The Bronx: Creating Fashion Identity through Race, Class, Hip-Hop Culture and J.Lo

Milesska Jordana Contreras-Hernandez
Graduate Center, City University of New York

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!
Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds
Part of the Sociology Commons

Recommended Citation
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/189

This Thesis is brought to you by CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Dissertations, Theses, and Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact deposit@gc.cuny.edu.
THE BRONX: CREATING FASHION IDENTITY THROUGH RACE, CLASS, HIP-HOP CULTURE AND J. LO

BY

MILESSKA J. CONTRERAS-HERNANDEZ

A master’s thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of the degree requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York.

2014
Thesis Approval Page

Milesska J. Contreras-Hernandez

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

Eugenia Paulicelli

April 20, 2014
Date
Thesis Advisor

Matthew Gold

April 29, 2014
Date
Executive Officer

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

THE BRONX: CREATING FASHION IDENTITY THROUGH RACE, CLASS AND HIP HOP CULTURE AND J. LO

By

Milesska J. Contreras-Hernandez

Advisor: Professor Eugenia Paulicelli

The following thesis is a three-part look at the way that fashion identity is created, practiced and understood in the Bronx. The majority of the thesis focuses on the area of Fordham Road, which is an area that is regarded as one of the biggest producers of fashion and consumption in the working class borough. This paper provides a look at the history of the borough to understand how an area like Fordham was shaped. Fordham is an area consisting of a variety of small and large businesses that cater to the members of the surrounding communities. These residents are from lower working class backgrounds and from a variety of Latin American and African American ethnic groups. Factors such as class, racial background, and the rise of hip-hop culture in the eighties, have all influenced the type of consumerism in the area. The stores, clothing, and products sold in Fordham Road are very particular and geared to this population.
When others think of the Bronx, they often apply an urban and “ghetto” street fashion persona to members of the various communities in the borough. This persona has everything to do with the types of clothing people from several parts of the borough wear, what stores they shop in, physical behavior, language, and their customs. It is because of these factors that cultural identity precedes fashion identity. This paper concludes with an analysis of this worldwide image of Bronx fashion identity as created by pop icon and actress Jennifer Lopez. Lopez’s successful career has contributed to the overall conception of how people from the Bronx dress and behave. This is supported through her constant expression of urban hip-hop culture and “Latinidad” in her songs, music videos and personal style.

Through the analysis of various academic sources, music videos, photographs, newspaper and magazine articles, this paper will provide variables that have all contributed to the creation of fashion identity in the Bronx. This study will show how space can determine the way a person identifies as an individual and as part of a subculture through their choices in fashion. The choices that people make are often predetermined for them by this space through forms of marketing and consumerism.
Acknowledgements

My interest in the way people in the Bronx dress came from growing up in the borough and always encountering people who questioned the way I dressed and presented myself. My style was never over the top or attention seeking, but it has always been different from that of my peers. My peers all wore urban name brands, wore the latest expensive sneakers and rejected seasonal trends. I always questioned why people from the Bronx were stereotyped with this sense of style and associated with hip-hop culture. I realized there were a lot of factors to consider that I could not apply to myself. My experience and work in the Liberal studies program helped me take on these questions and gave me the necessary background to explore this idea. My greatest thanks to Professor Eugenia Paulicelli, whose support in this process allowed me to commit to this thesis and whose courses helped me see fashion in a new light.
# Table of Contents

Approval Page ........................................................................................................... iii

Abstract ...................................................................................................................... iv

Acknowledgements ................................................................................................... vi

List of Figures ............................................................................................................. viii

Introduction ............................................................................................................... 1

Part 1: The North and the South Bronx ................................................................. 7
  A Symbol of Revival ............................................................................................... 9
  The Bronx is Burning ............................................................................................ 12

Part 2: Fordham Road ............................................................................................ 19
  Visualizing Fordham ............................................................................................. 20
  Urban/Hip-Hop Culture ......................................................................................... 42

Part 3: Jenny from the Block ................................................................................ 50

Conclusion ............................................................................................................... 60

Works Cited ............................................................................................................. 63
List of Figures

Figure 1: The Fordham center sign ................................................................. 21
Figure 2: Fordham alleys .............................................................................. 21
Figure 3: Mexican street vendor ................................................................. 22
Figure 4: Street Jewelry .............................................................................. 23
Figure 5: “Brand name” products ............................................................... 23
Figure 6: Accessories vendor ..................................................................... 24
Figure 7: Pretty Girl .................................................................................... 26
Figure 8: Bon Bini ....................................................................................... 26
Figure 9: Butt Boosting Jeans ................................................................. 29
Figure 10: Outdoor racks ........................................................................... 35
Figure 11: Clearance Sale ......................................................................... 36
Figure 12: Caps and Hats ........................................................................... 44
Figure 13: “Sneaker-heads” ................................................................. 47
Figure 14: Female Sexuality ..................................................................... 48
Introduction

"One of the most visible makers of social status and gender and therefore useful in maintaining or subverting symbolic boundaries, Clothing is an indication of how people in different eras have perceived their positions in social structures and negotiated status boundaries."

- Diana Crane (1)

The fashion instructor, Anne McField, describes her style as urban and preppy while standing on the intersection between Fordham Road and Walton Avenue in a New York Times Fashion video edition called Intersection. The series highlights style in various cities and towns all over the U.S., interviewing people on how they perceive their own style and that of others in the area. McField, dressed in a fedora from Urban Outfitters, combat boots, a green blazer, purple button-down and a bow tie, says that her style represents a taste for art. McField does not look for labels. She does not care how expensive an item is as long as it is something to which she can relate. Student Ana Sosa, dressed far more casually than McField, explains how she worked all summer for her name brand scarf. What is interesting about both of these ladies is that, although they are both from the same area, one evokes an old-fashioned masculine-inspired style and the other admits hers is overtly feminine, but has since toned it down to only enhance her curvy figure. Terrance Burke, a musician, describes his style as one that is similar to that of rapper Kanye West. His style is inspired by him, but at the same time is also very different. With his hoodie,
Beats by Dr. Dre\textsuperscript{1} headphones, his classic colorful limited edition Nike sneakers, a personalized jacket with a logo reading “UFO Gang,” a homage to street culture and association, Burke is a walking example of urban fashion. “There is always more than what it seems,” he says when referring to what others see in his style. The point of these \textit{Intersection} videos is to explore how people in a particular space dress and how they perform fashion identity. The following analysis will look at how a particular space dictates the way people will dress and how others will expect them to dress based on their association with that area. Space helps create fashion and cultural identity.

When asked how to describe our style or sense of fashion, we often will struggle to reply quickly. We have a hard time answering not because it is a hard question, but because it is one with many levels. There are various factors that we must consider before we give an answer. The answer to this question will place the subject in a particular space. What kinds of clothing is he or she wearing? Fabrics? Color? From which year did it originate? Time periods represent a change in fashion that was associated with the events and movements of that time, therefore making it pivotal to why trends come and go. Who else wears these types of clothing? Where are they from? Which store? Which collection or by which designer? These factors

\textsuperscript{1} Dr. Dre is a rapper and music producer from Compton, California who created and markets his own line of headphones worn by many of the youth in the Bronx. The headphones have been the cause of various assaults and robberies in New York (see Jamie Schram).
are then applied, by the words we use, to describe both the clothes we wear and ourselves. These are not simply questions of one’s fashionable image, but instead they are questions about an individual’s representation of character and one’s identity. According to the Merriam Webster online dictionary, identity refers to the “sameness of essential or generic character in different instances” or “the qualities, beliefs, etc., that make a particular person or group different from others.”

Identity is something that is shared. It is something we all can claim, and something we show others. Identity distinguishes us as individuals, but is shared since it also serves as a way of classifying a group. Identity serves as a tool of expressing our similarities and what makes us different at the same time.

To say your style is "free spirited" attributes various personality traits that differ completely from those of someone who says their style is "edgy." Free spirited might associate the subject with stores like Anthropology or Urban Outfitters. These chains emulate earthy and bohemian vibes. Describing your style as edgy could place the subject in Topshop. The reason behind this is that these words not only describe the types of clothes we wear, but are contributing to what kind of music we might listen to, which products we may purchase, where we might live, and how we think we appear to other people. These factors contribute to our overall identity. The

---

2 Identity also refers to the distinguishing character or personality of an individual (refer to definition of Individuality) or sameness in all that constitutes the objective reality of a thing (refer to definition of Oneness).
3 Topshop, a U.K. youth brand store, has four stores in the United States. The largest flagship store is located in Soho, New York City.
chances of someone describing their style as punk and being an advocate of the rap scene are slim, but not necessarily impossible. Focusing on the first possibility, we can look at what these factors are and how they help in shaping individual identity. While it is impossible to write everything that contributes to the way one identifies, it is possible to look at some of the most obvious factors. These factors—space, race, class, and consumerism—all contribute to how identity is constructed by an individual or group.

This thesis will use these variables to look at how an individual from a particular class and race will identify through clothing and consumerism to a particular space. The space of focus in this paper is Fordham Road. Located in the Bronx, New York, Fordham is diverse in its particular cultural backgrounds, rich in consumerism, and heavily occupied by the working class. What makes the area even more interesting is that at the end of Fordham Road sits Fordham University.⁴ The school is expensive to attend and therefore it lacks diversity. The majority of the students are of white racial backgrounds and of middle and upper classes. While these students reside on Fordham, they do not necessarily shop there. These students do not identify with the lifestyle and products of Fordham Road. Fordham caters to a

---

⁴ Fordham University was founded in 1841 and, according to their official school website, has about 30.4 percent of students of underrepresented racial groups. This includes 14.1 percent Latinos, 8.7 percent Asians, 4.6 percent African-American, 2.9 from more than one racial group, and about 0.2 percent identify as American Indian/Alaskan/Hawaiian/or Pacific Islander.
subcultural group that relishes in fast fashion, hip-hop culture, cheap spending, and street life.

Part One of this paper will provide a history of the Bronx by examining the way the borough was shaped demographically, socially, and economically. The paper will help give a better understanding of how the current generations of residents and shoppers of Fordham Road create and display identity. This will lead to an analysis of hip-hop culture. Because hip-hop culture, which has origins in the borough, is a huge influence in various Bronx communities, looking at the emergence of hip-hop as a fashion statement is important to understanding the fashion choices among groups in the area. Part Two of this paper will explore Fordham Road in particular: what does the addition of an *American Eagle Outfitters*\(^5\) to an area filled with mom and pop shops mean? Does this change the targeted group of the area? One of the areas most popular stores, *Pretty Girl*,\(^6\) is a store that believes “customers appreciate fashionable apparel, but are value conscious and look to *Pretty Girl* to provide low cost substitutes for their fashion needs.” What does having *Pretty Girl* and *American Eagle* state about the shopping center? Is this an attempt to bring about change?

\(^5\) *American Eagle Outfitters* was added to the directory of stores located on Fordham Road in February 2014. The store opened earlier than expected with signs during construction stating an opening of Spring 2014. The store is the first one opened in the Bronx and one of a few “American” brands in the area, besides *Gap*.

\(^6\) According to the *Pretty Girl* website, it is one of the “fastest growing junior, missy, and plus size, apparel chains.” The chain has been running since 1985 and has over 40 stores in New York and New Jersey and a single store in Chicago and Philadelphia. The store is popular for its cheap prices and huge variety of clothing.
Secondly, it will introduce the logistics behind identity and further explore the theories of social identity as seen by theorists such as Bourdieu. Following this will be a look at class in the area to understand how spaces of consumerism, like Fordham, come to be. What is the difference between shopping in parts of Manhattan and shopping in Fordham or Tremont Road? The types of stores in both these areas are different, but what about the fashions? Are they different intentionally? Or are they the same, but slightly altered to cater to their particular audience? Places like Times Square cater to tourism. Shopping here is catered to a variety of groups of many social class backgrounds and specific racial backgrounds, while Fifth Avenue mostly caters to the upper class. The upper class is limited in its racial background, so diversity in shoppers is limited. Fordham Road does exactly the same, only its class is the working-class. The racial backgrounds that Fordham caters to, however, are more diverse because unlike the upper class, the lower class is not limited to one racial group. Class is rarely ever separated from race and therefore race plays a strong role in how this area of the Bronx runs. How has race influenced the choices people make in where they shop and in what they buy? How does it influence what they wear?

To explore these points this paper will rely on various sources, such as periodic articles, newspaper and magazine articles, statistics from the New York City Department of City Planning, Citywide and Borough population, and photography.
Part 1

The North and South Bronx: A short geographical and cultural history

"The Bronx is a collection of neighborhoods. Formed by the interrelation between social and physical factors, neighborhoods are physically delimited social areas in which residents can associate with each other in a neighborly way."

While Manhattan (what everyone thinks about when they imagine the diversity of New York City) may be a melting pot, it is a melting pot of consumerism and corporate attraction. With its skyscrapers, old money history, and various luxuries, it is a place where marketing and consumerism thrive. The city’s reputation as a twenty-four hour machine of industry makes it a place of constant consumption and propaganda. Its population, however, are employees with homes in the outskirts of the city, tourists sight seeing the city that never sleeps, and tenants who can afford some of the most expensive rents or are sacrificing to do so. It is the tourists who flock the streets on a daily basis that populate the city’s most popular areas. Their sight-seeing, however, stays within the island of Manhattan. What they fail to realize is that beyond this island are historical examples of New York City’s reputation of thriving culture.

One of these places, the Bronx, is not as hip as Brooklyn or as ethnically diverse as Queens or as calm as Staten Island, but it is a large contributor to New York City’s diverse communities. Over the years these communities became spaces shaped by various residents to represent an idealistic persona that at times is and is not favorable to outsiders, but continues to suffice for those living there. The following section will give a historical look at the borough. It will focus on a time as early as the late 1800s up until the early 2000s to see how the Bronx came to be literally shaped as the borough that it is today. It will look at the geographical formation of neighborhoods and its demographics. This will lead into a look of how
these neighborhoods became diverse communities that now disperse their own cultural identities and give the borough the reputation that it has come to carry as well as challenge its stereotypes.

A Symbol of Revival is Born

According to the *Bronx County Historical Society*,\(^7\) the Bronx was named after its first European settler Jonas Bronck. Bronck settled along the Harlem River in 1639. This area is now known as Mott Haven. In the late 1800s the Bronx was originally a part of Westchester, but in 1914 it became a separate county. It was populated by tens of thousands of second generation immigrants who were looking for refuge from their settlement in East Harlem and the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Before this happened, the land was owned by wealthy families such as the Morris family, whose patriarch Lewis Morris\(^8\) signed the *Declaration of Independence* in 1790. The land they owned went on to become Morrisania, one of the boroughs earliest neighborhoods along with West Farms, which served as the boroughs industrial site, and Kingsbridge, an area that was shaped by the inclusion of the region’s first railroad in 1841 and the building of tenant homes in 1860. By the

---

7 The Bronx Historical Society was created in 1955 as a way to help preserve the history of the borough by running museums like The Museum of Bronx History on Bainbridge and the Poe House. The Poe House was home to late poet Edgar Allen Poe.

8 Lewis Morris III was a delegate to the Continental Congress from New York. His grandfather purchased land in what was to become Morrisania in the Bronx. This land eventually passed on through the family, but had to be rebuilt after a lot of property was burned during the American Revolution.
1930s the population that began at fewer than 9,000 had risen to one million residents. This growth in population made the area one of the fastest growing locations in the world at the time. Before this, New Yorkers had been migrating to other parts of the city like Brooklyn or even New Jersey in attempts to escape the crowded and limited conditions they were living in. These migrations brought about shifting populations.

In the 1880s the Bronx was home to a large German population and a few residents of Irish backgrounds. By 1930 however, it was 46 percent Jewish, with growing Irish and Italian populations. The Irish of areas like Mott Haven would later move to Fordham Road as it became far more appealing to middle class families. Evelyn Diaz-Gonzalez addresses this when she states, "The image or reputation of a neighborhood influences movement into or out of the area and thus stimulates or detracts from the areas viability. Hence a neighborhood can go quickly from desirable to unattractive" (6). Leaving one’s old neighborhood was considered a sign of success. Leaving meant that families were thriving and were gaining the means necessary to possibly achieve the “American Dream.” Thus, by the end of the decade the South Bronx was mostly working and lower middle class immigrants. The majority of whites were migrating to the North Bronx. The shifting population would go on to further affect the economic growth in these neighborhoods, as would the incoming depression.
Minority groups were barely represented during migrations to the borough. According to census records there were only 4,100 Blacks in the Bronx in 1910. They represented less than one percent of the borough’s population and two percent of the city’s. The Puerto Rican population began with 554 in 1919 and escalated to 61,463 in New York City by 1940. In 1930, 1,300 of them were born in the Bronx. Having little choice about moving, Jews, Italians, Germans, African-Americans, and Latinos lived side by side. The war years brought about juvenile delinquency as the violence between Irish and Jewish teens began to include Italian, African-American and Puerto Rican youths. Racial disputes encouraged this behavior among groups who had never lived side by side before. In 1940, three main spots in the South Bronx housed the majority of the Puerto Rican population. Mott Haven, Hunts Point-Crotona, and Claremont become known for their thriving Puerto Rican culture. By 1948, there were 72,000 Puerto Ricans in the Bronx. By the 1950s the borough went from two-thirds white to two-thirds African-American and Hispanic in 1960. By 2000, the borough was now mostly occupied by African-American residents and people of Spanish-speaking backgrounds. This change in population came to shape the overall identity of the borough.

The change in the borough’s reputation began the mid-1900s. 1923 is the year that the Bronx gained recognition for its institutions, businesses, and public works
like the Yankees\(^9\) organization. By the late twenties, the Bronx was known as the home of the Major League Baseball club—which gave the team their nickname the “Bronx Bombers”—the Bronx Zoo, and New York and Fordham Universities. The expansion of the new subway system and the expansion of subway lines in the Bronx helped shift movement in and from the borough to other parts of the city. The subway system expansion provided access to the people huddled in crowded Manhattan tenement districts to the more open and healthier spaces of the Bronx (Ultan). This, however, did not protect the borough from the havoc that the results of the depression and the following period would bring. After making it through the depression and World War II, two factors that ended the period of growth, the borough experienced more population changes, urban development and therefore neighborhood change.

**The Bronx Is Burning**

In the 1960s the Bronx saw itself lose much of what had helped the borough thrive and it became known as “the most famous slum in America” (Rivera 50). The borough became an example of “urban deterioration” when large groups of residents disappeared. Communities were left vacant because of issues like a rise in arson and crimes and a lack of proper housing because the growth of the commercialist enterprise caused overcrowding. The "process of urban growth and community

---

\(^9\) The New York Yankees are one of major league baseball’s most successful franchises. Their stadium has been located on 161st in the Bronx since 1923. In 2009 a new stadium was constructed across the street.
creation, within space and structures were commodities for sale and profit as well as accommodations for waves of different ethnic and racial groups and classes, engendered the conditions that resulted in the extreme neighborhood deterioration of the borough” (Gonzalez 1).

The spread of the poorer groups in the Bronx changed the borough. The loss of factory jobs and lack of jobs for Blacks and Latinos, who lacked the language or education, made it a financial struggle for many new comers who could not afford to live elsewhere. These older sections of the Bronx that had once served as refuge from the overcrowdedness of Manhattan had changed in ways that no longer made them appealing to middle class families. These families and businesses, who had made a home for themselves in the borough, were moving to the suburbs in the hopes of bettering their futures and were then replaced by immigrants with very little looking for work. According to Raquel Rivera, fingers were always being pointed at the very people experiencing the violence and struggle:

In typical blame-the victim fashion, responsibility was placed squarely on the shoulders of South Bronx residents. They were accused of being lazy, wild, and violent. But in reality, it was capitalist urban development ventures, greedy slumloards looking to make a quick buck and discriminatory government policies that were most directly responsible. It was during this period of Bronx history that hip-hop, as we know it, was born (50).
Hip-hop culture would grow to become a tool in the tough exterior and street style that would go on to dominate the borough’s reputation. This reputation was supported through elements such as breaking and graffiti art. Winnie Hu, of The New York Times, discusses how people from other parts of the city are fearful of the Bronx and continue to stereotype it as this place that continues to “burn.” This mantra is one that has stuck with the borough and one from which it struggles to depart, not just because people are scared of the levels of crime and believe that the entire borough continues to be consumed by this unlawfulness, but because residents of the borough themselves seem to at times take pride in the tough reputation. She states, “The Bronx’s image problem exposes the inherent tension for a place that seeks to establish itself as a viable alternative to the other boroughs even as it takes pride in its rough past and often casts itself as a working-class refuge from the excesses of Manhattan.” This pride came from years of struggle to better the borough while making a point about the differences that the borough has to offer that others might not. The people give it this tough persona with healing scars that scares outsiders. These scars are reminders of the place the Bronx used to be. It was a place where streets were dangerous to walk in because of muggings, where people were attacked because of their race, and where buildings looked like they were the remains of war zones.

Crime came along with the formation of street gangs from various racial backgrounds fighting for territory and eventually over drugs. The fights between
members of different racial groups meant that there were higher rates of violence in the South Bronx because this is where larger populations of minority groups settled. “Poverty in the 1960s was tied to race, a changing economy, urban decline, and a suburban exodus that accelerated as more Blacks and Latinos came in and the turmoil resulting from the civil rights struggle and the activism of the sixties engulfed the city” (Gonzalez 119). This was a problem that was not limited to the borough, but that also occurred in other parts of the city. The Bronx was the borough with the highest and most frequent crime rates. Violence came as a result of rebellion among youth and from race riots demanding jobs and rights. The riot of 1977 that came with the convenience of a power blackout serves as an example of the widespread panic that the borough experienced for years. By the 1980s about 55 percent of families were below the poverty level and 39 percent were recieving welfare in this part of the Bronx. The once fashionable Mott Haven and Hunts Point were replaced by the Concourse, Highbridge, Morris and University Heights, Kingsbridge, Fordham, Norwood and Bronxdale. These areas, however, soon saw a rise in crime too that created an atmosphere of terror. This shift resulted in a pattern of class-segregated neighborhoods predicated on the conflict between land values and the individual’s ability to pay for it. This was further complicated by locational preferences or restrictions based on age, family, race, and ethnicity. Diaz calls this

\[10\] The riot of 1977 was one that District Attorney Mario Merola described as “a state of anarchy.” The riot included looting of commercial strips like Fordham Road, fires, attacks on police officers, and attacks on innocent residents and business owners.
rise in locational preferences and restrictions “neighborhood succession.” This means that as cities grow extent and internal configurations change.

According to the New York City Department of City Planning, Citywide and Borough Population, between 1990 and 2000 the Latin population was the largest group in the Bronx, as well as the largest population of Latinos in any of the boroughs, with 48.4 percent. They were followed by 31.2 percent of the population being African-American and 14.5 of European ancestry. This last group continued to leave the borough, but the borough’s total population continued to rise with new Latinos and African-Amercians moving in.

Areas like Fordham Road had now become mostly African-American populated. The violence and crimes were pushing members of the the very same communities that the violence was coming from out of their neighborhoods. This pushed white communities, who were scared of integration, out of the areas in which they had recently settled. The levels of crime eventually became a problem that various organizations, clergymen, and residents came together to help bring about change. This change caused a new wave of residents to migrate to the borough as the price of living in Manhattan kept increasing and became a burden for the immigrant families who had settled there.

The Bronx has now grown to be a borough with a middle ground reputation. On one hand, it is known for housing rich cultural organizations such as the New York Yankees, the New York Botanical Gardens and the Bronx Zoo (which has been
recognized for its preservation of endangered animals), Fordham University, Manhattan College, Horace Mann, and Monterfiore Hospital, a hospital known for its successes in unusual and very complex surgeries. These organizations are an important aspect of New York City history and the overall shaping of the city. On the other hand, the Bronx is known for its rebellious and street culture-oriented personality. This is an identity that many take pridefully and has become a trademark for the borough.

What the Bronx has continued to lack over the years, with the uprooting of the Irish, Italian and Jews to Westchester and the borders of the upper Bronx, is a strong variety of racial and cultural groups. Out of all the boroughs the Bronx is the least gentrified and most abandoned (Marcuse 169). Between the years of 1970 and 1980 the Bronx lost 36.1 percent of college educated residents. The majority of these residents were middle class and of various white racial backgrounds. These groups left the borough for the more wealthier Manhattan and less urban Westchester. For these reasons the borough has attained a particular reputation that is associated with the limited groups to which it is home.

While there have been attempts to gentrify the borough, they have not necessarily been beneficial to the groups that reside in these areas. For example, Fordham University has made efforts to expand its campus and student body; the school recently finished a new dorm complex, but these efforts are only beneficial to students who have the money to attend the school. Outsiders will only see property
changes in their community but nothing that helps them. One effort that is slowly encouraging change in who shops in parts of the Bronx is the addition of popular American clothing chains. Many of these clothing chains have mostly appealed to members of white communities, but are now being brought to diverse communities in the Bronx. This will not only expose the people of the Bronx to a variety of trends and styles with which they have not associated, but may also bring about new groups to shop in the area because of the area’s convenience. This can hopefully bring about change to the borough’s racial limitations.
Part 2

Fordham Road:
A look at Space, Consumerism and Identity
Visualizing Fordham

Between the avenues of Jerome and Webster lies a long stretch of blocks as busy as Times Square on a summer day. This stretch of blocks consists of a variety of stores, businesses, vendors, and fast food joints. It thrives year round but with far more visible street life in the spring and summer. This place, Fordham Road (Figure 1), is located in the North Bronx and is a huge contributor to the thriving consumption in the area. Fordham has been blurring the lines between the North and South Bronx because of the social changes in the area due to shifting migrations. Unlike the South Bronx, the North Bronx has a slightly less delinquent reputation and actually is home to some of the more diverse groups in the borough. It is still, however, subject to separation among these groups based on communities. Fordham Road is home to many businesses that attract the borough’s large working class minority groups. Fordham thrives on the street culture and style of these communities. Physically, Fordham is filled with signs of the old borough that was the Bronx, but is slowly changing and becoming a visible product of corporate America attempting to make its way into the homes of these working class groups. Its graffiti alleys (Figure 2) are discordant with the up-and-coming businesses whose pavements and concrete remain untouched by the likes of the areas youth. The youth roam the streets of Fordham after school eating pizza and sipping on iced drinks from the dollar pizzeria in school uniforms or their own interpretations of fashion.
**Figure 1** – The Fordham Center sign sits midway through the outside mall.

**Figure 2** – One of the many alleys that lead to residential areas shows a contradictory image to that of the marketing and consumption mecca.
From nine in the morning until about nine at night, Fordham Road serves as the prime shopping mall for North Bronx residents. Driving through the area is as complicated as traffic on the George Washington Bridge during rush hour. Conveniently situated near the D train, the 4 train, the Metro North, and various MTA buses, the mall is easily accessible for people coming from Woodlawn or from Tremont. Both of these locations also have outside malls but their products are limited to smaller stores. The mall streets of Fordham are home to various regular street vendors selling peanuts, empanadas, hot dogs, churros (Figures 3-6), Latin ice treats, accessories, scarves, imitation products, Halal foods, and magic acts. Being the first sellers shoppers encounter as they make their ways to stores, it is the perfect setting to sell culture to a diverse community.

Figure 3 – This vendor sells Mexican snacks such as churros, fried onions, and mango on a stick.
Figure 4 – A female vendor braves the cold to sell jewelry on a Sunday afternoon.
Figure 5 – A vendor and her husband sell a variety of “brand name” fragrances and lotions. Many of these perfume bottles are celebrity perfumes and lotions that have the Bath and Body Works or the Victoria’s Secret logos on them.

Figure 6 – One of many accessories vendors that sell their products on a Fordham corner. This vendor is situated across from his competition.

Fordham’s stores vary from big chains to mom and pop shops. American production, marketing, and consumerism are all present in stores like Foot Locker, Modell’s, Marshall’s, Sears, and Best Buy. These chains are the representation of corporate America having a place in the daily consumption of the lower class Bronx communities. By selling products from big name brands such as GE, Microsoft, Nike, and Samsung, to name a few, making money off of this community of people is inevitable. Many of these products have become necessities rather than luxuries by
society’s current standards. The latest smartphones, tablets, or sneakers are all part of this community’s consumer culture. When it comes to purchasing certain products, the stores that carry these big name brands and whose credibility is far more known will sell regardless of the competition in the area. For example, despite various sneakers stores like V.I.M, Jimmy Jazz and BX Sports in the shopping center, Modell’s and Foot Locker continue to sell without a struggle. The prices at Foot Locker and Modell’s are sometimes higher than that of other sneaker stores. Sneakers from Foot Locker are no different than those from V.I.M. Both of these stores sell the same name brands, styles, accessories and appeal to the same groups. So what does Foot Locker have that V.I.M does not have? In this case, Foot Locker has a credible reputation with people outside of this community. Consumption in this area, as in many others, is not always done for self-attainment, but for status, which is what further represents the practice of American culture by Fordham’s customers. Along with massive American brand names and chains like Gap, Zale’s, Nine West, and now American Eagle Outfitters being added to the lineup, there are chains of stores that have always been common to consumers of the Bronx. Stores like Pretty Girl and Danice or Bon Bini provide fast fashion, cheap prices, and hip-hop/urban culture to communities that relish it and depend on it (Figures 7 and 8).
Figure 7 – *Pretty Girl* sits on the corner of the Grand Concourse and Fordham Road. The chain recently changed its name headers from black and white to this blue header in attempts to remarket itself.

Figure 8 – *Bon Bini* is known for its overtly feminine and revealing clothing.
New York City is expensive to live in without high paying jobs and the luxuries that come with that. People need to find ways to get what they want without overspending. Clothing is one of the first things that fall into the negotiable necessities. Finding ways to save with one’s wardrobe is the easiest way to save financially. With goals of attaining the American Dream, families have priorities that will contribute to their identities as Americans in the long run. These priorities include factors such as living conditions, educational attainment, and owning American products like cars and various forms of technological tools. Their choice in clothing, a small factor in their hopes of the American Dream, is already predetermined by their cultural background and their place of origin. With many of these immigrants coming from places where “fashion” is not as present as it is in the U.S, their views on clothing and personal attire is very limited to its use and, at times, its religious purposes. When they become established here, though, this changes. People become far more interested in the physical expression of their culture to other members of their communities and so consumption becomes necessary. But why do people shop? Need is obviously a relevant answer to why people spend, but what makes people shop for leisure? The American Dream comes with the hope that one has the privilege of luxuries and freedom of consumption without financial limitations. Shopping is a testimony to this desire to spend and not worry about finances.
Sharon Zukin believes, “Our desire to shop derives from the biological drive of hunting for food, the modern ideology of individual choice as the social drive—which has accelerated since the sixties—to get ‘the best.’ But we are thwarted by subjective factors like our bodies, by objective factors like price, and by simply not knowing where, at a specific moment, to find the bargains” (62). Why would someone spend a lot of time searching for products that we will eventually need to replace? Well, to start off, we live in a society that thrives on consumerism. People are encouraged to shop through strategic marketing plans and ideas to keep a good national economic standing. Secondly, these marketing campaigns are created to appeal to a particular group. They sell experiences that support the ideas and stylistic elements that appeal to these particular groups. While some groups answer to the creative aspect of products, such as the label, its designer, and the experience of the store it is sold in, like Macy’s or Saks Fifth Avenue, others prefer to be informed about products in the more obvious ways. This can include announced sales and ways in which they do not have to invest much time in looking for various choices and can settle for the most accessible. At times, these tactics mean catering to the particular cultural values and needs of certain individuals. Cultural expectations, like those a Latin woman tries to live up to, are present in several of the stores on Fordham Road (Figure 9). This has everything to do with the idea of creating one’s own identity and continuously catering to it. Because people want to be seen as individuals, they will make attempts to create their own particular style by purchasing an arrangement of
products offered to them. Through these purchases, people are formulating their look, style and their physical mark of identity. At times this is done with strong efforts to denounce current trends, labels, designers, and style genres. By refusing general trends or high fashion, individuals believe that this keeps them from looking like everyone else, and yet they look like others in their community.

Figure 9 – Everything in Fordham is loud and made to attract attention. At times, this even means advertising things that seem out of the ordinary, like this jeans store that caters to females looking to enhance their buttocks by wearing these specially designed jeans.

Roland Barthes argues that regardless of people believing that they are being free by choosing elements that differ from those of their peers, they are still participating in
fashion, and fashion is giving them a “double postulation” to confer either individuation or multiplicity. He continues:

The dream of identity (to be oneself, and to have this self be recognized by others) seems to be found in all mass works, and in all the activities of those who participate in it, whether we see it as the behavior of alienated classes, or we call it a contemporary action meant to react against the “depersonalization” of mass society; in any case, the dream of identity is essentially expressed by the assertion of a name, as if the name magically realized the person; in Fashion, the name cannot be directly displayed, since the reader is anonymous; but it appears that this reader dreams of her own name while delegating her identity to several personalities… (255).

People believe that being too similar to the rest of society means lacking individuality. What they fail to realize is that whatever they do decide to wear and purchase is still attached to a group that within itself has an overall persona and is not limited to an individual, but is actually a fashion culture because it has masses. Some people are aware of this relationship, while others don’t pay much attention because they are constantly changing their look and style. Culture is how we behave, our customs, ideas, and traditions. Culture is how we represent ourselves as individuals and as groups. Fashion refers to the influences and trends that are currently thriving in society, it is the way people relate and differentiate from one another visually. This
is done through a clothing code that consists of variables that convey someone’s identity (Davis 15). This combination of clothes that evokes a particular style is never the same on two people because its cultural definition varies by the identity of the person wearing it, their reason for wearing it, their location and even their emotional behavior (Davis 8). This is what fashion culture helps us understand. Fashion culture blends racial backgrounds and class groups through a particular style but also identifies them through labels and forms of consumerism. These forms of communication vary throughout the different classes.

With the discussion of consumerism, fashion, and identity, we must look at race and class. Both of these factors play an important role in the reasons why places like Fordham look and are the way they are. When fashion is sold, it is always geared at a particular group. These two factors are always in play when deciphering who is a part of that group. Class, a social construction to separate people financially, socially, and culturally, creates a guideline and a set of experiences when it comes to how one attains and practices fashion.

When class is discussed, the immediate thought is wealth. While wealth is the basis for how a person places in this social and economic ladder, there are other factors that can place a person on a particular level of the class ladder. Pierre Bourdieu’s *Theory of Class Reproduction* suggests that the dissemination of fashion throughout class is far more complicated than the process described by Simmel’s trickle down theory. He describes social structures as complex systems of class,
comprising sets of cultural tastes and associated lifestyles. “Within social classes, individuals compete for social distinction in cultural capital on the basis of their capacity to judge the suitability of cultural products according to class-based standards of taste and manners” (Bourdieu 7). How one chooses to present one’s social space to the world and depict one’s status distances oneself from lower groups. On class and status in his work *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*, Fred Davis states:

> Were everyone constantly trying to claim superior status via opulence of dress, immaculateness of grooming, and glitter of jewelry, the symbolic worth of such status markers would undergo—as indeed often happens—marked devaluation, thereby defeating the invidious ends they meant to serve. Some tacit regulatory mechanism affecting the occasions and manner of status display must therefore be brought into play if the game of invidious status competition is to retain even a modicum of symbolic integrity. In short, persons cannot be thrusting their best front forward at all times (61).

Consumption is something anyone can participate in as long as they have some basic form of finance. Consumption does, however, vary in forms and the types of products. The wealthy and the working class both participate in various forms of consumption with the end result being the type of product. For a member of the wealthy class couture gowns are accessible and keep them ahead of the trends with
their one of a kind pieces, but the poor must find other ways to emulate these very same looks. This challenge is one that spans over time.

Fashion and consumption have always varied among generations. The younger generation uses fashion as a way to separate themselves from their grandparents’ and parents’ generation, therefore forming an identity of their own that is catered to by new factors in fashion culture. How people shop and what they shop for has always been very relevant in understanding how they form a social identity and the process of transferring of the goods that eventually are available to these consumers. Jeff Hearn and Sasha Roseneil discuss consumption in their work *Consuming Cultures: Power and Resistance*:

Consumption is one of the basic ways in which society is structured and organized, usually unequally, sometimes incredibly so. Differential powers, resources and life chances are routinely produced and reproduced by and through consumption patterns. Consumption not only takes place within culture and thus within specific cultures; it also produces culture and cultures . . . Furthermore, consumption also constructs, even consumes, the consumer. People do consumption, are ‘done to’, constructed, consumed by that consumption. Consumption is a structure, process and agency (1).

While consumption caters to a particular culture or subculture, creating products that will be of interest to various people and groups, consumption will also be what
creates a certain style or culture. People today do not simply buy products but also purchase an experience or commodity. Producers and sellers have power over what that experience is and what people get out of it. This experience can be watching the dress you are about to purchase on the runway as it is shown on a big television screen in a high-end designer store or standing online to get a piece of the latest designer collection at *H&M*. The experience varies with the different types of customers. For some people the experience is more about the creative aspect while for others it is about the time spent purchasing their items, and the cost.

Time is a very important variable when it comes to consumption for members of these communities. That is, “time” not only in the sense of how long it will take a consumer to get to Fordham, but the time that it takes for a consumer to get their desired products. This is the focus of Fordham Road. It serves a community that relies on fast fashion on the condition that it is cheap and relatable. Stores contain hundreds of racks with multiple shirts that can all be brought in various colors for the same price, a price very appropriate for its consumers. When discussing 20th century fashion Diane Crane states, “Increases in availability of clothing to members of different social classes that were related to a gradual decline in the cost of clothing affected the origins and accessibility of fashionable styles” (Crane 3). This means that with cheap clothes comes the sacrifice of high-end trends.

*Pretty Girl* is a chain of stores where quantity is valued far more than quality. The stores, like the ones located in areas like Fordham, are known to many of the
lower class residents. They sell tops as low as three dollars and jeans for about ten dollars. With fifty dollars it is possible to buy at least three outfits (Figures 10 & 11). The chain sells shoes, accessories, fragrances, and clothing for women. The store on Fordham, which at times is as packed as an H&M on Fifth Avenue, caters to anyone on a tight budget. People shop at Pretty Girl for a variety of reasons. First, they will not empty out their wallet when purchasing two or three items. Second, the stores products are geared at various age groups and appeals to the masses of this area, and it is popular for its imitations of current trends. These trends, marketed by Pretty Girl, are created by the upper class and then trickle down to the lower class. The lower class creates a whole different approach to how these trends are then executed.

**Figure 10** - Many of the stores place products outside to attract buyers and have them go in for a look and then hopefully purchase something.
For example, a trend like the monochrome look is to be featured in a variety of tops and dresses that appeal to their particular shoppers. An A-line dress is not as appealing to Pretty Girl customers as it may be to H&M customers. In Pretty Girl, that dress will be a tube dress that is adjusted to fit the body of its customer. Pretty Girl customers are generally women of color, so not only does their wallet determine where they shop but also what they buy from there and with what expectations. H&M is a chain store that features yearly collections by well-known designers, as well as its own runway show during Fashion Week season. This not only places H&M at a pedestal of a "fashion knowledgeable" chain, with ranks and familiarity among the
high fashion community, but it also disconnects it from those who do not fit into this group. Susan Auty and Richard Elliot, when discussing social identity and fashion brands, state:

The interplay between social structures and personal choice means that consumer-citizens have complicated relationships with the consumer products that they buy, use and observe. An increasingly central consumption-related site and process, shopping is both a process involving an individuals’ search for, inquiries into, learning about and decisions about what, where, how and why to purchase products, and a process which is constrained by the social and material contexts of shoppers’ lives (3).

People choose to buy specific items because of their social status and everything that this entails. Consumption caters to everyone differently (it caters to his or her particular needs).

Race, like class, can never be separated from identity. In fact, race has a lot more impact on a person’s identity than class does because it is far more visible to others, while class requires a lot more analysis. To determine class, one would have to have knowledge of various physical markers that would indicate whether the subject has certain privileges. For instance, take a New York City subway cart as an example. In it are a variety of people from different racial backgrounds who are all headed to various destinations. This is the perfect setting to examine what social
identity people may belong to. At first sight, the guy standing by the doors in a suit appears to maybe be a man looking for a job, dressed in a suit that looks like proper interview attire. But what if that suit is an Armani suit? Well what unemployed man can afford an Armani\textsuperscript{11} suit? This man is now placed in a different category. He may not be looking for a job and may currently have one. His job may just be the type of job that requires formal attire. By wearing an Armani suit he is revealing he can afford expensive luxuries and may very well be a member of the middle or upper class. This, however, can become a challenge with the ability of fast fashion to replicate the looks that are set by upscale designers and the fashion industry. The products these fast fashion stores sell appear more expensive than they really are.

What can be said about the woman in Uggs\textsuperscript{12} and the velour hot pink sweat suit sitting down near the man in the suit? She has hoop earrings on and is listening to some form of pop music. Would this woman's identity change if we gave her a racial background? Most likely her identity would change because of the preconceived ideas society places on racial groups. If she was white, then maybe she's a Long Island college girl simply dressing comfortably, but if she's Latina, then she might be channeling fellow Latina Jennifer Lopez with her street style. This look of a velour tracksuit and hoop earrings was made famous by Lopez in her music

\textsuperscript{11} Armani, founded by Giorgio Armani, is an Italian fashion house that sells clothing, accessories, footwear and home goods. The brand produces for both the ready to wear market and haute couture markets.

\textsuperscript{12} Uggs are shoes that originated in Southern California and are popular for their look and feel due to their sheepskin material.
videos. When one looks at a female in this attire all the identity factors and behavior that Lopez emulates while wearing it are now embedded in that style, particularly on a Latina from the Bronx.

With race in the picture, one is led to apply various stereotypes that have been created by society for members of a certain group and those that may exhibit these traits. For example, a black man dressed in Jordan's, baggy attire and listening to rap music is automatically assumed to be "very street" and a member of "ghetto" culture. While the look that this man is evoking has hip-hop influences, it is simply automatically connected to street culture because of his racial background. If he were a white man, he may be seen differently.

Siegfried Zepf discusses two factors when considering one’s consciousness of identity. First, when thinking about identity we are considering one's "selfsameness and continuity in time" and secondly, the fact that others are aware of one’s "sameness and continuity." (144). We strive to separate ourselves from the masses, what is constant, but at the same time acknowledge our similarity throughout time. While identity is perceived as a consciousness of one’s sense of being it is also how others perceive us. They create these preconceived ideas about us from various visible signs, such as behavior, language, body, and clothes. In other words, we live out our identities each and every single day. One is not always aware of how our actions will affect one’s identity, but it says a lot to others. Identity may determine where one might choose to eat, to enjoy recreational activities, or what one chooses
to purchase. While this paper focuses on fashion and therefore the clothes we wear, one can't discuss how identity is evoked through the clothing one is wearing without discussing why they were purchased in the first place and from where. Where one shops contributes a lot to the makeup of one’s identity. Because stores have identities of their own, a particular commodity and experience that is being sold to its geared consumer, the type of characteristics that are associated with its shoppers are predetermined.

Zepf points out that it is not the instrumental value of a particular commodity that drives a consumer to purchase that particular product: "To be bought, commodities must create the impression that they can not only be used instrumentally" (45). When purchasing a product a buyer wants to be able to get the best quality, the latest and newest edition or version, and the status or reputation that comes with such a product. Consumption now caters to the way a person relates to others and the way they want to be viewed by others. The purchase of a particular brand represents a lot about the wants and dislikes of a particular buyer and helps them relate with others who purchased similar products. In other words, it has many possible meanings that can vary in various ways. Constructing meaning out of what we wear is a way of communicating with other people, and therefore it is a form of language—not a literary one, but a social one. We say a lot about ourselves through our clothing and overall expression of fashion.
According to Davis fashion changes because social identities change. Davis' concept of ambiguity and ambivalence serves as support for why there is a constant following of trends and yet there is a constant strive for difference and change. There seems to be a constant change in trends, which translates into various meanings for a number of different people who still remain similar to one another. For example, wearing skinny jeans can be seen as a trend that is similar among various groups. Its purpose is to be tight and fitted to the body, yet changes among styles of skinny jeans can vary and therefore bring about difference. These changes in the way people wear clothing, and the language and behavior that they attribute to these changes, eventually make up a subculture that is understood throughout generations even though it continues to change in ways to which each generation contributes. In the Bronx, and as examined in Fordham Road, hip-hop culture, which stems from a growth of Black popular culture in the borough, is an example of one of these subcultures.

Returning to the Intersection video, Terrance Burke evokes urban culture at first sight. This is not, however, an observation made just by his choice in outfit. While it is the first signifier of his participation in this subgroup of fashion, it is also distinctive by his manner of speaking, his posture and gestures, and his choice of fashion muse in rapper Kanye West\textsuperscript{13}. By choosing West, Burke is making a

\textsuperscript{13}Kanye West, while a constant challenger of fashion trends who is immersed in the details of the fashion industry through his friendship with fashion powers like
statement about the group of trendsetters that he emulates. This includes rap stars, basketball players, and hip-hop dancers who all use their social influence to evoke their ideas of masculinity, incorporating their Black culture and a taste for a particular type of music. This image is one that is continuously emulated in the Bronx. It does not require the wealth and status of the celebrities emulating it because it is one that represents where they come from. The Bronx is one of those places with which rap stars stress identification. The streets of places like the Bronx shaped their look and style.

**Urban/Hip-hop Culture**

“*Hip-hop was largely created by poor and working class youth. It began as a “ghetto” phenomenon. As is the case of any other culture, hip-hop was intimately related to socioeconomic and political realities of the time*” (Rivera 51).

In the 1980s there were a rise of rappers appearing from places like Brooklyn and the Bronx. They brought about a style of music that has until this day defined the spaces that these artists occupied. Their music provided accounts of their experiences growing up in these places, describing how people behaved, talked, what they did for leisure, how they dressed and expressed themselves. The fact that Sean Carter’s 14 “Empire State of Mind” tops Frank Sinatra’s “New York, New York” as the city

---

American Vogue Editor-in-chief Anna Wintour and Givenchy creative director Ricardo Tisci, emulates the look of hip-hop culture. This look supports his lyrics and art in hip-hop music.

14 Sean Carter is a rapper, music mogul, businessman, and designer of the Roca Wear urban fashion label.
anthem for the current generation demonstrates how dramatic change has been. The latter has come to be associated with the parents and grandparents of today’s youth, showing how the hip-hop generation has come to identify itself as new and current and one that has also become very influential in urban city life and social structure. The look of the hip-hop generation is one that has become so ever present in urban culture that many members of various classes practice it without even realizing it. Of course, depending on class, there are diverse factors into how the look is attained.

The look consists of jeans or sweats that ride low on the hips. This is always paired with sneakers, a necessary economic and culture statement (Figure 12), a cap with some sports teams logo, phrase or a city tribute (Figure 13), some sort of over the top jewelry (most likely gold chains, as popularized by rap groups like Run DMC), and an oversized T-shirt.
Figure 12 - Like many of the men’s stores in Fordham, this one, sells a huge variety of caps and hats; an essential for the urban look for men who associate their style with hip-hop culture. The caps have everything from team logos to names and slang terms.

The look has always attributed itself to street culture and has been driven into popularity through youth culture. The style has contributed to overall fashion culture, but is one that is at times outside of the two factors driving the preconceived ideas of this look: race and class. Sharon Zukin, who discusses the interest in trends and various fashion commodities, writes about hip-hop fashion culture:

Like rap music and professional basketball, certain designer labels have made a racial crossover. Identified as "black" they enjoy enormous commercial
success among all shoppers, but especially among teenage males; their advertisements in fashion magazines play on the dubious dangers of the streets and the outward signs of criminal cultures; and, as their sales in department stores and specialty shops increase around the world, they attract the interest of Wall Street analysts and investors. No doubt about it, black is hot these days, but only if it sells (146).

To the majority of insiders and outsiders hip-hop is associated with Black culture and the lower class. Granted, it is a look associated with wealthy rap stars, but they too were once members of the lower and working class. Hip-hop has an overall meaning and set behavior that is associated with this urban style and is understood and practiced by those who can relate to it. “Hip-hop culture’s main expressive elements, however, were not developed by the same people at the same time, nor do they all share common antecedents,” says Rivera (51).

According to Rivera, there were aspects of hip-hop culture that were already being practiced before the style came along, such as graffiti in New York. A lot of these artists, however, did not and still do not see their art as connected to hip-hop because of the reputation that came with it. Another hip-hop related element that already had a place in various cultures is the art of playing a disk jockey, which has direct relations in Jamaican sound systems and various hip-hop dance elements
drawn from other sources such as a Brooklyn-based combat dance called rocking and West Coast dance styles like popping and locking (Rivera 51).

The look has had drastic changes. While jeans were originally baggy, they have now been influenced by punk rock culture and are very fitted, but instead are worn below the hips, at times too low to consider them properly worn. The shirts are not always T-shirts and are also more fitted. Jewelry can vary and sneakers have now been restricted to a particular type. For example, Converse make you a member of emo\textsuperscript{15} culture, a pair of Vans brand you a skateboarder, but a pair of Jordan's\textsuperscript{16} or Nike’s makes you street smart and cool among the hip-hop crowd. Jordan’s, or rather most expensive sneakers, are the exception to the saving money scenario discussed with the lower class consumers of these communities (Figure 13). These sneakers are not only an expensive purchase, but they are an investment in status among peers. They serve as a signifier of style and the practice of fashion, a fashion that is approved by the community and represents masculinity and participation in street culture or rather the hip-hop commodity.

\textsuperscript{15} Emo fashion consists of dark clothing with slight hints of color, a taste for alternative rock music, various styles of colorful straight hair, and piercings. It stems from a taste for rock music that is based mostly on the concept of confessional lyrics and broke off from hardcore punk culture in the U.S.

\textsuperscript{16} Jordan’s are sneakers created and sold by Nike in honor of retired Hall of Fame basketball player Michael Jordan.
Figure 13 - Sneakers are such a profound part of urban hip-hop culture that men who obsessively collect them are called “Sneaker-heads.” They come in a number of colors and designs. Sneakers are also a career move for NBA players who design their own pair that is then sold to the general public. Michael Jordan was the first to have his own.

For females who participate in hip-hop culture, sneakers aren’t as important as is their choice of jeans. While women do wear sneakers, and there are females who buy into the whole “sneaker-head” subculture, they aren’t expected to wear them to evoke hip-hop culture. On the contrary, a female who does is often seen as practicing a masculine form of hip-hop. She is buying into a commodity mostly geared at men because of its popularity with male-dominated sports and rappers. Instead, women in hip-hop culture use their bodies as a means of participation. A woman’s role in hip-hop culture is often one of desire, made popular by their representation in hip-hop
videos, where women serve as entertainment for the rapper or as sexy background dancers for the viewer to enjoy. Because hip-hop culture is associated with Black culture, a term that is used to generally refer to minority groups like Latinos and African-Americans, a female’s body has a stereotyped appearance. This stereotyped image is of a curvaceous body. This image is highly regarded as the ideal look for women of this subculture. Fashion is then used to accentuate the body and exemplify femininity. Much of this clothing is either fitted to the body or reveling if loose or both (Figure 14). If the clothing is not fitted, it is geared at older women. The revealing clothes are advertised to young women who are a lot more willing to perform sexuality.

![Figure 14](image)

**Figure 14** - Female attire seems to convey a sense of comfort with the body and sexuality for women. These looks are sold at a store that markets to juniors and adult women.
This image of female sexuality is either deemed normal to the people who participate in it or overly explicit to outsiders. However, this scenario depends on who the person wearing the clothing is. At times this image has been used to represent sexual power among women from this cultural and racial group. This sexual power has expanded to create an idealized image of the Latina that represents comfort with their bodies and fashion identity. It shows no shame in presenting the body as an ideal and one that should be replicated or admired. Here the body is not only the visible identity of the individual, but it is a representation of a cultural and racial group. This image, of the sexy urban exotic female, is one that Jennifer Lopez is known to have helped create.
Part 3

Jenny From the Block: Creating a Worldwide Bronx Fashion Identity

“You mirror what the world mirrors to you.”

-Jennifer Lopez (Vogue)
There is a scene about one minute into a music video by pop star Jennifer Lopez\textsuperscript{17} where she and six young females walk dramatically in slow motion. All six girls, along with Lopez, are dressed from head to toe in urban fashions. Everything including jeans, sneakers, Timberland\textsuperscript{18} boots, fur lined coats, baseball caps, hoop earrings, and beanies can be seen worn by the girls. All of the girls appear to be of multicultural backgrounds and perform various urban dance moves to the song. The video is for Lopez’s song titled “Same Girl,”\textsuperscript{19} which is a homage to her Bronx-bred Puerto Rican roots. The singer takes the MTA 6 line train to the Bronx, a reference she makes note of in her first albums title,\textsuperscript{20} dressed in jeans, a leather jacket, and a New York Yankees baseball cap. She meets strangers and takes pictures with them and even does some singing with them. Although it is obvious that these are things Lopez is only doing for a music video, for we hear about her whereabouts in the media on a daily basis, what she manages to do with this video is create a fashion identity for the borough of the Bronx.

From the start of the video where we see Lopez on a Bronx rooftop in a Yankees cap and with hoop earrings on, it is obvious that she too posesses the look

\textsuperscript{17} Jennifer Lopez was born and raised in the Castle Hill section of the Bronx, which is where the video was shot.
\textsuperscript{18} Timberland is a fashion brand focusing primarily on footwear. The brand is popular for their yellow leather waterproof boots worn by people of various backgrounds.
\textsuperscript{19} The song “Same Girl” was written by Jennifer Lopez and hip-hop singer Chris Brown. The song was released on February 4, 2014.
\textsuperscript{20} Lopez’s first album was titled On the 6 and was a reference to her commute from the Bronx to Manhattan on the MTA subway system.
that registers with the Bronx. By choosing to wear jeans and sneakers over Louboutin\textsuperscript{21} shoes (which she pays homage to in another song), she establishes the urban identity that is associated with the people of the borough. By simply singing about still being the same person she was when she lived and shopped in the Bronx, Lopez is acknowledging that she is viewed differently. At this point, though, her class, social, and fashion identity have changed and no longer make her the “same girl” she was in the Bronx, yet she remains a representation of one.

Before looking at how Lopez continues to emulate her urban Bronx roots, particularly her constant use of Black culture through hip-hop, it serves our purposes to discuss her rise to fame and how issues such as her “Latinidad,” sexuality, body image, and expression of style have made her the cultural icon she is today. Unlike many of her famous Latina predecessors, which include the Puerto Rican Gloria Estefan and the late Mexican singer Selena Quintanilla, who both managed to reach a great level of success in the American market by sticking to their cultural roots and style, Lopez uses a spacial urban persona. This persona is one that heavily relies on her Bronx roots and a generalized sense of Latin background but not necessarily her Puerto Rican roots.

First, this urban persona is presented through her body. Francis Aparicio states, “The similarities of the real bodies of both Selena and Jennifer Lopez speak to

\textsuperscript{21} Louboutin’s are a collection of shoes designed by Christian Louboutin. The shoes’ signature red soles have been the focus of the designers marketing and branding for his footwear.
the reality of a ‘Latina look’ that is, in this case, not a homogenized result of Hollywood, but in fact two concrete, real Latina bodies” (98). Aparicio, who writes about the relationship between Lopez and Selena (who was the character Lopez played in her first starring role) as Latinas and how, regardless of their different Latin backgrounds, both singers use their sexual identities as tools that are necessary when engaging with the Anglo and non-Latino public.

In her “I’m Glad” music video, released in 2003, Jennifer Lopez is not simply paying a tribute to the 1980s and the film Flashdance, but is using the periods fashion and setting to her advantage. Complete with the big hair, dance uniform, and dance routine, Lopez creates a character that is itself neutral in terms of identity and race. Through this character she is also reminiscing about the dreams and challenges of a working class woman making it big as an entertainer. These challenges are most evident in the beginning of the video when Lopez walks in to an audition room of her superiors (a panel of white judges) and when we see her working at a factory. In the video she displays an array of very well-executed dance moves, but in the process is performing racialized sexuality. The dance attire not only seems far more revealing on Lopez than it does on the thin white dancers she passes in a hallway, but it also works to show off her body, a body for which she has become known.
Pricilla Ovalle argues that Lopez has been able to be successful in Hollywood because of the “urban sensualidad” that she sells to the media with her urban style through her music and videos. She became a tangible commodity in every aspect of the industry: film, music, fragrances, clothing, and style. She states:

The genius of Lopez’s brand of urban sensualidad is its local-global packaging of Latinidad. By popularizing an ethnic/Latina-ness defined and contained by the decidedly US urban center of New York, Lopez maximized her representational potential while retaining an “Americanness” in the media eye. While there should be no doubt that this delicate balance is proof of Lopez’s creative business savvy, it would be careless to overlook the late 1990s/early 2000s context of racialized sexuality, gender and cultural production within which her career trajectory developed (257).

Like Ovalle, Jeffries notes that “urban” is a word that became associated particularly with nonwhiteness and more specifically Black representation with the rise of hip-hop culture in urban areas like the Bronx as discussed earlier (Ovalle 258). The urban space, when filled with working class members and economic struggle and where race issues are a constant factor, serve as contributors to the constant changing of variables like music, style, and the “use of the body as a canvas” (Jeffries 158).

---

22 Ovalle defines “urban sensualidad” as the commodifiable packaging of urban U.S. nonwhiteness in order to make urban and hip-hop style marketable by media like MTV to a widely racialized audience (254).
Lopez includes this reminder of race and Black culture in her videos whenever she is seen encountering breakdancers, curvy women in revealing clothing, or basketball players in a park. Her “I’m Real” video, released in 2001, in which she claims to be different and is admired by men, features a very urban setting. The viewer is not informed on an exact location, but we know this is a very urban area with the heavy influence of hip-hop culture through dress, the language in the song, her behavior and the inclusion of rapper Ja-Rule. Her persona is sweet but still embodies that desirable female. Lopez uses her body, as in the “I’m Glad” video, to drive the mood through dance and her attire. She is once again not explicitly addressing her racial background, but because of the urban setting we assume she is a member of an urban subculture and therefore a producer. At this point Lopez has already assumed the J.Lo identity, a persona she created that is associated with attitude, sexuality, and female independence, and therefore did not need to do much to convey her urban style.

Raised in the Bronx by a working class family, Lopez has reached a level of fame that people from the Bronx do not conceive of happening to one of them. Success, to many of these “American Dream hopefuls,” is measured through education, something that Lopez’s younger sister Lynda Lopez exemplified by becoming a well-known journalist. Lopez, who was educated in the Catholic school system and was discouraged from the entertainment industry by her parents, did not complete much of college, and instead she used her dance and her desire to act to get noticed.
At times, her behavior was criticized. In a 2012 interview for *Vogue* magazine, Jonathan Vam Meter had this to say about Lopez’s transition throughout her career: “J.Lo was not America’s Latina Sweetheart back then—far from it. At the time she was widely perceived as high-handed and aloof as she rubbed our noses in her *nueva riqueza*. The romance with Ben Affleck—and the smug ‘Jenny from the Block’ video—had turned a lot of people off...she became seen as ‘a hip-hop pop star, a temptress running the streets of New York with Puffy.’”

Lopez, who is also famous for her love life and has been referred to as “the Elizabeth Taylor of the hip-hop generation” (Vam Meter), was romantically involved with both the actor Ben Affleck and the rapper Sean Combs (stage name Puffy Daddy). Both are very different men, but they serve as examples of her racial versatility. She is white enough to be considered a suitable match for Affleck, whose career puts him high on the celebrity status ladder, and is Black enough to keep up with Combs and the hip-hop scene. Memorable images of Lopez with both men show fluidity in her sense of style. Her famous green Versace gown, worn to the 2000 Grammy Awards when dating Combs, was overtly sexual and revealing. The point of this dress was simple: to reveal Lopez’s body. While dating Affleck she attended the 2003 Academy Awards in a Greek goddess-like Valentino gown. The gown covered the majority of her body and hid most of her curves. This look was far more about the

---

23 *Nueva riqueza* translates to “new money.” It is a term used to describe the lack of humbleness by those who have recently gone up in social class in Latin countries.
dress, as it tends to be at this particular award show, than it was about the body in it. To the MTV awards in 2000, while still dating Combs, she wore a white outfit that included a cropped top and low rise pants with a bandana on her head, reminiscent of hip-hop fashion. While this can be called a growth in her sexual identity, it can be argued that Lopez dressed according to racial expectations based on the setting and the person she was dating. Molina and Valdavia further explain this in terms of racial hybridity:

The contemporary experience of Latinas, which also holds true of other populations shaped by colonialism, globalization, and transnationalism, is informed by the complex dynamics of hybridity as a cultural practice and expression (Garcia Canclini 1995). Latinidad gains its postcolonial exigency, not from the ideological stability of dominant social classifications, but through the cultural, ethnic, and racial fluidity of Latina/o identity. Thus, Latina/o identity, as a hybrid form within U.S. culture, remaps dominant hierarchies of identity and challenges popular notions of place and nation (214).

By referring to Latinidad as a hybrid identity, Molina and Valdavia make it easier to explain why Lopez is able to represent the Latino community, but still be paired with many of her white peers in the entertainment industry. Her identity as a Latina is not what dictates Lopez’s style, but instead it is her role as an entertainer. To be
successful she must appeal to more than one group and this hybrid identity allows her to do that by transcending not only physically but socially as well. As a musician Lopez reveals an urban vibe, a vibe that stems from her upbringing in a working class borough with a strong influence of Black culture. Here she allows for her sexuality or “urban sensualidad” to dictate her persona. For example, the majority of her videos are an opportunity for her to show off this Latinidad. In her videos she dances and wears revealing outfits. The outfits Lopez wears are designed to embrace her Latina body. Lopez sings about the tough life, about struggles in love, and she uses slang terms and speaks a language associated with the urban streets. This is evident in a verse from “Same Girl” where she sings, “I’m a keep on growin’/Keep on shinin’/Just wanna do me/I had to thank God/ ’cause he chose me/I’m still the same” (Lopez). Here she does not say much, but she reveals a great deal: she hopes to keep growing in her career, she has a religious background, and believes that she has not changed at all from the girl that used to live in the Bronx. The ability of Lopez to shift across racial and ethnic representations is “limited by language as an additional signifier of difference, especially for Latinas whose skin tone may not be ‘colored’ enough to create ethnic or racial ambiguity” (Molina & Valdavia 215). When you listen to Lopez’s English-language fluency there is a lack of an accent that would place her in a clearly Latin group, and therefore “coded as racial-other in the United States,” as are actresses like Sophia Vergara from the show hit comedy series Modern Family.\footnote{In Modern Family Sophia Vergara plays the much younger sexy Columbian wife}
Unlike Lopez, Vergara has a strong Latin accent and a very curvaceous body that does not allow her to escape the “otherly” or exotic role in television. For Lopez, this allows her to take part in roles that would be geared for white or “American” actresses. She can be a chameleon on film.

But what does this say about Lopez’s overall identity? Has she really changed from the person she was in the past? The way to answer this would be to simply look at Lopez’s work and analyze what is really her and what is simply an entertainer’s identity. Unlike in her films, where she simply auditions or gets selected for a role, Lopez has a lot of influence over her music. This is evident in the lyrics, credited to her and occasionally several writers and producers, and the music videos whose concepts she orchestrates. She chooses what she will wear and the feel and look of the video. This is where we get to see the influence of her upbringing. Regardless of homes in Los Angeles and in pricey Manhattan, Lopez continues to go back to her “Jenny From the Block” days. She continues to reminisce on this place through her style. Sure she dresses up in Versace or Oscar de La Renta for award shows, and manages to pull the looks off gracefully, according to fashion critics, but in her own designs she chooses to promote hip-hop fashion.

The young females that Lopez markets her clothing to do not necessarily think they are exactly like Lopez, but instead take pride in the fact that she came of the show’s patriarch. She is known for being overly passionate, loud, and her comical use of Spanglish and misinterpretations of English idioms.
from a place like them and that she identifies with them. Instead of wanting to be J.Lo., her public is more invested by the idea that she is one of them. This is why anytime Lopez flashes her wealth, she receives heavy scrutiny. Bronx street culture thrives on the idea of a hard life, of knowing your way in the streets and community. When Lopez makes it evident that she can buy whatever she wants and that she lives easily, she is contradicting this ideology. It is not her being wealthy that is contradictory—it actually pays homage to the idea that a member of this community can move up and still be true to where they come from—but instead it is the diva behavior and lack of humility that comes with attaining this wealth that is the problem. To appeal to the mass audience, Lopez has had to become versatile in her fashion, her body of work and behavior, but to continue to stay true to her background she has had to evoke an urban fashion and cultural identity. Lopez has continued to do this through her style of music, rooted with a hip-hop, pop, and reggae sound, her slang and urban context in lyrics, her latin and hip-hop inspired dance routines, and the use of her body as an object of desire. This makes Lopez a strong representation of Latinidad in America and as an image of what Bronx-bred can mean.

**Conclusion**

To say that Lopez is the perfect example of what Bronx identity looks like is a stretch. While Lopez's individual identity is a result of her upbringing, one that is found in many parts of the urban New York borough, it is simply one and does not
define that of all. The Bronx experience is different, evident through the various
groups of people that have settled in the borough over the last one hundred years and
the various subcultures that have adopted their own sense of style and interpreted it
as they deemed acceptable. What this paper hoped to do is to look at how social and
fashion identity is shaped by space. Therefore, by looking at space we are forced to
look at factors such as race, class, consumerism, and its people.

First, an analysis of race was necessary because various fashion subcultures
are often deemed appropriate or attached to certain groups the way urban wear is
attached to Black culture or punk is to white culture. Race not only divides fashion
identities, but it also gives style a history that is associated with the group of people
that dictate it. Like race, class also divides fashion, but more so in the sense of
quality and control. Class, evidently associated with wealth, is attributed to the
distribution of products and dictates the various forms of consumerism. These
products are either mass marketed (ready to wear/fast fashion/bargained/outlets) or
very exclusive (designer/couture/collections). The division of production is what
divides the fashion system by class. The financial strain, the lack of use for various
overly expensive products, and the disconnect with the fashion industry of the
working lower class is what forces members of this group to sacrifice quality for
quantity or individual expression for assimilation. While many believe that they are
making individual choices in the products that they are purchasing, what they cease
to see is that what they are purchasing has been marketed to them by the reproduction
of fashion through the class system and has also been predicated by space. This system does not, however, mean that they are excluded from fashion (trends/style/expression). These groups still practice fashion, even if it is often delayed in trends and requires improvising to make up for what is lacking. This delay in trends is not as dictated by race as it is by class. The wealthy class, although mostly white, includes members of minority groups. The wealthy class includes other entertainers like Lopez, such as rappers, athletes, and television personalities who have a say in creating trends. These trends resonate with individuals and groups who can identify with the culture. Lopez's class allows her to create trends and inspire fashion, but her racial background keeps her relatable. Lopez remains relatable to members of the community she grew up in despite her fame and wealth through her execution of style. The star continues to evoke an urban look throughout her career and when she is dressed in couture, she is dressed the way "only a Latina would" look in that attire. She evokes this image because of her Latinidad.

While Fordham Road explores the way space contributes to the marketing of a particular style to a particular group of people, the history of the borough of the Bronx leads to an understanding of why this particular group of people. The changes that the borough went through, the economics, a population where the majority are working class residents, heavily influenced by Black and Latin culture, have all contributed to the thriving subcultures that have created fashion identities now associated with this space.
Works Cited


