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A Vehicle of Expression

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Claremont McKenna College

A Vehicle of Expression

Analyzing the Evolution of Car Culture and Its Significance to Various
Populations in Los Angeles

Submitted to

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And

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For

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ABSTRACT

This senior thesis studies the evolution and ideals of several populations in Los Angeles through the lens of car culture. The automobile is a symbol of expression and upon analyzing it, a great deal can be revealed about its owner. Los Angeles is home to the hot rodding, lowriding, and import tuning car movements. All three major car cultures were born from a marginalized youth population. The three movements shed light on the sentiments and assimilation process of the various ethnic communities that created the car culture. This essay will show how each movement not only influenced one another, but also the car industry as a whole. Additionally, this essay examines how advancements in technology have led the current millennial generation to form a mass youth culture. The mass youth culture of the present day is much different than the young populations of past time periods, and that is reflected when analyzing modern day car culture.

Introduction

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, a car is defined as “a vehicle that has four wheels and an engine and that is used for carrying passengers on roads” (merriam-webster.com). The automobile was created for one and one purpose only, and that was transportation. Despite the car serving only one purpose, it has grown to mean something much more to millions of people all around the world. Though it can be defined in such simple terms, the car can be customized in an infinite amount of ways. This is precisely why since childhood I have had a fascination with cars. As a child, different cars would evoke such powerful and unique reactions within me. The car’s inherent ability to ignite one’s passion and creativity has led to the creation of an entire world revolving around the automobile. There are millions of car fans obsessed with all types of car racing. There millions of car enthusiasts that tune their own vehicles. There is a broad range of car manufacturers creating vehicles specifically made for the enthusiasts of the world. There exists a multi-billion-dollar aftermarket car part manufacturing industry as well as a massive global media industry covering car news of all kinds. There is even an entire industry surrounding the production of toy cars meant for young car lovers. The car carries with it a unique significance to many individuals around the world.

I was born in the city of Los Angeles and since childhood, as many children were, I became infatuated with the automobile. I fell in love with the idea of the car and the endless possibilities it represented. As a child, there was nothing cooler than racing at high speeds. I would look at dozens of car magazines, play with Hot Wheels, gawk at my father’s car, and visit car shows. When I grew older, I quickly learned that all the

magazines I read and toy cars I played with were created because of the birth of past car cultures. Through my love cars and growing up in the city of Los Angeles, I began to see how the automobile was so much more than a means of transportation. It defined people, it united communities, and shaped the city in which I lived. The car played such a huge role to life in Los Angeles, I felt that one could study the history of the city and its ethnic communities through looking at the evolution of car culture. There are countless magazines and sources that look at specific car movements, but very few that tie them together and even fewer that analyze their origins. The lack of literature looking deeper into other meanings of the car beg several questions. Why has Los Angeles been the epicenter of these three massive car cultures? What served as the inspiration for the creation of each of these car movements? What did the physical vehicle represent to its community? How has each movement affected the trajectory and path of car culture as a whole? The answers to these questions reveal the power and significance of car culture within American society. This thesis will focus on the epicenter of car culture and how each movement influences one another.

As a consequence of how involving and personal tuning a vehicle is, car culture has the ability to act as a lens through which one can study the history and evolution of various ethnic communities in Los Angeles. Each car culture tells a story of a community formulating a unique identity while seeking to assimilate into society. Hot rodding was driven by a population of newly returned soldiers from World War II. Lowriding was created by the marginalized Hispanic community in Los Angeles. The import scene united the multi-ethnic Asian youth population of Los Angeles. Studying each movement can pinpoint each respective community's identities, lifestyles, gender

roles, and cultural practices. Each movement reflects both the values of American society as a whole as well as the population responsible for the creation of the car culture. Over time the communities and generations have evolved, triggering a shift in car culture.

My father was born in Los Angeles, but his childhood was split between living in El Monte, California and Mexico. My mother was born in Zacatecas, Mexico and moved to East Los Angeles upon entering high school. Both strongly identify with their Mexican heritage despite having lived in the United States for many years. This is often the case for many immigrants into America. However, I, along with many children of immigrant parents, have developed and crafted a unique cultural identity. The number of second and third generation children has been increasing greatly since 1990 (migrationpolicy.org). Car culture has continued to evolve and serve as a reflection of contemporary society. In recent years, the youth generation has changed greatly and become much more connected than any other time in the past due to the increased prevalence of technology like social media. With the evolution and creation of a mass youth culture, car tuning has witnessed a huge shift away from past traditions. As a member of the millennial generation, I aim to see how the shifts in car culture reflect drastic changes in the cultural identity of the contemporary young population.

Ethnic Automotive Culture: A Literature Review Comparing the Car Cultures of the Asian, Mexican, and White Ethnic Communities

The creation and mass production of cars has greatly influenced a variety of aspects within American society. Los Angeles is a city with a rich history that is intertwined with the evolution of the automobile. The car impacted the city's geographical layout, dictated the placement of cultural centers, and defined several populations. It is the epicenter of several automotive movements that sparked lifestyles and cultures that exist to this day. The city and its location play vital roles in the creation of the hot rodding movement, the first mainstream auto culture, that ignited a passion of tuning cars for years to come. There have been three major car movements that gained extreme popularity in Los Angeles, then spread across the nation and globe. When studying these three very different car movements, one can notice that each greatly influences the next. Hot rodding, lowriding, and import tuning were all Los Angeles born car movements that shed light on the contemporary culture of their respective eras. Particular car movements are typically more than just the mere tuning and tweaking of the vehicle. These movements sparked lifestyles, united cultures, and acted as a method of displaying one's identity. The literature recording these movements varies greatly. Hot rodding is one of the most well recorded car movements, but the lowrider and import tuning scenes do not have the same breadth of archives. The three books *Asian American Youth*, *Lowrider Space*, and *Cool Cars, High Art* each capture the

essence of the Asian, Mexican, and White American car cultures respectively. The authors of each of these books cover specific cultures in slightly different manners. However, they each cover several of the same themes when discussing their respective car movements. The three texts highlight two major themes of what the car signifies to the individuals taking part in the specific car culture as well as what the car culture reveals about the ethnic community it is a part of. Though each of these books touch on the specific car modifications and the followers, they fall short of looking at the big picture in order to take note of how each car culture influences one another and how the movement reveals a great deal about contemporary popular culture during that time period.

John DeWitt's *Cool Cars, High Art* focuses on the rise of the hot rod and kustom kulture in Los Angeles during the 1930s. DeWitt aims to shed light on the car culture that sparked an American obsession of tuning and modifying personal vehicles. DeWitt approached the topic of hot rodding both historically and technically. His main thesis is to create a piece that focuses on the creation, meaning, and practice of hot-rodding. DeWitt offers a unique perspective on the topic because it is clear that he has a great deal of experience in the practice of hot rodding. In order to provide support for his thesis, DeWitt gathers evidence from his own experience, pictures, art, and other written sources regarding hot rodding. DeWitt's mechanical knowledge and technical presentation of his work very much reflect the personality of hot rodding. Hot rodding was created during an industrial time period in which the United States was a global manufacturing powerhouse. DeWitt describes the formation and attitude of hot rodders when he writes, "When hot rodders began to appear in significant numbers on the streets

of southern California in the late 1930s, the last thing on their minds was making art. They were in love with speed. They reveled in grease, garages, and gas stations” (DeWitt, 3). Hot rodding was created with the hands that powered the golden era of industrial America. Hot rodding is a car culture that is focused on speed and mechanics. Many rodders do not care to create machines for aesthetic purposes. The automobile became a symbol of American ingenuity and engineering. DeWitt describes the mentality of the hot rodder when he writes, “These gearheads felt an almost mystical connection to their cars... This quasi-religious, thoroughly romantic, sense of identification with the machine as the source of meaning in one’s life was not confined to fiction” (DeWitt, 8). The reason for this deep connection to the car in hot rod culture was rooted in the “hands-on” work needed to create a tuned vehicle. The hot rod and its performance directly correlated to the amount of time and quality of work put into the vehicle. This “hands-on” car culture began in Southern California because of how dependent society was on the automobile. The hot rod racing culture then flourished because in California, “[Roddors] were able to perfect their rods and push them to their limits because they had easy access to flat, dry lake beds in unpopulated desert areas” (DeWitt, 6). DeWitt’s book highlights hot rodding, which is the oldest true car culture in America. Due to its age, DeWitt uncovers evidence defending his thesis using many historical books, media sources, and primary sources. Hot rodding sparked America’s predominantly male obsession of enhancing the automobile.

Lowrider Space by Ben Chappell discusses the Mexican American lowrider car culture. *Lowrider Space* covers the “aesthetics and politics of Mexican American custom cars” (Chappell, 1). Ben Chappell is an Assistant Professor of American Studies at the

University of Kansas. His unique American Studies background greatly influences his work and leads to an in depth cultural study of the lowrider movement. Chappell's book is unique because he aims to go beyond just covering the formation and evolution of the lowrider car culture. He aims to write about the "lowrider space." He describes the subject of his piece when he writes, "Lowrider space is an assemblage of bodies, cars, and landscapes, and their sounds, colors, textures, and movements- a formation that emerges on some scale whenever lowrider style is on display" (Chappell, 9). The study of the lowrider space allows for the reader to not only understand what the lowrider movement is, but also its significance within the community is, how it seen by others, and how the lowrider reflects its owner's individual personality. Chappell goes on to study the lowrider space using a critical ethnography approach. Chappell gathered evidence for his critical ethnography from a number of texts as well as from participation in a lowrider club and making his own lowrider. Chappell's writing contrasts DeWitt's greatly because rather than heavily focusing on the technical aspects of the car culture, Chappell writes in a more academic manner covering the cultural significance of the lowrider movement. Though Chappell focuses on the lowrider space in Austin, Texas, he writes about the origins of the movement. Lowriding began in the 1970s originating in the Mexican neighborhoods of East Los Angeles. Lowriding is car movement that is centered around generating an impact upon the viewer through cruising and modifications. This particular car culture places a high value on aesthetics. The focus on aesthetics within the car culture reflect its importance of identity. Chappell writes, "When a lowrider cruises down a street, its spatial field, an aura of identified spatiality, goes with it. The emotional and political charge that seems to infuse encounters with this

mobile zone of lowrider space reveals that lowrider style is not a simple or neutral kind of picturesque ‘difference’ (Chappell, 24). The lowrider acts as an identity for not only the owner of the vehicle, but also for the community and politics of the area that it is representing. The lowrider does not focus as much on performance like hot rods, however, it does focus on a high level of craftsmanship. Because lowriding is meant to impact the spectator, there is a large emphasis on detailed paint and chrome work on the car. The lowrider culture is inherently theatrical and encourages social gatherings. This focus in aesthetics and social gatherings is easily comparable to the Asian American import car culture.

Jennifer Lee’s *Asian American Youth* studies the significance, creation, and evolution of the import tuning car culture of Southern California. The book, *Asian American Youth*, is a piece that focuses on many social aspects of the lives of the Asian youth, specifically in Southern California. Lee studies the Asian youth’s assimilation and interactions with American culture. A portion of her study is dedicated to the Asian import car culture scene of Southern California, which is the birthplace of the movement. Lee’s argument for the section is that she aims to “investigate the history and development of import car racing as an Asian American socializing tradition” (Lee, 160). The study was conducted over a two-year period and was based on oral history research. Lee gathered her information using four methods. “1) In depth face-to-face interviews with ten import racers (eight males and two females) at four different sites; 2) informal conversations with numerous import racers, even organizers, and auto marketers; 3) participant observation in organized events and 4) media accounts- magazines and videos of actual racing” (Lee, 160). Because Lee’s thesis is about import

racing a socializing tradition, it is logical that she conducts an oral history survey. The interviews and conversational data lead to a more in depth personal understanding of import tuning. Car culture is an inherently social endeavor in which people tune or “trick out” their vehicles in order to show the world of their creations whether it is focused on performance or cosmetics. The research does not evoke an overly academic sensation, which leads to an informative, accurate history and evolution of import car culture. The import car culture began in the early 1990s. There was a large influx in Asian American immigrants in Southern California during that time period and the children of many of these families found that they lacked a specific identity. They were neither their native Asian culture nor truly “American,” so they came together and created a community that would come to define them (Lee, 163). Import car culture is one of the few groups that can truly call itself an “Asian” community because of its unique ability to unify many types of Asian cultures like the Koreans, Japanese, and Chinese. The import car tuning scene combined aspects from both hot-rodding and lowriding. The import scene has two major categories. One, that is focused on car modifications to improve performance and racing capabilities. Two, that is focused on automotive modifications that improve the aesthetic qualities of the vehicle. This car culture is very much based in the post-1950s pop culture of consumerism. Unlike hot-rodding that places a large emphasis on tuning the car yourself, import culture centers around the purchasing and tuner shop installation of aftermarket products. Lee states that this focus on the car as a reflection of status takes root in the customs of traditional Asian culture.

These three books capture several themes that are prevalent within each car movement, one of which is the theme of identity and what the car means to the individual

owner of the vehicle. To each of the presented car cultures, the car signifies something specifically different. The automobile represents an individual's perception of the car culture that he or she is participating in. The car in a sense also reflects the personality of its owner. Within the hot rod movement, the car represents mechanical perfection and is a symbol for speed. DeWitt's book about hot rodding presents the typical "rodder" as a tinkerer, one that is obsessed with perfection and possesses great patience. He writes, "The machine is, par excellence, a phenomenon of spiritual discipline... For the rodder the car is a musical instrument that produces true "industrial" music. An engine that doesn't sound just right isn't finished" (DeWitt, 62). This excerpt gives a glimpse of how the car is direct representation of the individual. A rodder's car represented masculinity, intelligence, and handicraft. Hot rodding gave birth to the image of a rebellious yet skilled individual who only followed the unwritten rules associated by car culture lifestyle. In contrast to the craftsmen of hot rodding, the lowrider is a representation of a very different individual. The lowrider culture focuses a great deal on appearance. Rather than tinkering on their own car, a typical lowrider pays to have the perfect looking car. Chappell, in his book about the lowrider culture, states, "In some ways, a lowrider becomes an extension of the human body... Lowrider embodiment forms a point of contact between self and society" (Chappell, 105-107). Lowrider culture places a large emphasis on both aesthetics and social gatherings. Many lowrider owners let the vehicle serve as their voice because much like the cowboys in Western films, speaking is not their strong suit. It tells society about the owner's social status, taste, and personality. The import car scene is another car culture in which the vehicle serves as voice for the owner. The Asian import tuning culture is similar to lowriding in the sense that the "ideal" vehicle is made through the purchasing and third party installment. In Jennifer

Lee's book she discusses identity by stating, "[Import tuning] Is used by Asian American youth as a proactive response to the history of marginalization and exclusion. Import racing forges a distinct identity for Asian American youth that allows them to look and feel both good and cool" (Lee, 166). The car within the import tuning and racing culture serves as an opportunity to join a supportive friendly community. Within this car culture there exists two major groups. Those who tuned for showings, and those who tune for performance racing. Depending on how the owner chooses to tune their car, the elements of the additions place he or she into a specific category. The automobile as a whole was as much a representation of its respective car cultural movement as it was of the individual who owned it.

Each of the three books focused on the concept of how each car culture revealed a great deal about the ethnic community and era it was associated with. The hot rod culture began in the 1930s in Southern California. It was started by predominantly young, white males. America during that time was in the midst of world war. The United States was an industrial powerhouse. The hot rodders of the time took pride in tinkering with their motor vehicles. Not only did hot rodding reflect the industrial golden era of the United State, but it also served as a symbol of freedom. The hot rod represented a lifestyle of freedom and fearlessness. The rodders of the time were pioneers of speed much like how their forefathers pioneered the West. Just as hot rod culture captured the essence of "white" America at the time, the lowrider movement served as representation of the male Mexican American community. The lowrider's emphasis on community and aesthetics reflect the cultural tendencies of Mexican American communities. The lowrider exists in a culture where reputation and experience are held in high regard. In the inner city, Mexican "barrios" where

the movement was popular, education does not hold extremely high value and that is why the vehicle is meant to serve as the voice of the owner. This contrasts the emphasis on knowledge and engineering associated with hot rod culture. However, the Asian import culture contrasts with both movements. In the Asian import culture, it is the basic knowledge that the more money one puts into a car the “better” it is. The focus is on the purchasing of the best parts that one can put in an automobile in order to either make it faster or more aesthetically pleasing. This reflects the importance of status and wealth that is very prevalent within Asian American culture. Each of the car cultures reveal a great deal about the ethnic communities within which they exist.

When studying the car movements, one can gain an understanding of nearly every aspect of the culture it is associated with. Each of the three sources analyzed today focused on specific car cultures. When looking at each of these pieces, one can notice how the recorded for each movement varies. Many of the history and literature regarding hot rodding is much like DeWitt’s piece, which are extremely detailed and technical. However, for both lowriding and import tuning, the literature surrounding the movements focus a great deal on lifestyle and culture. The pieces on lowriding and import tuning highlight the role of the car culture within their respective communities, but tend to leave out the technical aspects of the movement. For lowriding, a majority of the history regarding the movement was passed down orally. In the case of import tuning, much of the history can be found on online forums, but not as rigorously recorded as the literature on hot rodding. This thesis will attempt to fill in the gaps and provide a detailed history that captures each aspect of the various car cultures. However, each piece of literature surrounding the various car cultures proves that the car is a not only a form of transportation, but it is also a form of expression.

Chapter 1

Los Angeles has become the city it is today largely because of the influence of the automobile, and it is a city that has shaped automotive culture. The car has molded the city's communities in a variety of ways. The automobile served as an outlet of expression that united specific ethnic groups, allowing their culture and message to be spread on the public roads of Los Angeles. Hot rodding, lowriding, and import tuning were created by the White, Hispanic, and Asian communities respectively, to break free from the current popular culture in order to generate a unique, inclusive culture. Los Angeles has very much a been home for a variety of immigrant cultures that interact with one another in such a way that can only be found in this city. It is for that reason, along with the city's sprawling nature and dependence on cars that the city of angels became the breeding ground for each car culture. When studying the various car movements during the history of Los Angeles, one can learn a great deal about a culture's practices, priorities, and outlooks. To many, the car was much more than a means of transportation, it represented memories of their past experience. To others, it was a way to express their true identity. The car came to assert one's status, convey a particular lifestyle, and shape an identity. Studying car culture can also reflect society's views on topics like masculinity, youth culture, and consumerism. The three movements of hot rodding, lowriding, and import tuning reflect major characteristics of the city of Los Angeles and its various immigrant populations as well as the broader "American" culture as a whole. By studying how car culture changed over time, we can also understand how Los Angeles and its communities have changed over time.

Hot rodding began in the early 1930's and 40's and is credited as the first large scale car movement in history. Hot rodders take a production car and make adjustments to the vehicle in order to enhance its performance. Hot rodding was created with the hands that powered the golden era of industrial America. Hot rodding is a car culture that is focused on speed and mechanics. Every tweak and adjustment was meant to increase performance rather than the aesthetic values of the car. They would make adjustments to the engines to increase torque and horsepower. They would even go as far as to remove all unnecessary parts that did not enhance performance, like windshields or even fenders. Interwar America was a time of unwavering patriotism, which combined with engineering ingenuity to inspire the hot rodding car movement.

A very prominent racing scene in the Los Angeles area lay the groundwork for hot rodding. The first auto race in Los Angeles took place in 1903 at the original Los Angeles fairgrounds, which is now the area surrounding the Los Angeles Coliseum (Osmer, lecture). Throughout the first decade of the 20th century hundreds of sanctioned tracks began to open for use in the Southern California region. One of the largest and most prominent forms of racing at the time took place at the Los Angeles Motordrome (Glick, 1). It was a mile-long wooden track with consistent 18-degree banking located in Playa Del Rey (Glick, 1). This race track attracted thousands of spectators and hundreds of participants. The race cars that entered the events were reaching speeds upwards of 120 miles per hour in the early 1910's. Each of these tracks allowed for only specific types of vehicles to enter the races. A great majority of the vehicles were made specifically for racing and not for everyday usage.

This obsession with speed and racing spread quickly among fans of the sport, who wanted to experience the thrill they were watching in their own motor vehicles. There were a few racers that began to tinker with normal production cars in hopes to make them more exciting, torquey automobiles. This tinkering with production cars did not gain very much popularity during the very early 20th century for of a couple reasons: One, cars were still a luxury; and the roadway infrastructure of Los Angeles was not very comprehensive. Therefore, the only places that could host enjoyable, open road, and exciting driving speeds were raceways.

By the 1930s, the infrastructure for car travel became more established and as cars became more prevalent as well as less costly Los Angeles' sprawling nature, lead to large empty stretches of roads throughout the San Fernando and San Gabriel valleys. The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power has provided a very detailed history of the evolution of the road systems in the Los Angeles area. Their website provided a map that was created in the mid-1930s that proves how vast and comprehensive the road system was in the San Fernando Valley at the time. One can notice by looking at the map, how dependent Angelenos were on the automobile. With the growing popularity of the automobile and still burning passion for speed, the car was beginning to represent more than just a mode of transportation.



There was a growing population that found a huge enjoyment from using the car as more than merely a mode of transportation to get from one destination to the next. Many found pleasure in driving for leisure and navigating swiftly through the winding, hill hugging roads throughout the Los Angeles area. To a great majority, the car was the ultimate embodiment of freedom. All of these aspects came together into making hot rodding the first popular car movement.

The first participants of the hot rod culture did not conform to society's norms and expectations. They were fearless and mechanically intelligent. John DeWitt's *Cool Cars, High Art* focuses on the rise of the hot rod and kustom culture in Los Angeles during the 1930s. DeWitt describes the formation and attitude of hot rodders when he writes, "When hot rodders began to appear in significant numbers on the streets of Southern California in the late 1930s, the last thing on their minds was making art. They were in love with speed. They reveled in grease, garages, and gas stations" (DeWitt, 3). As time progressed and when thousands of soldiers began coming back home after World War II, the hot rod

movement was moving into the mainstream and developed many of the characteristics we now associate with the culture.

Hot rodding as a car movement transformed and gained a huge amount of popularity in the 1940-50s. After the war, many soldiers returned home for the first time in years. Many of the men were young and developed a large amount mechanical knowledge while serving in the military. A majority of these soldiers that grew up in Los Angeles were fascinated with the automobile as a child because of the city's history of racing. After growing up and fighting in the War, many of the young male adults returned to Los Angeles and latched onto the hot rod movement because it embodied their mindsets. Hot rodding, like the newly returned soldiers, revolved around fearlessness, freedom from the rules, and mechanical ingenuity. It is for these reasons that hot rodding attracted a very specific type of person. Los Angeles was the perfect location to host such a movement because of the weather and access to flat desolate roads. DeWitt describes the mentality of the post-World War II hot rodder when he writes, "These gearheads felt an almost mystical connection to their cars... This quasi-religious, thoroughly romantic, sense of identification with the machine as the source of meaning in one's life was not confined to fiction" (DeWitt, 8). The hot rodder's loved their cars because of the amount of work that they personally put into modifying their vehicles. The car was an extension of the self. They lived for breaking new records and pushing the limits of the cars further and further. As hot rodding grew more and more popular, street racing too saw an increase in activity. Many hot rodders would gather in various parts of Los Angeles in order to race on the public streets. The vehicles of choice for the hot rodders of the time where both the Ford Model-A's or Model-T's (Christensen, 12). They chose these

specific models because of their low price, abundance, and straight forward mechanical operation (Christensen, 7). The roadster designations of these models were the most popular because of their lightness. These cars were notorious on the streets of Los Angeles because of rising popularity of street racing. This is when hot rodders began to develop the “outlaw” reputation. The street racing hot rodders were fearless and not afraid death while racing or facing arrest by the authorities. Hot rodding quickly evolved from a hobby into lifestyle. The street racing hot rodders had frequent run-ins with the law and drove with reckless abandon. The hot rodder’s car served as his voice, by showing the world his dedication and mechanical intelligence. The hot rodder’s driving displayed to the world his courage and personality. All together the car came to act as a symbol for engineering ingenuity and masculinity. This movement united a large youth population Los Angeles that spread throughout the country. It went on to influence the car industry, the movie industry, and even the fashion industry. Hollywood began creating movies that glamorized the hot rod identity and lifestyle in movies like *Rebel Without a Cause*. The fashion industry began producing clothing to match as well as mimic the lifestyle associated with being a hot rodder. As can be seen in *Rebel Without a Cause*, the hot rodders of the time often wore heavy duty denim, boots, simple white shirts, and a jacket. The style was meant to resemble that of a prototypical mechanic that worked on hot rods. They adopted this style because of how it reflected their masculine obsession with tuning vehicles. It was simple style that actively shied away from unnecessary design. This street style of hot rodding was just one manifestation of the movement in the Los Angeles area.

At the same time as the urban street racing hot rod movement was growing, there was another group of gearheads that took to the salt flats for racing. The two hot rodding movements were not mutually exclusive, and there in fact were many followers that participated in both the urban and desert racing. The followers that took to race flats around Southern California and Utah were much more technical and their hot rods were not intended for daily use, but instead more focused on racing. This aspect of hot rodding revolutionized the car industry and triggered a huge shift in car culture. DeWitt points out in his book that another reason hot rodding was able to gain such traction and popularity in Southern California was because of its ease of access to flat and dry lake beds in desert areas (Dewitt, 21). The hot rodders that traveled out to these areas to race, often worked on their cars in more professional environments. Rather than work making quick adjustments and upgrades in order to be back on the street as fast as possible, these hot rodders labored to make precise and reliable machines. The speeds that many of these hot rodding enthusiasts were unheard of at the time and the car movement gained a huge following. Vic Edelbrock, Eddie Meyer, Ed Winfield, and Alex Xydias were among the few most influential hot rod technicians of the time period (Christensen, 20). These men forever changed car culture in America and around the globe. Christensen writes in book regarding the movement, “Alex Xydias, like legions of other young Americans, was the beneficiary of a war effort that required highly sophisticated government education for the engineers and mechanics who would maintain the quickly evolving squadrons of fighter and bomber aircraft” (Christensen, 21). These men came together to create precision parts to put into their race cars, hoping to shatter speed records. Their performance accomplishments got nation-wide recognition. With this incredible

popularity, Xydias took advantage of situation and saw an opportunity to open up this culture to more of the population. He then went on to open the So-Cal Speedshop, which played an important role in the car movement:

Alex could see that a lot of other young men lusted after these parts, so he made a deal with the young Vic Edelbrock to buy his high compression heads at wholesale. This led him to Kong Jackson's ignitions. All the young racers would meet at the dry-lakes and have at it. So-Cal Speed Shop sold most of them parts. So-Cal Speed Shop was instrumental in many of the record holders of the time, from Belly-Tankers, roadsters, streamliners and the very famous Double Threat Coupe. It was one of the last Ford Flatheads to compete at the Drag Races and Bonneville under the So-Cal banner (Christensen, 30).

This shift toward mass producing parts and dedicated garages for installation marked a transition within the car movement. It opened the movement to fans who may not have the necessary technical knowledge to construct at home modifications. These changes allowed for the hot rod culture to spread around the country and the world. The movement was so widespread and popular that in 1948, Robert E. Peterson created Hot Rod Magazine (motortrend.com), yet another sign that hot rodding was on its way to creating a global car culture. Hot Rodding was a pioneer movement born in the city of Los Angeles responsible for igniting a passion for tuning cars that still exists today.

Hot rodding began as a hobby deeply rooted in the American "do it yourself" mentality but as American society progressed toward a more mass-consumerist culture so did the car movement. Hot rodding's sphere of influence spread beyond popular culture of the time and triggered great change in the car industry. Car manufacturers began

creating performance oriented production vehicles in order to mimic the capabilities and style of custom built hot rods. This trend of large manufactures of carrying a performance focused line of vehicles still exists to this day. Nearing the end of the hot rodding movement, there were hundreds of garages that offered the sale and installation of both stylistic and performance add-ons.

The stylistic and mass consumerist aspects of the late hot rodding years played a significant role in shaping the lowriding car movement. Due to the fact that hot rodding at the time was primarily followed by the white community in Los Angeles, lowriding was a new car subculture that allowed new freedom of expression for ethnic minority groups in the inner city.

The lowriding car movement was born when the Southern California car culture fused with Mexican culture. Though the 1970's were the "glory" days of the lowrider culture, the history and origin of the movement can be traced back to the late 1930s. Lowriding is a car movement that was inspired by a lifestyle. Unlike hot rodding that grew from the urge to push the boundaries of automobile performance, lowriding used the car purely as a form of stylistic expression. In the late 1930s, there were several hot rodding enthusiasts that became less focused on performance and moved toward the styling the cars in a very specific way. These mechanics often lowered the vehicles by bending the chassis, cutting the suspension, and covering the rear wheels with large fender skirts (Frost, 1). The early practices of adjusting the styling of the car is often referred to as the kustom scene. Also, during the late 1930's to mid-1940's there existed a very popular fashion and lifestyle trend known as the "zoot suit" culture. The zoot suit style was a symbol of resistance for the Chicano youth that had a "rough and ready

reputation” (*Lowrider Magazine*). A huge portion of the zoot suit followers in the Los Angeles area were members of Mexican-American population. Both the zoot suit and kustom cultures came together to inspire the lifestyle subculture that later became known as “lowriding.” *Lowrider Magazine* highlights this interaction between the Chicano population, zoot suit fashion, and car culture:

Throughout many Mexican-American neighborhoods... cruisers have been dropping Chevrolets to a sidewalk-scraping stance since the late 1930s. It was part of the “zoot suit” fashion, a trend popular among teenagers from every culture. Mexican-American zooters, cool from slicked back hair to highly polished shoes, called themselves pachucos. They cruised beautifully restored, older Chevys, decked out in their oversized zoot suits for a night on the town. Often just the back of the Chevy was temporarily lowered, using sandbags hidden in the trunk beneath strategically placed planks of wood, or permanently dropped all around, the springs shortened by cutting the top few coils or heated until they collapsed to a proper cruising height. They cruised through the streets, honoring a custom that may have been practiced since the heyday of the Aztlan Empire. (*Lowrider Magazine*)

This excerpt reveals how the origins of lowriding were rooted in several popular trends during that time period. The Chicano community in Los Angeles embraced the looks of both the kustom culture and the zoot suit fashion trend because they embodied a persona that instilled intimidation and demanded respect, both desired attributes when living in various “barrios” in the city of angels. These trends began to define a lifestyle that would soon take over the streets of Los Angeles and pave the way for a powerful and defining movement in the city’s history.

Lowriding was inspired by stylistic trends that were adopted by and fused with Chicano culture, which over time evolved into a major movement that served both as an identity and voice for various communities. While hot rodding solely centered on the automobile itself, lowriding revolved around an entire culture and a way of life. The

lowrider movement is very much rooted in within Mexican-American culture in the city of Los Angeles. In *Lowriders in Chicano Culture: From Low to Slow to Show*, Charles Tatum takes a deep look into the history of Los Angeles and of the Chicano population before explaining the movement itself. This a method that that is absolutely necessary when telling the story of the lowrider subculture:

Los Angeles grew rapidly during the post-war period as veterans and non-veterans and their families moved there to live and work in the city's expanding commercial manufacturing sectors. The Mexican American population of Los Angeles County had increased to 600,000 by 1959. Powerful downtown commercial interests came together to formulate what was called the Greater Los Angeles Plan. One of the primary goals of the plan was to build more commercial buildings and higher-cost housing in the central downtown area. This resulted in the displacement of lower-income Mexican Americans and African Americans to areas where land was less expensive and housing was more affordable, the former group settling in East Los Angeles and the latter group in South Central Los Angeles. (Tatum, 7)

The excerpt from Tatum's book is significant because it sheds light on the adversity that the Mexican American community faced during a time of rapid growth for the city of Los Angeles. The Chicano community was forced away from their home to make way for commercial development. This displacement was yet another act that marginalized the minority population within the city of Los Angeles. The Mexican American community faced many obstacles because their voice was ignored by the city officials of Los Angeles. This was yet another act of discrimination that faced the minority communities in Los Angeles. Being forced into new geographical areas made assimilation difficult. These Mexican American newly and densely populated "barrios," like East Los Angeles, began to develop a unique culture that fused traditional Mexican culture with American popular culture. Many members of the community were united through the following of similar fashion trends like the zoot suit style, and through automotive culture:

East Los Angeles groups of low and slow cruiser owners began in the early 1950s to organize themselves into clubs with names like the Honey Drippers, the Pan Draggers, the Street Scrappers, and the Renegades. Club members would congregate and cruise down certain well-known Los Angeles Locations such as the Miracle Mile in West Los Angeles, Olvera street, and especially Lincoln Park. (Tatum, 10)

The lowriding lifestyle played a large role the newly formed Chicano culture. The car culture served as a second community or family to be a part of in a time of heated ethnic discrimination. The members of the groups cruised around Los Angeles displaying their vehicles. The purpose of the cruise was to display their rolling artwork as well as to display their culture. The vehicle was a rolling piece of culture and expression that could not be contained by the city's discriminatory laws. The city's "containment" of the Mexican and African American populations essentially created a segregated downtown. However, the lowrider allowed for the Chicanos to freely leave the barrio and assert their presence in Los Angeles. Due to these cruises, the lowrider trend was able to spread throughout the city. The lowrider as a whole was a tool utilized by the Chicano community to spread cultural practices and beliefs. It quickly became evident that automobile served a greater purpose to the community than just merely a form of transportation.

The lowrider movement unified a marginalized community by serving as a voice for the members of the Chicano culture. What about the lowrider vehicle gave it the ability to do so? This is a question that can only be answered by understanding the history of the Mexican American population in Los Angeles, as described above. When the Chicano culture clashed with automotive culture, lowriding was born. The early lowriders harkened back to kustom kar scene that branched out from hot rodding. Just as

the kustom scene revolved around display and show, so did the lowriding movement. Before the movement had the title of “lowriding,” the trend was to transform typically boxy and generic automobile into low, sleek, and intimidating vehicles. The first stylistic transformation was to lower the vehicle. This was done by either weighing the car down with cement blocks, bending the chassis, or by cutting off sections of the coil overs in order to reduce the ride height. Slowly over the years, the style evolved into many cars having custom made body panels in order to dramatically change the appearance of the vehicle into something more mysterious and unique. By the mid 1950’s hot rodding moved into the mainstream and had become quite commercialized. American society was also moving toward a more mass consumerist and “throw away” culture at the time. The commercialization of automotive culture combined with the transition toward a mass consumerist society greatly molded the evolution of lowrider movement. By the late 1950’s there were numerous lowrider “clubs” in the Los Angeles area. By this time the lowrider was adopting many of the traits we associate with movement today. Available for installation in body shops around Los Angeles were custom paints, rims, and chrome trims for a many models of vehicles. The level of customization available for purchase allowed for each vehicle to be unique. This meant that each owner poured a great deal of money to create a vehicle that was an extension of their own personality. In Ben Chappell’s piece on lowriding, he describes how the lowrider served as an extension of the self when he writes, “Conceiving of cars as bodies resembles the bodily identification with rides in the lowrider scene... a material presence to be reckoned with - than what they represented. This is why the preparation of a lowrider is the production of a public self as much as it is the crafting of a cultural text out of an industrial product” (Chappell,

106). As Chappell points out, the lowrider was an embodiment of both one's self and their culture. Not a single piece of chrome trim or pinstripe was placed without absolute intention. Every detail represented an active, conscious decision and each modification could reveal a great deal about the owner of the vehicle. Extremely detailed cars demanded respect from the community. In 1959 there was a law passed in Los Angeles that prohibited any vehicle with any part of it that was lower than the rim base (Tatum, 12). This led to yet another available modification. That modification was hydraulics. This added a new level of showmanship and pushed the movement into a new era. Bob Frost in his piece in the History Channel Magazine called *Low and Slow: The History of Lowriders* writes, "So, by the early 1960s, lowriders with hydraulics were a Chicano art form, distinctly separate from Ed Roth and the rest of the custom car scene. Lowriders with hydraulics were not only cool, they were playful - a good example of *rasquachismo*, described by scholar Tomas Ybarra-Frausto as a 'bawdy, spunky' Chicano sensibility - 'witty, irreverent, and impertinent' - that seeks to 'subvert and turn ruling paradigms upside down,' re-creating American icons, such as cars, with 'oppositional meaning and function'" (Bob Frost). The movement began as outlet for a marginalized community and many of its followers were viewed as outlaws or gang member. However, lowriding grew into a powerful display of art and culture.

The lowrider movement greatly influenced the progression of car culture by establishing a real market for a variety of aftermarket performance and aesthetic parts. Lowriding's signature paint jobs and chrome accents leaked into the world of hot rodding and were also cues picked up by major automotive manufactures of the time. Throughout the 1960s American car manufacturers produced vehicles with factory pinstriping or

optional chrome and metallic paint. The lowriding movement's emphasis on show and gatherings in urban environments created a trend that other car cultures in the future would emulate.

Aftermarket car tuning experienced continual growth as the years progressed, and in the 1990's Los Angeles became the epicenter for another global car movement, centered on the concept of tuning imported vehicles from Asian countries. Much like lowriding, import tuning is deeply rooted within a specific ethnic cultural community in the Los Angeles area, in this case, the Asian American community in the greater Los Angeles area. During the late 1980's and early 1990's, there was a large influx in Asian immigrants into the Los Angeles area: Korean, Chinese, Taiwanese, and Japanese families moved to various cities around Los Angeles. In many cases, the immigrant families were quite wealthy and moved to the United States in hopes to send their children to American schools so that they could go on to attend American universities. This trend resulted in a large population of Asian adolescents attempting to assimilate into American society, while still aiming to preserve their distinct cultural heritage. Though the children were from many different countries in Asia, they tended stick together because they shared very similar childhood experiences, adopted a similar aesthetic taste, and participated in many of the same activities. As the population grew older and were of the age to begin driving, the automobile became another form of expression that united the Asian American youth. The import scene reflects the identity, cultural practices, and lifestyle of the Asian American youth population. Import tuning was created by a youth population that struggled to find a cultural identity. They not only identified with the cultural practices of their ethnic heritage, but they also adopted

American popular culture. As a result, they created their own subculture to identify with that fused together aspects of American and Asian popular culture. This amalgamation of cultures was reflected in their style of dress, music, and even television. The interactions of the two different ethnic popular cultures led to the creation of import tuning scene. The import tuning or racing scene unified a population in search for an identity. Jennifer Lee's book called *Asian American Youth: Culture, Identity and Ethnicity* points out how import racing is a "pan-ethnic" community when she writes, "Groups were initially exclusively Chinese, Korean, or Vietnamese, but, with time, ethnic boundaries faded and converged toward a collective pan-ethnic identity. Now, import racing has become one of the few places, aside from political alliances, where Asian Americans have come together as a group" (Lee, 166). The import racing scene was a cultural creation that evolved into an identity that the Asian American youth as a whole could relate to. A majority of the youth population that identified with the fusion culture of the import racing scene shared many similar character traits.

Despite the possibility of being from a variety different Asian nationalities, the creators of the import racer/tuner culture shared a singular identity. John Stewart, the current editorial director at the Special Equipment Market Association, also referred to as SEMA, has had decades of experience in automotive journalism. John Stewart has a history working with mainstream publications that report on a variety of different car movements. When During the mid -1990's he spent his time as an editor for an import tuning magazine, requiring him delve deeply into culture. He stated that in order to understand why the import scene possessed many of its traits, one must study the creators of the movement. The members of the import scene embraced the white, middle-aged

John Stewart. He immediately noticed that due to its pan-ethnic roots, the members of the movement were extremely accepting to new enthusiasts. John Stewart point out that the members of the movement style oriented and technologically savvy. They were among the first use cellphones and master gaming consoles. The import scene followers embraced technology and invested into much of the latest technology of their time. He stated that the Asian American youth of the time placed a huge emphasis on appearance and many would be seen wearing designer street wear products from head to toe. The generation that created the imported scene was a child of the internet and video game era. They embraced technology into their daily lives with a variety of products like pagers, cell phones, and ECU tuning chips, which electronically increased an engine's power. Lastly, the import scene members were fearless and often viewed as "gangsters" because of how they adopted the "hip-hop" lifestyle. This lifestyle appealed to the predominantly Asian import followers because of how the hip hop culture of the time represented a level of defiance. The Asian American youth of the time were often constrained and defined by the stereotype of being a member of the "model minority." Embracing the hip hop lifestyle and other street cultures acted as a form of resistance to the model minority stereotype. A strong emphasis on style, technology, and maintaining a specific lifestyle all are directly reflected in the early import tuning scene.

The entire cultural assimilation process for the Asian American community triggered a number of trends that ultimately led to the creation of import racing/tuning. Jennifer Lee outlines the import scene's major characteristics when she writes, "Import racing is an emerging youth cultural form reconstructed by Asian Americans as a proactive response to cultural exclusion. It entails customizing or modifying import

subcompact vehicles and combining this with a youthful lifestyle. Participants “fix up” their Asian subcompacts and transform them into lighter, faster, louder, and visually fancier cars” (Lee, 159). The import scene only used Asian manufactured vehicles for tuning and racing. The car movement revolves around transforming everyday subcompacts into race ready machines. Pulling from both hot rodding and lowriding, the import scene had two distinct groups. There was a sphere of membership that purely enhanced the car for show purposes and another half that tuned the car in order to participate in races. Typical enhancements involved body kits, sports oriented suspension, durable brakes, wheels, and tires. Technology also influenced several of the available modifications for the cars. Many companies offered a software that when installed in the car’s computer system, altered the power output. The racing oriented sector of the import scene is much like a modern day hot rodding movement. The early import racers focused on drag racing just as the hot rodding movement did so. However, rather than making improvements to the car by hand, the import tuners visited body shops to purchase and install upgrades for the vehicle. The import racer sector also placed more of an emphasis on raw performance rather than focusing on the aesthetic appeal. The show based import scene, was greatly influenced by the lowrider movement. Many show cars boasted custom paint jobs, lowered stances, as well as exaggerated aerodynamic aids. The import scene encouraged upgrades of all kinds, including custom sound systems, interiors, and even headlights. The myriad amount of options available for each car allowed for the creation of bespoke vehicles that reflected the personality of the owner.

Within the import scene, the car was a representation of a lifestyle, culture, and personality. The import scene as a whole is a very social movement. It began as a social movement that united the Asian American youth population. The car served as representation of the owner's personality and status. Asian American culture places a large emphasis on wealth and status, which are traits reflected in the import tuner culture. The car displayed to the world the owner's wealth and status by the number of modifications done to the vehicle. The vehicle also represented masculinity. The import scene as a whole embodies a fight against Asian cultural stereotypes. The inherent hypermasculinity engrained within the import scene is meant to combat the stereotype that perceives Asian men as effeminate. Jennifer Lee writes about how the car represented the owners masculinity, "Import racing provides a cultural space for Asian American youth to form a pan-ethnic community and also allows Asian American males to construct and assert an unequivocally masculine, hyper-heterosexual identity" (Lee, 168). The car gave the owner the ability to assert his status and his masculinity without action or speech. The vehicle possessed the power transform the lives of the participants and transplant them into a glamorized lifestyle that mimicked the hip-hop culture. Import tuning gatherings provided an environment in which the car owners could live the lifestyle that their vehicles portrayed. Lee describes the gatherings when she writes, "[Enormously popular events] combine the display of cars with a nightclub that includes strobe lights, hip-hop and dance music, and other live entertainment" (Lee, 164). The lifestyle combined with the culture's tendency to race earned its followers an "outlaw" reputation, much like in the cases of hot rodding and lowriding. The gathering also tended to unite participants with similar interests. For example, there were gatherings and

groups formed specifically for Honda owners. The vehicle represented a much more to the owner than merely a mode of transportation. It was a form of personal expression.

The import scene is a social movement centered on the tuning of Asian manufactured cars created by the Asian American youth of Los Angeles. Jennifer Lee summarizes the movement perfectly when she states, “Import racing has filled a void for Asian American youth by providing them with an avenue for extracurricular activities that is both productive and positive. [It is] an opportunity for Asian American youth to form a collective pan-ethnic identity and reclaim their masculinity” (Lee, 174). The movement as a whole provided a sense of identity, community, and empowerment for the Asian American youth population in Los Angeles.

One can study the history of Los Angeles and its various ethnic groups through the lens of car culture. The automobile shaped the geographical growth of Los Angeles. Cities all around Los Angeles were planned around set streets and highways made to accommodate the motor vehicle. The three car movements studied in this chapter each influenced one another and sparked a following worldwide. Looking back, each car movement was created by an ethnic community and embodied many of the values of that specific culture. The car movements held a very specific cultural meaning. However, as time has passed, American society as a whole has changed dramatically. Many of the once first generation communities have now been integrated into American society for years. The new generation of young adults has a much different outlook than that of their elders. This change in perspective and identity has greatly influenced the world of car culture. Just as car culture served as a lens in which

to study past populations, taking a look at the direction for future car culture can reveal a great deal about the new identity of the rising adult generation.

Chapter 2

The three major car culture movements in the previous chapter show how car cultures were born from and driven by a youth population that felt out of step from their larger community in some form. Over time, the youngest members of these marginalized communities developed a new identity that embraces the cultural practices of their native ethnicity as well as the popular culture of American society. Car culture continues to reflect the dynamic process of identity formation among young people from traditionally marginalized groups. The current millennial generation and its culture has changed greatly from the youth populations of the past. The millennial generation has embraced and utilized technology more so than any other youth culture of the past. The various technologies have allowed for the entire youth generation to create an extremely connected and inclusive network. The current youth generation's process of identity formation has resulted in the creation of a population that identifies less with cultural heritage and instead more so with the united technologies of the current era. The internet has been the driving force behind connecting the current youth generation through instant messaging, blogging, and various social media platforms. The millennial generation's united identity has formed a new mass contemporary car culture, unlike any previous movements. The new youth culture is defined by their simultaneous unity through technology and social media, but divided by their extremely individualistic tastes. It is for this reason that there exist more car tuning companies and popular car styles than any other period in the past.

Los Angeles continues to be home to the hot rodding, lowriding, and import tuning car cultures. The changes in population over the years are strong indicators and

factors that influence car culture. In order to predict and understanding contemporary car culture, one must analyze past and present trends in population shifts. According to the Migration Policy Institute, Los Angeles County is home to the largest immigrant population in America with about three and half million immigrant citizens (Migrationpolicy.org). The most recent census also states that the most populous county in the United States is Los Angeles County (census.gov). One can notice that the spikes in population over the years in Los Angeles correlate with the rise in popularity with the car culture of that time. After World War II, there was a huge influx in population because of the returning soldiers. Many of the returning soldiers adopted the hot rod car culture, which raised its popularity and brought it into the mainstream. From 1940 to 1970 there was a steady growth in the amount of Mexican immigrants into the country, and a majority of that group settled in Los Angeles county (migrationpolicy.org). The increase in the Mexican immigrant population created a community that produced the lowrider movement. Los Angeles and the nation saw another great influx in population during the late 1980s and early 1990s. This new population surge originated from a variety of different Asian countries (ppic.org). The communities of the various Asian nationalities came together create and popularize the import scene. Each population that was associated with the creation of a car culture were relatively new members of Los Angeles that used the automobile to aid with the assimilation process. The communities that created these widespread car cultures were new populations of youth in Los Angeles that felt out of place within society of that time. However, since 1990 Los Angeles has not seen a huge spike in population from a new foreign culture. Los Angeles has only seen a steady increase in immigrant population from Asia and Mexico (ppic.org). With

the absence of new incoming youth populations, the car world has not seen the birth of another original car culture. Instead, much of the youth population from the communities that created the past car cultures are now second, third, or even fourth generation American citizens. The new youth population still embraces their ethnic heritage, but also shares a new more inclusive culture that is reinforced by contemporary social practices like social media and other technology. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and even Youtube have united the youth of this time period. This new millennial generation that is unified by American popular culture does not share many of the characteristics with the troubled youth populations of the past that created car movements.

The youth population's culture, lifestyle, and mentality have changed a great deal in the past 25 years within Los Angeles because of the ways in which mass consumerism has changed over the same time period. As the internet and mass consumerism grew, the world was becoming a smaller and more connected place. Since 1990 America's imports have grown by nearly two and a half trillion dollars (census.gov). The massive increase in the usage of the internet has been a major contributor to that growth. Insofar as retail, the internet was able to bring a wide variety of products to anyone with access to the web. This trend created a globalized economy. In the year 1999, the market size of online business services in America was valued at 22 billion dollars (Heath, lecture). The internet has become an increasingly prevalent aspect of each citizen's life and now currently in 2015 the market value has risen to over 300 billion dollars (Enright, 1). The growth of the entire internet retail space proves how technology has affected many everyday societal practices. Technology and the internet has shifted and evolved mass

consumerism. No matter one's location, it is possible to purchase and own an item that was produced in a foreign country. Other forms of technology like the cell phone, pager, and even instant messaging transformed the social practices of all citizens around the globe (Jones, 17). These technologies allowed for the citizens of the world to communicate instantly. The globalization of retail along with instantaneous communication forever changed the path and evolution of trends. Though a majority of the population widely adopted technology as a whole, young people embraced the advancements and assimilated them into their own culture and lifestyles (Jones, 18). The US chamber foundation conducted a study on technology and social media has shaped the identity and culture of the millennial generation. The study writes:

Millennials add content through constant connectedness and the popularity of social media, keeping marketers on their toes. This generation's connectedness also demands that brands ensure or influence that the user experience is positive... This is also important with Millennials because they help set trends through social media... When gathering information and making buying decisions, Millennials rely on recommendations from peers and friends more than from experts. They use mobile devices to read user reviews and explore information on social networks ("The Millennial Generation Research Review").

Technologies like the cell phone, iPod, and internet forums have forged a unique mass youth culture. With the introduction of these technologies, young people began to form subcultures and trends almost instantly. The unification of the millennial generation has transformed the way in which trends have spread around the world.

Car culture is yet another movement that has been greatly affected by this shift toward a more homogenized and mass youth culture. The import scene reflected that changing subculture. In the early 1990s, the creators and members of the Asian community in Los Angeles used internet forums and blogs to bring together a group of

enthusiasts with the same interests. This was a trend that grew more and more popular as technology advanced, with the inventions of platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook (“The Millennial Generation Research Review”). Technology allowed for the young to easily find and spread fashion, music, and other pop cultural trends. This generation’s identity and defining culture was greatly influenced by the development of various technologies. This common thread of technological inclusion and shift in mass consumerism, united this youth generation. The massive following of blogs, Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, and Instagram united an entire generation no matter one’s ethnic background. The various Los Angeles County is unique because it is comprised of 88 cities, many of which are densely populated with a singular ethnicity (lacounty.gov). According to the last census, less than half of the Los Angeles population identifies as “white alone” (census.gov). Referencing an earlier point, the decrease in incoming new ethnic populations signifies that much of the millennial generation born into ethnic communities consisted of second or third generation Americans. Despite being from a variety of ethnicities, an idea or concept could spiral into popularity and gather a following from a number of ethnic communities. Instagram recently released a statement mentioning that they have reached 400 million subscribers (blog.instagram.com). Craig Smith of DMR, an online site that gathers demographic statistics of various social media platforms, stated that 90% of Instagram’s users are under the age of 35 (Smith, 2). Many aspects of this generation have been homogenized, creating a mass youth culture with subtle variations due to influence from ethnic communities. The youth population of Hispanic communities in Los Angeles are exposed to and utilize social media in the same

way other ethnic communities do so, but within that space there is focus on specific trends.

Due to how technology and social media has led to the development of a new mass youth culture, car culture has changed dramatically. In our current society, the car's meaning and significance has evolved. To the past car cultures that were rooted in marginalized communities, the automobile was a work of art that required a significant amount of money and hours to create. The cars of each movement strived to fit a singular mold that represented a specific lifestyle or message. However, the new mass youth car enthusiast population, many of which in Los Angeles are second or third generation children of followers of past movements, has changed the car world in a way that has not been done before. The new mass youth culture uses social media to display unique car styles that represent themselves, which is many times a fusion of their cultural past combined with contemporary trends. This has led to the creation of many new styles and subcultures, rather than one movement representing a singular community or population. The various social media platforms provide a space for each one of these distinct styles to gain a huge following of likeminded individuals. Many of the popular new car trends fuse aspects of older car movements with newer contemporary styling and performance parts.

Both Nakai San and Waruto Kato are two car tuners that act as perfect examples of the change in styles. Nakai San and Waruto Kato both were very famous kit designers during the import scene movement of the early 1990s. They have now amassed a following of nearly one million followers worldwide on social media for their unique design that combines the lowered look of the lowrider and the wide body kits of the import racing scene ([instagram.com](https://www.instagram.com)). Their design and kits are unique because they are

not only made for Asian manufactured cars, but are also available for a wide range of vehicles produced around the world. Nakai San is extremely well known for his RWB (RAUH-Welt Begriff) line of wide body Porsches. He started building these Porsches in the late 1990s as well as the early 2000s (rauhwelt-usa.com). His unique blend of traditional German and import design landed him huge fame. In recent years there has been a huge demand for his uniquely styled vehicles because of his fame on social media platforms driven by the mass youth following. Waruto Kato created a company quite similar to Nakai San and used similar style cues, but created body kits for a variety of manufacturers like Dodge, BMW, Lamborghini, Ferrari, and even Chrysler (liberty-walk.com). These two designers created a look for cars that used past movements like import racing and lowriding for inspiration, which gained a massive following from individuals interested in that specific style.

Another style that has grown in popularity recently is the resto mod movement. A resto mod often refers to an older, classic car that appears from the outside to be original, but many of its parts have been replaced with modern tech. In a recent discussion with Colby Martin of the SEMA organization he pointed out that this new fusion of old and new car styles has led to the rise in popularity of the “resto mod.” Colby Martin’s “primary responsibility is to manage and direct the association’s grassroots network and oversee its outreach strategies to the hobbyist community and to the media” (sema.org). Colby is in constant communication with the enthusiasts at the heart of many of these trends. He stated that there are many young car fanatics that have taken a liking to older classic vehicles, but also love the speed, power, performance, and reliability of modern vehicles (Martin). Many original hot rodders view resto mods as a disgrace to the vehicle

but the massive youth car audience online has created a massive following behind it, creating a massive new market. One company that embodies this particular trend, is Singer Vehicle design (singervehicledesign.com). Singer produces restored Porsche vehicles that appear to be pristine classic cars, but all of the technical aspects of the car are modern in design (singervehicledesign.com). Singer's mission statement perfectly embodies not only the resto mod vehicle movement, but also how the aftermarket car industry has shifted to cater toward contemporary society's individualistic tastes. The mission statement reads, "Our specification and restoration choices reflect our vision of an optimized air-cooled machine and are aimed at enthusiasts all over the world. This vision is merely a launching point, a broad canvas for individual self-expression and fine tailoring" (singervehicledesign.com). The new mass youth culture that is defined by stylistic preferences that fuse together the old and the new have led to the creation of a variety of original, unique car trends. These styles have gained global popularity through social media and other online platforms.

Due to a technologically unified mass youth culture, two distinct car enthusiast groups have formed: a massive following of car culture and trends solely through online media sources and a group that owns and tunes their own vehicles. There is now a larger population that follows the "car scene" than ever before, but the current generation still lacks a singular defining car movement. YouTube for example, has over 1.2 million car related channels on their site (youtube.com). Other social media platforms like Instagram have thousands of car accounts with millions of followers. The television car and comedy show called Top Gear recently became "the most widely watched factual television program in the world, according to the Guinness Book of World Records, with

350 million global viewers” (money.cnn.com). The Top Gear car news Facebook page has 24 million followers (money.cnn.com). With the new technology, access to the internet is all that it takes to become a car enthusiast. Though there are now tens of millions of car fans around the world as proved by the sheer number of followers on the various media sites, there is a much smaller population that actually tunes vehicles.

Despite the massive online following of cars online, questions have been raised asking if this following is in fact a car culture of its own. In a piece called “Has Car Culture Crashed?,” a Drexel University professor in mobilities research that focuses on urban living and public transportation, Mimi Sheller, states:

Over the last decade there has been a decline in miles driven per year per person and per household, not just in the United States, but across all of the industrial economies. This is especially the case for 16- to 35-year-olds. There has also been a decline in the number of young people getting driver’s licenses...The Millennial generation has made the strongest shift away from car driving and car ownership compared to earlier generations at the same age (Sheller, 1).

There is clear evidence showing a decrease in the popularity of the act of driving. Many factors like the current state of the economy or environmental perceptions have the ability to cause this shift away from car driving. However, a passion for motor vehicles persists. Various internet platforms have allowed for that passionate sub-culture to continue the love for cars.

Due to the increased amount of popular styles, car tuning has become a much more individualistic activity. The car population that spends time tuning and working on cars is a relatively small community that has many different preferences. Car cultures of the past acted as an outlet and representation of an entire community. Recently, the

individualization of car culture has shifted the meaning of automobile. In a recent interview with Leon Kim, an avid car enthusiast and tuner, he explained:

There is a huge split right now. There are a ton of guys who know a lot about different styles and car stats, but don't know how to tune a car themselves. In the past, the car was a symbol for an entire community. Nowadays, the car is a symbol of personal expression. The huge variety of aftermarket parts gives you a level of customization that has never existed in car culture in the past. To me, my car represents my personality and my style (Leon Kim, interview).

Leon drives a highly tuned Lexus IS that embraces the look of older import racers and often attends large car gatherings in the Los Angeles area. He also pointed out that the other attendees of current car gatherings are inspired by styles they have seen on forums and then go on to create a car that is representation of their respective personality.

Contemporary car culture has placed a new meaning to the car. Both groups of modern car culture view tuning the automobile as a form of personal expression. The inherent individualism of current car culture is uniting young people from a variety of different ethnic backgrounds. Car culture is no longer about forming a unique ethnic identity but rather about a more general and collective youth identity.

Despite the lack of literature tracking this shift toward individuality in auto culture, evidence can be found when looking at the evolutions of trade associations, and publications. The Specialty Equipment Market Association, also known as SEMA, “consists of a diverse group of manufacturers, distributors, retailers, publishing companies, auto restorers, street-rod builders, restylers, car clubs, race teams and more” (sema.org). SEMA specifically deals with protecting and maintaining car culture within the United States. The directions and activity of SEMA are clear indicators of the current state of car culture nationwide. SEMA writes, “Today, the 52-year-old organization

performs many services for its members and for the hobby as a whole. Perhaps most importantly, SEMA works hard to protect consumers' rights to drive accessorized, customized and vintage vehicles. SEMA keeps close tabs on legislators in Washington, D.C., and also in each state within the United States, so SEMA members and anyone who loves cars and trucks can protest pending legislation that might harm our hobby, as well as endorse legislation that's good for car lovers" (sema.org). Because SEMA works closely with thousands of aftermarket car manufactures, even slight changes within car culture are easily noticeable. The shift toward a more diverse and individualistic car culture is reflected in SEMA's recent activity. Each year, SEMA hosts a trade show that is only opened to those in the trade and not the general public. In its first years, the show was held in the greater Los Angeles area and contained around 100 vendors with a total guest list of about 3,000 (Spoonhower, 3). The show continued to grow over the years steadily, but in the last 15 years there has been a massive spike in growth. There were about 1,200 vendors and 80,000 industry attendees (Spoonhower, 3). After attending the most recent SEMA 2015 show, I learned that there were about 2,500 vendors and around 200,000 attendees. The dramatic growth in popularity and vendors show just how rapidly the aftermarket car industry has grown recently. There are more aftermarket manufacturers creating products for a wider range of styles than ever before in order to cater to the more individualized contemporary car culture.

Further substantiation of this shift toward a more individualist car culture driven by the mass youth culture can be seen when studying the publications covering current car news. The early editions of Hot Rod Magazine from the 1950s and 1960s focused on a great deal of technical racing topics (hotrod.com). An issue from August of 1960

covered topics like “the latest stroker kit for the corvair,” Mickey Thompson’s world records at the drag strip, and how to achieve more power through boring and stroking. (Hot Rod Magazine). Each of these topics as well as the rest of the magazine consisted of extremely technical, racing oriented articles. The entire purpose of the publication was to excite the pure enthusiasts. Because of the “do it yourself” attitude associated with the hot rodding movement, the early issues included a multitude of “how to” guides on how to make one’s car faster. However, the publications catering to the lowrider scene focused a great deal on the visual aesthetics and social aspects of the culture. Lowrider Magazine was founded in 1973 and its earliest issues were filled with photographs of lowrider gatherings and exemplary cars (lowrider.com). The magazine acted as a journal recording the lives and lifestyles of lowriders all around the Los Angeles area. John Stewart, of SEMA, pointed out that in the early import scene publications, the target audience was young Asian males. For this reason, the publications featured advertisements in a variety of Asian languages as well as Asian models posing with cars. As the youth that drove the import movement grew older and the new generation’s obsession and widespread adoption of internet media outlets like Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and Youtube triggered a massive change within the car industry. The car, as well as other retail industries have had to greatly transform their marketing strategies due to the current generation’s reliance on social media (Sago, 1). The publications that catered toward one specific audience began to lose popularity. During this time period of change, major publications like Hot Rod Magazine, Lowrider Magazine, and Import Tuner all were acquired by larger media conglomerates (superstreet.com, enthusiastnetwork.com, lowrider.com). These publications were suffering because they

were not adapting to a new audience. Large media groups like The Enthusiast Network and Super Street created an online presence and covered a broader spectrum of content for these print publications in order to reach a larger audience (enthusiastnetwork.com). Magazines and other media outlets covering one specific movement could not financially survive on the market alone. It was necessary for a larger media conglomerate to acquire the various publications. The new found online presence for the magazines allowed for each publication to reach a much broader audience. For example, The Enthusiast Network's mission statement reads, "Our unique and innovative approach to content development and media solutions allows our partners to activate passionate groups of influencers effectively and efficiently" (enthusiastnetwork.com). The executive team at The Enthusiast Network witnessed how the current car market was evolving and changing at an extremely rapid pace and acquired 50 different publications and 60 different (enthusiastnetwork.com). The extremely diverse holdings of the network allowed them to thrive and reach the new broader audience. In order for publications to keep up with the changing styles, trends, and new releases, it was necessary to create online presence. The most popular print and online publications currently cover a wide variety of car news like Motor Trend, Road and Track, and Car and Driver ("Total Circulation of Consumer Magazines"). The decrease in popularity of publications covering singular car movements and significant increase of online sources catering to a broader car enthusiast audience is a clear indicator of an evolving car culture.

The current car culture has been greatly influenced by social media and the internet as a whole, but there are other factors that have helped sustain the shift. The

massive online following of car related news and trends has created a demand for specific styles. In order to sustain a car culture, there must be a popular style amongst car enthusiasts as well as a market of manufacturers willing to create the aftermarket products. The recent increase in the amount of popular styles due to internet fame has created a massive multi-billion-dollar market for vendors and aftermarket manufacturers. According to SEMA, the current retail aftermarket part industry is a 29.9 billion dollar a year market (sema.org). The huge following of car culture online has created a massive market and advancements in manufacturing that lowered production costs providing a supply to match the demand. Many of the current aftermarket parts are extremely easy to install quickly. The low prices and ease of installation of aftermarket car products have also contributed to shift in car culture. With car movements of the past like hot rodding, lowriding, and the import scene, tuning a car took an incredible amount of skill, time, and dedication. Making changes to cars of past movements was an event, in which much thought was put into every decision. For example, changing paint or changing the fascia of the vehicle in hot rodding and lowriding took a great deal of time and craftsmanship. However, with advancements in technology and production one can completely change the appearance of their vehicle in a matter of days at a relatively low cost. Leon Kim highlighted how the meaning of the car has changed in recent years to car enthusiasts:

When you were tuning a car in the past, it was a long term project. You had to be exactly sure if you wanted a specific color or a specific body kit. Once you pick your color or body kit, the tuner would have to do dramatic, irreversible changes to the car like sanding or cutting of body panels. Now, you can just pop into a body shop and wrap your car and get a body kit installed in just a few days. If you don't like it, you can just change both of them at any point (Leon Kim, Interview).

New technology has allowed for aftermarket manufacturers to produce parts with factory level precision for relatively low prices. One can now also choose to wrap their vehicle in any color of their choice and keep it on for however long they desire. Though these advancements have allowed for higher level of customization, it has also permitted less commitment from the owner of the vehicle. The decreased level of commitment and increased level of customizability has contributed to a new era of car culture that is centered on individual, stylistic taste. Contemporary car culture has moved away from a time period where the car was an emotional symbol and lifelong project for members of a displaced population.

Due to how Los Angeles has long been considered the center of global car culture, it has had this reputation because of how crucial the automobile is to daily and how its extremely diverse population has used the car in order to assimilate into American society. However, Los Angeles has not seen any recent influxes of entirely new populations. The driving force behind car cultures of the past has been the youth of that time period. The new millennial generation has been greatly influenced by technology. Technology has unified the millennial generation through various social media platforms and other internet based resources, leading to the creation of a mass youth culture. The new mass youth culture is not defined by one singular defining trend, rather the various internet platforms have allowed for a wide range of styles to amass a following of like minded individuals. The current mass youth culture has used the technology to find a group or movement in which they identify with. Car culture has been dramatically impacted by the millennial generation's inherent individualistic attitudes.

Conclusion

In my thesis, I aimed to show the reader how culturally valuable and significant the car was to several different populations within American society. It is evident when reading this thesis that studying a car culture can act as a window into the characteristics and personality of an entire era and population. Though each movement revolved around the singular idea of tuning a car, each one carried with it completely unique meanings. The car is often an embodiment or representation of one's ideals. As a car fan, it is interesting to see how at different types of car events the car can represent extremely different values. The owners at a hot rod, low rider, or import show differed greatly. Even within one individual car culture the members all shared a similar deep connection and emotional attachment to their vehicles, but their respective cars signified something unique.

In recent years, car culture has changed dramatically and many say that it is a dying form of expression. One article that grabbed my attention the most was written by Marc Fisher of the Washington Post called "Cruising Toward Oblivion." Fisher writes:

For nearly all of the first century of automobile travel, getting your license meant liberation from parental control, a passport to the open road. Today, only half of millennials bother to get their driver's licenses by age 18. Car culture, the 20th-century engine of the American Dream, is an old guy's game. "The automobile just isn't that important to people's lives anymore," says Mike Berger, a historian who studies the social effect of the car. "The automobile provided the means for teenagers to live their own lives. Social media blows any limits out of the water. You don't need the car to go find friends." Much of the emotional meaning of the car, especially to young adults, has transferred to the smartphone, says Mark Lizewskie, executive director of the Antique Automobile Club of America Museum in Hershey, Pa. "Instead of Ford versus Chevy, it's Apple

versus Android, and instead of customizing their ride, they customize their phones with covers and apps,” he says (Fisher).

This article along with many others compare current car culture to movements of the past. I believe using this method of comparison does not properly analyze contemporary car culture. After writing this thesis, I have learned that it is not possible to compare one car culture to the next. Car culture is a term that is often used broadly to describe the tuning of an automobile. However, if asked, each individual car enthusiast would have a unique answer to what they believed car culture is and is not. For example, many traditional hot rodders did not consider low riding to be a proper form of car culture. It is for this reason that it is not possible to compare one time period’s car culture to the next. Currently, car culture looks different to anytime in previous years, which is not to say that it no longer exists.

The automobile has transformed from a thing of rarity and simplicity into a commonplace, technology packed form of transportation. Contemporary society undoubtedly views the car in a much different way than previous generations. Like many other products currently, the car has become something that is replaceable. New technology renders fairly new cars obsolete and manufactures urge consumers to purchase the latest vehicles.

As a result of the mass youth culture expressing a multitude of different preferences, hundreds of new car styles have risen to fame and popularity. The various online platforms have allowed there to be more car enthusiasts than any other period in the past. This massive following has greatly impacted the car industry as a whole. In order to track the impact this new millennial generation has had on the industry, it is

essential to study the reactions of publications, manufacturers, and trade associations. There has been an overall increase in the following and participation in “car culture,” but a drastic change in the meaning of the automobile to millennial car enthusiasts. Due to direction of car culture, the lack of newly entering populations, and the individualistic attitude of the new mass youth culture, it is highly unlikely that we will witness a completely new singular defining car movement in the near future.

This thesis has shown me that car culture is a powerful and unique form of popular culture. The passion for car culture has not dwindled over time, but has rather manifested itself in different forms over the years. Car culture has become a global phenomenon no longer rooted within a specific community. Changes in the economy, technology, and ethnic relations have all triggered evolution in car culture, but it still remains a true reflection of various societal values.

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