Abstract

This article examines the production of space and contestation of spatial governmentality that occurs in the everyday cruising practices of lowrider car customizers in Austin, Texas. Lowrider style, practiced mostly, but not exclusively, by Mexican Americans, is a form of automotive aesthetics which carries associations with working-class, Latino/a barrio communities. Drawing on critical theories of the production and governance of space, I trace the politics inherent in lowrider cruising and the confrontations with police it occasions. From the perspective of lowriders, I present a critique of community policing as a practice of government, which has the effects of criminalizing lowriders and subjecting them to heightened levels of surveillance. [Keywords: lowriders, space, Mexican Americans, spatial governmentality]
air, seeming frozen in the act of lunging toward the cars that passed, as if it could spring out of the lot.

We stood around the parked cars and watched traffic, commenting on other custom vehicles as they passed, with metal plaques or stickers—“logos”—in the windows claiming rival or friendly club allegiances. A truck with tinted windows, wire spoke rims and a customized lowrider bike on display in its bed pulled in next to us, followed by a root-beer brown 1965 Impala. Logos on both rear-view windows identified them with Stylistic Syndicate. Members of the two clubs greeted each other with handshakes, and stood around chatting, always with an eye on the flow of traffic nearby. I noticed a car parked on the opposite side of the lot, slightly uphill from the street—a 1980s GM sedan that I had not seen before, relatively uncustomized apart from its shiny chrome rims. The logo covering the rear window identified the car as belonging to Just Cruzin, a relatively new car club in town that was quickly acquiring a reputation among the Kings and the Syndicate as being “troublemakers.” A lone Cruzer stood leaning against his car and watching the traffic and the rest of us warily.

A car passing in the westbound lanes on the other side of the street gunned its motor and sounded its horn in a rhythm something like “Shave and a Haircut,” the signature of the Cruzers. A few minutes later, a caravan of several cars rolled by the opposite direction, all honking the cadence. One car did the first section, “Shave and a haircut,” and the others responded with three honks, as if to articulate the syllables of “Just Cruzin” instead of “six bits.” The Kings observed, nonplussed—the tune didn’t carry quite the aggressive connotation it would on some streets in Mexico—but the encounter was not without tension. Whether or not they deserved the reputation for making trouble, the Cruzers were a rival club.

The Cruzer caravan pulled onto the side street and began to make their way into the lot, pulling up beside their lone comrade. Someone beside me said softly “chota...” (police). I turned around and saw an Austin Police Department patrol car entering by the opposite driveway. The red and blue strobe lights on the roof came on as the car stopped in the middle of the lot. The officer did not leave the car, but spoke over his loudspeaker: “Alright. Everybody clear the parking lot,” We all casually walked to our respective cars, calling over our shoulders to each other to establish the next meeting place.

“Alright. Everybody clear the parking lot,”

“Want to go to the pawn shop?”
“Want to go to the pawn shop?”
“What about the Bingo?”
“Alright, the Bingo.”

The lowriders rolled one by one out of the Pizza Hut lot and dissembled into the night.

This vignette illustrates how the mundane weekend cruising of lowrider car clubs produced and contested various configurations of social space. Lowrider cars are identified by a set of customization techniques
distinct from other styles like “hot rods” and “tuners,” and are predominately, though not exclusively, built and driven by Mexican Americans in the southwest U.S. (Best 2005; Bright 1995, 1997, 1998; Chappell 2006a, 2008; Mendoza 2000; Penland 2003; Sandoval and Polk 2000). Lowrider style is an idiom of everyday performance that had been consistently popular on the street for years before showing up in mainstream media culture via films like Boulevard Nights, Heartbreaker, Boyz in the Hood, Selena, Napoleon Dynamite, and Cars; as well as west-coast hip-hop videos; and most recently television shows like Pimp my Ride and The Low Life. These mediations, however, and the competitive car shows where the most elaborately customized vehicles are on display, are less representative of everyday lowriding than the cruising scenes that take place in cities and towns around the country, where lowriders gather to show off their cars and socialize. This article uses lowrider style as a focal point, not for formal or aesthetic analysis (Chappell 2008), but to conduct an ethnography of space and power from the vantage point of the cruising scenes created by lowriders on a regular, contingent basis. While the specific material poetics of lowriding is a topic worthy of inquiry, my concern here is to track the effects of this cultural form by crafting an encounter between everyday lowrider practice and social theories of space. By this route, lowriding offers a view on governmental practices of managing criminality in a diverse and stratified U.S. urban setting.

During my field work with lowriders in Austin from 2000–2001, with revisits in 2003, 2005 and 2006, it was cruising that particularly convinced me that lowrider car style, like many expressive cultural forms, is a spatial practice (de Certeau 1984; Thrift 2004). When a lowrider appears in traffic, it affects (indeed, it effects) the space it occupies. Since lowriders are associated in particular with urban, working-class Mexican Americans, the appearance of lowriders has the capacity to inscribe a site as a “barrio” place.²

If the performance of lowrider style produces a particular social space by asserting race- and class-associated signs, it is essential to recognize that the resulting lowrider space is specifically gendered. Like in other genres of car customization and imaginaries of “the street” and automobility more generally, lowriding carries multiple associations with masculinity, represented, for instance, in club names like the Boulevard Kings. Yet to define lowrider style simply as a form of masculinity presents it as more monolithic than it is, and discounts the long-standing presence and involvement of female lowriders, who do not necessarily view their own participation as masculine (Bright 1994; Sandoval 2003; Penland 2003). While lowriders are more frequently assumed to be men, gender roles within lowriding are diverse and subject to negotiation. Women were present in various capacities in the cruising scenes I frequented as a researcher: as car enthusiasts themselves, as less interested but tolerant wives, or as players in courtship that is a major social activity in lowrider space. By no means a utopia of gender equality, the space of lowriding, in its contingent and mundane construction, presented at least possibilities
for subtle flexibility between gender scripts that made gender no less of a complex and negotiated field than race, class, or culture.

What I call “lowrider space,” results from the performance of a particular version of Mexican American identity in public. On the street, lowrider style makes specific and precise reference to a particular range of social positions that are themselves complex, contested, and ambivalent. In my field research, the possibility of inscribing space with this social content, that is of giving sites particular spatial identities, at times contested dominant identifications of an area, and had the capacity to stimulate repressive responses from authorities. Thus lowrider cruising and its reception are factors in what Henri Lefebvre called the social production of social space (1991). The spatio-cultural activity of lowrider cruising provides an optic on the politics of the production of space, in tension with the effects of policies, practices, and discourses of policing and other factors in the urban spatial regulation. The result presented here, like any “partial truth” (Clifford 1986), is not a comprehensive account of what goes on in the urban spaces where lowriders cruise. Rather, my aim is to render the everyday operations of a particular formation of “spatial governmentality” (Merry 2001; Foucault 1991) as it was experienced and encountered by lowriders in a particular context. Without being a definitive representation of this context, such a rendering indicates part of what is at stake in the spatial politics of everyday cultural practice.

Constructing and contesting “the barrio”

David Díaz notes that studies focusing on the experiences of Latino/as have been grossly underrepresented in the planning and urbanism scholarship, despite the centrality to urban studies of Los Angeles, which is home to the second-largest population of Latino/as in the U.S. after New York and the second-largest population of Mexicans after Mexico City (2005). Recently, a burgeoning literature has sought to address the ways Latino/a communities and social positions are historically constructed in relation to urban space (Arreola 2004; Brady 2002; Dávila 2004; Davis 2000; Dear and LeClerc 2003; de Genova 2005; G. Pérez 2004; Ramos-Zayas 2003; Valle and Torres 2000).

Raúl Homero Villa’s study of the cultural politics of space for Chicano/as in Los Angeles is particularly relevant (2000). He details how “dominating spatial practices” in arenas of law and policy, the material construction and destruction of urban landscapes, and public discourse have operated historically to relegate Mexican American populations to particular locations and to construct those spaces and communities as marginal, giving them what Michel Laguerre terms a “minoritized” status (1999). Villa follows Albert Camarillo in calling this “barrioization” (2000:15). Through barrioization, space comes to be viewed as both reflective and constitutive of the subjects that occupy it, in the same way that Laguerre argues that public imaginaries take minoritized space to
provide both a causal explanation and political justification for the social marginality of a population (1999:96). In addition to the “top-down” processes originating outside of the communities on which they work, everyday practices in urban space can reinforce this designation, experienced as police surveillance, selective law enforcement, and collective punishment. Yet Villa notes, the historical reality of the barrio is not only repressive. The production of “geographical identity” also provides cultural material to be deployed as a resource in the legitimation of local knowledges, what he calls, borrowing from the underground magazine Con Safos, “barriology” (2000:6). Through the unofficial or “subjugated knowledges” (Foucault 1980) of barriology and its outward performances and textualizations, Villa charts the production of an alternate city within the metropolis of LA:

If not always with the producer’s awareness of their collective effect, these practices cumulatively produce and reproduce a mexopolis within the metropolis . . . This Raza second city—contrary to the rigid laws of physics but consonant with the fluid arts of urbanity—exists in the same space of the putative Anglo-American first city (signs of its diminution are everywhere to be seen), yet in a significantly other place from its dominant cultural milieu (2000:234–235).

Thus in the interplay of barrioization and barriology, both the production of particular formations of social space and their representation in discourse become sites of struggle over social position and the makeup (one might say the complexion) of the public sphere that is construed as the “mainstream” of society.

Lowriders play a dynamic role in these processes by carrying an association with the barrio even as they move throughout cities calling to mind Susan Stewart’s brilliant work on graffiti. She argues that graffiti pieces linger as trace signatures of their authors on city walls (1994:215). As Stewart suggests in the title of her book, Crimes of Writing, and as other scholars elaborate (Sánchez-Tranquilino 1995; Ferrell 1996; Austin 2001), in a social context in which populations are governed spatially, such representations acquire a spatio-cultural politics that pits claims to autonomy against a perception of social disorder. Like graffiti, lowriders assert a presence of marginalized urban knowledge and practice. Serving to mark a neighborhood as a barrio, or to assert barriological knowledge in the public sphere, lowriders are often interpreted by police and other authoritative audiences as social indicators of marginality, even as members of barrio communities see them as signs of home.

In the space of traffic, lowriders serve a synecdochic function, the barrio that moves. The closure of popular cruising sites by police, the most famous of which was L.A.’s Whittier Boulevard (Rodríguez 1997), not only targets lowriders in an assertion of control of public space, but becomes a symbolic exercise of state power over an entire community. Interviewees in Austin related to me how, when moving outside of demarcated “barrio” neighborhoods, they often met with a range of responses that figured them as a threat to the spatial order, from
questioning—"What are you doing in this neighborhood?"—to more aggressive and even violent reactions. Functioning as a flashpoint of ongoing spatial conflicts, lowriders lay bare the processes through which social space is produced and contested, and the relationship of these to the shifting and yet permanently uneven ground of cultural identity.

Barrio spatial and collective identity was particularly contested when I started fieldwork in Austin at the turn of the century during a period that could be recalled as the “high-tech boom.” Austin’s status as one of the fastest-growing cities in the U.S. during this time related to a nationwide reputation as a center for the “creative class,” a Southwestern bohemian outpost and self-styled “Silicon Hills” (c.f. English-Lueck 2002). Despite the importance for Austin’s distinctive cultural character of an historical relation to Mexico, consumably manifested in food and music (Valle and Torres 2000:ch.3; Dávila 2004), the construction of Austin as a high-tech, artsy mecca harbored an image of a largely white and high-income city. Contrary to accounts of the high-tech economy as making a substantial break with the industrial economic past (Florida 2002), the centrality of information industries did not eliminate so much as obscure class relations, reproducing a “digital divide” in the social landscape (Fuentes-Bautista and Inagaki 2005). The persistently segmented economy still required a substantial “Other” to this high-tech city (Pitti 2004; Ross 2002:123–4). Mexican Austin, including recently arrived migrants and second- or third-generation Mexican Americans, provided much of the labor in service industries (e.g. automotive mechanics) undergirding the information economy.

The need to rethink a notion of Austin as inhabited by Anglo/white, well-financed “knowledge workers” persists. At the close of the 1990s, it was newsworthy when the local press “discovered” that a plurality of students in the public schools had Spanish surnames—more recently, Latino/as made up 60 percent of the student body. Latino/as accounted for 63 percent of Austin’s population growth in the past decade, and in 2007 constituted 34 percent of the city’s population (Castillo 2007). Austin’s diversity, like that of so many American cities, has been represented, managed, and contested spatially. Most generally, “East Austin,” demarcated from the University of Texas, the state capitol, and centers of the high-tech industry by the concrete curtain of Interstate 35, was constructed in a 1928 city master plan as a majority-“minority” side of town (Garza 1998; Shank 1994:11). The central neighborhood known to residents as the “Eastside,” had been a barrio with a predominately Mexican-descended population for a couple of generations by the time of my fieldwork, but was targeted for gentrification due to the “character” offered by its residential housing stock and proximity to downtown (Aoki 1993). Thus there were high stakes to lowriders’ identifying with “barrio” spaces and communities: it amounted to proclaiming a Latino/a presence in “gringolandia” and claiming territory in the cut-throat political economy of real estate and public space in a “lifestyle” city.
The production of space

The Lefebvrian notion of the production of space has animated recent spatial theory (Massey 2005; Merrifield 2002; Soja 1989, 1996; Thrift 1996). Among the aspects of Lefebvre’s work that contemporary scholars find particularly useful are his open-dialectical approach to socio-spatial analysis and his concern for cultural and signifying practices in everyday life and political economic and physical contexts (McCann 1999:168). This is a crucial corrective for spatial analysis that dwells exclusively on such “macro” or “top-down” concerns as the design of the built environment, but neglects the practices of everyday life (de Certeau 1984). For example, in Fredric Jameson’s famous article on postmodernism and his spatial critique of the Bonaventura Hotel, he notes only in passing the “great Chicano market” that adjoins this buildings, and that serves him rhetorically as its Other (1991:12). He does not enter that market (or rather, the market does not enter his analysis) to see how postmodernity is “made effective” (Ferguson and Gupta 2002:983) and experienced “on the ground” (Limón 1994:107), which is to say in the less-theorized, more improvisatory processes than those sedimented in works of architecture.

Such a restricted sense of the “production” of space as building, designing, and policy-making, to the neglect of what Setha Low calls the “construction” of space through its use and consumption (Low 1999:112) reflects a more general pitfall in social analysis. The risk is that when considering the making of streets and buildings as opposed to the popular use of space, scholars fall prey to the same fallacy as in considerations of structure versus agency or base versus superstructure; that is, taking one term in the relation to be uniquely determinative while relegating the other to a more benign, epiphenomenal status (McCarthy 2006). Lefebvre rails against this reification of analytical distinctions as anathema to his method of a dialectical apprehension of social totality. He writes

We note that the concept of socio-economic formation has almost disappeared from Marxist writing, to be replaced by the simplified scheme: “economic base—political superstructure”. Theoretically, Marxist thought and method have become impoverished. Practically, neither capitalist society nor socialist society in the process of formation has been studied in a concrete way (1992:52 emphasis in original; cf. Soja 1996:36).

As in the best of Western Marxism, Lefebvre’s dialectical approach to social analysis views base and superstructure, economy and ideology, as mutually constitutive (Williams 1977). In the same vein, considering that spatial questions address economies of access to and control of territory, it makes sense to analyze a “socio-spatial formation” as perpetually contested, an unsynthesized dialectic. The challenge is to glimpse how the spatial productivities of policy, the state, and the built environment operate in kinetic relation to the constitutive uses of space, to the human beings who occupy and traverse it, and to signifying practices like
lowriding. Matters of performed identity and the spatial practices of everyday life must not be consigned to “some superstructural attic” (Soja 1989:43), but be considered as aspects of the production of social space (McCann 1999:168). It is in this mundane process of production that I joined lowriders during fieldwork on Texas streets, and in which I argue lowriders in many cities take part regularly.

Lowrider cruising

In Austin, there are particular spots where lowriders gather on weekends. During my research, Friday and Saturday nights were the times for cruising on Riverside Drive, and most early Sunday evenings lowriders gathered in a park in Austin’s Eastside barrio. The park was known officially as Fiesta Gardens, but nearly every lowrider I met called it Chicano Park. These had not always been the cruising sites. Several lowriders in their 20s and 30s told me about “back in the day,” the 1980s, when they spent weekends cruising Sixth Street, the main downtown bar and nightlife district of Austin. There was also an active Sunday cruising scene then that filled Chicano Park. By the early 2000s, Sunday cruises were generally restricted to a parking lot at one end of the park next to an elementary school, and Sixth Street was closed to automotive traffic during the peak partying hours of Friday and Saturday nights.

Lowriders generally attributed the attenuation of the park scene to a rise in gang violence in the 1980s, which was a traumatic period for the community. José, a lowrider who witnessed a gunfight as a young father in Chicano Park with his children, remembered this time as a turning point in the spatial regulation of lowriders by police. He noted, “after that they came out with the curfew, open containers, no glass containers, and they started showing up on horses, so they can look down and see into your car better.” In addition to interpreting the appearance of mounted police as a measure of spatial regulation, José considered the closure of Sixth Street traffic as an attempt to control cruising. Without considering the lowriders’ perspectives, turning Sixth Street into a pedestrian zone make sense as an attempt to appeal to tourists and college students the same way that Beale Street in Memphis and the French Quarter in New Orleans do. Regardless of the plans and intentions that actually led to this policy, which are not my immediate concern, the effect of pedestrianizing Sixth Street was to move lowriders and cruising out of the downtown area on weekends. During my fieldwork, lowriders did not go quietly along with this arrangement, cruising around the perimeter of the closed areas in downtown until the lanes reopened after last call at 2:00 am. Since the advent of these circumstances though, the situation for lowriders has been a constant struggle over space: “People are getting places [to cruise], and then after a week or two, cops will shut it down.” The experience of police shutting down cruising sites ties the Austin lowrider scene to a broader history of street closures and conflict between police and lowriders (Penland 2003:38–39).
The cruising on Riverside that I experienced was a constant game of “getting places,” which lowriders also called “posting up,” and being “moved on” by the police, as illustrated in the anecdote that opens this article. Contrary to José’s implication that lowriders manage to keep “places” for a couple of weeks, I found this to be a process that could occur multiple times in one night. Lowriders began to gather in a parking lot, usually of a closed business near the main drag, and when police arrived or took notice, dispersed. This practice of moving people on coincided with police pulling lowriders over in traffic. Every lowrider I met had been pulled over, often times for reasons that they described as dubious at best—like allegedly broken brake lights that mysteriously fixed themselves as soon as the car was stopped. By both breaking up impromptu lowrider gatherings and subjecting lowriders to heightened surveillance through traffic stops, police may have been responding to the popular association of lowriders with gang culture, but from the lowriders’ point of view, it was clearly a matter of racio-cultural profiling.

Many lowriders take great pains to distance themselves from associations with gangs, drugs and criminality by forming self-described “positive” clubs with strict membership requirements and disciplinary structures, or taking on various charity projects. In Austin at least once this included a “taco plate” fundraiser for a police benevolent fund—the APD declined to send a representative, which the lowriders took as a slight. Nevertheless, it is clear that some gang members do appreciate lowrider style, and I doubt any lowrider would claim that there has never been a lowrider car financed in part by the odd drug deal or other illicit means. But any characterization of lowriding as necessarily linked to criminality oversimplifies matters. In any event, my research does not provide an answer to the moral question of whether lowriders are essentially or predominately criminal (Jameson 1991:62). More to the point, as Andrew Ross argues in a different context with reference to rap music, censorship, and obscenity debates in the courts (Ross 1993), the generalizing question of “positive” or “negative” misses a crucial point about the effects, if not the intentions, of moral panics over expressive culture. Despite ostensible aims of preventing crime, many times the effective function of police interaction with lowriders in public space is the regulation of space. This regulation of space is thus a stake in the public reception of lowrider style regardless of the accuracy of lowrider profiling.

Spatial regulation itself involves a political problematic that is by no means self-evident or settled. City parks, for example, must remain accessible to the public in theory, but can also be subject to rules such as a sundown curfew. The production of public space also implies a process of designating and sorting out of the individuals and uses that are constituents of “the public” from those that are unwelcome (Deutsche 1996). Such interpellations often proceed obliquely through the management of space through measures like park use fees (Davis 2000:63) or quality-of-life ordinances (Mitchell 2003).
These processes are also not dependent on the intentions, stated rationales, or character of the individuals involved in them. The patterns of regulation that became clear from the vantage point of lowrider space are not to be taken to indicate the unique culpability of particular actors, such that their replacement would eliminate the problem. Urban spatial regulations that I am examining here are more a matter of “policing” than “police officers,” in a way analogous to Foucault’s notion of “governmentality” as a rationality emergent in discourse and other practices that proceed according to a certain logic (1991). Foucault’s concept has been picked up by scholars interested in recent neoliberal operations or “technologies” of power that have extended many functions of government to everyday spheres. Rather than being coterminous with the state, “government” in this Foucauldian usage refers more generally to the “the conduct of conduct,” which may also be practiced by non-state actors. The scholarly discourse on governmentality signals a critical method of tracking historically specific forms of rationality through which government is practiced (Inda 2005). The self-governance and production of docile subjects represented by discipline (Foucault 1979) may be part of this overall assemblage. The converse of disciplinary production is the management of those populations deemed not self-governable.

A governmental dynamic of spatially configuring who and what “belongs” in the public was played out weekly in the lowrider scene of Austin. Most Sunday cruises I attended at the park ended with a police car pulling into the entranceway to the parking lot after dark, so cars could only leave, but not re-enter the lot. When not intervening to alter the scene this way, the police generally parked on an empty field adjacent to the parking lot and observed the cruising. Occasionally patrol cars themselves would take a cruise on the circuit into and around the parking lot, or officers would walk among parked lowriders. Although they did at times write tickets for moving violations, much of the interaction police had with cruisers was reminiscent of teachers trying to maintain an orderly classroom through close surveillance and the micromanagement of behavior. Officers would direct lowriders to straighten out their parking jobs so that cars fitted entirely between the lines of a parking space without crossing into the next space. When lowriders paused in the midst of a cruise through the parking lot to chat with others outside the car, officers ordered them to keep moving so as not to impede “traffic.” Just by their presence, officers regulated the use of hydraulics and sound systems, both of which could bring tickets for their owners. If someone was playing their system to show off its power when a patrol car approached, friends would warn the lowrider to turn the music down and avoid being cited.

Very much akin to Villa’s dialectic of barrioization and barriology, the contestation of lowrider cruising space in Austin was part of a larger struggle between a narrative of criminality and a narrative of positivity or community. On top of its relevance for the interpellation of citizen-subjects, this struggle produced contested space, as sites came to be
defined simultaneously as high crime areas and as home places with names like Chicano Park. The contestation of spaces through their use as lowrider cruising scenes epitomizes a long-standing ideological battle over whether urban places and populations are to be represented as pathological, disorganized, or dysfunctional; or as sites of social agency, knowledge, and self-representation (Kelley 1997). The production of space is not a point of arrival, when one of these narratives wins out over the other; it describes a process, the ongoing clash between possibilities, like Villa’s metropolis and “mexopolis” (Thrift 2006).

To be clear, the intentions of either lowriders or police officers alone are insufficient to sway this contest one way or the other. Analysis should therefore move beyond tidy definitions of the parties in conflict to examine the historically specific operation of politics with these sites of struggle (Hall 1981). It is crucial to include in this analysis the question of how the productive process of spatial formation works through everyday practice, including the ways that culture serves as both the object and instrument of power.

Community policing/spatial governmentality

In 2000, the Austin Police Department (APD) held a series of public town hall meetings to discuss with various neighborhood communities the new community policing approach that for about a year had been designated as the department’s official strategy. Community policing has acquired a certain cachet in most cities around the U.S. (Merry 2001:16), and the term refers to nostalgic images of beat cops who know the neighbors, check storefront doors at night, and in general enjoy a good rapport with their constituents. As Ramona Pérez demonstrated, community policing has the potential to be informed by cultural contrasts between officials and community members, with the possible effect of disrupting stereotypes and uninformed presumptions of criminality (2006). This may well be the purpose of community policing, as well as its reality in some contexts, but from the vantage point of lowrider space, policing practices looked very different. The Austin town hall meetings provided clues about this discrepancy, as the discourse turned to the management of space, including the discernment of the potential criminality of particular sites and populations. This theme advanced a particular rationality or logic through which practices of everyday life could be interpreted as either legitimate or symptomatic of disorder. The meetings were not a glimpse of some kind of control center directing the regulation of space, nor did they provide a generalizable representation of individual officers. Yet as public presentations in the communities with which lowriders were identified, they were part of the discursive practice of the policy—the voicing of its rationale.

The narrative at the APD meetings called for self-policing as part of the community policing program, presented through recruitment of citizens as “partners,” the expansion of neighborhood watch programs, and
related measures. But this was not to undermine or even challenge the authority of the police proper. At the Eastside APD meeting an officer argued that people living in places designated as high crime “hot spots” should not complain about police harassment, since “you have to trust that the police know what they’re doing.” This notion of community involvement that does not diminish in any way the authority of police mirrored a document from the same era of Austin politics, the city’s representation of its mid-1990s Anti-Gang Initiative to the United States Conference of Mayors for its Best Practices Database (City of Austin 1999). The Database document notes that “the community has been involved” in that “citizens get training and other information from the officers and officers get current information about gang activity from the citizens.” Any civilian responses to or critiques of law enforcement policy are absent from this official record of community involvement—the role of any involved community members was to be as consumers or providers of information.

More important than community involvement at the APD meetings was an implied cartography of the city, in order to identify “hot spots” of probably crime, and to focus “suppression” activities there. The APD presented its strategy as being to saturate hot spots with uniformed officers in an attempt to deter crime in places where crimes were likely to occur. This relied on a calculus of risk that, as it classified certain sites as likely scenes of crime, by implication classified the people there as likely criminal. At one town-hall meeting, an APD spokesperson reported proudly in her presentation on the success of a hot-spot strategy called “high-profile interdiction” which involved stopping and identifying anyone “out there” in a hot spot. This served as a performance of police control, but was also legitimate, she argued, since when people are seen in hot spots, “after a certain time, they’re up to no good.” At this point, she showed a slide of a man viewed from the back wearing the cholo style favored by many lowriders—an oversized plaid shirt, shaved head—being put into a patrol car.

As implied by the photo, the tendencies of community policing toward spatial regulation, especially through the interpretation of visual cues as symptomatic of criminality, can have a particularly strong impact on lowriders. The high visibility and race- and class-marked aesthetics of lowrider cars increases a driver’s chances of being targeted for surveillance. Even more generally, lowriders stood to be found on the wrong side of the “community” boundary implied in the discourses about “quality of life” issues. As one of the focal points for policing hot spots that the APD announced, this referred to a range of minor infractions that were interpreted within a “broken windows” theoretical framework as indicative of social disorder. According to this logic, a non-functional parts car on blocks in a driveway or the sound of a high-wattage and bass-heavy stereo system diminishes the quality of life for legitimate subjects of a community, either by putting them ill at ease or by contributing to a context of likely criminality. No one at the meetings I attended self-identified as a lowrider or car customizer,
despite the high number of clubs that cruised some of the host neigh-
borhoods. In this way the meetings performatively constituted a com-
munity to which lowriders were figured as “Others.”

As I have suggested, the effects of community policing in Austin, (with regard to lowrider cruising) resonate with Foucault’s analytics of
governmentality, particularly the sociospatial relation that Sally Engle
Merry has termed “spatial governmentality” (2001). Spatial forms of
governmentality in contemporary urban contexts depart in key ways
from the discipline that Foucault documented in early liberal techniques
of government (1979). In particular, Merry argues, recent governmental
technologies of spatial production and policing tend to abandon the
therapeutic or reformatory aims of discipline, which seek to produce
docile subjects through such means as incarceration in the penitentiary
or psychological treatment. Rather, spatial governmentality emphasizes
the regulation of space by managing populations, that is by removing
undesirable persons or practices from particular sites: “The logic is that of
zoning rather than correcting…” (Merry 2001:17). In a situation of
spatial governmentality, then, it is not that particular behaviors (devi-
ance) render the production of a particular legitimate kind of subject
problematic, so much that the presence of certain individuals or collect-
tivities renders problematic a particular production of space. Given that
APD practices in regulating lowrider space were directed by a cartogra-
phy of hot spots, and that material signs had the potential to figure a
place as probably criminal, the production of a site as anything other
than a hot spot was contingent upon removing or managing those signs.
Thus a strategy of “moving on” offending bodies from a particular site
jibes with spatial governmentality in that “there is increasing focus on
managing the spaces people occupy rather than managing the people
themselves” (Merry 2001:19). This way the practices of spatial regulation
promoted by the APD meetings could be construed as not directed at
particular individuals, and hence as not discriminatory, despite the fact
that their effects are concentrated on particular populations and collect-
tive identities.

Yet the point is not to assert contrasting theoretical positions on
the nature of power or to periodize its history by alternately emphasizing
discipline, governmentality, or more suppressive police action
(Barry, Osborne, and Rose 1996:7; Chappell 2006b; Foucault 1991:102). Again, such terms provide an analytics through which to
examine how particular combinations of different techniques of gov-
ernment are deployed in historical situations. In examining the spaces
of lowrider cruising that constituted my field site, the optic of govern-
mentality clarifies how the production of particular subjectivities and
spaces are mutually imbricated with the governmental project of
managing a range of acceptable or possible practices (Merry 2001:18).
While spatial governmentality has coincided with “the neoliberal
regime of individual responsibility and accountability” in the U.S.
(Merry 2001:20), techniques of discipline also continue as possibilities
for those individuals who fail the test of self-governability. Hence “in
American cities, spatial strategies are typically used by the wealthy to exclude the poor, while those who fail to respect these islands of safety are incarcerated" (Merry 2001:20).

Here again, however, Lefebvre’s open, that is, unsynthesized, dialectical method is instructive of how to read such analytical divisions: like Low’s delineation of the “production” and “construction” of space, Merry’s analytical distinction between incarcerating technologies that produce disciplined subjects and spatial technologies that organize desirable or undesirable bodies and populations actually can be seen as describing two moments in the same social process. Spatial governmentality, then, is best understood not as the essence of a particular political structure, distinct from discipline or punishment as other essences, so much as a rationality of government that combines various techniques of social management and repressive violence into an historical assemblage that emerges in practice (Chappell 2006b).

For this analysis, as in a multiscalar notion of the production of space, Lefebvre’s refusal to map a determinant-epiphenomenal relation onto everyday politics is instructive. The implication is that spatial identity is not only an *a priori* quality to which political technologies respond. Moreover, policing and other technologies of spatial governmentality do not only react to stable identities, they also produce them. This is illustrated in another vignette from my fieldwork.

**Tickets to warrants: producing criminal subjects**

When I pulled into the carwash for the weekly car club meeting, the first person to greet me was Miguel, the son of the club president. “Somebody got arrested at the car show,” he said, announcing the main news of the week. I recalled a previous Boulevard Kings club meeting at which several members announced their intention to travel to a small, predominately white town outside of Austin for a custom car show. The Anglo organizer of the show had strongly encouraged them to come, saying he wanted lowriders represented. Someone had passed around a flier for the show, and members particularly took note of the slogan “We don’t discriminate; we appreciate.”

“I don’t know, Williamson County...” said one King, shaking his head. His apprehension referenced the reputation of the place as a conservative area, where police would be quick to target those who did not “fit the context.” Eddie nevertheless announced his intention to go, to “represent” and support the welcoming gestures made by the show organizer. The club’s newest member, Darren, also went. Darren was white and had just moved to town from west Texas. He had found the club by cruising by the carwash when a meeting was going on and was quickly accepted on the basis of his lowrider minitruck, which featured an expensive, multicolored paintjob and body modifications including a “cap” with tinted windows and a tailgate that was split in half in order to open like a Suburban’s.
At the Williamson County show, the Kings later told me, a former friend showed up and accused Darren of stealing his truck. The accuser had done the paintjob and was accepting payments over time for it, holding the title as collateral. By the time Darren moved across the state, he had fallen behind, and the friend reported the truck stolen as a means of repossessing it. In the faceoff at the car show, though, this became moot: the police checked Darren’s driver’s license and found warrants in the computer. He was arrested. While the police were holding Darren in a patrol car, according to Eddie, other club members approached to find out what was happening. The Williamson County officer ordered them to step back. As Eddie reported the exchange, the officer said, “You’re threatening me by standing so close.” Interpellating the club members as a threat, the officer seized control of the spatial arrangement of the situation.

“I don’t know what you’re going to do while I’m arresting your friend here,” he told Eddie. “You’re putting my life at risk. I’ll take you all downtown. You have any warrants? I’ll shut this show down.” Uncertain how welcome they were at the show by that point, Eddie and the club members withdrew and left Darren to spend the weekend in the county lockup.

Though Darren was white, he was participating in lowrider style and collaborating with the otherwise Latino club to establish a lowrider space at the car show. Further, he had customized the car via working-class means, rather than buying it outright. These factors situated him in a particular relation to the law, intensified by his outstanding warrants. This experience of finding oneself in an adversarial position to the law and profiled as a target for police inquiry joined many others that lowriders narrated to me, as well as the tense interactions with police I witnessed as a participant-observer in lowrider cruising, as a consistently invoked characteristic of lowriding. Even when practiced by white participants, lowrider style remained racially-marked and barrio-identified, which I argue made lowriders particularly subject to regulation by pullovers. Whatever the given reason for pulling over a lowrider at a traffic stop, police often run a routine check on the driver’s license for warrants. Thus a calculus of threat and probability, directed according to racial and cultural logics at the regulation of particular spaces (Butler 1993; Gilroy 2001), creates situations that set in motion routine policies that ostensibly would apply to everyone. The sense among lowriders, however, was that this was a targeting application of general policy.

This “exceptional” relationship between lowriders and police practices of profiling and pullovers functioned to regulate access to and use of public space, but it also affected the subject position of the target population. For these kinds of encounters often lead to tickets (for moving violations, unsanctioned customizations, inadequate or lapsed insurance, hitting hydraulics in traffic, or playing loud stereos) which, when unpaid, become arrest warrants. When a disciplined subject receives a traffic ticket, he or she governs him- or herself by paying it,
and thus joins the population that is willing and able to conform to this social contract. The governmentality of traffic regulation establishes a script for legitimacy that is class-specific: the easiest way to remain on the right side of the law is to have the necessary disposable capital to pay the fines for periodic deviations. Yet everyday life presents an abundance of reasons not to pay a ticket, and working for an hourly wage in a neoliberal environment that demands flexibility from its workforce meant that paydays for the Boulevard Kings could be less than dependable.7

This was the case for many in the Austin lowrider scene. The service economy of Austin was filled with “work at will” jobs, which meant it was easy to quit a job, and easier to get fired. Turnover in wage workplaces was high. Being a wage worker also meant that about the only way to acquire the expensive commodities necessary to maintain a certain stylistic identification was through credit. Often in cruising spaces, conversation would turn to various things people were making payments on: their car, a paint job, hydraulics setup, jewelry, televisions, or cell phones. Despite the displays of luxury and investment that are part of lowrider style, Austin lowriders generally did not occupy the economic position implied by such consumption. The middle-class finances that go into the most famous award-winning show cars are available only few lowriders, many more of whom scrape together a fabulous ride by bartering work and materials, working long overtime hours, and other elaborate strategies of stretching scarce resources.

The instability of wages and the ubiquity of payments placed prioritization at the center of personal finance. If paying a traffic ticket means losing phone service, not having gas to drive a car to work, or not being able to pay rent, it can be demoted on the scale of priorities. In a curious parallel to the way that spatial governmentality often operates in an “actuarial” calculus of risk (O’Malley 1996), mandates to self-governance in a situation in which resources are finite invites the weighing of possibilities. Not paying a phone bill will surely cancel your service, but not paying a ticket only raises the possibility of being arrested. Choosing to live with this possibility rather than the certainty of losing the phone or some other contracted service therefore produces a certain warranted subject position. It quite literally criminalizes the ticketed driver as a fugitive from the law, compounding the original misdemeanor. While it is not at once physically evident who has warrants and is thus undesirable or unwilling to fulfill the contracts regulating public space, profiling by logics of probability led police to subject Mexican American lowriders to a greater degree of surveillance and regulation than some other citizens. This was not a matter of which individuals were employed by the police force, but a manifestation of the logic ingrained in an historical formation of governmentality.
have tried to present lowriders not as an exotic bit of local color but rather as a focal point for the everyday, contingent productions of social space, offering views on the contested sociospatial relations of a diverse and stratified city. Such a spatial approach contributes to the understanding of the political implications, if not direct intentions, of expressive cultural practice (pace Aldama 2004). There is an extensive literature documenting how Chicano/a cultural production has engaged contemporary political struggles (Habell-Pallán 2002; Maciel, Ortíz, and Herrera-Sobek 2000; Saldívar 1997). Lowriders use embodied presence and the production of space to confront and contest social positions attributed to Mexican Americans, as well as public imaginaries of the city more generally. The analytical tools provided by Lefebvre and Foucault help clarify the significance of this. While not always issuing a direct message of resistance, the politics of lowrider space is certainly “oppositional” (Sandoval 2000), a material instance of the “search for space and place” (Vélez-Ibáñez 1996:221). Such a politics is necessarily ambivalent. As citizen-subjects, lowriders play a part in the policing of space, one that is sometimes compliant as well as contestative. As suggested in the field vignettes, struggles for space also occur between segments of the population, not only in conflict with the state or the dominant class. This is not to say that lowriders only have themselves to blame for any criminalization that results from their everyday performances: rather, it lends extra gravity to the decision lowriders sometimes make to refuse particular mandates to self-governance. That lowriders persist in “representing” (Ramírez 2004), knowing it may make them a target of surveillance and regulation underscores the importance of lowriding to its participants.

From lowrider space, it is easy to see how governmental practices of spatial management not only organize differently identified bodies by moving some on and implicitly protecting others, but also, in the process, produce the very identities needed to proceed with these operations. In this way, the spatial governmentality of automobile traffic in the public is not only the result of an execution of structures of power, but it is a production and reproduction of the social material necessary for those structures to exist. The racist imaginaries that construe minority bodies and populations as “probably deviant” (Butler 1993; Moore 1985) are given form as a self-fulfilling prophecy. This is not only a top-down production, defined at the level of policy, but rather a negotiation of space, practice, and identification, which is ongoing in everyday life. Whether or not a population conforms to the identity of a self-governing, “decent” citizenry affects the nature of the social space individuals produce by occupying certain material ground marked as “public.” Alongside practices of profiling lies a process of recruitment: it is in the failure or refusal—predicted or actual—to toe the governmental line that unruly bodies become targets of “moving on.” Yet this is no mere matter of personal choice, as the inclination and capacity to
participate in the governmental regime are overdetermined by positioning factors such as race, class, gender and neighborhood of origin or residence. The intersection of these histories with everyday iconographies of style and contestations of “the public” greatly expands the stakes involved in racial profiling in traffic, and points to the profoundly political undertones that infuse lowriding as a cultural practice of identification and performance.

Notes

Acknowledgments. This essay owes an intellectual debt to Matt Archer, who introduced me to governmentalities. Fieldwork and writing were funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research (grant #6600), The University of Texas at Austin, and The University of Kansas. For critical readings and timely encouragement of earlier versions, I am grateful to Anja Bandau, Jacob Dorman, Richard R. Flores, Ruben Flores, Doug Foley, Adam Frank, Tanya Hart, Steven Hoelscher, Marike Janzen, José E. Limón, Marc Priewe, Robert Rotenberg, Kathleen Stewart, Pauline Turner Strong, and three anonymous readers. No one mentioned is responsible for my mistakes. This research would have been impossible without the help and generosity of the lowriders of ATX.

1 All names of clubs and individuals are pseudonyms.
2 Lowrider style does have a considerable following outside of Latino populations, most notably among African Americans. The Black lowrider scene of Los Angeles, for instance, overlaps with west-coast hip-hop as part of a long history of local intercultural exchange (Alvarez 2008).
3 In the interest of economy, I refrain from quoting lowriders at length, since my focus here is more on embodied engagements with spatial politics rather than textual ones. Lowriders’ own discourse is included in the larger project of which this essay is part.
4 Lowriders’ constant awareness of being under police surveillance framed my relationship to them. The president of the Boulevard Kings first introduced me to club members as a researcher from the local university, and accounted for the fact that my Anglo, middle-class bearing made me stand out in the scene by saying “So if you see him out there on Riverside, he’s not the cops.” This got a laugh from the club members, and turned into a ritual that he repeated over the years when I returned for more fieldwork and there were new club members who did not know me.
5 Racial profiling was a national issue when I started fieldwork, but was generally only discussed in terms of the identity of the driver, rather than considering car style (Knee 2003). Support for the lowriders’ interpretation is available in public discourses of gang identity and criminality, which refer as much on aesthetic, visual markers as they do actual criminal acts (Chappell 2006b).
6 I presented the narrative of the Williamson County show and a much earlier version of these ideas at the Potsdam University conference “Representing Chicano/a Cultures,” and in its proceedings (Chappell 2006a).
7 I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for the reminder that lowriders have historically come from a variety of class positions, including the relatively stable one that was once assured by employment in industrial production. In the specific context that produced this essay, however, the more precarious situation suggested here was the norm.
8 I am aware that Lefebvre and Foucault engaged in rigorous debate as contemporaries in the mid-century French intellectual scene. Yet the analysis of lowrider
cruising has benefited from a Levebrian point of departure and a Foucauldian
analytical framework, drawing on LeFevre’s open dialectic and insistence on attend-
ing to the everyday, and Foucault’s models for close-focus analysis of the particular
combinations of techniques of government. Indeed, I argue that to pit one thinker
against the other goes against the generous spirit in which both invite critical
engagement with their works, and the suspicion both expressed towards totalizing
ontological theories.

References Cited

Aldama, Frederick Luis

Alvarez, Luis

Aoki, Keith

Arreola, Daniel, ed.

Austin, City of

Austin, Joe

Barry, Andrew, Thomas Osborne, and Nikolas Rose

Best, Amy

Brady, Mary Pat

Bright, Brenda Jo
Butler, Judith

Castillo, Juan

Chappell, Ben

Clifford, James

Dávila, Arlene

Davis, Mike

de Certeau, Michel

de Genova, Nicholas

Dear, Michael, and Gustavo LeClerc, eds.

Deutsche, Rosalyn

Díaz, David

English-Lueck, J. A.
2002 cultures@siliconvalley. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press.

Ferrell, Jeff

Ferguson, James, and Akhil Gupta

Florida, Richard

Foucault, Michel
Fuentes-Bautista, Martha, and Nobuya Inagaki

Garza, Mary Jane

Gilroy, Paul

Habell-Pallán, Michelle

Hall, Stuart

Inda, Jonathan Xavier

Jameson, Fredric

Kelley, Robin D. G.

Knee, Stan

Laguerre, Michel

Lefebvre, Henri

Limón, José E.

Low, Setha

Maciel, David, Isidro D. Ortíz, and Marfa Herrera-Sobek, eds.

Massey, Doreen

McCann, Eugene J.
McCarthy, Anna

Mendoza, Ruben

Merrifield, Andy

Merry, Sally Engle

Mitchell, Don

Moore, Joan

O’Malley, Pat

Penland, Paige

Pérez, Gina

Pérez, Ramona

Pitti, Stephen

Ramírez, Catherine

Ramos-Zayas, Ana

Rodríguez, Roberto

Ross, Andrew

Saldivar, José David
Sánchez-Tranquilino, Marcos

Sandoval, Chela

Sandoval, Denise

Sandoval, Denise, and Patricia Polk

Shank, Barry

Soja, Edward

Stewart, Susan

Thrift, Nigel

Valle, Victor and Rodolfo Torres

Vélez-Ibañez, Carlos

Villa, Raúl Homero

Williams, Raymond