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Emily Kearns

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# Car Modification: A Vehicle for Self Expression

EMILY KEARNS



Emily Kearns is a Sophomore majoring in Early Childhood Education and English. She wrote this paper

in the fall of 2012 as part of her coursework for an Introduction to Folklore class taught by Yasar Ozan Say. It is the culmination of a semester-long interview-based project. After graduating, Emily plans to pursue teaching and also obtain a Masters degree in education.

**W**hen considering what falls into the remarkably broad discipline that is folklore, some of the first images that come to mind are peasants and farmers performing folk dances, passing down folktales, and engaging in age-old rituals and ceremonies. I certainly never would have considered car modification to fall under the folkloric umbrella – after all, it seems far too modern, and we often have the misconception that folklore is concerned exclusively with the lower-class workers of the distant past. However, after looking closely at some of the more modern interpretations and definitions of folklore (of which there are many), it becomes clear that car modification – and even car repairs, to a certain extent – more than qualify as facets of this overarching genre. Folklore is divided up into three major sections: material, verbal, and customary lore (Wilson 1986, 229). Material lore has to do with folk objects and tangible items, verbal lore is relayed orally, and customary lore refers to rituals or practices. Car modification, the focus of this paper, is considered a type of material folklore since it deals most primarily with folk objects and how their owners interact with them.

## Introduction: Car Modification as Folklore

The qualifications for what constitutes a folk object are markedly vague, and define nearly any object that has been created and/or noticeably modified by a person for the purpose of expressing themselves or a particular message. A few of the most common examples include the architecture of old barns, the patches of hand-sewn quilts, and carvings. A modified car meets these major guidelines: it is a physical object and has been changed from its original form to express the specific intentions of the owner.

As Simon J. Bronner emphasizes in his chapter entitled “Folk Objects” in Elliott Oring’s *Folk Groups and Folklore Genres*, “despite the ‘otherness’ of objects, humans nevertheless project their own ideas and emotions onto them and see them as reflections of themselves” (Bronner 1986, 204). In modern American society, this is perhaps most true in regards to cars; many car owners, regardless of their knowledge of automotive work, feel connected to their vehicles and value them beyond their essential purpose as a mode of transportation. I myself am capable of nothing beyond checking fluid levels and changing a tire, and yet have fondly named my car and view it almost in the same way a child views a favorite stuffed animal. I am not alone in this: cars hold a special place for many people who are not involved

in the intricacies of mechanical and automotive work. For the purposes of this paper, however, I will focus most prominently on the opinions and practices of David Carroll, a man who is invested in his car in ways that the average person is not.

### **I. David Carroll and his Pontiac**

On a cold December evening – is there any other kind? – I sat down to interview David Carroll, a man whom I had the distinct pleasure of meeting about a year ago when he and my mother met by coincidence, became close friends, and later started dating. He currently lives in Methuen, MA, but maintains many connections with his hometown of Chelsea, MA. Though he works as a Massachusetts Auto Damage Appraiser by day, by night Dave is a man of many hobbies. Among his various pursuits are traveling, amateur video editing, computer work, cooking, home renovations, scuba diving, and automotive work. An incredibly likable and outgoing person, Dave’s goofy sense of humor and ability to relate to almost anybody earn him many friends everywhere he goes. He is a rare kind of person who is always open to new people and experiences, but also fiercely loyal and devoted to old friendships that he has maintained throughout his entire life. Dave is passionate not only about his relationships with other people, but also about all of his hobbies. For each of the activities that he is involved in, he has countless stories and experiences to share with anybody who will listen. This applies to his hobby of automotive work and car modification.

Ever since he was a teenager, Dave has had the same 1972 Pontiac Lemans that he originally purchased in 1984:



Since then, he has poured countless hours of labor, effort, and passion into this car, which has followed him throughout all the major events in his life. As he has changed, the car has changed as well.

Though the Pontiac still requires some tweaks to its interior before Dave will consider it “finished,” his work on it is nearly complete.



This paper will explore how people like Dave engage in this type of folklore, the different aspects of car modification, and how an owner’s perception of their car can change over time. Dave’s skill with mechanical work was born largely out of necessity, but also quickly took the form of self-expression. It is my belief that the Pontiac is a manifestation of the overlap between Dave’s practical skills and his personal self-expression, as well as a piece of art that represents him on many different levels.

### **II. Verbal Aspects of Material Lore**

Despite the fact that folklore is divided into material, verbal, and customary lore, there is still a significant amount of overlap between these subgenres. Car modification is a perfect example: while it is mainly considered to be material lore, it can also take on many aspects of verbal lore as well. People who modify cars do not do so in a vacuum; they might work

in garages, talk about their hobby with friends, or engage in online forums and discussion boards. They may even visit car shows and meet with others who share their passion, bringing in aspects of customary lore as well.

Dave is quite vocal about his Pontiac, and is guaranteed to have a story to tell about each repair, stylistic choice, and car show that he has been a part of. This helps to keep him connected to the material aspect of his folklore even when it has been months since he was last able to work on his car. Integrating aspects of verbal lore into a largely material hobby is necessary with car modification (as with many other large-scale folk objects that take time to complete), since the amount of time spent actually interacting with the object is fairly low on a weekly, monthly, or even yearly basis.

Repairing, restoring, and modifying a car stands apart from many other types of material folklore simply because of the sheer scale and cost that such a massive project entails. Because of the intense level of dedication and the heavy investment of both time and money that are required for this hobby, modifying a car is a rather gradual process. Those who work on cars are not completely unique in this, however – certainly a barn, sculpture, or even an intricate quilt could take just as long and be equally labor-intensive to complete. Projects such as these make a verbal or customary aspect to the material folklore necessary; otherwise the tradition-bearer risks losing touch with their object entirely. Though Dave does not have sufficient time or money to constantly work on the Pontiac, he still practices the verbal aspect of his folklore often; this keeps him connected to his car even when he has not driven it in months. Dave has a fairly large storytelling repertoire, and it seems like he has a Pontiac story for every situation: some are short and make people laugh, some are long and impressive, and others are deeply sobering and meaningful to listen to.

Due to the fact that the details of automotive work are largely a mystery to the majority of people – I could not tell you the difference between a transmission and a drive shaft, and know few people who could – Dave uses his stories as a way to connect his passion to the people around him, even those who are much less knowledgeable than he is. He knows that my sister and I will relate best to the stories that describe the visible additions to the car, the interesting places he has taken it, or the humorous situations that it has put him in. He often relates the story of the first day he bought the Pontiac: it was so badly broken it would only drive in reverse, and he hurt his neck driving it backwards all the way to his house. When he talks to some of his friends, however, he will go on and on about the engine, the belts, and the brakes, and tell stories about the mechanics of the car that make no sense to somebody

who is outside of the folk group. To Dave, his stories are not only about feeling connected to his folklore, but also about communicating his love of cars with other people and sharing a part of himself with those around him. This often requires him to adapt the stories to fit the situation, something that he does exceptionally well.

### III. Self Expression

When asked what first got him started with automotive work, Dave's response has surprising duality to it. He describes how he had "a dream" when he first saw this photograph of a Pontiac in a magazine:



I can picture him in his youth tearing the page out and holding onto it all these years, captivated by the image that he then strove to obtain for himself. He calls the car his "first baby" and regards it fondly, even lovingly. This is the answer that I expected him to give.

Far less romantically, however, he tells me that much of his knowledge of mechanical work was initially driven by necessity and economics. Dave was thrown out of the house on his eighteenth birthday, and had to learn how to support himself at a young age. At that point in his life, it was unrealistic to pay somebody else hundreds of dollars for car repairs when the

parts themselves only cost a fraction of that. It always made more economic sense to do the work himself, so he did.

There is an intense contrast between this practical application of skills and the sentimental attachment that Dave clearly has for the Pontiac. While he worked to pay the bills and support himself, he never let go of his first car, even when it became difficult to keep. He describes how there were many times in his past when he had to get creative in order to hold onto it, but it was always worth it: “a lot of blood, sweat, and tears in it, and it’s hard to get rid of it after that,” he says in our interview.

Throughout his life, Dave has possessed many other vehicles, but now, at age forty-four, the Pontiac is the only one he still has from his youth. When asked why, he simply smiles fondly and says, “It was my first car,” almost frustrated that he does not have any other, perhaps more compelling reason. However, I find this answer to be quite compelling. Despite the fact that much of Dave’s knowledge of cars was once a matter of economics and practicality, there is nothing practical about his current relationship with the Pontiac. Rather than being the means to an end that many cars become (despite our undeniable attachments to them), for Dave, the Pontiac is more of a method of self expression than anything else; it has transcended usefulness, and the traditional bond between car and driver. From his practical knowledge, he has created something almost entirely artistic that reflects his own tastes and preferences as an individual. Not only does it convey

the muscle car and sporty Pontiac image that he originally gravitated towards in his teens, but it is also a showcase of his passion and talent for automotive work that only grew as he got older.

The car stands as a compilation of Dave’s skills, as well as a method of expressing himself personally. Almost anybody’s car says something about them: it hints at their social class, their aesthetic tastes, and sometimes even their age. But far fewer people dedicate the time, money, and effort into creating something that truly represents them. Car modification is the overlap between practicality and creativity, making it the perfect vehicle for self expression.

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