

Aida Hurtado

MUCH MORE THAN A BUTT: Jennifer Lopez's Influence On Fashion

Jennifer López is the contemporary icon not only of Latinas in fashion but also of a Latina aesthetic in the embodiment of Latina style (Negrón-Muntaner, 2004). In many ways, the extensive fashion coverage that J.Lo (as she is known to her fans) has received is unprecedented for a U.S. Latina or Latino. Nevertheless, Latina/o culture has had a steady and important influence on how we adorn ourselves since at least 1848 at the end of the Mexican War, when much of what is now the southwestern United States became part of this nation. The end of the Mexican-American War in 1848 codified in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo the colonized status of Mexico's former citizens in what became part of the U.S. southwestern states of Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas. Mexicans residing in this region lost their citizen rights and saw their language and culture displaced overnight. Other non-Mexican Latino groups joined the United States after 1848.

Fashion as Communication Code

Latinas/os in the United States exist within the larger context of fashion trends and conventions, what some fashion theorists refer to as a “code” of communication, similar but not identical to the use of language. Nonetheless, as Fred Davis writes, “we know that through clothing people communicate some things about their persons, and at the collective level this results typically in locating them symbolically in some structural universe of status claims and life-style attachments” (*Fashion, Culture, and Identity*, p.4). Although capable of individual style, in other words, Latinas/os have a repertoire of fashion vocabularies that emanate from histories, social existences, and aesthetics derived from their cultures. This is not to say there is one uniform Latina/o aesthetic in fashion or a uniform visual “code,” but rather, as Davis points out, fashion is “an incipient or quasi-code, which, although it must necessarily draw on the conventional visual and tactile symbols of a culture, does so allusively, ambiguously, and inchoately, so that the meanings evoked by the combinations and permutations of the code’s key terms (fabric, texture, color, pattern, volume, silhouette, and occasion) are forever shifting or ‘in process’” (*Fashion, Culture, and Identity*, p.5). For Latina/o fashion codes to be “read,” they have to have “meanings that are sufficiently shared within one or another clothes wearing communit[ies]” (*Fashion, Culture, and Identity*, p.6). Therefore, although broader Latina/o fashion codes communicate across Latina/o nationality groups in the United States (such as Mexican, Puerto Rican, Central American, Cuban), with strong connections to fashion codes and aesthetics in the rest of Latin America, nonetheless, Latina/o fashion also has



AIDA HURTADO

specific constituencies as defined by regional aesthetics (for example, “Tejana style,” “L.A. style”), age groups (for example, “homie style,” “gangsta style,” “chola style”), and social class (for example, haute couture—Carolina Herrera, Oscar de la Renta, Narciso Rodriguez). Of course, these styles are not mutually exclusive but rather commingle to create a layered and complex aesthetic that only a sophisticated fashion reader can decipher.

Fashion Vocabularies

Below I explore various aspects of Latina/o fashion when fashion is defined as “the modal style of a particular group at a particular time ... the style which is considered appropriate or desirable” (Lauer and Lauer, *Fashion Power*, p.23).

Fashion as a Social Problem

Latina/o youth, like other young people, have been at the forefront of creating “street fashion.” The aim is to express a particular historical moment as embodied in the cultural climate of the time. The zoot suit popular in the 1940s, for example, characterized by broad shoulders and pegged pants, became a powerful symbol of “pachuco style” and was enshrined for future generations in the play *Zoot Suit* by Luis Valdez. Valdez explores the significance of clothing in creating a sense of identity and cohesiveness among Mexican-American youth in Los Angeles (Noriega, *Aztlán* 26, no. 1: pp.1-13). The play portrays Los Angeles’s infamous Sleepy Lagoon murder mystery and the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943, in which U.S. service men on leave beat up people, mostly Mexican-Americans, wearing zoot suits. Luis Valdez “weaves fact with fiction to depict the fate of 22 young Mexican-Americans brought to trial for murder and railroaded into life sentences” (Valdez, Kinan, *Zoot Suit* program notes). It is the pachucos’ zoot suits that ultimately indicted them as murderers in the eyes of the mainstream media. Valdez also uses direct quotes from newspaper accounts to illustrate the central role wearing a zoot suit played

in the Sleepy Lagoon murder trial. The play further highlights how clothing reinforced the general public’s stereotypes about Mexicans, especially young Mexicans.

More recently, Latina/o youth have developed a distinctive style of oversized clothing, wearing caps with specific emblems (often of particular sports teams) and athletic shoes. The styles of Latina/o youth overlap with other ethnic and racial groups, specifically with African-Americans, and have been used by authority figures as indications of “gang affiliation” (Linneman, *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, 15 September 1996, p.A1). The fashion style has been declared indicative of a social problem, whether the youth wearing the attire in fact engage in problematic behavior or not. Many high schools have enacted dress codes to prohibit the use of clothing items associated with this style specifically (Robledo, *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, 14 January 1995). Ironically, many white suburban youth have appropriated the “gang” style of clothing and have not been stigmatized as youth of color have been (Wagner, *San Francisco Examiner Magazine*, 10 November 1996). Capitalizing on this trend, mainstream designers like Tommy Hilfiger have designed collections directed at this particular market. This market has also been re-appropriated by designers of color, usually newcomers to the field of fashion, like record mogul and hip-hop rapper P. Diddy (formerly known as Puff Daddy) and by hip-hop clothing brands such as FUBU (For Us by Us), Phat Farm, and Eckō (Specter, *The New Yorker*, 9 September 2002). Designers of color wanted to reclaim the right of “minority people” to wear “clothes created by minority” designers (Specter, *The New Yorker*, 9 September 2002, p. 123).

Fashion as Ethnic Aesthetic

The Oxford English dictionary defines “aesthetic” as “The philosophy or theory of taste, or of the perception of the beautiful in nature and art.” For Latinas/os, their particular culture and language are integral parts of developing an aesthetic distinct from the one developed in mainstream U.S. society. This

ethnic aesthetic, if you will, is identifiable not only by Latinas/os but by non-Latinas/os as well. As Nancy Gibbs indicates,

The word is sensibilidad [sensitivity]. It refers to a quality of temperament easier to recognize than define, a spacious basket of subtleties: strength without roughness, pride tempered with humor, a hint of festival, a tinge of tragedy. ... Artists, designers, actors from all corners of Latin culture resort to the word when others fail to capture just what is infectious about a Latin sense of style. (Time, 132, no. 2, 1988, p. 68)

According to Gibbs, “This sensibilidad is changing the way America looks, the way it eats, dresses, drinks, dances, the way it lives” (Time, 132, no. 2, 1988, p. 68). Furthermore, “Latin colors and shapes in clothing and design,” which have their origins in “Moorish curves of Spain” or the “ancient cultures of Central and South America” have been “thoroughly mixed into the mainstream” (*Ibid.*). Many times these Latina/o influences are not fully acknowledged or their sources fully identified.

Although not always easy to define, as Gibbs indicates above, “Latina/o taste” is often identified as revolving around a heightened emphasis on color in general—whether in clothing or in other objects, including Latinas/os’ homes. For example, an article reviewing the dressing conventions in the nation’s capital notes that the fashion norms are sober colors and conservative suits for both men and women. In a sea of black and gray, “Hispanic women ... represent the exception to the District’s stale fashion air” (Aguilar, Hispanic, October 1992, p.12). Honduran-born designer Alberto Uclés, who is based in Washington, D.C., asserts, “Hispanic women are a separate class [in the D.C. fashion scene]. I would say they are avant-garde. They take chances with color.” The article concludes that Latinas’ sense of style and elegance “comes from the colors of our local cultures” (*Ibid.*, p.14).

Another aspect of this ethnic aesthetic is Latinas’ unabashed adherence to sensuality,



Photograph courtesy of WireImage

so much so that it is often described as dressing “sexy.” Brooklyn-born Puerto Rican designer Alvin Lee Nazario describes his evening wear as inspired by “Hispanic women [who] dress very sexy and are very confident in what they wear” (López, Hispanic, July 1999, p.100). Similarly, when Jennifer López launched her “sporty chic” fashion line in April 2002 in partnership with Andy Hilfiger (Tommy Hilfiger’s brother) and Larry Stemmerman, she too emphasized the sensuality of a Latina aesthetic by proclaiming that her clothes



Photograph courtesy of Denis Reggie

were made for women who were “little to voluptuous” but all got “to be sexy” (Tippit, Puerto Rico Herald 15, no. 19, 26 April 2001, p.1).

The Latina aesthetic recognizes the distinctive phenotypes and body shapes of Latinas, integral parts of their sensuality, as significantly different from those cultivated in the U.S. mainstream fashion world. A subject that has generated much comment and debate is that sine qua non feature of the Caribbean Latina—her posterior. Jennifer López, again, has become the poster girl for a physical feature associated not only with Latinas but also with women of African descent.

The fact that women of color, as

exemplified by López and African-American pop singer Beyoncé Knowles among others, have prominent derrières has been liberating for fashion. Instead of further reinforcing the “waif look” popular with models (and other performers, like Calista Flockhart), designers have recognized and embraced the fact that Latinas are “voluptuous,” and they have reconsidered the mainstream aesthetic of extreme thinness, an aesthetic many writers have questioned, suggesting it may not apply to any significant group of women.

Latinos in High Fashion

Latinas/os have also made their mark in the highly selective halls of high fashion. Fashion designers like Oscar de la Renta, Carolina Herrera, and most recently Cuban-American Narciso Rodriguez, have fashion lines that are worn by the wealthiest and most visible fashion icons in the United States and in the world. For example, Narciso Rodriguez designed Carolyn Bessette Kennedy’s wedding dress for her nuptials to John Kennedy Jr. Ms. Kennedy’s choice astounded the fashion establishment as Narciso Rodriguez was relatively unknown and considered a “wunderkind” because of his youth.

The participation of Latina/o fashion designers in mainstream haute couture gives the Latina/o population visibility. In addition, their particular aesthetics and fashion vocabularies, which inevitably influence their designs, increase their visibility and claim a presence in highly selective visual culture like fashion magazines, international fashion events, and mass media.

Fashion as Identity

Regardless of which fashion vocabularies Latinas/os deploy, fashion theorists propose that the individual display of style is related to an individual’s social identities. Social psychologist Henri Tajfel defines social identity as those aspects of the individual’s self-identity that derive from the person’s knowledge of being part of categories and groups, together with the value and emotional

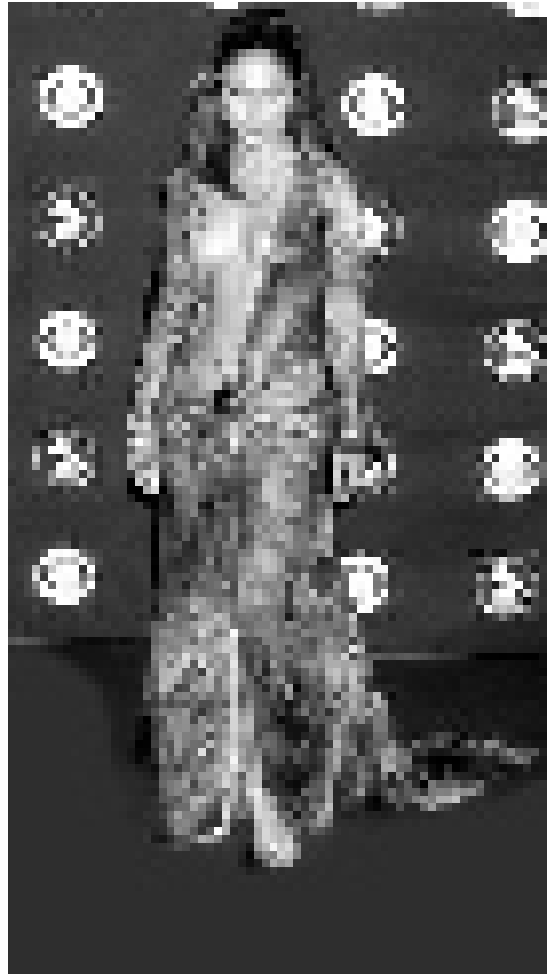
significance attached to those memberships. That is, our collective existence is filtered through our sense of belonging to different groups, which in turn funnels our selection from among the many available ways to display ourselves.

Not all social identities are equally salient in Western societies. Those social identities that represent master statuses—for example, race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, physical ability, and physical beauty—have great psychological significance for the construction of self. That is, “dress ... comes easily to serve as a kind of visual metaphor for [social] identity” (Davis, *Fashion, Culture, and Identity*, p.25). Fashion is an ideal vehicle for communicating to the world an individual’s group and cultural affiliations. Through the use of the various fashion vocabularies discussed above, including an ethnic aesthetic, individuals can mark their identification with their ethnicity, social class, and regional identity, among other things. Similarly, if an individual can be identified as Latina/o either by their physical appearance or by their accent, they can subvert or affirm this marker through their use of fashion. Clothing then becomes an important tool to display or divert ethnic, gender, and class identification.

Fashion Fusion: The Dress Heard Around the World

Jennifer López caused a stir at the 2000 Grammy Awards ceremony by wearing a green Versace dress. The following day, every major news outlet carried a photo of López wearing what is now considered one of the iconic fashion images of the 20th century.

It was fortuitous that around the same time López had just released her first album, *On the 6*, and had already gained international recognition as an actress with over 20 films under her belt. As she moved into designing her fashion line a year later, and her perfume “Glow” after that, she redefined how fashion is produced and entwined with other artistic endeavors. Fusing all aspects of fashion with artistic performance, López now has



Photograph courtesy of FeatureFlash

unprecedented visibility in fashion outlets as well as other media.

Although the fusion of music, especially hip-hop, with fashion had started earlier, the “triple-threat” of music, fashion design, and acting can be said to have started with López’s success in all three arenas. In fact, López made entertainment history in 2001 by being the first artist to simultaneously hold first place at the box office (with *The Wedding Planner*) and have the number one album (*J.Lo*). López’s success in entering the field of fashion with her own clothing line and perfume (with accompanying lotion and shower gel), along with her distinctly Latina fashion persona, opened the door for other

AIDA HURTADO

Latina artists as well as for other artists of color. For example, Colombian-born singer Shakira's English-language album Laundry Service has been wildly successful not only because of her musical talent but also because of her distinctive Latina aesthetic. Shakira introduced yet another Latina fashion vocabulary with her low-slung leather jeans, leather halter-top, and layered necklaces and bracelets, as well as reinventing her native Middle Eastern belly dancing (her parents are from the Middle East) with a rock-and-roll twist.

Jennifer López also furthered the fashion fusion by focusing on the Puerto Rican market. (Her parents immigrated from Puerto Rico to New York City). Her ability to speak Spanish and feel a strong affiliation with Puerto Rican culture led to her first full-length televised concert in 2002. Her transnational focus has influenced Latin American pop artists like Shakira, Thalía, Ricky Martin, and Paulina Rubio to venture into U.S. markets by recording in English. Latina artists moving back and forth between cultures will undoubtedly influence all artistic expression including fashion.

Similarly, Beyoncé Knowles, an African-American artist formerly with the "girl group" Destiny's Child, has recently followed Jennifer López's lead and recorded her first solo album, Dangerously in Love (2003), and she has done innumerable high-fashion spreads establishing a distinctive aesthetic, which several journalists have identified as very similar to J.Lo's. In addition, Beyoncé, who recently dropped her last name to signal

her solo career, had leading roles in the film Austin Powers in Goldmember (2002) and in MTV's hip-hop remake of Bizet's classic opera Carmen (2001).

What I'm calling "fashion fusion" is a relatively new trend in fashion and one that is in the process of being invented. For example, Jennifer López is reported to have her own big-screen version of "Carmen" in the works. How the hip-hop version performed by Beyoncé will influence López's interpretation, especially in the fashion trends it will certainly launch, is still unknown.

Legacy

In the year 2003, it became official, Latinas/os constituted the largest minority group in the United States. This has enormous implications for Latinas/os in fashion. To be sure, major fashion labels will restructure their products to appeal to an ethnic aesthetic as well as to physical bodies that deviate from the current mainstream. They will certainly follow Jennifer López's lead in designing clothes, for example jeans, for women like her that fit "both her narrow waist and voluptuous hips." According to López, "Her line grows out of a desire to help other women like her find clothes that fit their curves." Young Latinas/os will certainly draw inspiration from current Latina/o designers to join the profession and put their stamp on future fashion trends. As Latinas/os participate in mainstream media, including fashion at all levels, there will undoubtedly be a shift in how people everywhere incorporate Latina/o fashion vocabularies into their everyday displays of self.

Bibliography

- Aguilar, Dahlia. "In Search of Style." Hispanic (October 1992): 11-14.
- Davis, Fred. Fashion, Culture, and Identity. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Gibbs, Nancy R. "Earth and Fire: Latin Flair Adds Color and Spice to American Styles." Time 132, no. 2 (11 July 1988): 68-72.
- Lauer, Robert H., and Lauer, Jeanette C. Fashion Power: The Meaning of Fashion in American Society. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1981.
- Linneman, Bob. "Gang attire prohibited, but a big sale item." Santa Cruz Sentinel (September 15 1996): A1.
- López, Steven. "Spicing Up Fashion (Hispanic American fashion designer Alvin Lee Nazario)." Hispanic (July 1999): 100.

- Negrón-Muntaner, Frances. *Boricua Pop. Puerto Ricans and the Latinization of American Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 2004.
- Noriega, Chon. "Fashion Crimes." *Aztlán* 26, no. 1 (2001): 1-13.
- Robledo, Roberto. "High School Cracks Down on Gang Attire." *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, 14 January 1995.
- Specter, Michael. "I Am Fashion. Guess Who Puff Daddy Wants to Be?" *The New Yorker* (9 September 2002): 87-127.
- Tajfel, Henri. *Human Groups and Social Categories: Studies in Social Psychology*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
- Tippit, Sarah. "Jennifer Lopez, Hilfiger Unveil 'J.Lo' Fashions." *Puerto Rico Herald* 15, no. 19 (26 April 2001): 1.
- Valdez, Kinan. "Luis Valdez' Zoot Suit." Program notes, February 20-March 30th, 2003.
- Wagner, Scott André. "Cross-over." *San Francisco Examiner Magazine* (Sunday 10 November 1996): 7-10. 24-28, 30-32.

Sidebar

Box-office heat and chart-topping success can be fleeting. Like so many business-savvy entertainers, Jennifer López is more than a performer—she's a well-marketed brand worth an estimated \$105 million. Don't be fooled by the rocks that she's got; here's the J.Lo-built empire—block by block.

Hollywood

López, who earns more than \$12 million per film, is the highest paid Latina actress in Tinseltown. Her films, including *Selena*, *The Wedding Planner*, and *Maid in Manhattan*, have grossed more than \$500 million worldwide.

The Pop Charts

J.Lo has released four albums since June 1999: *On the 6*, *J.Lo*, *J to tha L-O!: The Remixes*, and *This is Me ... Then*. All are certified platinum or multi-platinum sellers.

Seventh Avenue

J.Lo by Jennifer López includes her adult clothing line, J.Lo Girls, J.Lo Swim, and Glow by J.Lo, her fragrance. Together her J.Lo by Jennifer properties generated \$130 million in retail sales in the first full year of operation (2002).

The Boardroom

Nuyorican Productions, her production and development company, in conjunction with Columbia Pictures, is developing a television pilot for NBC, a remake of *Carmen*, and an adaptation of the Latina chick-lit book *The Dirty Girls Social Club* by Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez.

Lifestyle

López's restaurant, Madre's, opened April 2002 in Pasadena, California.
SOURCE: *VIBE*, July 2003, p. 96

**The text of this article first appeared in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Latinos and Latinas in the United States* and is reprinted here by permission of Oxford University Press, Inc. Copyright 2005 by Oxford University Press, Inc.

Professor Aida Hurtado is a social psychologist with a transdisciplinary perspective that she applies to the study of social identities and their varied impacts on psychological functioning. Her interest in media is to link the social with the subjective in effort to decipher the meaning images, image making, and image interpretation has on the self. Professor Hurtado received her BA in Psychology and Sociology at Pan American University in South Texas and her MA and PhD in social psychology at the University of Michigan. She is currently a faculty member in Psychology at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her most recent book is *Voicing Chicana Feminisms: Young Women Speak Out on Sexuality and Identity* (New York University Press, 2003). Hurtado is the Chair-Elect for the National Association for Chicana & Chicano Studies 2006-07.