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Paisa Aesthetics: Streetwear Fashion and Latinx Aesthetic Labor

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Master of Arts  
in Feminist Studies

by

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June 2022

The thesis of Michelle Alejandra Mireles is approved.

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Eileen Boris, Committee Chair

June 2022

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by

Michelle Alejandra Mireles

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## ABSTRACT

Paisa Aesthetics: Streetwear Fashion and Latinx Aesthetic Labor

by

Michelle Alejandra Mireles

This paper uses visual and material culture analysis of garments, marketing materials, and exhibitor booths as well as textual analysis of online discourse to unpack the cultural sensibilities of Chicanx streetwear fashion designers. I argue that what I term, paisa aesthetics, are mobilized to visually disrupt how race, gender, sexuality, and citizenship are aesthetically understood in mainstream fashion narratives and challenge normative ideas of Mexicanidad. By reclaiming and queering paisa, these designs center Mexican American nostalgia, working-class lives, and the experience of first-generation migrants while simultaneously poking fun at illegality and racialized sexist tropes in high fashion/culture spaces. In addition, I argue that the cultural work that the fashion industry depends on is within a colonial capitalist logic that renders it as unorganized labor and decontextualized aesthetics. I examine the collections of Equihua and Paisa Boys to identify those cultural legacies and specificities that are lost in the process of consumption. Paisa aesthetics provides a vocabulary from which to understand the bicultural sensibility of Chicanx and Mexican communities in the U.S.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
A. Background: What is Streetwear.....	1
B. Methods.....	1
Framework.....	1
A. Notions of Taste and Appropriation.....	1
B. Style and the Body as Visual Disruption.....	1
C. Paisa Aesthetics.....	1
Paisa Textiles: Equihua’s Chicax Rasquache Sensibility.....	1
Centering Paisaness Through Mexican American Nostalgia.....	1
Conclusion.....	1
Bibliography.....	1

## Introduction

The price list for Equihua’s exhibitor booth reads “carniceria” and “cortes al gusto”. A cardstock in bright neon green, yellow, red, and orange displays garments and hair accessories resembles a menu-style price list. With a small calendar in the corner, the price list mimics a typical promotional flyer commonly found in butcher shops in predominantly Latinx neighborhoods throughout Southern California. The brand’s price list is meant to show passersby cortes<sup>1</sup>— vaquero shirts, funchies (hair accessories), donas earrings, and blanket coats. Escalating the metaphor, the entire exhibitor booth is transformed into the neighborhood carniceria with vinyl signage, a glass display case, and a deli-style ticket dispenser. A few booths away, a bright neon sign reads “Paisa Boys”. A to-go order window completes the makeshift taco shop. I’m in the middle of the Long Beach Convention Center at Complexcon 2019, streetwear fashion’s largest annual convention. Suddenly, these exhibitor booths consume me, transport me. A sense of what I can only describe as Mexican American nostalgia sets in.

This paper examines the design practices of Chicanx and Latinx streetwear designers to identify how working-class brown aesthetics are mobilized in culturally specific ways and then decontextualized through the process of consumption. Equihua and Paisa Boys utilize what I term, paisa aesthetics, to visually disrupt how race, gender, sexuality, and citizenship are aesthetically understood in mainstream fashion narratives. The figure of the paisa both reifies and complicates the “hard working immigrant” trope and narratives of an ideal industrious citizen. By reclaiming and queering paisa, Equihua’s and Paisa Boys’ designs center a Mexican American nostalgia tied to working-class lifestyles and the experience of first-generation

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<sup>1</sup> Spanish for cuts of meat. In this flyer, the Equihua design team utilizes this metaphor to stand in for their different garments and accessories for sale. The price list also reads, “cortes al gusto” which translated reads as “cuts to your liking” but engaging with the metaphor of meat as fashion garments we can take it to mean, “fashion to your liking”.



migrants while simultaneously poking fun at illegality, racialized sexist tropes, and the trope of hard-working immigrants.

#### *A. Background: What is Streetwear?*

This paper requires a brief history on the contested definition of streetwear to demonstrate the ways in which hegemon functions in fashion history and to that end a delineation of how cultural theft is possible in this space. Many fashion experts credit the origins of streetwear to Vision and Stüssy, brands said to first coin the term and monetize the specific stylistic choices that have now defined the genre.<sup>2</sup> In this interpretation of streetwear, however, nowhere is the street mentioned except in a passing nod to the contributions of hip-hop and skateboard culture. In fact, most discourse about streetwear often credit Stüssy as the person/brand who took inspiration from Los Angeles' DIY aesthetic of punk, hip-hop, skateboarding, surf, and other subcultures to later coalesce into the genre we know today as streetwear. Popular sportswear and athletic wear brands like Nike soon caught on and attached themselves to hip-hop culture and professional sports, using popular figures as spokespeople to promote their designs. However, this discourse functions as a “discovery” narrative and in tandem with extractive colonial logic that decontextualizes in order to normalize an institutionalized memory of how this popular style was created. In this ahistorical narrative, the fashion industry erases the cultural actors that labored to imagine, perform, and otherwise adorn

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<sup>2</sup>Bobby Hundreds. “Bobby Hundreds’ 50 Greatest Streetwear Brands of All Time.” *Complex Style* (blog), *Complex* June 21, 2011. <https://www.complex.com/style/the-greatest-streetwear-brands/>.; Steven Vogel. *Streetwear: The Insider’s Guide*. London: Thames and Hudson, 2007.

their bodies in a way that represents specific subcultural beliefs, values, politics, and lived experience.

Since its inception, streetwear has always been counter cultural adornment and embodiment for Black, brown, working-class youth. Like most normative histories of cultural and aesthetic practices, the fashion industry's ahistorical and apolitical account of streetwear decontextualizes the genre's most ubiquitous styles—graphic t-shirts, hoodies, sneakers, baseball caps, and most, if not all, popular “urban” styles. This decontextualizing of marginalized communities' aesthetics is possible through cultural appropriation bolstered by racial regimes and extractive colonial logics. Major fashion houses, corporate CEOs and tastemakers extract Black and brown working-class fashions to sell for profit and make palatable to white middle-class consumers and fast fashion markets.<sup>3</sup>

In the U.S. streetwear operates as a space where working-class people of color engage in a sartorial politics to negotiate/navigate their relationship to nation, race, gender, sexuality. Streetwear is often framed as a masculine space of adornment—modern day dandyism with an edge—where extravagant displays of colors, textures, and silhouettes are not uncommon for men. However, it is important to reframe streetwear as queer space of possibility even though it appears as a hypermasculine and heteronormative space. I use queer in the way that Cathy Cohen describes queer as a queerness to any normalizing tendency to force any gender or sexuality into a static identity independent of its relation to power.<sup>4</sup> I see queer potential in streetwear's push

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<sup>3</sup> The term fast fashion is synonymous with major retailers like H&M, Forever21, or Target which offer their customers trendy and affordable pieces that cycle out constantly throughout the year. A traditional fashion cycle includes only 4 seasons: Autumn/Winter, Spring/Summer, Pre-Fall, and Resort. For some fast fashion companies producing a weekly trend is not uncommon, meaning up to 52 seasons a year. The goal of fast fashion is to produce constantly to sell constantly.

<sup>4</sup>Cathy J. Cohen. “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, no. 3 (1997): 437–65.

back on what is considered fashionable, respectable, and gender appropriate. For example, a more hip-hop style of dress includes mixing baggy clothes traditionally read as masculine with glamorous jewelry traditionally read as feminine. Or a punk style of dress that might emphasize black industrial clothing and painted nails with heavy makeup for all genders. Streetwear pushes boundaries by blurring “gender appropriate” accessories and hybridizing racialized aesthetics onto t-shirts with anti-state sentiments, marking a queer performance of citizenship through politicized dress. Through streetwear working-class urban youth of color—whether skateboarders, surfers, hip-hop heads, or punks—engage in non-normative performances of nationality.

Unlike fashion industry narratives, communities engaged in streetwear cultural production do not contest the contributions of the streets, Black and brown youth, and working-class beginnings. In fact, it is a point of contention that manifests in discourses of “OGs” versus “posers”.<sup>5</sup> This tension is important because it signals a tendency to gatekeep streetwear from mass adoption. Yet, as we see today, that impulse has done little to prevent the appropriation of streetwear aesthetics by major fashion companies. This tension also suggests that references to “the culture” continue to be a coded undercurrent that carries a distaste for newcomers. To some degree this manifests as a distaste for women participating in the streetwear space. Women are often referred to as posers or not knowledgeable enough about specific cultural trivia. Although the presence of women is also absent from origin narratives, women have always existed and produced within the space. Similarly, queer, trans, and nonbinary cultural producers have always contributed to streetwear aesthetics predominantly in the club kid scene of the 1980-

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<sup>5</sup> “OG” refers to original, as in an original member of said community. The term “poser” refers to someone who is a newcomer or is not as deeply ingrained in the culture by unspoken standards from the majority group.

90s. These contested histories are necessary to lay out in order to engage with streetwear as a space of many converging marginalized stories and embodiments, all comingling and at times fighting for space. And, although there are many fashion objects that fuse the semi-permeable parameters of streetwear—hoodies, t-shirts, bomber jackets, track pants, baseball caps, and sneakers—the street as aesthetic is ultimately what creates *the look*.

Today, this once marginalized and, at times, criminalized way of dressing has trickled up from the streets to the high-fashion runways creating a frenzy of fashion brands eager to cash in. Streetwear is so popular today that a complex resell market exists in which items sell for hundreds and sometimes thousands of dollars through online platforms. The streetwear resell market has flourished into its own industry and underground economy, opening a space for streetwear “hypebeasts”<sup>6</sup> and “influencers” with major YouTube and social media presence. Followers of the most popular brands go out of their way to be the first to purchase an item only to resell it for double to triple the price online. Take for example a brand like Supreme, which began as a humble skateboarding brand from Brooklyn in the 1980s. Today, Supreme’s popularity is so far reaching that the brand has brokered collaborations with luxury brands such as Louis Vuitton and Comme des Garçons. Even city government agencies like the New York City Metropolitan Transportation Authority collaborated with the brand to create a limited-edition metro card available only at specific train stops. Supreme serves as prime example of the cultural reach garnered by streetwear in recent years.

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<sup>6</sup> Hypebeast is a common term used to describe an aficionado of streetwear that collects the trendiest and latest collections of major brands. Hypebae is the female equivalent. Streetwear exists within gendered and fluid states of what is accessible to men versus women. The term is sometimes used in a derogatory manner to suggest someone who is not deeply ingrained in “the culture” and only following trends.

It is in this context, that I unpack the aesthetics mobilized by Equihua’s and Paisa Boys’ exhibitor booths, fashion collections, and social media content. Both Equihua and Paisa Boys mark a moment in which marginalized designers are reclaiming their space in streetwear post-aesthetic gentrification by major fashion brands. These designers’ collections center the nostalgic and humble origins of the streets, the people who traverse them, and the communities that rise out of them. In this paper I examine the aesthetic choices and design practices of Equihua and Paisa Boys to name the cultural legacies and specificities that are lost in the process of consumption. In doing so, I interrogate streetwear as a “legitimate fashion category”, upheld by invisible cultural work and aesthetic legacies to mark where this categorization separates culture from industry. Moreover, I argue the cultural work that the fashion industry depends on is within a colonial capitalist logic that renders it as unorganized labor. This, of course, is a disservice to the actual reproductive labor required to inherit, sustain, and reproduce culture.

This thesis argues that the adoption of streetwear as a legitimate fashion category veils the unwaged and unrecognized cultural labor of working-class communities and people of color. I ask: How do we account for the informal work of producing “the culture” of streetwear? How do the exhibitor booths and fashion collections of these designers represent the intimate and immaterial work of culture? Moreover, Equihua’s and Paisa Boys’ designs speak to a moment in which Latinx people are a leading demographic in the U.S., reaching new levels of political and social significance.<sup>7</sup> As these designers “brown” the fashion industry, from the streets to the runways, how does this shift conventions of taste and, in turn, implicate notions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and citizenship in the U.S.? Also, what can we make of the nostalgic elements

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<sup>7</sup> “U.S. Hispanic Population Continued Its Geographic Spread in the 2010s | Pew Research Center.” Accessed May 16, 2022. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/02/03/u-s-hispanic-population-continued-its-geographic-spread-in-the-2010s/>. The Hispanic population in the U.S. has increased by 50% or more from the years of 2011 to 2020 and it is leading the population growth in major counties across the nation.

of working-class stories within these designs? What work does the figure of the paisa do to complicate the imagined “hard working immigrant” and the entangled narratives of the industrious citizen?

### *B. Methods*

This thesis deploys a qualitative approach that involves visual and material culture analysis of garments, marketing materials, and exhibitor booths present at Complexcon 2019 staged by Equihua and Paisa Boys. In addition, I engage in textual analysis of online discourse about these objects and the figure of the paisa. I made photographs of the convention and the exhibitor booths and collected marketing materials and other objects as visual data and as part of the booth experience. This includes a faux calendar-style price list of the “New Classics” collection and a paper ticket taken from a classic deli ticket dispenser. There were garments at the convention, but much like a real-life butcher shop, the booth was buzzing with a crowd trying to glimpse the collection behind the glass display. I found it best to reference the designs through Equihua’s and Paisa Boys’ website and social media accounts, which gave me ample time to conduct a visual analysis of the garments from multiple angles and for extended periods of time.

Complexcon is meant to sell an experience of streetwear culture. Thus, exhibitors invest a considerable amount of creativity in making booths as interactive and innovative as possible. In considering “the experience” as a site of investigation, I engage in self-reflection as an attendee of Complexcon, as a Latinx woman that engages with streetwear aesthetics, and as a feminist researcher. Therefore, I interject “the experience” at moments to provide context. I engaged in casual ethnography, unplanned interactions as well as participatory observations, including a conversation with Brenda Equihua and staff at the Paisa Boys booth visit. I disclosed to the designer and staff that I was attending Complexcon 2019 for an academic research project about

streetwear and Latinx aesthetics. Equihua responded by eagerly taking 10 – 15 minutes to describe her design concept and process. This short conversation was unexpected but ultimately welcomed and insightful for the purposes of this paper. The conversation about her design process for the “New Classics” collection helped connect some of the aesthetic and conceptual choices made for the exhibitor booth. It illuminated the overall significance of her design approach and aesthetic practices during the development stage. For this paper, I use parts, but not all, of that conversation to highlight how elements of Latinx aesthetic practices like *rasquachismo* are present within the collection. Similarly, the team at the Paisa Boys booth approached me as a potential customer and shared some of the conceptual details behind the booth and collection. I disclosed my position as a researcher and that I was making observational notes and pictures of the convention. Growing up as a participant in street subcultures, I was apprehensive of how my disclosure would be received. Streetwear can be a closed off space to perceived outsiders. I dressed the part, not to deceive but because it is within my own style repertoire to do so, with a causal and comfortable outfit—baggy ripped jeans, classic skate sneakers, and a tank top. Generally, my presence as a researcher was received with curiosity and excitement about the possibility of a “PhD in streetwear”, as one attendee put it.

Additionally, this study utilizes visual and discourse analysis to unpack social media posts concerning Complexcon 2019, Equihua’s “New Classics” collection, and Paisa Boys’ designs. This digital content includes blog articles and social media posts collected through specific google searches including: “Equihua”; “Mexican designer uses blankets as coats”; “LA designer blanket coats”; “San Marcos blanket coats”; “Complexcon 2019”; “Paisa Boys”; “LA streetwear”; “Latinx streetwear”; “history of streetwear”; “what is streetwear?”, and similar search terms or phrases. The first set of search terms derived from Equihua’s work and social

media posts that had come across my personal feed. I was aware of the collection before deciding to write this paper and had previously collected Instagram posts and blog posts related to it. The search terms related to streetwear were meant to collect a general sense of how streetwear is defined online. There is a long-standing debate on what is and is not streetwear that sometimes results in gatekeeping. Now with the rise of “high fashion” streetwear and celebrity designers, it felt necessary to see how the online community was engaging in this discourse and how the category expanded or contracted. In the fashion industry, genres like “streetwear” and “athleisure” are now a more commonly recognized market segment. However, the industry’s decontextualization and detachment from aesthetic origins of streetwear (of which “athleisure” is often combined with) obscure the long-standing aesthetic traditions of those contributing to the culture before “high fashion streetwear” walked the runways of Louis Vuitton, Gucci, Prada, and other well-known luxury brands. The online discourse surrounding Equihua’s “New Classics” collection and the Paisa Boys, along with discursive attempts to define streetwear, serve to contextualize this study’s visual analysis, as well as the significance of this collection to a moment in streetwear fashion discourse. Thus, the online discourse contextualizes the designers’ collections in a way that speaks to the larger discourse of Latinx aesthetic practices, creative expression, and cultural production in/outside of major fashion circles.

## **Framework**

As the field of fashion studies coalesces into a discipline there is a new energy around the treatment of race, gender, sexuality, class, and colonialism connected to acts of self-adornment, designers of color (queer or otherwise on the margins), and to global fashion supply chains and



their effects on the Global South.<sup>8</sup> Take for example, Kimberly M. Jenkins' *Fashion and Race Database* ([fashionandrace.org](http://fashionandrace.org)) established in 2017, which focuses on the need to “decentralize the study of fashion” and engage fashion scholars to “illuminate under-examined histories and address racism throughout the fashion system.”<sup>9</sup> Projects such as Jenkin’s demonstrates the new, interdisciplinary approaches that the field of fashion studies and theory is eager to engage with. This call for a more inclusive fashion studies grew along with a rising interest in cultural studies during the late 1990s and early 2000s. In *Fashion Cultures: Theories, Explorations, and Analysis*, Bruzzi argues that there is a need for a more complex study of fashion, primarily a feminist lens that does not simplify or vilify fashion, but instead approaches it as a topic worthy of nuanced feminist critique, new perspectives on consumption that go beyond the individual consumer, and an understanding of fashion that includes conversations about place-making and the joy/pleasure in consumption. Gibson’s definition of fashion as encompassing both “high fashion” and as “everyday fashion (clothing behaviors in general)” and the “desire to map the ‘complex, disjointed or oppositional’ relationship between the two” insists on a new theory of fashion, a “transdisciplinary” style which is multivocal and multimodal.<sup>10</sup> Gibson adds that previous feminist scholarship has read fashion as trivial capitalist consumption and thus problematic. Sharing Gibson’s desire to map this “complex, disjointed, and oppositional” relationship, I view fashion as everyday acts of adornment, beyond just consumption and industry, although nevertheless intricately tied to both. The process of adorning oneself happens in public and private spaces rich with potential to theorize with and through the lives of women

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<sup>8</sup> Stella Bruzzi and Pamela Church Gibson, eds. “Introduction.” In *Fashion Cultures: Theories, Explorations, and Analysis*, 1–4. London; New York: Routledge, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> “The Fashion and Race Database.” Accessed May 3, 2022. <https://fashionandrace.org/>.

<sup>10</sup> Pamela Church Gibson. “Redressing the Balance: Patriarchy, Postmodernism and Feminism.” In *Fashion Cultures: Theories, Explorations, and Analysis*, edited by Stella Bruzzi, 349–62. London; New York: Routledge, 2000:360.

and other marginalized people as they engage with fashion, their “storehouse of identity-kits, of surface parts, which, assembled, determine the ‘interior essences’ which is subsequently taken to determine the assemblage itself.”<sup>11</sup> Gibson asks us to consider what a new material politics of fashion might do and to consider not “raising questions of and for fashion” but instead “use fashion itself to raise questions” about more general social and political forces.<sup>12</sup>

The democratization of fashion in the twentieth century challenged power relations based on gender, race, and class. As fashion historian Bonnie English explains, the democratization of fashion through mass production amid a growing middle-class brought the downfall of elitist fashion codes.<sup>13</sup> English attributes this the broader shift in fashion and art in which tastemakers became obsessed with popular culture. The buying power of a younger middle-class created a new kind of fashion which started to imitate popular street styles and subcultures through a “form of stylistic pastiche which has dominated fashion for more than fifty years”<sup>14</sup> and led to closing the gap between fashion as a commercial and a cultural product. This moment in fashion history requires scholars to “frame fashion within broader context, to engage with multicultural and multidisciplinary issues, and to forecast future developments.”<sup>15</sup> In this light, popular culture and street styles can be read as a “communicative political tool” and a “beacon for sociopolitical statements in dress.”<sup>16</sup> Important to this project, studying fashion in this broader context that “engage[s] multicultural and multidisciplinary issues” means I must attend to the appropriation

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<sup>11</sup> Gibson, “Redressing the Balance”, 356.

<sup>12</sup>Gibson, 356.

<sup>13</sup> Bonnie English. *A Cultural History of Fashion in the 20th and 21st Centuries: From Catwalk to Sidewalk*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Berg, 2013.

<sup>14</sup> English, *A Cultural History*, 2.

<sup>15</sup> English, 3.

<sup>16</sup>English, 3.

of “visual tropes of non-Western ethnic cultures”, the “sartorial pastiche” of street-style from the early twentieth century onward.<sup>17</sup>

Today, fashion is even more relevant to understanding subject formation as it materially represents class, gender, race, and nation. As English suggests that in the twentieth century “stylistic changes in both fashion and art multiplied at an ever-increasing pace” leading to serious consideration of “how fashion has been, and continues to be, embedded in the cultural fabric of society.”<sup>18</sup> Or in Marxist terms, the mere act of producing to consume and consuming to produce innately and inadvertently produces subjecthood. Nowhere is this more evident than in the consumption and production of fashion objects. The impact of fashion objects carries such creative power for subject making that shopping malls and department stores, much like museums, have become cultural institutions which display consumer culture’s latest works in store windows. Today this is seen in ecommerce, social media, and online communities with algorithms that fine tune user’s feeds to promote consumption. In contradiction to how we understand other artistic forms, fashion blurs and repositions the line between industry and culture. In doing so, fashion is both functional and wearable art, but also a reflection of our self-constructed subjectivity and its relation to structural power.

#### *A. Notions of Taste and Appropriation*

The notion of taste has played a prominent role in an ongoing battle between the dominant class and the field of cultural production<sup>19</sup>, and therefore a new reading of taste is necessary to unpack what constitutes “high fashion” or “street”. Bell and Bourdieu argue that

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<sup>17</sup> English, 3.

<sup>18</sup> English, 3.

<sup>19</sup> English, 5.

the upper class regards taste as the purest sign of their “true nobility and cannot conceive of referring taste to anything other than itself” and that “the most important determinant in the history of dress is the condition of class struggle.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, a society with shifting class structures will evolve its tastes to reflect categorical shifts. The opportunity for lower class consumers to obtain consumer goods associated or closely imitating upper classness causes the latter to redefine taste to uphold the original distance between classes.<sup>21</sup> The rise of popular culture and street styles changed this relationship, however.

Foregrounding how the relationship of taste and street styles dance around each other provides a clearer picture of how the category of fashion itself becomes entangled in capitalist and colonialist logics. Now, high fashion consumers can access and appropriate street aesthetics/designs/concepts through their favorite luxury brands which rework street aesthetics in finer fabrics and finishings. Designer quality elements create the distance necessary for high fashion consumers to participate in what was once read as lower-class, “urban”, and in its most derogatory form “ghetto”. Departing from Bell and Bourdieu’s trickle-down theories, this, in fact, is a reminder that most high fashion today has imitated one or many street styles and in the current fashion moment most styles trickle-up, are appropriated and reworked, then trickle back down as decontextualized “inspired by” collections. The appropriation and manufacture of street fashions from high-end designers obscures the messiness of appropriation---so much so that a high-end designer can appear to bring something fresh to the catwalk, which the upper and middle classes will swoon over, only to find a similar aesthetic already present in working-class and marginalized communities’ cultural productions of art, music, and dress. Taste and trickle-

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<sup>20</sup> English, 5.

<sup>21</sup> English, 5.

up appropriation mark an important point from which to trace how race, gender, class, and colonialism need to be examined in the study of style trends. Fashion, thus, needs to be capacious enough to include the sartorial choices of communities creating fashions outside of a formalized market, far away from Paris or Milan, and even further from dominant notions of taste. How can we examine dominant notions of taste without a clear understanding of colonial systems of labor and value? How can we make sense of the ongoing theft, or cultural appropriation, without an analysis of colonial logics of extraction? How do we attend to these problems in fashion historiography?

Subcultural aesthetics, of which includes street styles reveal how communities create meaning through adornment and identify with or remain outside of a social collective. In studying British punks, Polhemus and Procter found that “meaning inherent in their clothing became paramount to their social and political protest, and when Western designers embraced this look, its social value or currency was diminished.”<sup>22</sup> This phenomenon of punk street styles simultaneously rebelled against dominant notions of taste but with time conquered the fashion world on a global scale. Fashion scholars have read this “deviance in dress” as something that should “not be defined in opposition to fashion, but as ‘a periodically fashionable attitude’ in the history of dress.”<sup>23</sup> My project is interested in what happens when the “anti-fashion”, the “street style”, the “periodically fashionable attitude” becomes widely acceptable. As Hollander argues, when this deviation becomes accepted, “the notion of the avant garde disappears.”<sup>24</sup> Or, as Hebdige argues, design today uses objects, and I would add other aesthetic choices, that are disconnected from their origins and recycled in a way that “that history is turned into a personal

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<sup>22</sup> English, 111.

<sup>23</sup> English, 111.

<sup>24</sup> English, 111.

memory” and appears to “exist everywhere but come from nowhere.”<sup>25</sup> The fashion industry extracts sartorial practices from diasporic communities. In doing so, the fashion industry erases the immaterial creative labor of producing culture. Another useful way of thinking about subcultural styles is to view them as what Reina Lewis calls “diasporic fashion systems”—a web of “overlapping local, regional, national, transnational...and diasporic fashion system whose impact on [diasporic] design and dressing is always context specific and changeable.”<sup>26</sup> The fashion industry leverages prestige and privilege as it (re)presents culturally significant styles as trends: i.e., the consumption of streetwear style by white middle-class consumers.

The fashion industry decontextualizes popular fashion objects to mask extractive cultural appropriation. These objects are then sold and repackaged as a type of rebellious cool that only exist in opposition to white heteronormative citizenship models. Fashion design normalizes copying silhouettes and taking “inspiration” from working-class of color communities and subcultures. This common practice speaks to the colonial extractive logics of the fashion industry mirrored throughout the supply chain and rationalized through racial regimes.<sup>27</sup> In this way, the fashion industry can excuse major brands for the cultural appropriation of aesthetics while simultaneously profiting from racialized and classed tropes like “urban cool” (Black, Indigenous, or brown) and “edgy/rebellious punks” (working-class). This theft ignores how Black, Indigenous, brown, queer, working-class people labor to reimagine their lives and experiences through sartorial practices. Streetwear is a set of stylistic preferences born out of Black, Indigenous, brown, queer working-class youth subcultures. The aesthetic choices of these youth

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<sup>25</sup> English, 122.

<sup>26</sup> Reina Lewis. *Muslim Fashion: Contemporary Style Cultures*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015: 6-7.

<sup>27</sup> Cedric J. Robinson. *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning: Blacks and the Regimes of Race in American Theater and Film before World War II*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007: xii-xv.

subcultures can be read as what Saidiya Hartman calls the wayward<sup>28</sup>, or what Macarena Gomez-Barris terms the countervisual.<sup>29</sup> These adornment strategies “reimagine and articulate” new forms of belonging for Black, Indigenous, and brown working-class youth as they navigate their relationship to U. S. empire.

Attention to colonial histories and extractive logics allows me to recontextualize the sartorial practices of Black, Indigenous, brown, queer, and working-class subcultures and pull to pieces “Eurocentric visual theories [that] ignore the weight of colonial seeing.”<sup>30</sup> To understand how subcultures and ethnic fashion styles challenge or uphold cultural hegemon, we need to examine how colonialism, labor, and the notion of productivity, determine the ideal citizen. Hong historicizes the inclusion racialized populations into the formal labor market as a process inherently tied to the development of modern Western subjecthood. In the U.S., capitalism’s contradictions are managed by defining citizenry around heteropatriarchy and whiteness “subtended by the production of racialized and nonnormatively gendered and sexualized workers who provided the labor force.”<sup>31</sup> For most of its history, the U.S. has barred racialized groups legally or socially from the category of citizen, which has worked in tandem with economic exclusion to render their labor as less valuable and surplus. The construction of this nonnormative noncitizen allows the devaluation of not only their labor but culture as well, making both extractable and disposable. From this, I see the devaluing of Latinx aesthetic work as one more process of capitalist and colonial management of difference. Or in other words, this

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<sup>28</sup> Saidiya V. Hartman. *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. First edition. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019.

<sup>29</sup> Macarena Gómez-Barris. *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives*. Dissident Acts. Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2017: 6.

<sup>30</sup> Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone*, 6.

<sup>31</sup> Grace Kyungwon Hong. “Existentially Surplus.” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 18, no. 1 (January 1, 2012): 87.

logic extends to the production of culture as much as the production of goods and services making it so Latinx and other racialized people's culture is as extractable and disposable as the value of their labor under capitalism. However, following Lowe, Ferguson, and Hong the cultural work of women of color, and I argue that of all marginalized groups, represents a site where the "contradictions of capital return" and where the "incoherence of the ostensibly universally available propertied subjecthood" break down. Thus, women of color's and other marginalized groups' cultural production allow for new forms of imagining citizenship and can be read as world making strategies.

Drawing from Gaye Theresa Johnson, I conceptualize streetwear as "strategies enacted by working-class youth to imagine and articulate a new mode of social citizenship."<sup>32</sup> By fashioning the self, working-class youth, and people of color labor to create and mobilize sartorial practices and their embodied experience to negotiate citizenship. I consider these acts of adornment as Hartmanesque strategies that reframe "the radical imagination" of people of color.

<sup>33</sup> I argue that these strategies and practices are labor outside of the category of formal waged work but nonetheless necessary work for survival. Similarly, I understand Gomez-Barris' "decolonial queer femme episteme" as a method that "perceives otherwise by attending to the resonances of lived embodiment as world-shaping activities."<sup>34</sup> In other words, attending to quotidian aesthetic practices of marginalized people, demonstrates the imagination at work and how new forms of social citizenship are formed through wayward strategies or "countervisual resistances."<sup>35</sup> The fashion industry's "Eurocentric visual theories ignore the weight of colonial

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<sup>32</sup> Gaye Theresa Johnson. *Spaces of Conflict, Sounds of Solidarity: Music, Race, and Spatial Entitlement in Los Angeles*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013: 12-13.

<sup>33</sup> Hartman. *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*.

<sup>34</sup> Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone*, 9.

<sup>35</sup> Gómez-Barris, 6.; Hartman.



seeing, neglecting its earlier forms of power”, allowing it to form its own normative and whitewashed histories of aesthetic practices.<sup>36</sup> I view these normative histories as part of the long arc of colonial theft in which decontextualized aesthetic practices become “personal memory” as Polhemus suggests.<sup>37</sup>

In the United States, race and gender regimes create a dichotomy of good and bad citizen—the former associated with white heteronormativity and the latter with non-white and nonheteronormative subjects. Non-normative aesthetic expressions, often marked by race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class fall outside the bounds of the ideal citizen and crash up against hegemonic white middle-classness and high-brow culture—including “high-fashion”. Scholars have theorized historical moments of primitive accumulation concluding that in those moments of accumulation, capital has not only taken land and labor, but it also accumulates the differences and contradictions it must create in order to dispossess, violate, steal, or otherwise justify violence.<sup>38</sup> Federici and Robinson further demonstrate that this process of primitive accumulation is not a static moment in history but an ongoing historical process of dispossession.<sup>39</sup> To dispossess is to remove, to oust, to put out of possession. The nature of the fashion industry works to continuously consume the earth’s resources while profiting from the labor of sweatshop workers, enslaved prison labor, and “surplus” people. The fashion industry functions as a microcosm of colonialism in its extractive logics that manage the flow of capital from the surplus bodies and geographies into the fashion capitols of the global north. Through this the binary of good (possessive individual) and bad (surplus and disposable) citizen are

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<sup>36</sup> Gomez Barris, *The Extractive Zone*, 6.

<sup>37</sup> Ted Polhemus. *Streetstyle: From Sidewalk to Catwalk*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1994.

<sup>38</sup> Silvia Beatriz Federici. *Caliban and the Witch*. 2., rev. Ed. New York, NY: Autonomedia, 2014.; Hong, “Existentially Surplus”.; Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning*.

<sup>39</sup> Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*.

reified in the production of garments, the consumption of those garments, and the disposability of “ethnic” trends. The notion of surplus is what becomes sticky<sup>40</sup> and marks certain styles as available for theft. Beyond appropriation, outside of their historical context these styles also become disposable. Immaterial labor becomes material in embodied forms.

LaBerge’s concept of “decommodified labor” and Hong’s notion of “existentially surplus” clarify the colonial process that devalues sartorial and aesthetic labor. LaBerge explains Marx centering the commodity object problematically locates the value onto the object instead of onto the labor power that produces the object.<sup>41</sup> The realm of the aesthetic emerged as a counterbalance and to circumvent to a seemingly totalizing view that Marx noted as the “material relations between persons and social relations between things.”<sup>42</sup> Because style is closely tied to industry, the cultural and aesthetic contributions of stylistic preferences often escape the realm of “real” art and culture and are often dismissed as trends or fads. This fails to consider the accessibility of self-adornment to marginalized communities and the larger cultural implications of their aesthetic practices. This cultural work is illegible to formal cultural institutions, labor markets, and the fashion industry because of a legacy of colonialism that renders their labor as surplus unless productive and in the service of capital. In other words, the work of fashioning oneself is read as unproductive, trivial activity. In my discussion, I explore the unproductiveness in relation to Latinx streetwear designers’ use of hyper-productive aesthetics and return to this idea of good and bad citizen. For Chicanx and Latinx communities, personal style has always

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<sup>40</sup> Sara Ahmed. “Affective Economies.” *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 117–39.

<sup>41</sup> Leigh Claire La Berge. *Wages against Artwork: Decommodified Labor and the Claims of Socially Engaged Art*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019.

<sup>42</sup>La Berge, *Wages Against Artwork Artwork*, 10.; Karl Marx. “Economic Manuscripts: Capital Vol. I - Chapter One.” Accessed May 4, 2022. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm>.

served as a form of sartorial politics that rebel, question, mask, or mark their relationship to the ideal United States citizen.

### *B. Style and the Body as Visual Disruption*

For Chicanx and Latinx people, self-fashioning and modes of dress have been historically used as a tool to challenge the notion of U.S. citizen and disrupt normative understandings of race, gender, and sexuality. I view streetwear as part of the genealogy of Chicanx and Latinx cultural practices that incorporates the aesthetics of graffiti and muralism, rasquachismo, and affective strategies of nostalgia and humor. I focus on DIY and rasquachismo design methods used in Equihua's collection, exhibitor booth, and social media content. I also examine the nostalgic and humorous elements of Paisa Boys' t-shirts collection and social media. On the one hand Equihua, uses rasquache practices and finds alternative use of common household items as textile and raw material. Through re-working of plastic table covers and fleece blankets, these commonplace materials are given a new life outside of the home. As Chicanx scholars argue, rasquachismo repurposes objects and materials to "make the most from the least" and is both "defiant and inventive."<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, Paisa Boys' imagery evokes a type of Mexican American nostalgia that laughs in the face of assimilationist politics while simultaneously complicates the image of the paisa as a hyper productive. Both designers use fashion as a means to communicate an alternative to assimilationist impulses that whitewash Chicanx and Latinx bodies through sartorial means. Their designs challenge the visibility of citizenship by presenting alternative modes of dress outside of heteronormative white middle-class sartorial rules and notions of taste. Further, these designers challenge what is often considered appropriate

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<sup>43</sup> Amali Mesa-Bains. "Domesticana: The Sensibility off Chicana Rasquachismo." In *Chicano and Chicana Art: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Jennifer A. Gonzalez, C. Ondine Chavoya, and Chon Noriega. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019: 92.

expressions of Latinidad and instead opt for incorporating that which is ridiculed as too working-class, too excessive, and too brown.

Studies of Black and Latina girls' self-fashioning and artistic practices demonstrates that Blackness and Latinidad become legible "through varied processes of inscription, assumption, and disavowal."<sup>44</sup> White heteronormativity is the rubric that Blackness and Latinidad are measured against, marking anything outside of that rubric as excess and unproductive—too Black or too brown, too sexual or too raunchy, too working class or too cheap. These processes are what interest me in the glorification, adaptation, and representation of paisaness in Equihua's and Paisa Boys' work. With what intentions do these designers adopt paisaness? How is paisaness palatable and even widely accepted as cool through these designers' work, yet still seen as excessive in the context of working-class people, the real paisas? Now that streetwear is widely accepted as fashionable, how does fashion function as an arbiter of taste?

I follow Ramirez', Ford's, and Rosa-Salas' use of the term style and style politics which argue that style is a site where relations of power are contested—the visual signaling of aligned or misaligned political values, the marking of respectable citizens, and the unnecessary pathologizing of consumption patterns.<sup>45</sup> Through consumption fashion objects are transformed and used to "alter or subvert their intended use-values."<sup>46</sup> As Ramirez suggest in her study of pachuca style politics, Mexican American women created a "distinct generational and ethnic identity, defied middle-class ethics, aesthetics, and expectations, and affirmed the qualities of

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<sup>44</sup> Jillian Hernandez. *Aesthetics of Excess: The Art and Politics of Black and Latina Embodiment*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020.

<sup>45</sup> Marcel Rosa-Salas and Isabel Flower. "'Worth More than Just Its Weight in Gold': Nameplate Jewelry and the Practice of Oppositional Respectability." *Journal of Marketing Management* 36, no. 13–14 (September 1, 2020): 1312-14.

<sup>46</sup> Catherine S. Ramirez. "Crimes of Fashion: The Pachuca and Chicana Style Politics." *Meridians* 2, no. 2(2002): 3.

Chicana differences.”<sup>47</sup> The pachuco/a, as scholars have theorized, is recognized as the harbinger of the Chicano/a movement and a significant moment in the “politicization of Mexican Americans and the creation of an oppositional, rather than assimilationist, Chicano cultural identity.”<sup>48</sup> From pachuco/a style scholars have traced the evolving aesthetics to cholo/a and streetwear styles of the late twentieth and early twenty first century. I view Equihua’s and Paisa Boy’s designs as a continuation of this aesthetic genealogy in contemporary fashion.

Chicanx feminist studies theorize and approach fashion as a visual vocabulary and part of a cultural repertoire from which self-identification and social group identification style politics arise.<sup>49</sup> In *meXicana Fashions*, Cantu and Hurtado argue that self-adornment signals group memberships as it relates to class, gender, sexuality, and other social identities or groupings.<sup>50</sup> Cantu and Hurtado further argue that reclaiming the “right to self-adornment to highlight previously derogated social identities, such as being Mexican or lesbian, is a scheme to reconstitute the self on positive terms rather than the stigma assigned by society” and create opportunities to “talk back to hegemonic aesthetic standards.”<sup>51</sup> The evolving fashion aesthetics of Chicanx designers, and community members, speaks to what Chicana lesbian feminist Gloria Anzaldúa theorizes as a borderlands sensibility.<sup>52</sup> In a study of trans Latina aesthetics, Alvarez argues that a hint of queer possibility is always present in the aesthetic.<sup>53</sup> I view the visual vocabulary of Chicanx fashions as not only space for self-identification or group identification, but also as

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<sup>47</sup> Ramirez, “Crimes of Fashion”, 3.

<sup>48</sup> Ramirez, 1.

<sup>49</sup> Rosa-Salas and Flower. “Worth More than Just Its Weight in Gold”.

<sup>50</sup> Aida Hurtado and Norma E. Cantú, eds. *meXicana Fashions: Politics, Self-Adornment, and Identity Construction*. First edition. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2020: 3.

<sup>51</sup> Hurtado and Cantú, *meXicana Fashions*, 5.

<sup>52</sup> Hurtado and Cantú, 11.

<sup>53</sup> Eddy Francisco Álvarez. “Finding Sequins in the Rubble: Stitching Together an Archive of Trans Latina Los Angeles.” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 3–4 (2016): 618–27.

space where a borderlands sensibility and queer aesthetic possibility combine to reimagine social citizenship.

### *C. Paisa Aesthetics*

As the first generation born in the U.S. daughter of Mexican immigrants, I have an intimate knowledge of the word paisa.<sup>54</sup> This word was thrown around throughout my upbringing in the home, in school, in my community. I define paisa as it is used in the Mexican American and Chicana context, which differs from how other communities of Latin American heritage utilize the term. The word originates from paisano which directly translates to “countryman”. The term was then used in a modern Mexican American/Chicana context colloquially to address an acquaintance or friend that is also from Mexico or of Mexican heritage.

A survey of the popular usage of the term in digital user-contributed platforms like UrbanDictionary.com frames the community context in which paisa is often used today. Language is ever changing and in our digital age, public dictionaries and Wikipedia pages mark the evolution of terms, their meanings, and uses in contemporary culture. Paisa carries negative connotations and is often used as a derogatory marker of recently arrived Mexicans or someone who, as the top urbandictionary.com definition reads, is “really Mexican”. The signs of “really Mexicaness” are articulated in online forums by the paisa’s fashion choices and refusal to speak English. Paisa is further defined as hypersexual in the final sentence that illustrates the archetype of the “Latino lover” with an insatiable sexual appetite. Paisa, although used for all genders, is most often associated with masculine bodies that dress in a particular Western or vaquero style—

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<sup>54</sup>Urban Dictionary. “Urban Dictionary: Paisa.” Accessed December 17, 2020. <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Paisa>.

cowboy boots and hats, flannel shirts. However, paisa aesthetics also extend to the perceived tacky-ness or “naco”, a similarly problematic term steeped in colorism, anti-indigeneity, and classism. Styles that are in anyway perceived as excessively adorned are also paisa—rhinestones, heavily patterned motifs, form-fitting clothes, and bright colors. The particularities of paisaness stem from the visual nods to “rancho life” as well as “low skill” occupations which are most available to migrants upon arrival—jornaleros en la pisca, construction work, seamstress work, and domestic or care work. The figure of the paisa is etched by a parameter of tackiness, excess, Spanglish or only Spanish, working-class. To summarize, a paisa is a Mexican either born in the U.S. or recently arrived that is working-class and exhibits aesthetic excess associated with lower-class tastes.

I use Jillian Hernandez’s concept of “sexual aesthetic excess” to theorize the specific “paisa aesthetics” in Equihua’s and Paisa Boys’ collections to think through the othering that happens within the Mexican and Chicanx community—the classed, raced, sexed, and gendered politics that play out as community members negotiate their belonging in the U.S.. National belonging is intrinsically tied to visual/cultural production as Hernandez suggest either as 1) vernacular expressions or 2) as those that manage to take up space in the “higher taste” spaces—like fashion.<sup>55</sup> The re-centering of paisa aesthetics in these designers’ work demonstrates that visual representation continuous to play a role in U.S. social relations and how marginalized communities visually disrupt citizenship with the awareness that “bodies of women of color, people of color, and sexual minorities signify reproductive futures and new morphologies of the family and American national identity.”<sup>56</sup> For my purpose, paisa aesthetics represent the

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<sup>55</sup> Hernandez, “Aesthetics of Excess”, 65.

<sup>56</sup> Hernandez, 65.

reproductive futures and new morphologies of the ever evolving “Mexican American” identity and its place in the social fabric of the United States. In many ways, Hernandez’ chonga girls and paisas are “antithetical to the efforts made by second and third generation Latina/o youth to assimilate to American culture. Like an embarrassing cousin one is reluctant to introduce to friends.”<sup>57</sup> By reclaiming paisaness, Equihua and Paisa Boys center excess as beautiful, high fashion, exclusive and expensive. Does the use of typical “low class” textiles, styles, and iconography suggest a (re)presentation of the American dream for Mexican diaspora—one that is capacious enough to welcome the paisa, chongas, and nacos? Do paisa aesthetics suggest a move away from white heteronormative ideals of Mexicanidad?

### **Paisa Textiles: Equihua’s Chicax Rasquache Sensibility**

In 2019, I attended ComplexCon, a relatively new annual streetwear convention that brings together fashion, music, artists, food, and other creative projects. ComplexCon debuted in 2016 as an in-person culture and fashion event by the namesake media company, Complex.<sup>58</sup> Since its debut, ComplexCon has grown increasingly in popularity and evolved from a convention to an interactive experience for aficionados of streetwear fashion, music, and culture. The convention consists of three principal areas. First, a marketplace with exhibitor booths

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<sup>57</sup> Hernandez, 74.

<sup>58</sup> Rob Kenner. “The Oral History of Complex.” *Complex* (blog), March 22, 2012. <http://www.complex.com/pop-culture/2012/03/the-oral-history-of-complex/2000>; Dan Rys. “Complex Media Shuttters Print Magazine After 14 Years.” *Billboard* (blog), December 7, 2016. <https://www.billboard.com/music/music-news/complex-media-shuttters-print-magazine-14-years-7604456/>. Complex is a media company founded by fashion designer Marc Ecko. As a streetwear designer, Ecko founded Complex Magazine to cover fashion, music, and creatives as they evolved streetwear culture. The magazine is no longer in print and Ecko has moved onto other media ventures under the name, Complex. Current projects include social media content, podcasts, videos, and most recently, events like ComplexCon.



where attendees can purchase the latest “drops”<sup>59</sup> from their favorite brands and explore new or established brands in the streetwear market. The second area is a music stage for concerts and musical collaborations. The final section is the podcast/panelist area where special guests (music artists, designers, artists, celebrities, other people of interest) are interviewed or give presentations on topics related to “the culture”; fashion career and market trends; and the latest brand collaborations. Throughout the event space there are also massive art installations. Some are given their own designated exhibit space, while others plaster the makeshift walls, cover the floors, or invite the attendees to interact with the artwork. Tickets to enter the event range from \$60 for a one-day pass and up to \$600 for a VIP experience. The event has been referred to by marketing experts as a “cultural Super Bowl.”<sup>60</sup> Not only do streetwear fans wait hours in long lines to buy limited-edition items from the most popular brands, but the convention itself brings in major cash flow from booth rentals, advertising, and sponsorships contracts which account for 8 to 9 percent of Complex Media’s annual revenue.<sup>61</sup> The cultural reach of streetwear , evidenced by events like ComplexCon that center all-encompassing cultural experiences in addition to shopping, have changed the way major fashion brands reach consumers. This level of revenue generating event could not be possible if a strong legacy of streetwear culture had not already been present for brands to latch onto. As mentioned before, streetwear is one of the most loyal of fashion subcultures because of a strong connection to “the culture” and attitude of “if

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<sup>59</sup> “drops” or “a drop” is a common word used for new item releases by a brand. The item release tends to be limited edition and sell out quickly, creating a frenzy of aficionados swarming to purchase the item before it is too late. This “drop” phenomenon is something inherent to streetwear since its inception. although now other fashion brands and consumer product brands have adopted the model of limited-edition “drops” to create a stir of interest for the brand or product line.; Isabel Flower. “Understanding ‘The Drop’: How a Streetwear Staple Has Shifted Buying and Selling.”(blog). Dry Clean Only, April 12, 2018. <https://www.grailed.com/drycleanonly/understanding-streetwear-drop>.

<sup>60</sup> Tim Peterson. “‘The Cultural Super Bowl’: How ComplexCon Tapped into the Allure of Streetwear Culture.” Digiday (blog), November 9, 2018. <https://digiday.com/marketing/complexcon-cultural-super-bowl-streetwear-culture/>.

<sup>61</sup> Peterson, “The Cultural Super Bowl”.

you know, you know”, which serves as a form of gatekeeping and generates buzz from the industry at large.

In 2019, Complex named Equihua as one of the four West coast designers on the “Brands to Watch” list. To be part of this exclusive list was undoubtedly a milestone for the nascent designer. Complex, as a streetwear institution, can make or break a new or established brand in this space. This was a significant moment for Equihua’s work and helped solidify the brand’s future success in a highly competitive West coast market.

What drew me to Equihua’s booth was her ability to bridge the world of luxury and working-class histories through visual narrative. Raised working-class in Santa Barbara, California, Brenda Equihua spent her early years learning about luxury goods from yard sales



she frequented with her mother in the more affluent Montecito neighborhood.<sup>62</sup> I borrow from

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<sup>62</sup> Araceli Cruz. “This Fashion Designer Is Turning San Marcos Blankets into Stunning Streetwear.” We Are Mitú, April 16, 2018. <https://wearemitu.com/culture/san-marcos-blankets-streetwear/>; Keith Estiler. “Equihua’s ‘New Classics’ Collection Honors Mexican American Culture.” HYPEBEAST (blog), January 9, 2018.

Chicanx scholars to understand Equihua’s design of the exhibitor booth which was fashioned into a *carniceria* with a glass display case full of “*cortes al gusto*” as a bicultural Chicanx sensibility.<sup>63</sup> The glass display was framed by typical *carniceria* items—a ticket dispenser, a food scale, a roll of plastic food wrap, and fresh *cempasuchil* flowers. The food scale toppled over with fuzzy fleece hoop earrings and a cardstock sign that read “VENTA donas \$95”. Similar cardstock signs were used inside the display case to advertise the prices of Equihua’s New Classics collection. “Shrine Virgen” t shirts, *cobija* reversible bucket hats, and “Shmoney” bags were divided by white plastic and faux greenery. The walls of the exhibit booth displayed the designer’s larger items like fleece bomber jackets, *cobija* full length coats, and *manteles* button down shirts.

In my reading, the exhibitor booth speaks to the unique mixture of items and images that can only be born out of the Los Angeles Chicanx lived experience, specifically a *paisa* working-class experience. Neighborhood *carnicerias* serve as a home away from home. The *carniceria* is where you find affordably priced meat and groceries, gossip with neighbors, and read the community bulletin. Moreover, the *carniceria* is where you find the excess cuts of meats—*tripas* (intestines), *tuetano* (bone marrow), *lengua* (tongue), *cabeza*(cheek), *oxtail* and chicken feet — not usually found in mainstream grocery retailers. In a brief conversation, Equihua emphasized the importance of using everything on the bone to create her collection. During the design

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<https://hypebeast.com/2018/1/equihua-new-classics-collection>.; Monica Kim. “These Graphic Blanket Coats, Made from San Marcos Cobijas, Celebrate Latino Culture.” *Vogue*. Accessed May 7, 2020. <https://www.vogue.com/article/equihua-san-marcos-cobijas-blanket-coats>.; Mitú. “She Turned San Marcos Blankets into Jackets That Were Featured In Vogue And She Credits All Inspo To Her Mom.” *We Are Mitú* (blog), May 8, 2019. <https://wearemitu.com/fierce/brenda-equihua-found-inspiration-from-her-mothers-style-to-become-la-jefa/>.; Jonita Singh. “Equihua Brings an Unapologetically Latinx Look to The Streetwear Space.” *WinkReport* (blog), February 14, 2020. <https://winkreport.com/equihua-brings-an-unapologetically-latinx-look-to-the-streetwear-space/>.

<sup>63</sup> Mesa-Bains, “*Domesticana*”.

process Equihua did not have to look far from home for the excess cuts that make up her collection. San Marcos style blankets and manteles de plastico are the principal textiles used in the collection and were sourced locally in her own home, through family and friends, and from vendors in the downtown Los Angeles callejones.<sup>64</sup> In my analysis, I read the use of feminized homey textiles as a queer imagining of femme paisa aesthetics outside of the home. A once simple utilitarian object, the vividly colored fleece blanket that warms the family in winter and the patterned plastic table cover that protects furniture, is transformed into an elevated high fashion garment. The tacky, the excess is reworked into perfectly tailored and highly coveted objects worn by celebrities.<sup>65</sup> The carniceria thus serves as the perfect backdrop for which to display the aesthetic spillage, the extra cuts of meat.

The New Classics collection draws attention to what Chicana feminist scholars name the sensibility of Chicana rasquachismo which centers themes related to community, home, and religion.<sup>66</sup> In rasquachismo a “new cultural vocabulary [is] composed of sustaining elements of Mexican tradition and lived encounters in a hostile environment.”<sup>67</sup> Equihua’s designs asks us to contend with the fear of losing safety and home, the blanket coat can be read as a literal safety blanket for Mexican migrants and Chicana communities traversing the hostile environment in the U.S. Additionally, the plastic table cover doubles as a protective armor against a dominant white normative fashion landscape that reads brown bodies as already excessive. The image of the Virgin de Guadalupe is similarly invoked in a protective manner, in the “Pray for em” fleece bomber jacket. The themes of safety and protection further emphasize the importance of dress as

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<sup>64</sup> Singh, “Equihua Brings an Unapologetically Latinx Look to The Streetwear Space”.; Estiler, “Equihua’s ‘New Classics’ Collection Honors Mexican American Culture”.; field notes from Complexcon 2019.

<sup>65</sup> Singh, “Equihua Brings an Unapologetically Latinx Look to The Streetwear Space”.

<sup>66</sup> Mesa-Bains, “Domesticana”, 91.

<sup>67</sup> Mesa-Bains, “Domesticana”, 93.

armor and resistance. Both safety and protection move in and out of feminine and masculine roles in the Mexican and Chicana community. In the domestic and traditionally read as feminine rests the idea that mothering and nurturing roles in the family remain “women’s work”. Simultaneously, protection and safety outside of the home falls onto men in the form of a hyper-masculine performance of the protective father figure. As Equihua labors behind a sewing machine to make something out of nothing, taking the bone marrow and making stock, she embodies a Chicana rasquachismo that is queer and capacious enough to reimagine imposed colonial gendered relations within the Chicana community. Further, Equihua’s feminized textiles transformed into both home and armor disrupt and pierce through the visibility of feminine and masculine in streetwear and creates space of protection for expressions of queer, non-binary, and *generos neutrales*.

### **Centering Paisaness Through Mexican American Nostalgia**

A few feet away, the Paisa Boys exhibitor booth similarly recreated a neighborhood staple—a seafood restaurant equipped with a window where customers could pick up “to-go orders”. A brightly colored neon sign flashed “PAISABOYS”, and a scrolling sign read “You Know the Fucking Vibes”. The main wall displayed a mural of Bugs Bunny drinking a beer and Ariel from the Little Mermaid enjoying a shrimp cocktail on a beach. A menu-style poster showed off the custom t-shirt prices to the left of the takeout window. Garlands with the Mexico and Australia flag hovered above the booth to celebrate the new collaboration between Paisa Boys and Australian brand Street X. The collection consisted of graphic t-shirts with an animated shark holding a gold-plated machine gun with palm trees in the background. The shirt had both

brand's names screen printed above and below the gun slinging shark and read "Mariscos El Tiburon" with the local Australian and U.S. address of both brand's flagship stores.

The exhibitor booth and t-shirt design references to Latinx seafood restaurants in Los Angeles is what caught my attention. In this sense, Paisa Boys and Equihua shared an acute attention to local references found in predominantly Latinx neighborhoods in Los Angeles. Their designs not only centered the streets of Los Angeles, but the materials, visuals, and booths were steeped in Chicanx and Mexican border culture. Particularly, Paisa Boys' t-shirts homed in on what local publication, L.A. Taco, has called "Mexican American Nostalgia"—a sense of belonging neither here nor there and always longing for what used to be/could have been.<sup>68</sup>

Paisanness is complicated by anti-respectability politics that play out in the iconography used in the collection. The Chalino Sanchez t-shirt, for example, uses the image of the famed "rey del corrido" in a collage that includes a gold medallion of the popular Jesus Malverde, the patron saint of the poor and narcos, doves, and rolled bundles of money under the letters "RIP". Chalino Sanchez carries cultural significance because he represents a self-made man that found fame and success "al otro lado" as a popular corrido composer and singer. His fame is also in part to the violence and crime that followed him throughout his life. Herrera-Sobek has theorized the corrido as a hypertext that links a web of culturally significant moments, icons, and references together.<sup>69</sup> The use of Chalino's image on Paisa Boy's t-shirts is an example of how the corrido speaks to multiple generations regardless of lifestyles because it is imbedded in deep cultural understanding of the oral tradition and the violence of the border. Although problematic

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<sup>68</sup> Ulysses Villa. "Born Out of Mexican American Nostalgia, Streetwear Line 'Paisa Boys' Brought OXXO to L.A. for a Day." L.A. TACO (blog), February 16, 2021. <https://www.lataco.com/paisa-boys-oxxo/>.

<sup>69</sup> Maria Herrera-Sobek. "The Corrido as Hypertext: Undocumented Mexican Immigrant Films and the Mexican/Chicano Ballad." In *Culture Across Borders: Mexican Immigration & Popular Culture*, 227–58. University of Arizona Press, 1998.

and hyper masculine in theme and imagery, corridos and Chalino's image is used as irreverent humor about illegality and illegitimate economies that are attached to racialized migrant bodies. I recognize and in no way condone the violence brought upon feminized and queer bodies due to drug trafficking, border crossings, and violence at the border. But I ask, how can we read the appropriation of Chalino's image as a centering of anti-state illegitimate economies and what does that suggest about the coerced choices made under capitalism in order to survive? How does this image persist even as the number of femicides continue to rise along the border?

Paisa Boys' Instagram feed aesthetic further speaks to an anti-respectability politic. Most of the social media content consists of multi-photo posts with busy and loud images showcasing what they interpret as paisa culture. Here paisa is used to describe a hybrid of Mexican and Chicana working-class culture to reclaim the paisa in its different iterations across street subcultures. Hot pink lowrider trucks, vaquero styles, mullet haircuts and bushy mustaches, charro embroidery, air brushed portraiture, cholo aesthetics, jarripeos, and the local botanica are all paisa. In one wide sweep, Paisa Boys reclaims the loud and excessive, the "really Mexican". Additionally, Paisa Boys co-founders, Barba and Bandera have referenced the use of the term paisa as an intentional act to reclaim the derogatory term into something that is aspirational to achieve—the paisa look as homage to their working-class upbringing. I don't intend to reduce Mexicaness to only what is named as paisa here, I simply point to these images as a potential to use paisa as a lens from which to reimagine Mexicanidad as complicated, classed, gendered, and ever evolving. Here, paisa coalesces and diverges from normative ideas of what is and is not "really Mexican" through popular iconography. Paisa seems to be a constantly moving target and in that there is queer potentiality to move away from the Mexicanidad as white colonial project. How can paisa materials or visual signals challenge the "American dream" and center a critical

understanding of the existence of that dream altogether. In Paisa Boys' irreverent humorous collection, paisanness signals an underlying current that denies the imagined Mexican and Chicana community that is often reduced to only disposable labor and celebrates the imaginative and creative ways in which working class aesthetics speaks to a subconscious and bicultural sensibility of the borderlands.<sup>70</sup>



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<sup>70</sup> Hurtado and Cantú, *meXicana Fashions*, 11.





## Conclusion

In this paper, I aimed to account for the informal work of producing “the culture” of Chicana streetwear by unpacking how Equihua’s and Paisa Boys’ exhibitor booths and fashion collections show the intimate and immaterial work of culture. Both Equihua and Paisa Boys mark a moment in which marginalized designers are reclaiming their space in streetwear post-aesthetic gentrification. The mass market adoption of streetwear has turned once marginalized and criminalized subculture styles into a legitimate fashion category. In doing so, the cultural specificities and aesthetic labor of visual cultural production are obscured. I argue that the cultural work that the fashion industry depends on is within a colonial capitalist logic that renders it as unorganized labor and decontextualizes aesthetics. The above pages examine the aesthetic choices and design practices of Equihua and Paisa Boys to identify those cultural legacies and specificities that are lost in the process of consumption. I read the fashion and visual

aesthetics of these two brands as part of the genealogy of Chicana cultural production. I read Equihua's and Paisa Boy's use of rasquache and nostalgic designs strategies as a potential queer site of Mexicanidad, queering pasianess and paisa aesthetics in the process. As these designers "brown" the fashion industry, they shift conventions of taste, and in turn notions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and citizenship. Thinking through paisa aesthetics provides a lens from which to understand the bicultural sensibility of Chicana and Mexican communities in the U.S. By reclaiming and queering paisa, Equihua's and Paisa Boys' designs redraw the parameters of Chicana streetwear culture and working-class aesthetics.

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