

Sightlines 2017

Gilda Posada

LOW N' SLOW:
THE EVOLUTION INTO
XICANX

Low-riding has been a form of social practice in the Chicax community since before the Chicano movement.¹ I am interested in the representation found in low-rider aesthetics as incorporated in automobiles. Cars render aesthetics mobile and make low-rider identity, pride, and culture accessible to multiple sectors of Chicax communities across *Aztlán*. However, this social practice has not always been welcoming to all due to the focus on masculinity and heteronormative ideologies.

This article focuses on the low-rider aesthetics found in the *Por Vida* digital billboard mural at Galería de la Raza, and the practices enacted by local Bay Area low-riders and the gallery staff, myself included. In June 2015, I invited Maricón Collective to create a digital billboard mural through my position as Galería de la Raza's Studio 24 fellow. Manuel Paul of Maricón Collective created *Por Vida*, which put forward a queer representation of low-rider culture and centered trans lives. In investigating *Por Vida*, and the four occurrences of vandalism of said mural, I intend to bring forward queer low-rider aesthetics and reshift the discourse of what it means to be part of the Xicanx community. I will do this through the queering of Dylan Miner's concept of "low-riding through *Aztlán*."

In his book *Creating Aztlán: Chicano Art, Indigenous Sovereignty, and Lowriding Across Turtle Island*, Miner describes *Aztlán* as neither primordially given nor fixed, and as constantly changing; it is a space that serves as utopic for Xicanos in its detribalized, indigenous notion of spatiality.² Miner presents the idea of low-riding as an intentional "slowness" that "seamlessly repositions us between various temporalities." Low-riding through *Aztlán* becomes a way to investigate *Aztlán* through engaging precolonial indigeneities alongside colonial, modern, and contemporary Xicano responses to colonization.³ I am proposing to queer this concept of "low-riding through *Aztlán*" and investigate it through a lens of fluidity that allows for intersectional experiences to come forward when considering Xicanos. While the term queer on its own has been critiqued for having the same problems as white normativity, being that it is as much a site of antagonism as is heteronormativity, a "queer lowriding through *Aztlán*" takes into consideration multiple antagonisms that index issues of class, gender, race, sexuality, and decoloniality.⁴ I am proposing that "queer lowriding

1. The spelling of the term "Chicano" will change throughout this article. When referring to the decade of 1960s the spelling "Chicano" will apply. "Chicax"/Xicanx is used in this article when talking about the current community that has decolonized the term to be inclusive of gender-fluid, gender non-conforming, queer and trans folks.

2. Dylan T. Miner, *Creating Aztlán: Chicano Art, Indigenous Sovereignty, and Lowriding Across Turtle Island* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2014), 3.

3. Ibid.

4. Jorge Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 22.

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through Aztlán” brings forward women of color or queers of color, to create a disruption or queering of colonial legacies that impose norms of patriarchy, heteronormativity, and machismo, while actively creating space for decolonized *Aztlán*.⁵ This queering would then investigate the limitations, biases, and boundaries that still exist in the current state of the Xicano community. As it stands, there has been a push toward breaking the binary that exists in the term “Xican@.” While the term has allowed many to claim ownership of this subjectivity, it still brings into question the replication of gender binaries and leaves out folks who are gender-fluid, gender nonconforming, nonbinary, or trans.⁶ For this reason, the decolonization of the term “Xican@” has advanced into “Xicanx.” A queer “low-riding through Aztlán” would thus embrace Xicanx. Xicanx is defined as always in formation and in process toward decolonization and deconstructing oppressive structures/hxstories, an act that builds on the reflections, desires, visions, and critiques of previous generations. Through this lens, I propose that Maricón Collective’s *Por Vida* billboard and the steps taken by Galería de la Raza upon its vandalism opened a decolonization process in the Xicanx/Latinx community in the Mission and online, one that put Xicanx identity into practice.

Maricón Collective was a queer Chican@/Latin@ DJ and artist collective working to preserve East Los Angeles queer history by bringing together queer people of color (QPOC) and allies through art, music, and celebration. Maricón was founded in 2014 by Rudy Bleu, Carlos Morales, Manuel Paul, and Michael Rodriguez. They shared an appreciation for traditional Chicano art forms and a dissatisfaction with the homogeneity of heterosexual machismo in Latino culture. In reclaiming the term “maricón,” a crude word for a gay man used by cis men and women to insult gay men or to question the masculinity of straight men, the group sought to redefine the term to empower QPOC. Maricón was best known for DJ events and the images used to promote their events. Paul’s role was as the lead visual artist. Most figures portrayed in Paul’s work represent a lifestyle that Maricón Collective was inserting into queerness (fig. 1).

In a Low N’ Slow process, the queering of *Aztlán* began with Paul’s *Por Vida*, “created to celebrate Transgender life, especially in the Latino community.”⁷ The mural demonstrates a queer

5. Susy J. Zepeda, “Queer Xicana Indígena Cultural Production: Remembering Through Oral and Visual Storytelling,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2014): 121.

6. Tanisha Love Ramirez and Zeba Bray, “Why People Are Using The Term ‘Latinx,’” *The Huffington Post*, last updated April 7, 2017, accessed April 17, 2017, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/why-people-are-using-the-term-latinx_us_57f53328e4b0cc0fa136a159.

7. Manuel Paul, Email exchange with author, May 24, 2015.

Chicana/o low-rider aesthetic and falls in line with what Ben Chappell calls “a means of performing masculinity” normally present in low-rider car paint jobs.⁸ In an image that resembles low-rider artwork, Paul centers a figure as the object of the gaze, for consumption and to take into the imaginary. Paul is not in the business of replicating sexualized women on the hood of a low-rider. Instead, he presents a transgender *vato* for consumption. Aesthetic choices like the roses create a border around the *vato*, allowing him to be the focus of viewers. This is further emphasized by the yellow airbrush quality behind the figure and the roses that strategically and geometrically reflect each other as they are placed along the body. A scroll under the central figure is reminiscent of the way low-riders create messages to honor their subjects. Often low-riders feature text to amplify their message; here Paul writes “Por Vida,” a term often used by Chican@s to signal dedication to a lifestyle—in this case both low-riding and being queer and trans. The lines that radiate outward in all directions from the transgender *vato* also help in centralizing and framing him as the main image. These lines allude to the rays that stream outward in traditional images of *La Virgen*, which is a frequently replicated visual in low-rider art.⁹ In this sense, the rays coming from the trans *vato* automatically elevate them into a level of praise and sacredness.

The mural is composed of three central images that make for a triptych. A scroll behind all of the figures fills the entire image area. Additionally, the space is filled with roses, chains, and an underlay of color with airbrush effects. In the center of the billboard is the transgender *vato*, with a yellow backdrop; they are shirtless, have a teardrop tattoo on their left eye, and wear a hairnet. Paul depicts stereotypes associated with a *vato*, but on a closer look, one can see that under the figure’s chest, those are not rose thorns but instead surgery scars emblematic of a trans figure. This central *vato* is then supported by two opposing images. On the left of the mural are two *vatos*. The *vatos* have goatees and ribbed white tanks. One is resting his head on the back of the other, and beams radiate from the right side of the men, signifying a motion of embrace. On the right side of the work, there are two women placed on top of a pink airbrushed background. The two women have pompadour hairstyles, dark lipstick, and sharp eyebrows, and are gazing into each other’s eyes while touching the other’s face with their hands.

⁸ Ben Chappell, *Lowrider Space: Aesthetics and Politics of Mexican American Custom Cars* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), 79.

⁹ See John Leñós and Artemio Rodríguez’s *Muerto Rider*, and Gilbert “Magu” Lujan’s low-riders.

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Once again beams radiate from where the women are embracing one another, but stemming from the parts where their bodies touch. The chains frame the mural, creating a border, and the only points where they do not meet are in several places around the transgender *vato*, which can be read as a breaking of chains. The flowers on the bottom left and right of the mural are not yet in bloom, but the flowers that surround the trans person have come into fruition. The blue color behind the *vatos*, the pink behind the women, and the yellow behind the trans person are used to purposely address gender binaries and to pay tribute to previous generations, who have informed the change in a decolonial identity formation: Xicanx (figs. 2–4).

After three days on display, the mural was defaced with blue and red spray paint. The color of the spray paint defacing the mural is relevant because blue and red are the colors affiliated with gangs. The Mission District and Bernal Heights are home to the largest Latina/o populations in San Francisco and both neighborhoods have seen a spike in gang violence over the last couple of years, especially dealing with cases of Latina/o youth.¹⁰ The Mission District is home to many and the Bayview is home to their opposing rivals, Sureños. Thus, the message that was sent was that local gangs set aside their differences to stand in solidarity against this mural.

Ironically, the center image of the trans *vato* was left untouched, signifying that the community felt a connection with the center *vato*. That is, until the following day, when *El Tecolote* published an article disclosing that the center image was a transgender person. On the same night the article was published, the trans *vato* was tagged, an indication that the community no longer felt represented by him. These actions clearly reflect a colonial mode reliant on distinguishing severe gender formations that enforce a heteronormativity.

The mural was reinstalled the following week and defaced the same night with black spray paint. This time, the defacement covered all figures and also made sure to cover the words “Por Vida.” Galería Executive Director Ani Rivera reported the incident to the San Francisco Police Department, but they said that because there were no direct threats made to individuals in the space, or graffiti that stated direct hate speech toward a group of people, they

10. Laura Waxmann, “Police and Community Address Spike in SF Mission Gang Violence,” *Mission Local* (October 2016).

11. Rivera and author’s visit to SFPD office at Valencia and 17 St. on June 23, 2015.

12. Kevin L. Jones, “Mission District Gallery’s Queer Cholo Mural Defaced Again,” *KQED Arts*, June 22, 2015. The article states that Paul and other Q-Sides artists had reportedly received homophobic comments and even threats of bodily harm through social media.

could not label the vandalism a hate crime incident.¹¹ Around this time, social media conversations surfaced that called the mural an appropriation of low-rider culture. Media outlets were labeling it a “Gay Cholo” mural, which complicated the situation as it was describing protesters as angry, stereotypical gang members. Simultaneously, individuals on social media were going onto Maricón Collective’s Instagram account, finding users on their page, and threatening them directly.¹² SFPD suggested that these messages and threats be reported to Instagram directly, as it fell outside of their jurisdiction. It is important to note that because these communities were being threatened, the primary instinct was to go to the police to seek protection. As a queer low-riding of Aztlán allows us to see, police are part of a larger structure of oppression that has affected communities of color for generations, but that consciousness would come later.

So what did this all mean for a queer Aztlán? As queer Xicanx were targeted, many showed support by donating funds for a mural replacement and installation of cameras. The mural was to be reinstalled for a fourth time, this time on a new vinyl form, which would allow graffiti removal and a faster installation. The mural installation was followed by a community vigil condemning the vandalism, and with Galería installing cameras to discourage vandalism from recurring. Once more, self-defense tactics were linked to colonial modes of surveillance and militarism, but in the eyes of many, this would protect the visual manifestation of a queer Aztlán and trans and queer lives. Still, that did not stop vandalism and hate from occurring on social media and in person (fig. 5).

Community members fell into agreement that the mural should come down. The majority who rallied against the mural did so because it showcased LGBTQIA individuals and pushed “the gay agenda.” Comments suggested that it belonged in the Castro, not the Mission, indicating that there was a place for queer folks in SF, just not in the Mission. Some claimed that Cesar Chavez and other Chicano figures would have stood against the mural—invoking *machistas* to stand against homosexual and trans peoples (fig. 6).

One summer night, two individuals took to Bryant Street and set the mural on fire. SFPD responded to the scene, took the footage from the cameras, and left a police officer on duty for an entire week. During this same time, local youths who were against

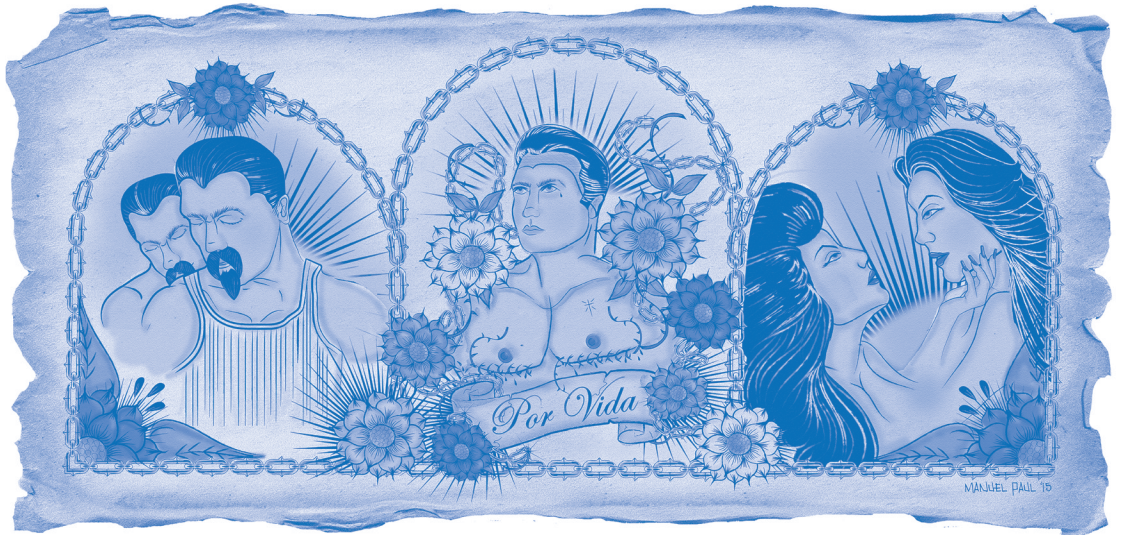


Figure 1: Manuel Paul, *Por Vida*, 2015; digital billboard.

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Figure 2: Manuel Paul, *Por Vida* 2015; digital billboard (First Deachment, June 16, 2015).



Figure 3: Manuel Paul, *Por Vida*; digital billboard (Second Deachment, June 17, 2015).

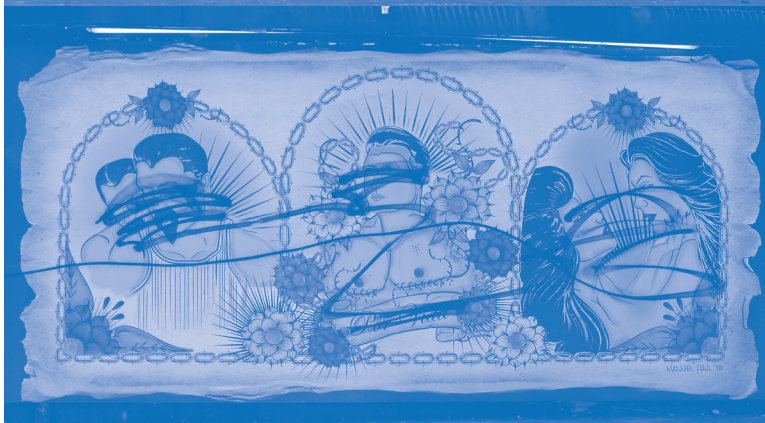


Figure 4: Manuel Paul, *Por Vida* 2015; digital billboard (Third Deachment, June 20, 2015).

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the mural were coming to the gallery and standing outside of it in protest of the mural being reinstalled once again. This occurred for about two weeks, during which time SFPD declared the incident a double felony—arson and hate crime.

Though the Galería decided not to, SFPD released video footage of two Latino men setting the mural on fire. As soon as the footage was released, news outlets began pursuing the men responsible through their channels. After the manhunt, SFPD started implementing gang injunctions targeting the youth who were standing across the streets protesting the mural. The police frequented the Muni stop and would arrest four to five youth on a daily basis.

Galería staff had to make a decision as to whether to intervene. These individuals might be among those who set the mural on fire, or in support of that, and may have made threats to LGBTQIA individuals. Yet these folks also formed part of the Chicana/o community that Galería aimed to engage and support. Galería then made the choice of not pressing charges for the individuals who set the mural on fire. Upon staff consensus, it became clear that the solution was not to keep engaging police, as police represent an aspect of the prison–industrial complex that has already damaged many families in our communities. It was here that Galería took the step towards Xicanx and decolonization, as it embraced engaging in a neverending process of consciousness that would better serve its communities. In this awareness, Galería reached out to local organizations that engage in restorative justice practices, such as HOMEY, which works directly with youth on the street to offer interventions and alternatives to violence and involvement with the juvenile justice system.¹³ Galería received training on what to do if cops showed up to arrest the youth. To facilitate Xicanx practice, Galería staff were aware that they had to keep pushing away colonial and oppressive structures that would in the long term affect the records of the youth. That is why Galería began opening its doors to the youth protesters to sit and protest inside the gallery space.¹⁴

In support of Galería’s approach, other Bay Area groups that engage in decolonial and healing practices provided space for healing circles and *limpias*, ultimately resulting in a community forum at Mission City College, where all parties were invited to join

13. CALLES PROGRAM: Community-Based Street Intervention Program, HOMEY, accessed April 17, 2017, <http://www.homey-st.org/calles-streets.html>.

14. If any youth were taken in for breaking the gang injunction, they would be arrested by undercover police and it would go on their record. Three write-ups equaled a trip to juvenile detention, and if the youth was on parole, they would automatically go back into the system on the first strike.

15. “Community Forum and Conversation” at Galería de la Raza.

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Figure 5: Instagram comments, screenshot, 2015.

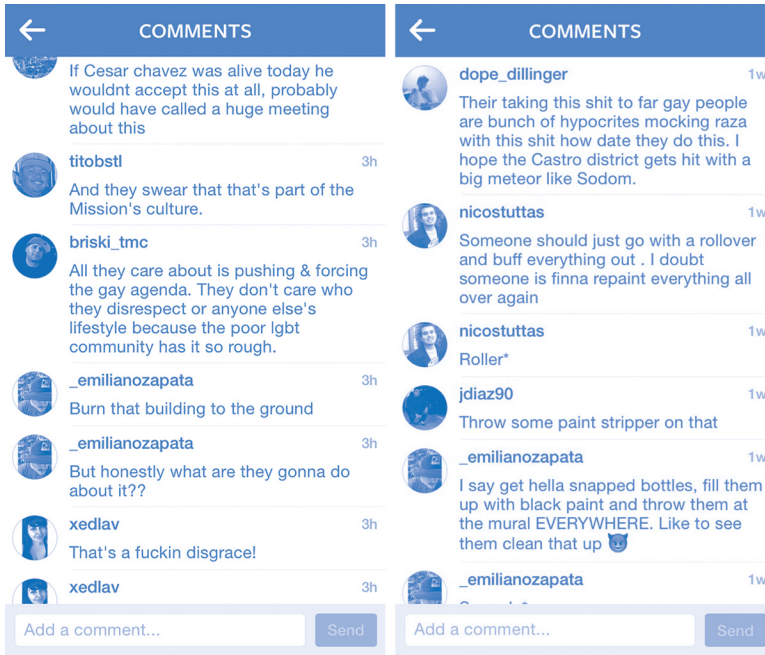


Figure 6: El Teclote, *Por Vida*, digital billboard (Fourth Decadement, Arson, June 29, 2015)



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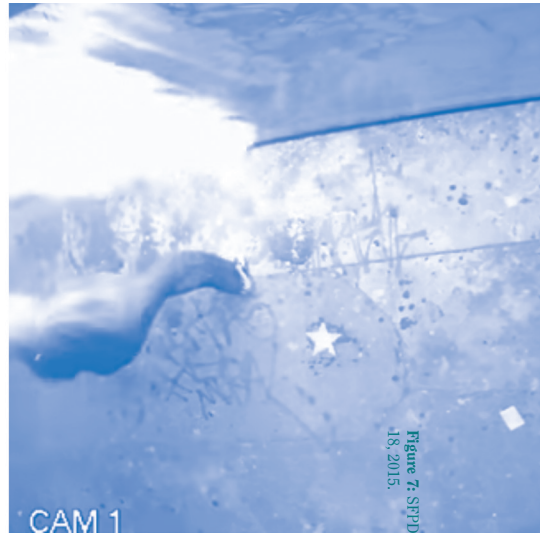
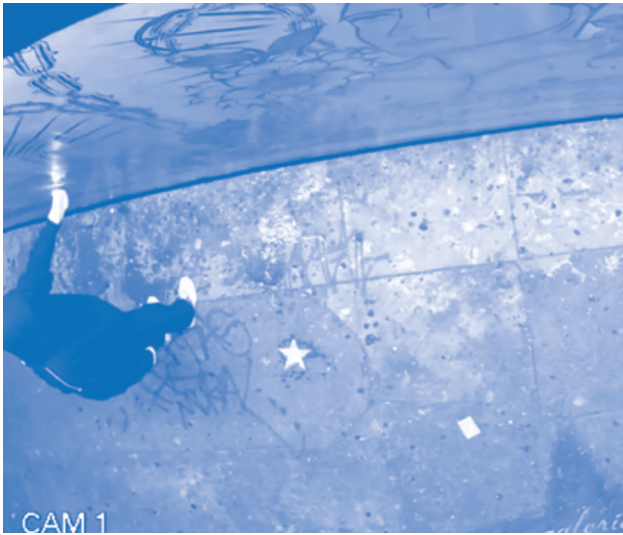


Figure 7: SFPD *Por Vida* Mural Arson Video Release; July 18, 2015.



Figure 8: Youth protesters and SFPD undercover police; Photo by Author; July 23, 2015.

the conversation. The forum consisted of two panels that were followed by community conversation mediated using a restorative justice approach by a third party.¹⁵ Galería reached out to community elders, artists, scholars, and activists to speak on the panels and facilitate a community conversation. Yolanda Lopez, a Xicana elder present at the event, took a stance in front of everyone and told Paul that “The mural created an opening” and that he “became the spear that finally pierced a hole to what the Chicana/o movement was fighting for all those years and what we thought had long been closed.”¹⁶ Lopez indicated that Paul’s mural had created a transformation and allowed for the boundaries of the subjectivity of the term “Xican@” to continue to be expanded in the transformation into Xicanx. With “Xicanx,” Galería put out a statement that it “will continue to outreach to both supporters and opponents of the mural, with the goal to have as many perspectives on the issue,” acknowledging that our experiences are fluid.¹⁷ Although no one from the opposing viewpoints showed up to the community forum, the mural became a space where praxis occurred, and ultimately that is the stage in which Xicanx is advocating to operate in.¹⁸ Xicanx is not an end, it is rather a way of life, a constant negotiation with oneself to open up and to keep making ways for inclusions, instead of marginalizing and excluding others, as we have done for generations because of colonization. If we are to low-ride our way through Aztlán, we have to be aware that although we carry roots to this land, it belongs to no singular person or experience. In this sense, a low-rider queering of Aztlán allows for a collective ownership and accountability of us all. As Juan Fuentes said, “We are a community *por vida*,” and we have to reach a place where we can transform together, not against each other.

16. Yolanda Lopez statement at Mission City College Community Forum, July 25, 2015.

17. “Community Forum and Conversation” at Galería de la Raza.

18. Elisabetta Silvestro, “Galería Forum Well Attended But Not by Mural’s Opponents,” *El Tecolote*, last updated July 31, 2015, accessed April 17, 2017, <http://eltecolote.org/content/en/news/galeria-forum-well-attended-but-not-by-murals-opponents/>.

