused present. Any interruption—be it the expectation of conversation from an unwitting passenger or a bump in the road—threatens to disrupt the flow of riding low. Some lowriders, like Ruben, cruise specific locations (i.e. Church Street, in Burlington); others, such as Carlos, lean towards “riding around and not going anywhere” (2009b). Yet in both cases, the trip is always the
destination; lowriding is not so much the getting there as it is the going. This celebration of movement is echoed by Hanh, who proposes that the purpose of walking meditation—another type of movement—“is really to enjoy the walking—walking not in order to arrive, but just to walk” (2004: 27).

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My Uncle James is my grandmother's oldest son. He had a Buick '89. And I remember I used to go out to Coney Island and he’d pull out of the garage and he was just like my granddad—he got it from my granddad, the clean car and everything. And I remember he’d put either Al Green or Marvin Gaye in the eight-track player.

We used to go cruising in Manhattan and I remember the car being so clean under the streetlights, man. It’s just like, you know, we’d just be riding and talking. My Uncle James’s nickname is The Grouch. He’ll call you up and he’ll just be yelling, but he’s just talking to you. And I remember, man, we’d be riding. . . . I used to be scared of him when I was younger, but we would ride and he would just seem like a totally different person.

I guess cruising and riding and stuff changed him too. He’d be sitting there and he used to always talk to me about taking care of his mom—which is my grandma—and I guess, now that I think about it, the cruising stuff probably had an effect on him because he didn’t seem like the Grouch anymore. I wasn’t afraid of him.
—Jessie Davis (2009b)

Lowriding feels good. It takes away pain, stress, and fear. Those in whom this feeling manifests itself most strongly suggest that, while it can be talked about and maybe even partially taught, pura onda soul is a dimension of lowriding that a certain few perceive early and work to develop, understanding that lowriding is about both car and driver. This lowrider spirit guides these most gifted practitioners through realms not just of cruising, but through life. Jessie once noted that “a lot of good stuff comes out of this lowriding stuff” (2009b). Carlos similarly mused that “lowriding . . . just keeps me going. Big time” (2009a).

Lowriding, then, is a way of living one’s life, a purposeful and deliberate approach to navigating the complexities of the modern world. Alternately spoken of as
“real love” by Jessie, “beyond” and “flowing” by Johnny, a “good feeling” by Carlos, and “relaxing” by Ruben, it incorporates a multitude of meanings that change with the terrain. Lowriding is a method of synchronization between present mindfulness and memory, a rejuvenating way to leave pain and stress behind, if only for a little while, and to gather a clear sense of purpose.

For the most devoted lowriders of Lowyalty, feel is at the heart of their practice. Those with whom I have talked about feeling frequently qualify their words by explaining that putting lowriding into words is nigh impossible. What I think they are trying to suggest is the impossibility of describing what Csikszentmihalyi terms “flow.” Yet although flow may be relative and subjective, we can all understand the sensation, the ways that an activity to which we are devoted requires our full attention, giving us purpose, energy, and hope. My discussions about lowrider feeling with the members of Lowyalty are clearly about more than just cruising in a car that is clean; they’re about the ways that we define ourselves—to ourselves and others—and keep our hands and minds busy and our lives full of meaning.

Speaking about the experience of the divine touch, gospel singer W. Lawrence Richardson once explained to ethnographer Glenn Hinson, “You got to be in it to feel it. And if you’re not in it, you just sit there and you look” (2000: 1). That “in it” sensation is critical, as it gives rise to fully engaged knowledge, which in turn inspires confidence and fulfillment, even in times of doubt or lack. Ruben, Johnny, Carlos, and Jessie are “in it” in deeply profound ways; they know what it means to cruise, and what cruising signifies. As Jessie says, “It’s a lowrider world” (2009b).
To Semora

I am driving with Ruben through the back end of Alamance County towards Semora. It is rainy and quiet save the thrum of rain on the roof of the van. The tires hiss wet on the road. Ruben takes the curves fast, saying nothing. It is the first day of March in the year 2009.

I quietly take his picture from the passenger side. This type of driving through the country towards a home is pleasant. It doesn’t matter to me whose home it is. But as it happens, we are going to visit his parents.

We are gliding past churches and derelict trailers set in relief against a steel sky. The winter has been long and I believe we are all ready for spring. Ruben nods towards a tumbledown house in dark repose. “I grew up in a house like that,” he says. Ruben’s family—his wife Suellen and son Leo—murmur in the backseat. They are sleeping.

Ruben asks me if I have ever heard Lil Rob. I have not. He inserts a compact disc into the stereo, and a moment later Lil Rob comes tumbling out the speakers. The bass rumbles low through the van so that I think it might wake Suellen and Leo, but they sleep as though they’re accustomed to these frequencies and this type of travel.

I want to visit Ruben’s parents because I want to see the blue truck that figures so prominently in his memory. But I also want to visit them in order hear stories begun several weeks earlier at Ruben’s house.

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It was a sunny day then. Ruben’s father, Ruben Sr. (see fig. 50), had walked with me into his son’s backyard and then stood before me to talk about how he came to live in Caswell County, North Carolina. We were meeting for the first time. He showed me his
green card, pointing out the expiration date, as though to sandbag against any future trouble, as though to say, “One can’t be too cautious.” And then he took me to the treacherous borderlands between the United States and Mexico, offering his crossings as signposts in his life. He said: There is nothing but fear and walking and a dead tiger still warm in those in-between lands between countries—no food, no water, no nice place to lay down. He offered an aging photograph of himself and stood back smiling. It was taken in the early 1970s, and he wore a shining belt buckle and long hair. He later asked Marta, his wife, to remind him what she called him back in those days. “El Peludo,” she answered. *The Longhair.*

On that day in Ruben’s backyard, his father spoke of crossing the border as both a game and a life-and-death proposition. I did not say much; to speak would have been to foul the flow. Ruben Sr. talked about good times and liberation and hustling to feed his family in the same breath and reminded me that life is not discrete; joy and sorrow and persecution and backbreaking hard work all happen on the same day, at the same time. And then he stepped back inside through the sliding glass doors to help his sons lay floor. I stood outside and looked into the sky.

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We are crossing a bridge over a tributary of Hyco Lake. The rain wrinkles the water and Ruben says, “My brother Ramon sometimes takes his boat out there in the summertime.” Then we are turning down a gravel lane, coming to rest in the driveway of a trailer home. Ruben’s mom sticks her head out the door and waves. We climb the wooden steps to the front door and enter. Marta and Ruben Sr. greet me warmly, smiling.
I ask Ruben whether we might look around, and he takes me out into the backyard to look at his father’s garden plot and chickens in the rain. There, near the back of the trailer, is the blue truck. It sleeps under a tarp, and Ruben poses near it as I take a picture. We consider removing the tarp, but the truck is not so important right now. The truck is the pretext for me to come here into the Olmos home and listen to stories that Ruben wants to hear, and wants me to hear. I believe that with me here, with my recording equipment, Ruben can ask his father some questions he might not be able to otherwise.

We say things to strangers that we wouldn’t normally say to the ones we love.

We’re back in the trailer; the light is low. Rain falls on the roof.

“When was the first time you crossed the border,” Ruben asks his father from the couch.

*For the first time? The first time, 1970. July. Por Tijuana.*

*I ask, Do you remember anything about that time that you came over? Were you driving? Were you walking?*

*Walking. Walking until somebody picked us up and brought us to where we were going.*

*Was it all desert? Or river? Ruben asks.*

*No, not river. There aren’t any rivers over there.*

*All desert, adds Marta.*

*I ask, And so you were coming into Tijuana?*

*Yeah.*

*From Tijuana into California?*
Yeah. The second time I went through Tecate. Walking. All the way to Santa Isabel. You know Santa Isabel? Y Santa Ramona? I walked all the way over there. I don’t know how many miles it is. But I was walking all night, all day. Sometimes I’d walk at night; sometimes in the day I couldn’t walk.

Was it unsafe to walk in the daytime? I ask.

Marta translates, Esta peligroso?

No. No peligroso por la imigracion que lo mira a un.

Ruben asks, So you would have to hide in the daytime and walk at night?

Yeah. Yeah, and I walked into—you know Rancho Murieta? I walked over there too. You know, I crossed pretty close to the immigration checkpoint in Temecula. You know Temecula? Rancho Murieta is maybe five or ten miles from there. Yeah.

I ask, So what do you remember about that time walking? Was it hot? Did you have enough to eat and drink?

No. We had one bottle of water for three people. One bottle maybe this high [and he holds his hands about eight inches apart].

For three people? asks Ruben.

Yeah. And no food.

None?

No, no.

So how did you survive? I ask.

Que dice? Ruben Sr. asks the room.

Como sobreviste sin comida? clarifies Suellen.

Tomando agua, he replies.
Only drinking water, Marta says to me.

Yeah. Tomando agua, Ruben Sr. repeats. And some places didn't have water.

Even if you're really thirsty, you could only drink a little bit. When we found water, we filled it up.

I want to know about lions on the road, and so I say: You were telling me last time I saw you that at one point when you were walking, you saw un leon.

Oh yeah. It was pretty close to Santa Isabel. Maybe 5:30 or 6 o'clock in the afternoon, me and two other people were walking and I saw—we'd call it a tigre. He was dead. And I touched it and it was still hot. It wasn't cold. Se acaba de morir. And I told the people I was with, Let's go! Run! There are a lot of tigers here! And sometimes there were panteras too, you know? Those are gatos. Big cats. Gatos montez. And you know rattlesnakes?

Ruben Sr. pauses, and then continues, The third time I crossed the borderline was at San Luis. Walking to Yuma. You know Yuma, Arizona?

It's very hot, I say.

Yes, it's dangerous, agrees Marta.

Yeah. Well, I came to over there to wait for somebody to pick me up and bring me to San Bernardino.

You were crossing over to pick fruit and vegetables? I ask.

Yeah. Naranjas.

And when was the last time you crossed? Marta asks. La ultima vez?

Well, the last time was—I think '73. You know, pero I crossed many times in Texas. You know, outside Piedras Negras. Como se llama alla? El Moral?
El Moral, Marta confirms. She looks and me and says, See, I'm from the borderline. I'm from Piedras Negras. That's where he crossed.

And I was walking, Ruben Sr. continues. I crossed—they call it the Rio de las Nueces. It's close to San Antonio, Tejas.

You know San Antonio, Texas? Marta asks me. There's a big river that crosses there.

Ruben Sr. adds, They call it Rio de las Nueces. Rio de pecans, like this. Rio de las Nueces. You know, it's got a lot of water, that river. To cross it you'd wait for the train to come. El cargero. There weren't any passengers. Wait. Cuando the train stopped, let it pass. Another one coming, and the train is going slow, slow, and slow. We'd run and catch it. Catch it to San Antonio. Across the river.

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We continue like this through the afternoon, speaking in fits and starts. The commonly-known family lore is directed at me; other stories are new and Ruben Sr. and Marta work to remember places and faces and approximate dates. They work to recall the routes that took them through Florida and Georgia and North Carolina, through orange groves and fields of tobacco, hospital waiting rooms and tenant trailers. Ruben and Suellen lean in close. There is a deep and luxurious listening in the room, as though we are the only ones telling stories on this day.

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We are driving home and it is getting dark. Suellen, Leo, Ruben Jr. and Anais are all asleep in the back of the van. I’m not saying anything and neither is Ruben.
We are in front of Ruben’s house. There is a red Chevy dropped down low glistening in the rain in Ruben’s driveway. It’s a new car; I don’t know whose it is. Ruben looks at it but doesn’t say anything. I climb out of the van and gather my gear from the trunk. He walks up to me; Ruben Jr. is asleep in his arms in the rain. “Alright then,” he says. And he goes inside.
Chapter Four: On Pride

In the beginning was the Car, and the Car was with Art, and the Car was Art.
—Dave Hickey (1997: 61)

I arrived at Ruben’s house at noon for the Lowalty meeting (see fig. 35). By the time the members were ensconced in the kitchen, lured by boxes of pizza and orange soda and wedged into a motley assortment of chairs, the sun was disappearing behind the backyard fence visible through the sliding glass doors. The club members, set in relief against the late-winter sky, became studious and quiet, as if to suggest that the time for fun was over—many had spent the better part of the afternoon beneath Drake’s ’62 Impala—and business was imminent.

I had been working with Lowalty for nearly a year—not long in life’s grand scheme, perhaps, but an eternity for a young car club—and the changes in the club’s membership were profound. While many of the longtime club members, including Ruben, Jessie, Rocky, and Corona, were on hand, there were several new recruits fleshing out the ranks. Jason, a former bailiff from Virginia Beach, sat to Ruben’s right taking notes, and at the back of the kitchen, near the sink, sat Drake, an esteemed, jocular lowrider from Rocky Mount with over 20 years of cruising under his belt. Carlos Gomez, a man whom Ruben once described as the backbone of the club, was gone, as were Payaso, Big Roy, and L.A. Carlos had found a place for himself as a member of the North Carolina chapter of Majestics, an organization that encourages the type of highly competitive lowriding for which Carlos is known.
After an hour of talk (attending to a variety of club housekeeping tasks), Ruben, standing confidently in front of his flock, shot me a quick look and then addressed the room, explaining, “Alright, I’m going to do something different for you all. I’m going to go around and ask each one of you: When you drive a lowrider, how does it feel?”

After a moment of silence, Drake, the most outspoken of the group, took up Ruben’s challenge. “I just feel I’m the man on the highway when I’m in my lowrider, you know what I’m saying?” Murmurs of assent around the room. He continued: “I pull up beside a Bentley and he looks good, but I can pick my car up. Ain’t nobody looking at his Bentley, you know? People are saying, ‘That Bentley’s expensive, but look at that lowrider, he’s hopping!’”

The club members laughed knowingly; this was a narrative to which they could relate. Drake continued, remarking on the way a car that is truly bad can elicit unexpected responses.

When you walk up on a clean car, you're just like—you're making an ugly face. And [the owner’s] like, "You don't like it?"

"Hell yeah I like it!" You know? But you're frowning because that's just what they make you do.

A dude could drive past in a Maserati and you're sitting here with a candy, old-ass car with little bitty-ass rims that make noise when you pick it up. And that is prettier than any brand new payment driving past you. (Ryderz 2009)

Drake’s commentary positioned pride—“I’m the man on the highway”—front and center, while simultaneously touching on the aesthetic relationships that lowriders have with their cars. In Drake’s estimation—and the estimation of many members of Lowyalty, judging by the reaction that his words elicited—the bonds that lowriders have with their “candy, old-ass” rides are special and should be celebrated. This unique relationship
between car and driver, one built on a rich aesthetic that recognizes value in vintage
vehicles and the lowrider’s ability to transform a rusting hulk into a thing of eye-catching
splendor, works to raise old, heavily modified lowriders above brand-new, stock cars,
regardless of disparity in cost.

Spurred forward by Drake’s enthusiasm, another new member named Eric
addressed the group, explaining

The first time I drove a lowrider, it was a car that I did myself. The only thing that
somebody else did was put in my hydraulics. I helped paint it and everything else. I
just felt like I was just showing off my thing, my do. Just like a piece of clothing or a
piece of jewelry. You know, I just felt good about what I did, and I showed the world
that this is something that I can do—now let's see what you can do to top it. I just felt
like I was just on top of the world. (Knight 2009)

Pride is a concept that is articulated on many levels among Lowyalty members; while
Drake discussed what his car could do, Eric makes clear that his car spurs conversation
about what he can do. This notion that lowriding might have the capability of so filling a
lowrider with pride that they would feel as through they were “on top of the world” drew
Rocky, a gifted but reticent Lowyalty member into the discussion. “Lowriding makes me
feel—like I can do anything,” he began.

For example, my truck (see fig. 22). Everything you see on that truck, I did it. . . .
Painted it, customized everything. And knowing that I can go to car shows and win
trophies—I mean, it feels awesome. I can go over there and I can actually get first
place, second place. When we went to Tampa for [the] Lowrider Magazine [car
show], I didn’t think I was going to win anything. I came back with that first place
Lowrider Magazine trophy. . . . First place. My sweat and everything—first place.
(Rocky Olmos 2009)

The answers that Ruben’s question elicited reminded me of my first forays into
the realms of lowrider experience. While Ruben, Jessie, Carlos, Johnny and myself have
together attempted to untangle lowrider experience over time, and in so doing have
arrived at some conclusions regarding the ways that experience, memory, and emotion are closely interrelated, our earliest discussions were largely befuddled affairs, my questions unclear, their answers sincere attempts to hit an obscure target. However, even at this disorienting first stage, detailed statements regarding pride—frequently evoked by public display of the car—were common refrains. This press towards pride makes sense; a finished car is a demonstration of serious and deliberate planning and dedicated effort. As such, it portrays its owner as “a hard worker and a serious and responsible person” (Gradante 1982: 36). As lowrider Victor Vega explained in 1981, “If you got your car together, you got your life together” (cited in King 1981: 2). Ruben invoked this same notion when he described his embroidered Lowyalt shirt—an honorary item given to only the most dedicated and hard-working club members—as testament to his success, and an inspiring symbol for young members.

Growing up, I worked in the fields. How rough was that? Growing up, I lived in a little old trailer with two bedrooms and five brothers. All my friends got nice houses. Growing up my dad never had a nice car. Imagine your parents picking you up in an old car, and everybody's looking at you. I know how that feels. People are out there living like that. Just to wear the shirt makes you proud. I mean, it's like, “I'm cool.” I got a member that works in the tobacco fields. You should have seen when he found out that I used to do that. And then I talked to him. It was on Christmas. I told him, “Yeah, I done that.”

[He was thinking,] “My president pulled tobacco. My president worked in the fields. Look what he got. He made it.” You know what I mean? You should have seen his face.

So I've done that. I'm proud of what I've done. “Yeah, look what I got. I made it.” To me, it's worth it to see their face, to wear the same shirt I'm wearing. No matter what. I know how it feels to be on the bottom. (2009a)

Confronted for the first time with questions about feeling, many Lowyalt members point towards pride. Pride is one tangible reward for what is frequently a lifetime’s worth of dedication to the art and craft of lowriding; moreover, the members of Lowyalt take
pride in the claiming and realization of an aesthetic ideal that intertwines appearance and competence, and connects them dialogically to past and future lowriding communities. A clean car communicates positive messages about its owner, portraying him as an extraordinarily skillful mechanic, an impeccably tasteful artist, and a connoisseur of vintage vehicles. An immaculate vehicle can additionally function as a symbol of life accomplishment that extends beyond automotive skill, taste, and artistry. This particular sense of achievement, a culmination of the various narratives of pride that rise in conversation with the members of Lowyalty, marks Ruben’s discussion of his embroidered Lowyalty shirt as an emblem of success.

The feeling of pride that lowriding engenders is not exclusive to Lowyalty; it seems that whenever outsiders write about lowriding, they invariably include comments about pride. In 1978, for instance, writer Calvin Trillin reported on the burgeoning lowriding scene centered on Whittier Boulevard in Los Angeles. While his piece was ostensibly meant as a primer on lowriding, the most profound sections point towards the feeling of pride as critical to the practice. “You got pride. You got a nice ride,” a member of the Chicano’s Pride car club explained to Trillin. “You show off. They check it out. They say, ‘That’s the way. Look at that. That’s sharp to the bone. That dude’s got a bad ride’” (cited in Trillin 1978: 73).

The pride that this anonymous rider invokes, brought about by demonstrating his immaculately constructed lowrider in public, continues to be echoed by members of North Carolina’s lowriding community three decades later. “You take pride in your car,” Carlos recently told me. “You can’t just ride dirty. You can’t. I mean, it’s the same as a person. You’re not going to be all dirty and be proud of yourself” (2009a).
Countless shades of pride exist. Some lowriders remark on the type that is found at 2:00 in the morning underneath the hood of a Lincoln Town Car. Others speak of the kind encountered at a stoplight, when all the surrounding traffic slows to ogle their lovingly restored ’63 Impala. Still others comment on the pride inherent in showing off a recently modified car to a group of lowriding peers. Though the language and emphasis changes with the teller, talking about feeling with the Lowality Car Club frequently turns to pride; the most dedicated lowriders are familiar with the ways that, as a personal odyssey and a public performance, lowriding is a proud endeavor.

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Showing off one’s car has long been a part of the tradition of lowriding, and is an aspect on which many lowriders, as well as scholars of lowriding, remark; pride clearly manifests itself in this public arena. William Gradante, an ethnographer who worked with lowriders in the Fort Worth-Dallas region, argues that public display is a natural end result of building a car. “He has invested a great deal of time, money, and effort in his ‘ride’,” he explains of his hypothetical lowrider. “And prefers to cruise along at a pace that allows him to show it off” (1982: 28). A seriously clean ride has the ability to appeal to a wide array of audiences, including fellow lowriders, non-lowriding car enthusiasts and modifiers, and the auto indifferent.

Displaying a clean car to other lowriders is critical, as it provides a read on one’s own standing within the lowriding community and a method of knowledge-sharing and acknowledgment among like-minded individuals. Car display within the lowriding community is often highly competitive, with new modifications kept as closely guarded secrets until the car is unveiled in order to intensify the presentation. Lowriders tend to be
vocal about their appreciation for a special vehicle. Nearly every member of Lowyality
has a story about their first encounter with a particularly spectacular lowrider; Drake
recently asked the club, “You know when you just get a chill?”

I mean, that’s real. Like when I saw the Sunday Driver for the first time. I don’t care
how many times I see that car—I walk up to it and look because I’m going to see
something I didn’t see the day before. It’s stupid. (Ryderz 2009)

The “chill” that Drake refers to, rising from the awareness of how much time and effort
goes into building a jaw-dropping ride, was a sensation with which the rest of Lowyality
was familiar. Eric quickly replied in jest, “I thought I was the only one!”

For his part, Carlos is clear that his work on his car is in part a system of dialogic
communication between himself; the riders that he looked up to during his childhood
years in Hollywood, California; and serious lowriders he expects to encounter at future
car shows. Recalling the unveiling of his celebrated Lincoln Town Car—known as
Purple Rain in lowriding circles—at the Lowrider Magazine show in Tampa, he recalled,
“I was watching from the corner, and members from other clubs would walk by and just
STOP—and turn around. Two guys from Rollerz Only that I’ve seen in videos and
magazines came over and were pretty impressed with it. Hearing from those older dudes
was a big thing” (2008b).

Exhibition of clean rides in non-lowrider situations is also an important part of the
practice, and one that allows lowriders to offer up their cars for inspection and
appreciation to the general public. Drake recently recounted a time when he was fueling
up his modified Chevy El Camino at a country store.

A whole bunch of Harleys pulled up. Dudes that look like they should have been on
Hee Haw with their long beards; the average Black person probably would have said
nothing to them. And they came up like, “Yo, I like this, man. This is lovely.” . . .
They rapped with me. Cars bring mixed people together that would never talk to each other. (Ryderz 2009)

Lowriders instigate talk, Drake suggests, by raising the ordinary to the extraordinary; they provide a point of entry and reference—classic American cars—while simultaneously suggesting that these vehicles can be blocks of marble under the most gifted sculptor’s hand. A classic Caprice glinting in the sun, paint and chrome waxed to a mirrored gloss and accentuated by the high harmonies of the Temptations, is a profound and magnetic object that draws curious spectators. Ruben remarks on the bewitching powers of a lowrider, explaining that, “If [onlookers] see a basic car, they’re just [going to] look at the car and walk off. I want them to look at a Lowloyalty car—and just stare.” Carlos echoes this sentiment, explaining, “I want people to look at the car and stay there, so the car has to be special” (2008a).

Yet another variation of pride arises from entering a lowrider into a public performance in which the audience is car savvy enough to recognize the effort that goes into modifying a vehicle; these onlookers are often in possession of (non-lowrider) modified cars themselves, and the situation thus becomes one of comparison, contrast, and competition. Lowloyalty narratives of this nature frequently take the form of stories about encounters with other modified vehicles, including mini-trucks, donks (cars with exceedingly large rims), and souped-up sports cars. These stories often pit the lowrider’s classic car against a newer, more expensive vehicle; in so doing, they reveal that the strength of a lowrider lies in its subtle and invisible modifications, and celebrate the thoroughness with which lowriders construct their cars. Rocky explains,

I remember when I first got my truck with the hydraulics. I was at the light, and this guy with a Honda was showing off his [stereo] system and stuff. So I looked at him, man. I had a system in my truck too. Turned it up. He got all excited. He had TVs, so
he flipped down the TVs. I had TVs—flipped them down. And then he looked at me and I looked at him. I said, “Hold on, wait.” I dropped that truck, started hopping on his ass. He got mad, turned off the TVs and the system, and took off. That felt so great, like I could do anything. (Rocky Olmos 2009)

Jason, the new Lowyalty recruit from Virginia Beach, had a similar story of being challenged to an automotive duel at a stoplight.

I remember this dude came up to me. We were at the red light in Hampton, Virginia, on Mercury Boulevard. He pulled up in this little Escort blowing stuff away [with his stereo], and he looked at me, looked at my [Buick] Regal. And I was like, "OK." So he put his system on. I put my little highs and mids on. And then he just gave me a face like, "That ain't shit." When he did that I looked at him and I hit that switch. Locked the front of that thing up. He looked straight ahead; he wouldn't look at my car anymore. I started honking the horn, yelling out the window, like, "Hey!" And he wouldn't look at me. . . . When I pulled off at the light, I just tipped it over and leaned it up on three wheels and pulled over on the right. His car didn't even move. I felt like I was just the man. You couldn't touch me for shit, man. (Morales 2009)

Rocky and Jason’s stories depict multiple, intertwining gradations of pride—both in the besting of their rivals, and in the ingenuity that building a bad ride requires—that are inherent in the practice of lowriding.

Even the quietest riders don’t hide their light under a bushel. Carlos, one of the most low-key lowriders with whom I’ve spoken, explains, “I don’t necessarily like the attention. Ever since I was in school, I’ve been shy. But I like to see people’s reactions” (2009b). Clean cars, in Carlos’s estimation, are meant to be seen. They are transcendent, functional pieces of art. To not show them would do a disservice to the tradition of lowriding, for a clean car conveys more than just automotive prowess; as a glimmering, carefully wrought work of beauty, it speaks about the driver’s ingenuity, artistry, and craftsmanship. As a highly utilitarian object that is frequently offered up for public appreciation, it serves as a symbol of the lowrider and his community, conveying a serious work ethic and deep sense of responsibility and dedication. Importantly, for those
in possession of truly transcendental vehicles, a clean ride speaks about their love and devotion to a highly evolved aesthetic practice.

I asked Jessie, another soft-spoken lowrider, whether showing off a car was important to the tradition. “That’s a big part of it,” he replied.

I mean, you'll get guys that are like me. I'm pretty much a quiet guy. You would think that quiet people would lay back, not really want to be out there. But a lowrider’s going to attract a lot of attention. . . . But it’s a good thing, man. It's a good thing. It's all positive because your car represents you. You put a lot of hard work into it and sometimes you want to go out and show people what you're working on, you know? (2009b)

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It follows that for public pride to be stoked, the car must be seen; and in order for the car to be seen, it must be built. Carlos spent a solid three months working upwards of sixteen hours per day putting his Lincoln Town Car together, often arriving home after three in the morning (see figs. 10-14). Had he paid another mechanic to do the work, he estimates that the cost of labor would have been about $36,000, and he says that he lost 15 pounds in the process. But although building the car was taxing, Carlos explains that he continues to take on new lowrider projects of this magnitude because they give him purpose and an internal sense of accomplishment.

Well, doing the work gives you that feeling too. I know nobody's done a Chevy [engine] swap on a Lincoln and made it work. So that makes you feel good. . . . Modifying things is such a good reward, man, especially when other people see it. Especially when it's something crazy that no one else has done. (2009a)

Other lowriders with whom I’ve talked frequently remark on this grueling process, explaining it as a means towards a very personal feeling of pride. “Some of these cars are in backyards and they’re rusted out,” says Jessie. “And for you to take something from pretty much nothing, something that somebody left or forgot about, and bring it back to
life means a lot, just to see stuff go from one point to another. It's good, man.” (2009b)

Similarly, Johnny mentions the ways that resurrecting his car produced a feeling of accomplishment.

My first car I bought, it was, like, from the graveyard. I just rebuilt the motor. The shell and the outside looked rough. But, I was driving it. You would not believe the feeling of it, like, “Oh my god. It works!” You just step on it and we’re going. The feeling of accomplishing what you set out to do—it might be little, it might be big but you did something. The feeling of it, man—God. And you can also feel it in someone else’s ride, because you know what they went through. You’re on the same page, you have the same feeling, you have the same ability. You can just feel it. (J. Olmos 2008)

Pride is a powerful component of the nexus of feelings that comprise the experience of lowriding, and the type of pride that results from constructing a masterpiece out of castoff parts is a particularly potent strain, celebrating as it does the ingenuity and vision of the builder and the rocky road he has traveled from “nothing” to “something.”

Carlos reckons that a true lowrider’s work “never ends. It never ends. I don’t care what you do to your car, it never ends. Never” (2009a). But work, Carlos suggests, is not to be lamented; it is a route towards pride, a process that, performed skillfully with heart and mind, offers bountiful rewards.

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_We true devotees aspired to full consciousness of our rides. There was no aspect of their technology and design whose historicity we did not comprehend, whose efficacy we had not analyzed, whose aesthetics we had not contemplated. . . . Thus, years before I had ever seen an official “work of art,” I could claim an evolved aesthetic._


It’s important to realize that while the cleanest cars can attract the auto-indifferent with their flash and filigree, the modifications performed on a lowriders are in no way arbitrarily showy; rather, the customization of lowrider vehicles is largely governed by a codified set of rules about how a car should look. While these emically-derived rules—
the lowrider aesthetic code—continue to shift and evolve over time, and vary from club to club, many of the most predominant modifications have long been a part of the larger community aesthetic and are consistent across time and space. These include lowering a car, installing hydraulics, reupholstering the interior, and painting the vehicle with eye-catching designs or a smooth glossy finish. Moreover, the presentation of both car and driver is largely governed by this aesthetic code; a driver is squarely in the realm of lowriding when he is cruising low and slow, garbed in a crisp pair of khaki pants, Chuck Taylor sneakers, and a white T-shirt, and listening to a grooving golden oldie.

Early in my relationship with Ruben, I asked him why he liked to ride low. “It catches somebody’s eye,” he explained. “It’s different.” (2008a) Many months later Jessie echoed this response, remarking that he was drawn to lowriding as a child because the cars “were so different. I mean, they were just so different from any other cars.” (2009b) Over time, I have realized that this invocation of “different” offers a rich host of community-derived interpretations within its economy of language. While this project doesn’t purport to offer an extensive overview of the rich history or aesthetics of lowriding, discussion about the experiential dimensions of the practice often take us towards these realms; and while I don’t suggest that a lowrider’s primary motivations arise in opposition to middle and upper class normative values, it’s important to recognize that lowriders do in fact see their vehicles—and the work it takes to achieve them—as “different.” But how are we to understand difference?

To be sure, academic discourse on lowriding often focuses on certain types of difference, specifically the methods by which the Latino and African American otherness of race and class is reconceptualized to become a source of pride within the community.
Michael Cutler Stone suggests that the old, sagging second-hand cars—referred to by some Anglos as “Mexican Mercedes”—that were legion in West Coast barrios following World War II, became, through a process of lowrider rejuvenation, vehicles to be lauded as works of art by insiders and outsiders alike. “Low riding made a virtue out of economic necessity,” he explains. “[This] is represented by way of stylish embellishment, a commentary upon the material inequities corresponding to class and ethnic differences.” (1990: 7) This commentary, Stone argues, was effected by a conscious flipping of the simultaneously developing hot rod aesthetic; where hot rods were largely Anglo, lowriders were Latino; where hot rods were jacked up, lowriders lay low; where hot rodders valued speed, lowriders cruised slowly. Other writers noticed this oppositional relationship that was rooted in ethnicity and class. “Lowriders do happen to alter a car in a way that makes it almost the precise opposite of a style long favored by Anglo car customizers,” wrote Calvin Trillin in 1978 (73).

Be that as it may, discussions of lowrider aesthetics and tradition among members of Lowyalyt rarely focus on ethnic or class differences; in an early interview, Carlos was quick to dismiss my suggestion that an Anglo lowrider was analogous to a white rap artist, and Ruben added, “I try to have everybody, it doesn’t matter. We’re together and we’re a family and we’re going to have a good time. To me, skin color doesn’t matter.” (2008a) As an all-inclusive, multiethnic group whose members work a variety of jobs—from picking produce to running a successful auto body shop—Lowyalyt members discuss “different” in a different way. For them, the “different” qualities of lowriding suggest a rewarding departure from much more broadly shared experiences; to ride low is to find respite from the workaday life of responsibility and routine.
Members of Lowyalty explain the aesthetics of lowriding as golden rules that are the results of a long history of meditation on how cars look. This meditation itself is a prideful endeavor that conjures a shared sense of past and present; in communion with the good feeling that cruising low and slow produces, it forms the bedrock of the lowriding tradition. To the members of Lowyalty, all facets of lowriding—from the juiced resurrection of a rusting ’63 Impala to the donning of a pair of khakis for a Sunday drive—suggest a sanctified relationship between car and driver that is markedly different than those that most people have with their cars. This difference—one that club members situate within a longstanding history and tradition—is the one that Lowyalty celebrates.

I once asked Carlos why riding low was important. He replied,

That’s part of the tradition. You got to have hydraulics and you got to ride low. There’s a feeling of cruising down the street. It’s something that you love. Once you get that feeling, it’s over. (2008b)

Carlos’s description of the importance of riding low is concise and authoritative in its foregrounding of both tradition and feeling. He rides low because he must; it’s part of the aesthetic. Similarly, when I asked Jessie why khaki pants and white T-shirts—a look associated with chulos that is liable to cause police profiling—were the uniform of choice for many lowriders, he explained,

I see it as being a part of the lifestyle. It's like if you call yourself a hockey player and you show up to the hockey game in basketball shorts and a T-shirt. It just goes hand in hand. Of course, this has been going on since the ’70s, so, I mean, it's just a part of the lifestyle. Like I said, you wouldn't want to show up to that game in the wrong gear. It goes with the image. (2009b)

To follow tradition, to understand an aesthetic, is to respect the rules that govern the practice. This is not to suggest that these rules are hard, fast, and unbreakable—lowriders push at the boundaries of their tradition in a variety of ways—but rather that to be a
lowrider means to perceive the practice as a tradition with its own deliberately constructed aesthetic.

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I offer this discussion on lowrider aesthetics by way of explaining that, for Lowyalty, the way lowriding feels and the way a car looks are intimately connected. Lowyalty members choose to interpret the difference lowriding entails in ways that suggest a clean car not as an outright political protest, but rather a nudge against everyday reality, a method of heightening sensation and journeying to the beyond through a set of prescribed, but elastic, rules. When discussing experience with Ruben, Carlos, Jessie, and other members of Lowyalty, we inevitably talk about the types of features and modifications they consider important in a car. Through these conversations—talk that intermingles the realms of the technical, aesthetic, and experiential—they explain that the way a car curves and wings, the way it lays low or rears up on hydraulic pumps, enables the flow of feeling. They build their cars a certain way because that’s how it’s done. But the reason that’s how it’s done, at least in the estimation of the Lowyalty Car Club, is because it feels good.
I am now a father. I am not an expert on cars. I have no plans to own a lowrider, at least not any time soon. However, I consider the members of the Lowyalty lowrider car club friends of mine; through their cars, they have taught me some things about life.

Lowyalty speaks fluently about deep vehicular aesthetics—lines, curves, personalities—while I remain largely inarticulate. But our friendship is grounded in a different language, one of memory. We stumbled onto this realization—the realization that we all stoke feeling with memory, and trigger memory with the things with which we surround ourselves—the way that a man walking through dense woodlands might stumble onto a sunny open space. Once there, we blinked in the light, happy to have found it; from that place the woods didn’t look nearly so dark and impenetrable. Lighting the way with memory as a lamp, we have been able to forge a path through some of the dark parts as though on a shared mission, not one which pits ethnographer against community. We cut our trail with conversation.

Perhaps it’s my new status as parent, but this talk about memory causes me some small nostalgic sadness. Maybe it’s knowing that one day my brain, along with the things with which I’ve surrounded myself to make meaning out of my life, will crumble into dust; then, in my son’s mind, I will be a memory. And perhaps he will surround himself with things—my guitars or notebooks or records—that transport him to a place that reminds him of me. And then he will be gone. And so on. Will somebody someday memorialize us they way we remember those that came before us, through late-night conversation, shared stories, candid recount?
The salty cynic in me can’t help but wonder whether this process of documentation, this recording of voices and images and thoughts on scraps of paper and disks and drives, is futile in the face of the desiccating winds of time that dry everything up and blow it all away. But then I remember that the present is all we have, and I labor to live in it. And then this documentation becomes a personal mission, in much the same way that building a ’63 Impala or having a baby or writing a song becomes a personal mission—not so much an inscription on the historical record (though that is surely part of it)—as a means towards understanding our present condition, bringing ourselves and those we love happiness, and fostering pride in the ways in which we surprise and challenge and embrace and embrace our fellow man.

I have written about myself throughout this project because to not do so would be unfair to Lowyalty and myself. I have always been the filter in my writings about lowriding, and I do not purport to be an expert. But I do consider myself an attentive and sensitive listener. I love Lowyalty because of what they’ve taught me about themselves; these things have taught me about myself too. I hope this is apparent.

Lew Welch was a poet that got lost in the woods in 1971. But before he did that, he wrote a poem called *I Saw Myself*.

*I saw myself*
*a ring of bone*
*in the clear stream*
*of all of it*

*and vowed,*
*always to be open to it*
*that all of it*
*might flow through*

*and then heard*
*“ring of bone” where*
I think that Lew is saying that when we allow ourselves to be open, experience washes through and subsides; then we are left with some residue that is memory, and we are happy and fulfilled. But lately I’m drawn to the last stanza, where he talks about the ring of the bell, the way in which he sings against silence. I hope that I’ve done some bell-ringing for Lowalty. I know I’ve tried. *Pura onda.*
In Conclusion: And So

Revelations come slowly. I have been working with the Lowyalty Car Club for over a year, and we are just now finding common ground in the understanding that it’s good—pleasurable even—to think about how and why things invoke feeling. I did not initially strike out for the Alamance county line with the intention of alighting on this good community. I was lucky; I cast a line and got a bite. I hold Ruben’s good intuition and uncanny sense of timing largely responsible for our growing relationship.

As a folklorist going into the field, I know not what I seek, and even less what I will find. But this, in my opinion, is one of the quiet joys of fieldwork. I think often of the ways that our work frequently takes us on discursive paths towards the heart of the matter—whatever matter our work calls on us to address—and am frequently reminded of Henry Glassie’s obscure early journeys through the well-groomed fields of Northern Ireland. “When first I came to Ireland,” he writes, “I drove the borderland.”

Every place would have done me, but I lit quickly beside the Lough. Though I knew no one, had no leads, I knew something about the people from the way they handled their land. On an early visit, I told Hugh Nolan that I had chosen Ballymenone because of the devotion displayed on the farmland, and I dared to call his place beautiful. “Och, aye,” he replied in unsurprised, and he told me a story about a local man who was found one sunny day, standing along and gazing over the fields. To the neighbor who interrupted him, wondering what he was at, he declared, “It’s a lovely country, a lovely country altogether.” (2006: 18-19)

Like Glassie, I knew no one. But like Glassie, I was well aware that something special was being communicated through the wondrous vehicles of the Lowyalty Car Club. It has taken talk to uncover stories. These tales exist with or without me. How do I, as a folklorist, celebrate this spectacular expressive culture to an outside audience? What questions do I ask? How do I talk about feeling?
As an outsider stepping into a new community, my crises of confidence have been legion: Why here? Why me? What for? Glassie’s narrative suggests that the way an object is tended—be it a field or Chevy Caprice—implies feeling, and is good guidance for a green ethnographer wandering the straits of material and expressive cultures. The cloudiness that marked my initial involvement with Lowalty has given way to a much clearer purpose, one in which I act as advocate, cheerleader, and, importantly—for the purposes of this discussion—stoker of conversation that moves towards memory and feeling. The going is slow because waters are deep.

Of course, in discussions of belief, the question often becomes one of presentation. Can we ‘prove’ feeling to skeptics? If so, how? As a folklorist interested in feeling, my most critical task is to advocate for those with whom I work; this means sensitively portraying their beliefs and practices in a way that moves those of us outside of the community towards new understandings. I do this, when appropriate, by letting the words of my consultants and collaborators stand equally with my own, rather than by dismantling—and thereby subverting—them for theoretical purposes. I believe this arrangement demonstrates belief in a positive and convincing way, offering eloquent testimony as a means of realization. Ben Chappell, a lowrider scholar who, like myself, grapples with how to discuss the feeling of lowriding, recently remarked,

A project like this is always going to be problematic and that’s part of the work, to deal with that problematic. To me, it’s about going out into the field and having these conversations. One of the values is the way [a project like this] exposes the limitations of what has counted as knowledge. Bringing this evasive knowledge in contact with the ways we produce knowledge has the potential to influence it. It’s a very critical ethnographic standpoint; those that are not standard knowledge producers have something to teach us. (2009)
My purpose, then, is to challenge our academic boundaries by centrally positioning the words of Lowyalty, to present these speakers as masters. I do not claim expertise; my explication works, I hope, to lend a fullness to that which might otherwise be taken for granted. Lowyalty discusses flow; I, in turn, interrogate what this means to outside audiences. It is my hope that my writing does not explain the feeling out of lowriding, but rather offers ways to more fully hear and understand it. This is the purpose of this project.
Appendix A: Images

Figure 1: Ruben Olmos driving to Semora, N.C.

Figure 2: Ruben Olmos with first-place trophy, Charleston, S.C.
Figure 3: Ruben Olmos with his father’s blue Ford truck, Semora, N.C.

Figure 4: Ruben Olmos looking into the mirrors installed in the trunk of Drake’s ’64 Impala.
Figure 5: Carlos Gomez with son Nathan, Durham, N.C.
Figure 6: Ruben Olmos’s Sunday Driver.

Figure 7: Lowyalty Car Club plaque, Durham, N.C.
Figure 8: Chain steering wheel in Jason Morales’s Lincoln Continental Mark IV.

Figure 9: Jason Morales’s Lincoln Continental Mark IV.
Figure 10: Carlos Gomez working on Purple Rain.

Figure 11: The frame of Purple Rain.
Figure 12: Purple Rain’s engine in progress.

Figure 13: The interior of Purple Rain.
Figure 14: Purple Rain, Durham, N.C.

Figure 15: The Lowyalty Car Club, Spring 2008.
Figure 16: The Lowyalty Car Club, Spring 2009.

Figure 17: Charlie’s Transmission, Durham, N.C.
Figure 18: Jessie Davis with his 1964 Impala, Burlington, N.C.

Figure 19: Jessie Davis’s 1964 Chevy Impala, Burlington, N.C.
Figure 20: Jessie Davis’s Impala, Burlington, N.C.
Figure 21: Johnny Olmos (photographer unknown)

Figure 22: Rocky Olmos’s Chevy S-10, Durham, N.C.
Figure 23: Ruben Olmos’s Chevy Fleetline, Burlington, N.C.

Figure 24: 1959 Chevy Impala ragtop (photographer and location unknown)
Figure 25: Drake Ryderz’s 1964 Chevy Impala, Elon, N.C.

Figure 26: Drake Ryderz’s son in front of his ’64 Impala
Figure 27: Ruben Olmos with the North Carolina Folklore Society’s Brown-Hudson Award, Spring 2009.
Figure 28: Lowalty plaque in rear window of Drake’s ’64 Impala.

Figure 29: Club members at work on Drake’s Impala, Burlington, N.C.
Figure 30: Lowalty member L.A., Durham, N.C.

Figure 31: Lowalty cars, Spring 2008, Durham, N.C.
Figure 32: Loyalty club meeting, Winter 2009, Burlington, N.C.

Figure 33: Payaso (left) and Big Roy (right) with children, Durham, N.C.
Figure 34: Payaso’s lowrider up on three wheels.

Figure 35: Ruben (left), Drake (right), and Rocky (laughing) at a Lowyality meeting.
Figure 36: Tex (left) and Ruben (right) working on Drake’s ’64 Impala.

Figure 37: Purple Rain (rear view), Durham, N.C.
Figure 38: Purple Rain side murals, Durham, N.C.

Figure 39: Purple Rain engine mural.
Figure 40: Ruben Olmos’s Sunday Driver (courtesy of Lowrider Magazine).

Figure 41: The Sunday Driver’s wheels.
Figure 42: The Sunday Driver’s side mural.

Figure 43: The Sunday Driver’s trunk mural.
Figure 44: Suellen Olmos with Ruben Jr.

Figure 45: Ruben, Suellen, and Ruben Jr., Semora, N.C.
Figure 46: From left—Rocky, Ruben, Ramon, Jessie. Suellen and Leo Olmos in foreground.

Figure 47: Ruben Sr. (left) and Ruben Olmos, Burlington, N.C.
Figure 48: Ruben Olmos Jr., Burlington, N.C.

Figure 49: From left—Marta, Anais, Jojo, and Ruben (Sr.) Olmos, Semora, N.C.
Figure 50: Ruben Olmos Sr., Semora, N.C.

Figure 51: Ruben Sr.’s indoor peppers, Semora, N.C.
Figure 52: Ruben Olmos, Semora, N.C.
Works Cited


______. 2008b. Personal interview, Durham, N.C. 26 March.


