Fashion Signs: How Fashion Shaped the Counter Narrative of Blacks in South Central Los Angeles

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With over ten million residents living in Los Angeles County, Los Angeles has become a global melting pot with its diverse inhabitants coming from all over the world; thus, the city is not only a physical location but also a discursive site of intersecting cultural narratives. Morteza Dehghani and Sonya Sachveda note that cultural narratives have a significant effect on the shaping a cultural identity. In their essay, “The Role of Cultural Narratives in Moral Decision Making,” Dehghani et al. observe,

Great Cultural narratives such as those contained in most religious text or in folk stories can deeply imprint our long-term memory, whether or not we ever encounter these situations in real life. It is not implausible to think that those values seep into our beings and affect our reasoning. Thus, Dehghani et al. speak to the power of cultural narratives that can “seep into our beings.” Theorists such as Georg Simmel and Roland Barthes have highlighted the importance of fashion and clothing as an important marker of culture. Los Angeles, known for its beachwear, Hollywood fashionista commentators, and clothing districts, lays claim to being one of the fashion capitals of the world—a key creator of cultural narratives that has proven to be influential and, for some, even hegemonic. After all, many have regarded fashion as synonymous with high fashion, a signifier for the privileged and the elite. Fashion, however, can also act as a subversive force, challenging dominant cultural narratives.

In my essay, I argue that a fashion counter narrative is being created in the neighborhoods of South Central. In his article, “Considering Counter Narratives,” Michael Bamberg states, “Narratives provide the possibility of a format that has become the privileged way of fashioning self and identity, at least in ‘modern times,’ which is open to a certain fluidity, to improvisation, and to the design of alternatives” (354). As
powerful cultural narratives are codified, those opposing those narratives form counter narratives. For Bamberg, this can often be a fluid process, for as master narratives are created, counter narratives are formed, allowing for a process that is potentially liberating and emancipating (361-62). In South Central, a number of young Black youths have used fashion to create their own counter narratives; however, as Bamberg has noted, this process is a fluid one, and, as we will see, cultural narratives are ever-changing and, at times, easily co-opted by the very powers that are being challenged.

**Fashion as Sign**

The world is comprised of multiple signs: signs of significance, signs of reassurance, and signs of approval or disapproval. Early on, the linguist Ferdinand Saussure argued that language is built upon a system of signs that are composed of two parts: a signifier and a signified, the form and the concept. Other theorists have taken Saussure’s ideas and applied them to multiple semiotic systems, noting that signs can take many different forms, including words, images, sets of objects, and, even, fashion.

In the text *Defining Visual Rhetoric*, Charles Hill credits Roland Barthes with being a key theorist translating Saussure’s theory of signification from a linguistic sign to multiple signs. He states, “Quite literally, these objects conveyed the meaning of their lives. Rather than depict reality accurately, or even impressionistically, the creator assembles and arranges “blocks of meaning” so that the description becomes yet another meaning. Rather than reveal truth or provide understanding, the poem or the image offers yet another meaning” (Hill 17). Barthes demonstrates that signs—whether verbal or visual—constitute a code and system that various communities use to create meaning. How we create and read signs can have significant social consequences. People may make life and death decisions based simply on how they interpret someone’s body language, tone of voice, and gesture. For instance, in the South Central Black community, clothing and dress play a significant role in the creation of signs. Clothing can signify a person’s background, the wearer’s economic identity, or,
even, an individual’s territorial identity. In the Black community fashion itself tells a communal story, despite the multiple representations of fashion itself.

While many may not agree with the power of fashion, fashion itself can exercise power over any social group. Discussing the significance of fashion in her article “Dressed to Kill,” Young Kim describes fashion as “a domain in which self-perception and taste manifest, where the desires for beauty and consumption materialize; it is also a contested ground where social hierarchy is articulated through individual spontaneity and state control” (Kim 160). In his text “Philosophy of Fashion,” Georg Simmel has argued “fashions are always class fashions, by the fact that the fashions of the higher strata of society distinguish themselves from those of the lower strata, and are abandoned by the former at the moment when the latter begin to appropriate them” (564). Although I agree with Simmel that fashion engages in a hegemonic norming process that might force individuals to assimilate and lose their sense of individuality, I also argue that the power relationships enacted between social classes can be far more complex. For instance, large fashion names like Chanel, Moschino, DKNY and Philip Lim often promote an exclusive image, encouraging groups to adopt their label—conforming to their social message. However, we can also see that groups can refuse to adhere to such normative class coding. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, young black youth rebelled against such labels and created what has now become known as hip hop or street fashion. Ironically, as a response, “high fashion” attempted to emulate, rather than separate itself from, street fashion. When the cultural narrative of high fashion is threatened, designers may appropriate key elements of the counter narrative fashion and incorporate them in their design as their own, ultimately changing the symbolic meaning of these fashion signs. Barnard states,

There is a further complication to this situation that should be pointed out here. It is that, being a continually moving battle, the working of hegemony does not stop with punk’s or hip hop’s challenge. Punk- and hip hop-inspired or related fashions may be found in any high street. Chanel took the gold ropes and incorporated them into catwalk fashion in 1991 and Tommy Hilfiger used Coolio, Raekwon, and Sean Combs as models in the
mid-1990s. The dominant classes and dominant ideologies have recuperated the objects and items and the meanings of the objects and items. The trappings of punk and hip hop have become or have been made into commodities and, some would say, if it was ever upset, the balance of power has been truly reestablished in the favor of the dominant classes.

Fashion often walks a fine line between inspiration and cultural appropriation. While Hip Hop artists aimed to resist high-end fashion, the same fashion moguls intentionally incorporated this “rebellious” fashion in order to gain capital and a new audience. Fashion can engage in a battle of ideologies, where fashion is the visual display of this argument. Marginalized groups may use fashion as a sign to exhibit resistance; however, by incorporating the fashion pieces into haute couture fashion, key labels ultimately alter the symbolic meaning of these clothing, undermining and even destroying its original power.

South Central

I would argue that one of the trends occurring in South Central that demonstrates the social dynamics and complexities of fashion is the 1990s retro fashion movement. In examining this movement, I will demonstrate the ways that the young wearers of this fashion may navigate between the master narratives and counter narratives of fashion. Storeowners, such as Sam Snapson who owns an online retail store specifically selling vintage clothing, have noted that 1990s vintage fashion has become so popular that the market for vintage 1990s wear has grown immensely. Young black adolescents who have embraced the retro trend dress in chambray shirts, tapered denim, jerseys, and snapback baseball caps. These articles of clothing are very reminiscent of the fashion of the 1990s, inspired by then popular movies like *Boyz N The Hood* and photographs of major rap groups such as NWA, who included such rappers as Ice Cube, Dr. Dre, DJ Yella, MC Ren and Eazy E. Watching old movies and the images that are re-circulated by the media, many young Black millennials have become inspired by these icons and, in turn, emulate their style. But the question still remains: Why are the youth of South
Central emulating and reclaiming this cultural memory? I argue that this trend is both reflective of a desire for community and desire for economic and material success.

**Fashion and Cultural Memory**

The 1991 film *Boyz N the Hood*, written and directed by John Singleton, is set in the ‘90s in South Central Los Angeles and follows the fortunes of a group of young Blacks: Tre, Doughboy and Ricky. Struggling to escape the life of violence and drugs, Tre and Ricky dream of attending college; while others, like Doughboy, are caught up in the violence that is endemic to the neighborhood. In this film, these characters are exposed to gang violence, police brutality, and issues of poverty. Although some scholars have argued that films like *Boyz N the Hood* perpetuate stereotypes, the conditions depicted in the movie resonate with youth who live in an area that is still plagued with unemployment and high crime rates. For instance, in one scene, we see how Tre, played by Cuba Gooding Jr., is trapped by the master narratives imposed by the very institutions that should protect him: the law. In this scene a black officer, who should understand the ways that blacks are entrapped by stereotypes, brutalizes him, after pulling Tre and Ricky over. Dressed in the homogenizing uniform of the law, the officer only sees Tre and Ricky’s race and clothes, which identify them with the “hood.” The officer places a gun to Tre’s throat and states, “You think you tough. You tough huh? Oh you scared now, I like that. That’s why I took this job. I hate lil’ motherfuckas like you. Lil niggas ain’t shit. You think you tough huh. Ill blow yo head off with this Smith and Weston, couldn’t do shit. How you feel now? (*Boyz N The Hood*). Here Tre is twice brutalized by master
narratives, first by the officer assuming he must be a gang member, rather than an aspiring college student, and second by the same officer, dressed in the uniform of power, asserting that he regards Tre’s life as meaningless and has the power to destroy him with impunity. With the recent killings of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Oscar Grant, we see the continuing power of master narratives that not only marginalize black youth, but also has the very power to destroy them.

Some critics of *Boyz N The Hood* have expressed concern that the film perpetuates the very stereotypes from which young Black men are diligently trying to free themselves. In the film, the three main characters, Tre, Doughboy and Ricky, all are representatives of marginalized Black young men caught in difficult social and economic environments. For example Doughboy and Ricky are two brothers coming from a single parent household. Doughboy, who becomes a member of the Crips, has multiple altercations with law enforcement. Ricky, the favored son, is both a star football player, with a commitment to USC, and a teen parent. Finally there is Tre, who happens to be the only character with a positive father figure and who manages to survive the harsh realities of South Central Los Angeles in the 1990s with the help of his father. Although these narratives may reflect the lives of young men from a number of marginalized groups, these are also common stereotypes of Black men perpetuated by the media.

Expressing her own concern with the social representations of black men, Charlene Regester states,

> Here, as the black male assumes the passive, victimized role, he represents a castrated figure that can no longer serve as a threat to white males. Given that this image of black males is grossly distorted in view of their preeminence in the popular culture, such representations are understandably disturbing and dangerous (338).

Nevertheless, Regester also asserts that *Boyz N The Hood* has an underlying message of brotherhood and camaraderie, for in analyzing how the film displays this sense of community, she states,

> As representations of youthful black male camaraderie, these films collectively foreground the black male athlete and his tragic
circumstances, exploring inner city life and its influences on the fate of the
black male and displacing onto a young black male victim the larger
sociopolitical dilemma of crime, poverty, and disenfranchisement (334).

Regester acknowledges the harsh circumstances these Black men are placed in,
recognizing, however, that the film is a story of Black brotherhood. After Ricky becomes
a victim of gang violence, Doughboy avenges his brother, knowing that he, in turn, will
be killed. In the end, Tre assures a sorrowful Doughboy that he "still got one brother
left." In a world in which Black men are marginalized and murdered, the young men
have to rely upon each other. The film does not have a happy ending, but it does depict
a reality that many young people in South Central can understand. According to a 2012
New York Times article, by Jennifer Medina, “In Years Since the Riots, a Changed
Complexion in South Central,” she writes,

South Los Angeles still faces the same kind of economic troubles it did 20
years ago: unemployment is high, and those who are able to secure a job
typically earn little more than minimum wage. Empty lots dot the streets, a
stubborn reminder of the broken promises to rebuild the area after
buildings were burned and razed in 1992.

Unfortunately the same problems that once plagued South Central in the 1990s remain
an issue for the community today. The film captures this crisis, as Doughboy states,
"Either they don't know, don't show, or don't care about what's going on in the hood."
But at the same time, it emphasizes a story about brotherhood. By reclaiming these
cultural memories through fashion, a number of the youth are preserving the memories
of the past highlighted in the themes of the film—where young boys grew up to become
as close as brothers, sharing a special bond that could not be broken. In addition, these
youth are identifying with a larger group: a sense of the communal self.

James Harris of Complex magazine named the film Boyz N The Hood one of the
most stylish movies in his article, “The 25 Most Stylish Movies of All Time.” Harris
explains that his team chose this list objectively; the team “[fo]cused on more
contemporary color pictures that continue to influence style today, and placing
precedent on archetypes, transnational symbols, and films often overlooked by less
capable list writers.” Further clarifying why they chose Boyz N the Hood for their number twelve spot, Harris states, “This film not only showcased the struggles and triumphs of everyday life in Black America, but also the style that would influence a generation.”

The innovative 1990s retro fashion trend in South Central reflects various cultural themes derived from, as Harris suggests, “archetypes, transnational symbols, and films.” While not all members of this community are adhering to this fashion trend, many young blacks of South Central Los Angeles are choosing to wear this culturally identifiable style, consisting of Retro Jordan shoes or Nikes, crew tee or crewneck hoodie, and a snapback baseball cap. As I argued earlier, part of the rationale for this trend is the desire to establish a sense of community in a world that, as echoed in the film Boyz N the Hood, “ain’t no fairytale.”

Although it is difficult to associate a trend with any specific text, Dilia López-Gydosh and Joseph Hancock, in their essay, “American Men and Identity: Contemporary African-American and Latino Style,” discuss several issues with defining a trend and associating it with a cultural group:

Helen Bradley Foster contends that while the clothing of American blacks has traditionally been clustered into one style, it possesses many unique looks and qualities that reflect the dichotomy between American and African. She also argues that while African Americans have traditionally “adopted the prevailing cultural dress of each period, their style often sets them apart.” (16-17)

Although many are wary of associating a certain style with an ethnic group, out of fear of homogenizing the group, Lopez-Gydosh and Hancock observe that there is and have been distinct styles that have been associated with the Black community. I agree and add that although the 1990s retro trend is only one of many contemporary trends in the South Central community, many of the youth of South Central Los Angeles have become so involved with emulating this style that they have begun to hunt for vintage clothing of this era. Vintage eBay shop owner Samuel Snapson searches for 1990s vintage clothing on a regular basis, and because of the high demand he is able to sell his products at an exponential rate. Snapson sells vintage snapbacks, windbreaker
jackets, and other 1990s vintage items with prices spanning from $25.00 to $500.00, depending on the rarity of the item. Snapson’s customers range from young teens to famous celebrities, such as veteran rapper Fabolous. Snapson’s eBay store is currently selling a deadstock (no longer available in stores or retailers) 1991 *Boyz N The Hood* snapback for 119.99, and the average price for a typical snapback is $25.00-$30.00.

Although the rarity of these objects makes them desirable, these artifacts are also cultural artifacts—carrying with them whole systems of signification. This 1990s retro trend has become so popular in South Central that it represents more than simply a style choice. The Black adolescents of the South Central community, who are adhering to this trend, are in essence creating a fashion counter narrative against the current narratives set in place. Although fashion, establishing its own signs of power and prestige, can be hegemonic, especially in conjunction with the Black community, the counter narrative in place shows that Black fashion can also display their own signifiers—signs of community, brotherhood/sisterhood, and innovation within a community. In choosing to emulate the style of the characters in the film of *Boyz N The Hood*, fashion wearers are making a choice to select a clothing style associated with the South Central community. Thus, the community itself is creating the fashion that then is moving out of the community and into the fashion world. The fashion counter narrative, in its own way, gives power to the community, as the clothing represents not the world of fashion moguls but the world that reflects the wearer’s cultural concerns and memories.

Although I’ve been examining the 1990s retro fashion specifically inspired by the film *Boyz N The Hood*, another key aspect of the 1990s inspired fashion is sneakerwear, and one of the most popular shoes happens to be the Air Jordan. As reflected in the film *Boyz N The Hood*, Nikes and Air Jordans were the most popular shoes worn during this time period. Currently, these shoes are in high demand, particularly in South Central Los Angeles. Air Jordans, which were released in 1990s, have a cult like customer base in Los Angeles. Journalist Michael Livingston II’s article “The Culture Examined: The Air Jordan Phenomenon” compares this event to the Holy Pilgrimage to Mecca. He states,
Every year, young men and women travel in packs to Foot Lockers and DTLRs across the county for the newest release of the Air Jordan Retro shoes. This year, it was the Jordan XI Concords, sold at retailers for $180. Though not a holy place, these outlets hold the Holy Grail for shoe collectors: Retro Jordans.

The Jordan Brand rereleased the Jordan shoes with the exact same design as the original 1990s release, with minor changes as the Retro Jordan collection. Livingston adds,

The Air Jordans’ phenomenon is found in their exclusiveness and their mystique. They are proud to own shoes that have been released before—and will undoubtedly be rereleased again in the future. The same Jordan XI that were released in 1995 are the same as the ones released in 2001 and 2011; only difference is the color. What doesn’t differ is the color of the people stampeding, stabbing and shooting each other for the sneakers.

At each release of the Retro Jordans, the sneakers are sold out within the first couple of days. Due to the high number of consumers versus the limited stock of the sneakers, customers know that the shoes are sold on a “first come first serve” basis. Often, customers participate in “camp outs” for these sneakers, bringing blankets and tents and sitting, sometimes for days, in order to

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ensure that they will be among the few to purchase their Retro Air Jordans.

In South Central, on a Jordan Release date, one can expect to see lines wrapped around stores like Millennium Shoe Store, and several other shoe stores in the Baldwin Hills Crenshaw Plaza. The process of attaining these highly coveted shoes have become increasingly difficult as many have implemented a lottery system in order to combat the ever growing issues surrounding the camp out. Consumers must fill out a lottery ticket form and enter a random drawing; if selected the customer then is allowed to stand in a line of hundreds and, depending on availability, are able to purchase the shoes.

While many may not understand this desire to obtain these new sneakers, rapper Wale highlights the significance of shoes in the Black community in his song “The White Shoes.” According to the song’s lyrics, white shoes can empower the wearer: “Take this good advice/ Cause they’re gonna judge your life/ Say we can’t always be fly/ We gon’ be good long as them sneakers white” (Wale). Wale explains the significance of having new shoes in the Black community in his lyrics as he highlights the ironic advice he receives one day as someone explains to him that despite all the obstacles he faces as a Black person, he will do fine in his community as long as his sneakers are white, signifying clean or new.

Wale suggests that the white sneaker, or the expensive sneaker, shows status in the Black community. But inevitably, he also foregrounds a central irony: how can young people afford to buy these expensive white shoes, or, in the case of 1990s retro fashion—Air Jordans. Slyly, Wale notes how most of these shoes are attained. Wale states, “Free lunch for everyone, Income was very uh/ On the second and 16th everyone would have everyone 1.” Wale observes how most people coveting these shoes are living below the poverty lines, as they qualify for the free lunch program, which only is available to those who make under 20,000 dollars a year. Wale also states that despite poverty, on the 2nd and 16th (dates that most welfare recipients receive their aid) if these white shoes were released, these families would undoubtedly purchase these shoes. Wales suggest that these sneakers are more than fashion to some, but instead an ironic symbol of wealth among those in poverty. The individual wearer may be communicating,
“Although I am poor, I am not as poor as you, so I matter a bit more, even if it is just by a foot.”

While attaining these costly shoes may be a sign for material status, these shoes are also signifiers of Michael Jordan’s athletic prowess, reflecting his glory days as a star athlete. Michael Jordan is essentially a success story and his shoes are emblematic of this period of his extraordinary achievements. Livingston posits, another reason for the brand’s popularity is the popularity of the name: Michael Jordan. Each Retro Jordan shoe released tells a story related to the career of Michael Jordan. Jordan wore the XI during the Chicago Bulls’ 72-win championship season of 1995-1996. He has shoes dedicated to significant moments in his career: The Shot in Cleveland, the 1984 playoffs where he scored a playoff record 63 points against Larry Bird’s Celtics, and 6 NBA Championships. Everyone wanted to be like Mike, and to be like Mike meant buying his shoes. It didn’t matter if the shoes didn’t help one jump higher or play better. You just had to have them.

Essentially, Livingstone is arguing that Retro Jordan shoes are part of Michael Jordan’s mythology—to buy and wear his shoes is to participate in this mythos. Although it has been twenty years since Michael Jordan’s heyday, his social and economic status has yet to fade as he is still considered one of the best basketball players ever. In addition to his athletic mythos, Michael Jordan is also a capitalistic success story—through his hard work and determination, he reaped economic and social success. Thus, purchasers of his shoes may desire to identify and even emulate Jordan, allowing them also to identify with a retro Jordan in his prime. His shoes demand a cost, and for some, even a sacrifice, but his wearers literally can “buy” both Michael Jordan’s athletic myth and capitalistic American dream.

The 1990s retro fashion movement in South Central Los Angeles has allowed Black youth to use fashion as a means of creating counter narratives that give insights to the life of their community. However, as stated previously, the creation of narratives and counter narratives are so fluid, allowing for constant change and creation of new narratives. As soon as fashion houses appropriate a fashion counter narrative and
subsume it back into the master narrative, they alter the original sign system, transforming empowerment into appropriation, community into commodity, and cultural memory into a homogenized identity. In “American Men and Identity: Contemporary African-American and Latino Style,” López-Gydosh and Hancock observe:

American fashions came from Europe until the 1950s; however, black styles began to inspire the fashions of white American dress as well. Many items from both Latino and black style have been adopted as mass fashion, including sneakers that minority athletes have worn first, doo rags made popular by African Americans and Latinos during the late 1960s, Yamamoto Kansai sweaters (also known as Bill Cosby sweaters), and hip-hop and reggaeton apparel (17).

As Bamberg suggests, the sign system in both narratives and counter narratives are ever fluid. While some may be emulating the 1990s retro fashion as seen in Boyz N The Hood, others may simply be engaging in this trend to create a sense of community. By wearing this clothing, individuals in a community become identified with one another and in a sense the clothing of this trend becomes a sign for that group. However, what happens to the counter narrative when it no longer is associated with its creator? Despite the creation of a counter narrative, larger fashion moguls have found ways to incorporate Black style into mainstream fashion. Consequently, these styles are transformed into a larger trend, and the 1990s retro trend may no longer represent the community within South Central Los Angeles, but, instead, is transformed into a headlining piece of

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the SS 15 Chanel catalog or a mass-produced item, placed on the sales rack. Major urban clothing store like Urban Outfitters, noticing the popularity of the 1990s retro styles, have begun to sell these Black fashions in their stores. West Coast personalities such as Tupac, rap group NWA, and various other “hood idols” are placed on these t-shirts and sold for $28.00. Not only have major fashion corporations appropriated a Black urban trend, but they have also sold the very “hood” that Doughboy observed that no one outside the “hood” cared about—that is, until it could be commodified. Thus, what was once deemed “ghetto,” has been usurped and coined “urban chic.” Recently, items associated with Black culture—“durags” and “baby hairs” showed up on the runway of DKNY and were praised as high fashion. In the Black community “durags” or wave caps are worn at night to keep hair well groomed; however Black men and women began to wear these pieces as a fashion statement, deconstructing the boundaries between public and private. This risky and innovative style became very popular in the Black Community and was highlighted in South Central LA, but the mainstream fashion world dismissed the trend. However, now that Chanel has placed these head wraps on the runway, it has been deemed acceptable. Blogger Arielle Newton of Blackmillenials discusses this issue as she states,

> You think that sporty “Urban Tie Cap,” will sell for $1 like a du-rag does? Nope. And when the person foolish enough to fork over $50 for a du-rag places that trendy fashion statement on their heads, so comes an aura of elitism that will only (and inevitably) fuel even more prejudice against the people who typically wear them. That’s right. Black men. Which leads me to my next point. How often have Black and Brown bodies been demonized for their appearance? Black men who wear du-rags Urban Tie Caps are thugs, Black women with gelled baby hairs Urban Fabulous hair are ratchet bitches.

Newton expresses her frustration with the mainstream fashion industry and how these forces commandeer Black style. With money and privilege, these major fashion corporations have taken a community’s counter narrative and morphed it into the master narrative. Essentially Black culture has become just another trend during Fashion Week.
Through the analyzing the 1990s retro fashion trend, I have examined how fashion has played the role in the creation of a counter narrative for some of the youth in South Central today. Through fashion we are able to see a trend emerge, inspired by well-known films and figures of the 1990s. These clothing styles have become signs of community, as the youth have been able to use fashion to forge a group identity. By drawing upon cultural memories and personas that resonate with a community, fashion can speak to a community’s shared experience and aspirations—whether they are embodied in the tragedy of *Boyz N the Hood* or the athletic and capitalistic success narrative of Michael Jordan. Despite the master narrative’s ability to take these figures and appropriate this trend as their own, the impact remains: even if for a moment in time, the youth in South Central were able to create a narrative that displayed their truth, for their community and the world to see. While these fashion signs are not true of all Black people of South Central Los Angeles, it creates a story true for many and gives hope to those who wish their truths to be heard.
Works Cited


