

## Living Lowrider Culture in San Diego

Project Director, Alberto Lopez Pulido

### 1. Project Summary:

The University of San Diego along with its community partner Via International seeks funding to produce a basic website and twenty-minute documentary on the history of lowrider culture in the borderlands of San Diego that covers a forty-year period beginning in the nineteen-fifties through the nineteen-eighties. This project examines the lowrider movement as a cultural expression that affirms the identity and history of the Chican@/Mexican community. Lowriding represents the act of building and customizing cars that are low to the ground. The proposed project entitled: *Living Lowrider Culture in San Diego* will commence in June 2012 and produce: 1) archival materials from twelve unedited interviews, 2) a twenty-minute documentary on lowrider culture in San Diego and the borderlands, 3) a basic website to archive materials and completed documentary, and 4) a public reception to occur the evening of the 42nd annual Chicano Park Celebration in April of 2013. A major outcome of this project is to feature the values of community, artistry and creativity embodied in lowrider culture as illustrated in the lives of twelve women and men who will be featured in the documentary and website. These materials will be used to educate our youth, instruct educators and community leaders on the positive values and contributions of the lowrider community and their unique cultural contributions to our California history.

### 2. Project Rationale:

The stories that will emerge out of *Living Lowrider Culture in the History of San Diego* are of critical importance and significant because they seek to debunk the overarching myth portrayed via the media and governmental (law enforcement) agencies that lowrider culture is nothing more than a deviant and destructive lifestyle. Instead, this project documents the cultural practices and worldviews that define and affirm community identity and creativity as illustrated through the stories that comprise lowrider cultural expressions in San Diego and the borderlands.

This project will enhance the public's understanding of a unique and integral segment of the cultures, people, and histories of California by examining the history of the lowrider movement in San Diego. Contemporary Lowrider Culture emerged out of a post WWII socio-economic context marked by the automotive industrial boom bringing forth a series of leisure activities around the automobile. Returning veterans along with economic prosperity provided employment opportunities for numerous urban Mexican Americans and access to class mobility. Not only was the automobile a site to counter class inequalities, but also it became a canvas for Mexican Americans to express and affirm their cultural identity, history and community. It produced a "counter-aesthetic" of "low and slow" in contrast to the mainstream "hot rod" culture where emphasis was on customizing cars that were raised high off the ground and built for speed. Lowriders were lowered and built to cruise slow (Sandoval 2003:6).

However, it is unfortunate that the few studies that have addressed the history of lowriders concentrate on the communities of Los Angeles and Santa Fe, New Mexico (see: Padilla: 1999; Sandoval: 2011; 2003; Ides: 2009). The *Living Lowrider Culture* project seeks to rectify this limitation when it comes to understanding the lowrider movement in the history of California and offer some insights as to the future of the movement. Not only will this project address San Diego lowrider history, but in addition, will reflect and analyze the impact of the lowrider movement of San Diego on the border city of Tijuana (see: Reyes and Martell: 2010). As a result, California audiences will find great appeal in this little known story focusing on the most significant international border city in the history of California.

This project will produce: 1) archival materials from twelve unedited interviews, 2) a twenty-minute documentary; 3) a basic website to archive materials and completed documentary, and culminate with 4) a public reception to share, document and affirm the rich history of the lowrider cultural movement in the borderlands of San Diego. The impact of this project twofold. 1) Affirmation and validation for the participants whose personal narratives and oral histories will comprise the core of the website and documentary. These represent oral histories that run the risk of being lost if they are not documented. 2) Exposure to new knowledge and ways of knowing for the audience. As a result of being exposed to the website and video, the audience will discover that the lowrider movement has deep roots in the history of San Diego and California. That the lowrider movement is actually a positive cultural expression with deep roots in community formation and persistence. In sum, the Living Lowrider Culture project is important because it originates with an educational objective where the documentary and webpage will be utilized to orient and educate our youth and in particular our Latin@ youth on the critical value of the lowrider cultural movement.

#### Bibliography:

- Ides, Matthew Allan. 2009. *Cruising For Community: Youth Culture and Politics in Los Angeles, 1910-1970*. PhD Dissertation: University of Michigan.
- Padilla, Carmen. 1999. *Low'n Slow: Lowriding in New Mexico*. Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press.
- Reyes, Rigo and Carlos Martell. 2010. "Lowriding Chicano Park History". *Chicano Park Day Celebration Program: 40 Años De La Tierra Mia*. San Diego, California, 24 April.
- Sandoval, Denise Michelle. 2003. *Bajito y Suavecito/Low and Slow: Cruising Through Lowrider Culture*. PhD Dissertation: Claremont College.
- Tatum, Charles M. 2011. *Lowriders in Chicano Culture: From Low and Slow to Slow and Show*. Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press.
- Stone, Michael. 1990. "Bajito y Suavecito: Lowriding and the Class of 'Class'". *Journal of Latin American Popular Culture*:

### 3. Humanities Content and/or Approach:

*"An expression of our own culture, tradition and history in a visual way that brings beauty and pride to the community."-Rigo Reyes (Community Activist)*

*"Lowrider culture...acquires meaning through the interrelationships of people to their cars...[it] is...a way of life....The power within lowrider culture lies very much with people that engage in its practice...." -Denise Michelle Sandoval (Scholar)*

The focus of *Living Lowrider Culture in San Diego* is to understand and communicate the human experience of a car culture and expression that comes directly out of a specific cultural and regional space. Utilizing a humanities lens, this study analyzes and acknowledges lowrider culture as a cultural expression that is fundamentally relational and communal. It embraces the perspective offered by Denise Michelle Sandoval that focuses on the "lived relations" that emerge out of lowrider culture. Lived relations underscores how the activities of building, customizing and driving a lowrider brings forth unique relationships, associations and cultural practices with others with a goal of building and affirming community. As the above quotes highlight, people who engage in lowrider culture create cultural meanings and affirm identities through their relationship with others because of activities associated with their vehicles.

This project recognizes lowriding as an expressive act that in fact "performs" certain aspects of ethnic culture. It underscores the fact that lowriding culture is deeply social, communal, artistic, creative and collective. It is within this historical and cultural context that *Living Lowrider Culture* seeks to document how these individuals are socially organized through their vehicles. Important emerging humanities themes and questions this project seeks to answer are the fact that lowriders are works of art and represent an extension of the person who imagined and created them. As a result, this project will uncover how early lowriding cultures required human and cultural ingenuity on behalf of its participants due to limited resources and as part of a working class cultural art form. Additional humanities themes represent an examination of the bi-national expressions in the history of the lowrider movement in the borderlands of San Diego in the face of calculated and systematic tactics by law-enforcement agencies to redefine the lowrider movement as "gangs on wheels" and move to shut down lowrider culture during the 1970s as documented in the stories told by the individuals interviewed in this project. Finally, this project will offer a gender analysis of lowrider culture by interviewing women participants who are key to the lowrider movement in San Diego.

Mr. Rigo Reyes is the community partner and consultant to this project. He has been an active member of the lowrider community for nearly forty years. Mr. Reyes has identified twelve participants who are critical to the history of lowriding in the borderlands of San Diego whose stories will comprise the documentary and webpage. They will also participate in the planned reception. All participants are identified in Table One found at the end of this proposal. The Humanities Advisor will also serve as the Project director for this grant. Alberto López Pulido is a scholar of Ethnic Studies

who has played a key role in researching and organizing the materials found in this grant and offering a critical reflection and analysis in consultation and with guidance from his technical assistants, project advisors and community partners.

#### 4. Project Activities and Programming Plans:

*Living Lowrider Culture in the History of San Diego* will analyze and document lowrider culture along the U.S.-Mexico border over the 2012-13 summer, fall and spring semesters following the University of San Diego calendar. The first phase of this project will be to collect all twelve interviews via HD digital cameras. As stated above, all participants have already been identified. All interviews will be filmed over the summer months (June-July) of 2012. A total of six days will be scheduled to film a total of twelve interviews. Two interviews will be scheduled per day. Ms. Kelly Whalen will conduct all of the video graphic work. Dr. Alberto Pulido and Mr. Rigo Reyes will conduct all of the interviews. The next phase of this project will be to edit all of the interviews that will occur during the fall semester of 2012 (August- December) with the goal of producing a 20-minute documentary with the same title as that of the grant. In consultation with Pulido and Reyes. Kelly Whalen will conduct all editing and documentary production. During this same, Ms. Susan Harris will design and program a basic website. She will create a look and feel for this project that will invite participation and appreciation of the topic. The spring semester (January-March) 2013 will consist of the research team finalizing the documentary and uploading the entire interviews onto a website for future research. The website will highlight key excerpts and anecdotes from the participants. The final phase of this project will be to organize a public reception and premiere of the documentary during the evening of the 43<sup>rd</sup> annual Chicano Park Day. (Go to <http://chicano-park.org/> for more information). It is an ideal setting due to the fact that over 325 lowriders participate annually at this event where lowrider and Chican@ culture are celebrated. Our plan is to have this event take place at the Centro Cultural De La Raza in San Diego. See: <http://www.centroculturaldelaraza.org/> for more information.

The forty-year period covered in the *Living Lowrider Culture in the History of San Diego* is organized into the following three categories:

The *foundational generation* covers the period of the 1950s. This generation is characterized by Mexican American social clubs such as “Los Gallos”, “Los Chicanos” and the “Bean Bandits” out of the barrio of Logan Heights in San Diego. These clubs were comprised of young Mexican American men that slowly began to acquire cars, and as a result, partook in the weekly social events of American automobile culture that marked the times such as the drive-in theaters. The automobile represented an avenue through which people were now gathering to support and affirm their community through their newly acquired vehicles. Salvador “Queso” Torres, Howard Holman, and Jesse Arnet have agreed to be interviewed for this section of the documentary.

The *affirming generation* spans a twenty-year period and is divided into two phases – phase one – 1960s; and phase two– 1970s. Phase one of the affirming generation identifies and documents the story of key individuals who were heavily influenced by members of the foundational generation but were instrumental in transforming and establishing the social clubs of the 1950s into clubs organized around their automobiles. It shifted the automobile and placed it at the center of all club activities. For phase one we interview Philip “Peabody” Gomez, Francisco Gonzalez and David Aguilar. Phase two builds on the vision and creativity of Phase one but with a clear focus on Chicano nationalism and resistance. This period is marked by a major growth and renaissance in Chicano lowrider culture. Lowrider clubs flourish during this period. The Chicano youth movement that pushed cultural affirmation, self-determination and resistance to the forefront of community identity in relation to the dominant Anglo culture inspired the lowrider community. The cultural icons and expressions of *Chicanismo* are embodied throughout the lowrider experience and dominant the aesthetic expression of lowrider culture. Chicano cultural history and art speaks to and affirms the community. For phase two we interview Eddie “Swoopy” Galindo, Rafael “Rafa” Garibay, Rigo Reyes, and Gloria “La Muerte” López.

The *transitional generation* covers the 1980s and as with the previous generations is depicted by a period of change. The car club associations that epitomizes the affirming generation begins to slowly disappear and are replaced by a younger generation of lowrider owners. The choice of vehicles begin to change and the more traditional lowrider community that can be found in the earlier periods begin to disappear. The direct tie to affirming community and interpersonal relationships are replaced by new and different forms of association driven by the commercialization of the practice. Lowriders enjoy a commercial success and international exposure through various media outlets that redefines traditional lowrider culture. This period is captured through the lives of Danny Estrada and Elizabeth Moreno.

Please see Table One at the end of this grant proposal for additional information regarding these generational categories.

The majority of the growth in California over the past ten years has been Latin@ youth and the County of San Diego is no exception where Latin@ children between the ages of 5-17 comprise 45 percent of all children. This is a major population this project wishes to attract. Furthermore, the general population in the border region of San Diego and Tijuana will find this project of great value as it strives to educate and inform everyone on the history and contribution of the lowrider movement in our communities. The Department of Ethnic Studies has a well-established track record of working in the community. It continues to collaborate with the Chicano Park Steering Committee (CPSC). This project will utilize this resource of the CPSC to advertise and announce this important project and event through the annual Chicano Park Celebration where 7,000-8,000 people participate each year. The Department of Ethnic Studies will also take advantage of its additional community partners, such as Via International, along with its our Offices of Public Relation and Community Service Learning as outreach

strategies for securing participants with our website and reception and premiere of documentary.

### 5. Project Evaluation and Documentation:

The major objectives of Living Lowrider Culture is to address the following issues with regards to the lowrider movement in the borderlands of San Diego: 1) debunk negative myths and replace them with positive contributions. 2) Document this history that is currently absent in the history of California that runs the risk of being lost. 3) Bring recognition to the bi-national lowrider communities. 4) Produce new knowledge and ways of knowing to the audience regarding the lowrider movement in San Diego. 5) Affirm and validates all participants who contribute to the film. 6) To educate our youth.

Objectives 1 – 4 will be evaluated through a survey with questions that addresses these themes. Surveys will be administered after each public event. In addition, a survey will be placed on the webpage for visitors to complete in addition to a webpage tracker. Objective 5 will be evaluated by giving a specific survey to documentary participants after watching the film. Objective 6 will be evaluated through course evaluations in conjunctions with courses or educational presentations at the University of San Diego, Via International, and any other community venue that will permit for an educational venue to teach about the history of lowriders in San Diego. The project team plans to present its work at national conferences such as the National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies and the American Studies Association. The project director will create a Drop Box for Living Lowrider Culture to centralize and document the process and the results of the survey for all to review. All of these materials will be linked in our webpage.

### 6. Project Personnel:

**Alberto López Pulido** is the Project Director and Humanities Advisor. He is Chair and Professor of the Department of Ethnic Studies at the University of San Diego. His research focuses on the examination on the multiple articulations of *recovery*, *discovery*, and *affirmation* by Latinas/os and communities of color throughout the history of the United States and the Americas. He has extensive research and teaching experience in the areas of Chicano/Latino Studies, Ethnic Studies Border Studies, Chicano Literature, Ethnic Studies and Higher Education. All of his credential and areas of expertise makes him an important component of this project. He can be contacted at [apulido@sandiego.edu](mailto:apulido@sandiego.edu)

**Rigoberto (Rigo) Reyes** is a Technical Consultant. He saw his first lowrider at the age of ten and by the age of seventeen bought a 1957 Chevrolet that he customized in a year. At the age of eighteen he joined his first lowrider Car Club "The Casinos." This club eventually became the "Amigos" Car Club of San Diego in 1977. Rigo's experience with lowriders led him to organize the first *Lowrider Council in California* in 1979. Rigo has received various awards for his community involvement in relation to his commitment

to affirming lowrider culture, including recognition by the County Board of Supervisors in 2002, and also from *Lowrider Magazine*. Rigo is the Program Director for Via International a non-profit community development organization that focuses on developing human potential through grassroots initiatives that benefit the community. Rigo is a native of San Diego. Rigo attended Southwestern College and National University where he received a BA in Behavioral Science. His years of being an active member of the lowrider community makes him an integral part of this project. He can be contacted at [rigo@losninosintl.org](mailto:rigo@losninosintl.org)

**Kelly Whalen** is a Technical Consultant. Kelly Whalen is an independent multimedia journalist based in Oakland, California. Her documentaries have broadcast nationally on MSNBC and PBS, including her national Emmy-nominated film "Tulia, Texas," which brought to light racial injustices in America's "war on drugs." She is a contributing producer to the ongoing PBS series, "Not In Our Town," featuring community responses to hate crimes. She recently produced and edited a series of webisodes adapted from the PBS film "Welcome to Shelbyville," about rapid demographic change and a unique approach to immigration integration in a small town in Tennessee. An alumna of U.C. Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism, Kelly was also a recipient of the International Reporting Project fellowship at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies and the Changing Face of America New York Times fellowship at the Chief Justice Earl Warren Institute on Law and Social Policy at U.C. Berkeley. Kelly's years of experience and expertise makes her an ideal consultant for this project. She can be contacted at [kellyawhalen@gmail.com](mailto:kellyawhalen@gmail.com)

**Susan Harris** is a Technical Consultant. She is the creative principal for Fluent Studios. Susan has been specializing in multimedia since 1995. She studied design and later taught at the California College of the Arts (CCA) in San Francisco. After working for various designers -- including on the ground floor of Flash software developer Macromedia -- Harris founded Fluent Studios, a full-service design agency specializing in interactive, motion, and Internet design. Fluent Studios primary clients are non-profit and media organizations with a focus on mission-oriented web design for educational and pro-social purposes. Fluent Studios' clients include MTV, BET, Current TV, Al Gore, Kaiser Family Foundation, PBS.org, KQED, and Macromedia. She has extensive experience with sites that service the educational mission of public broadcasting, and in 2001 her work on a teaching tool designed to integrate cultural diversity into classroom curricula was awarded a National Education Television Association (NETA) award. Harris co-authored a high-end Web design textbook (*HTML and Web Artistry II*) currently in circulation in both English and Spanish. Her expertise and areas of interest make her work relevant to this project. Her work has been awarded some of the most prestigious medals in the field of web and online journalism design. She can be contacted at [susan@fluentstudios.com](mailto:susan@fluentstudios.com)

## 7. Applicant Organization

The University of San Diego is an educational institution of higher learning committed to advancing academic excellence, expanding liberal and professional knowledge, creating a diverse and inclusive community, and preparing leaders dedicated to ethical conduct and compassionate service. USD is well suited for this project because it has the only undergraduate Department in Ethnic Studies in the region that is fully committed to applied research and experiential learning. In tandem with the Center for Community Service Learning, the department has established strong ties with numerous partners such as the Chicano Park Steering Committee and Via International. Please see the following link to learn more about our Offices for Community Service Learning: [http://www.sandiego.edu/csl/course\\_based/](http://www.sandiego.edu/csl/course_based/) For a relevant example of the Ethnic Studies Department's Partnerships see: [http://www.sandiego.edu/cas/es/students/chicano\\_park.php](http://www.sandiego.edu/cas/es/students/chicano_park.php) Please see the end of this grant proposal for more information regarding our partnership with Via International. One additional and critical asset from the University of San Diego is its recent designation as a "Change-Making Campus" where projects such as Living Lowrider culture are strongly encouraged. Please see the following link: [http://www.sandiego.edu/about/news\\_center/usdmag/fall-2011/around-the-park/changemakers/](http://www.sandiego.edu/about/news_center/usdmag/fall-2011/around-the-park/changemakers/) As is evident with the aforementioned, the University of San Diego and the Department of Ethnic Studies is well positioned to execute and successfully complete this project. The University of San Diego's executive officer is Dr. Julie Sullivan. Here is a link to her webpage: <http://www.sandiego.edu/about/administration/biography.php?ID=310>

## 8. Timeline :

Time Period	Activity	Who is Responsible
March 2012 (During Spring Break – March 5-9, 2012)	Project Team Meeting in San Diego. Overview of Project and scheduling of Interviews in San Diego	Project Team of Alberto, Rigo, Kelly and Susan
June-July 2012 –	Conduct interviews of 12 participants. 2 per day for a total of 6 days	Alberto, Rigo and Kelly
August – November 2012	Editing of documentary. Beginning Work on Webpage. Heavy internet communication	Kelly and Susan with assistance from Alberto and Kelly
December 2012	Update and status of Project in Oakland	Project Team of Alberto, Rigo, Kelly and Susan



January – March 2013	Finalizing of Webpage and documentary.	Project Team of Alberto, Rigo, Kelly and Susan
April 2013 – Chicano Park Day	Premiere of Documentary: "Living Lowrider Culture in San Diego @ Centro Cultural De La Raza, San Diego	Project Team of Alberto, Rigo, Kelly and Susan

### 9. Work Sample:

**Alberto López Pulido's** work sample demonstrates his qualifications as Project Director and Humanities Advisor. Here is a link to one of his many publications in the areas of Latin@ culture with a specific emphasis on analyzing and interpreting religious expressions within a Latin@ cultural context. This publication appeared in the scholarly journal entitled CENTRO out of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies at Hunter College: <http://centropr.hunter.cuny.edu/journal/journal-collections/journal-2000>

**Kelly Whalen's** work sample is a short piece about a teacher of Lion Dancing in the Bay Area that appeared on the website of the local newspaper. It is a relevant example because it deals with cultural expressions and preservation of ethnic communities. It showcases all of her skill sets – shooting, editing and producing: <http://vimeo.com/7995401>

**Susan Martin's** work sample is entitled: *Greater Than - Deciding Moments*, represents a microsite about people's deciding moment in taking a stand against HIV. The design of this Greater Than is relevant because it is organized by individual persons and each person has their own page. <http://www.greaterthan.org/decidingmoments/>



1 November 2011

To Whom it May Concern:

Via International is a 501(c) 3 service organization based in Chula Vista, California. Dedicated to building "paths to self-reliance for an interdependent world," Via International has more than 36 years of experience addressing community needs by supporting community members to become agents of positive change. Emerging from the communities, programs are designed to improve quality of life. We define Community Development as a process of engagement that includes basic needs such as food, housing and health; but also incorporates art and cultural initiatives as essential needs for true community.

For the past 28 years the low-rider car club Amigos has supported our organization to host community activities for children in the border region and has supported outreach and education with high school and college students from all over the country. An unknown attribute of San Diego based car clubs is their work with community organizations and their particular focus of engaging young people to learn about cars, paint and create designs on the cars as cultural expression, and keep young people involved in positive community-building processes.

It is for this reason we are interested to provide support and fiscal sponsorship to the envisioned historical video on the low-rider movement here in San Diego. We have for many years collaborated on community service projects with the University of San Diego and we see this project as an extension of that work.

Annually we host approximately 200 students from across the United States and from local San Diego communities to engage in an immersion service experience in the border region of San Diego/Tijuana. As one of the activities, these students benefit greatly from engaging with the car clubs, learning about the culture of the clubs, and learning about the culture of the region. We feel the video will be a key addition to the experience and education of these groups.

If you have any questions or require further information please do not hesitate to contact me directly.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Elisa Sabatini", with a stylized, flowing script.

Elisa Sabatini

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<u>Unique Characteristics and Contribution</u>	<b>Foundational Generation: 1950s</b>	<u>Unique Characteristics and Contribution</u>	<b>Affirming Generation (Phase I) 1960s</b>	<u>Unique Characteristics and Contribution</u>	<b>Affirming Generation (Phase II) 1970s</b>	<u>Unique Characteristics and Contribution</u>	<b>Transitional Generation 1980s</b>	<b>Total</b>
Pioneer of Chicano Clubs "Los Gallos"	Salvador "Queso" Torres	Key Transitional Figure from Foundational to Affirming Generation	Philip "Peabody" Gomez	Trailblazer in creating new phase of Affirming Generation >>	Eddie "Swoopy" Galindo	Key Transitional Figure from Affirming to Transitional – Mini-Trucks	Danny Estrada	4
Pioneer of Chicano Clubs "Los Chicanos"	Howard Holman	Key Figure in Lowrider Movement in Tijuana – influenced by Chicano Lowriders in San Diego	Francisco Gonzalez	Key Transitional Figure into new phase of Affirming Generation – Example of Resistance	Rafael "Rafa" Garibay	Key figure in Chicana Lowrider Movement Leader in "Specials" Women's Car Club	Elizabeth Moreno	4
Son of Pioneer of Chicano Clubs Joaquin Arnet "Bean Bandits"	Jesse Arnet	Key Figure in Lowrider Movement – Community Historian – Archival Materials >>	David Aguilar	Key Leader and Chicano Activist with a vision to create car clubs >>>	Rigo Reyes			3
				Early Chicana Lowrider – key figure in Lowrider Movement in Tijuana	Gloria "La Muerte" Lopez			1
<b>TOTAL</b>	3		3		4		2	12

**TABLE 1**