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The Criminalization of Chicano Male Youth & their Community Agency

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“The Criminalization of Chicano Male Youth & their Community Agency”
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Lowriding is an important aspect of our history and has served as an important form of cultural expression. It not only served as a form of cultural expression, but as an outlet for youth to exhibit their artistic and creative talents in living art that would be judged at car shows. These car shows were a chance for local car clubs to bring their art to the community and more importantly, an outlet to keep youth engaged in their community positively. An important aspect of Lowriding culture is cruising; cruising is when the cars from the shows are taken to the streets and the works are displayed within the community by parading up and down the streets. Cruising brought all walks of life to the streets to admire, enjoy, and engage with the artist and their artwork. Consequently this cultural form of expression and community engagement was turned into a focal point of state sponsored attacks on our youth.

In the 1970's in Sacramento, California, Lowriding became a popular outlet for youth, which had been written off by the Sacramento public school system as delinquents, problems, and not college material. Many of the Chicana and Chicano youth had been pushed out of the compulsory schooling system, which the public school system had given up on them (Sr, 2011). Lowriding for these youth was a saving grace that allowed them to utilize their skills in creating community artwork, develop community organizing skills, and develop life lessons that could not be taught within the walls of compulsory schooling. At the center of this battle between Chicana and Chicano youth and the city of Sacramento was the Washington Neighborhood center.

The Washington Neighborhood center served the youth of Sacramento for over 55 years and developed outreach programs for the youth of the city (Johansson, 2004). A major outreach program was the Sacramento Lowriding Association that would reach out to youth who were in the process of being pushed out of the compulsory schooling system. As a result of this outreach, the most undesirable youth of the city were able to come together across the city from various barrios to create art and become engaged, active members in their communities. This community activism and community art went beyond any exhibit or institution and encouraged participants to apply their creative ambitions to art, but more importantly, to community organizing. The driving force behind this outreach program was Tony Gonzalez.

Tony was an openly queer Chicano male who grew up within the Washington Neighborhood center, first as a part time employee who cleaned toilets and then eventually sitting on the board of directors (Sylva, 1995). Tony was dedicated to the Chicana and Chicano youth of the city of Sacramento who sought out the youth of the city to join him in alternative forms of education being offered by the Washington Neighborhood center that revolved around cultura and community organizing. Tony sought out Chicano male youth who were mostly being harassed by police, who were from economically disenfranchised sectors of the city, and were in the process of being pushed out of schools and being tracked into the prison industrial complex (Sr, 2011). With the support of the community, Tony would go to local middle schools and recruit those who have been identified as local gang leaders by the Police department.

Tony provided these young men an alternative to a schooling system that had given up on these young men and left them to the unforgiving streets of the city's gang

and drug culture that ran rampant in the 1980's. He knew that these youth were not a problem to the city but rather an asset to their community (Sr, 2011). In Tony's eyes, these youth needed education that reflected the reality of their community, which national, state, and local policies had left them with little to no choices. A major focus of Tony's education program was not only preventing these youth from becoming a part of the growing population of the prison industrial complex, but community organizing (Sr, 2011).

One of the major projects that Tony had the youth get involved in was through the Sacramento Lowrider Association community improvement projects within the communities that these youth came from. Some of these projects included planting trees on major streets that were used to cruise on, cleaning up trash, and promoting anti-violent education on the nights of big cruises (Wiley, 1983). Within this community engagement these youth also became major recruiters for the Sacramento Low-rider Association. They outreached to their peers to become involved in not only the culture of Lowriding but also becoming advocates for their own communities against poverty and violence.

A major rallying point for the youth of the Sacramento Lowrider Association was their car shows. The car shows were a space where the youth would apply the education that was gained through Tony's activism and applies their community organizing skills (Sr, 2011). The youth not only participated in showing their artwork but also were hired within the car shows in various positions from security, registration, helping with displaying the cars, and all the other ins and outs of putting together a major show. The car shows that were put on by the Sacramento Low-rider Association was able to generate anywhere from \$20,000 to \$50,000 of donations for the Washington

Neighborhood center to not only continue its operations but expand its outreach to the youth of Sacramento (Sr, 2011) (Penland, 1995).

The success of the outreach that Tony Gonzalez had along with the Washington Neighborhood center came under attack by the Sacramento Police Department with the emergency ordinance that was issued on March 22, 1988. Ordinance Number 88-016 declared cruising was illegal within the city (Sacramento City Council, 1988). The ordinance was put into the city code immediately and was the first of many anti-cruising policies that directly affected the Chicana and Chicano youth associated with the Sacramento Lowriding Association. This ordinance rocked the community because a major function of car shows and his outreach project revolved around cruising, which was an integral part of Lowriding. As a result of this attack, Tony reorganized and did everything within his power to continue to develop his much needed outreach program for the youth of the city of Sacramento.

From this ordinance, with the Sacramento Police department, Tony addressed the concerns of the city and went on a tireless campaign to create a space within city designated just for cruising. What developed from this city attack on Chicana and Chicano youth was the creation of Miller Park within Sacramento, which was a designated space to continue cruising after car shows (Gonzales, 1991). In collaboration with the city and the development of Miller Park, cruising within the city was cut down by 60% and the Sacramento Lowrider Association went on an education campaign to inform its members of the city's policies against lowriders in order to avoid further conflict between Police and the Chicana and Chicano youth who participating in Lowriding (Penland, 1995) (Sr, 2011).

Though Tony addressed the needs of the city and did everything that was asked of him, the city still came down on the Chicana and Chicano community who fit the profile of anyone associated with lowriding culture. The Sacramento Police department engaged in intense campaign of terror that targeted, harassed, and ticketed anyone who was deemed to be cruising after any car shows. The police harassment lead to the Sacramento Lowrider Association defending themselves and the community by creating a campaign of ride-a-longs on major cruising strips documenting, video taping, and intervening utilizing the city codes to try to cut back on the police harassment of the lowriding community (Sr, 2011). This long battle between the Chicana and Chicano youth and the city of Sacramento's Police department forever changed with the death of Tony Gonzalez.

The long time advocate for Chicana and Chicano youth in Sacramento who positively influenced the lives of many youth with his outreach and education died of HIV AIDS at the age of 40 on January 7, 1995. Tony was a major force within the lowriding community and dedicated his life to the youth of Sacramento, which was reflected in his work and outreach through the Washington Neighborhood center (Sylva, 1995). During this somber moment, the city Police along with the Chicana and Chicano community came together to honor the loss of a great advocate for the youth of Sacramento, CA.

The community was never able to recover from the death of Tony and as a result the battle between the city and the Chicana and Chicano community had turned in favor of the city. Later that year the Sacramento Low-rider Association was hit with an all out assault that resulted in financial penalties against them that resulted in the city wasting

over \$15,000 in funds to prevent a cruise after a show (Penland, 1995). From this a \$35,000 sanction was placed on the association to hold the next car show, which affected their ability to generate the funds they once had before. This dramatically changed its outreach programs for the most needy youth of the city of Sacramento. As a result, the Washington Neighborhood center had to cut back with its youth programs aimed to address the inequality within the city. Though the problems facing the youth within the city have not changed since then, no revenue generator has been produced or replaced in effectiveness of Tony's education for youth through Lowriding to help the youth of the city.

Most importantly, the legacy of Tony has been forgotten by most and the potential to create education rooted in self-determination based around the needs of the youth that he had developed has become a part of that forgotten legacy. It is critical that we as a community continue to talk to our elders, our community, and listen to the needs of our gente. In listening and discovering our own history, we can understand the richness, resistance, and survival we have engaged in during various moments of history where our Brown bodies have become the focal point of state sponsored violence. In remembering, we can find strength and live the legacy of the Tony Gonzalez's of our communities. Rest in Power to Tony Gonzalez and all of our forgotten heroes who worked in collaboration with the their community to imagine different possibilities with those who have been systematically marginalized within our community.

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