

“Wanna hear my voice, look at my feet!”

How Female Sneaker Aficionadas Negotiate their Femininities and Identities Within a Male-centric Subculture.



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Acknowledgments

It's amazing what rushed scribbles on random scraps of paper can manifest into. I never imagined my passion, or crazy obsession with trainers would lead to this, but I am happy that I was always able to see beyond the rubber, canvas, leather and glue. My biggest thank you is for the aficionada community whom I am forever indebted to. To all the wonderful women I met during my research trip, who took the time to "chop it up" with me. Your words are truly the heart of this work. Your passion, knowledge and presence is inspiring to me and I am forever grateful for your time and insights. To my supervisors Dr Rebecca Fraser and Dr Sarah Garland, two great minds and great towers of support for the past two years and more, who made supervisions fun and engaging - as they should be and who got me to this point. To my parents, hopefully you will finally understand what it is I do, and what has kept me in Norwich five years too long. I am incredibly lucky to have such a loving and caring family who are proud of what I've done, and proud I'm not the child who wouldn't amount to anything as some teachers labeled me. Most importantly this dissertation is for everyone not here to see me complete this journey.

The photograph on the title page is of J.X and was taken in Miami by Lemara Lindsay-Prince.

Abstract

This dissertation is a feminist inquiry into sneaker culture, using the qualitative method of ethnography to study a community of female sneaker collectors. These women exist in a predominantly male-centric subculture which entails buying, collecting and trading pairs of sneakers. The women or 'aficionadas' that exist in this subculture are often excluded, and often their participation and presence is rendered invisible. They constantly defend their identity, femininity and place in the subculture from negative stereotypes. They are denied the authenticity of being a true connoisseur, as well as their aficionada status. However, aficionadas manage to resist their invisibility as well as the assumptions made against them by enacting their agency and negotiating their femininity and identity, through a bricolage of masculinity and femininity. Sneakers rose to significance during the explosive and expressive Hip-hop movement in New York City during the late 1970s. It was a movement that promoted creative self-expression and influenced everything in its way such as dancing, music, sport and even fashion. Within these predominantly male spaces, male performances and exhibitions of masculinity were fostered. Moreover, the sneaker emerged as an object with significant importance to the wearer. As well as enhancing movement and performance of the wearer, it was also used as a signifier for street style. Its rising popularity amongst African American and Latino American youth transformed its intended use, from an object primarily used for function, to one used solely for fashion. The subculture that rose from the obsession was largely male as a large number of male experiences became connected to the lifestyle of sneaker culture. A gender division exists in sneaker culture that privileges the voice and experience of self-appointed male aficionados over female aficionadas. However, the aficionada community I interviewed aim to change this through their bricolaged identity as played out through their consumption and identities.

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“People who know me have seen me in too many kicks. It wasn’t like I had on bullshit kicks. I always have ill kicks. That’s what the rep is really like, you always have ill kicks. It starts from there, and then I guess if we think about it more deeply, I am an aficionada.”

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Introduction

The purpose of this dissertation is to present and interpret the lifestyles and experiences of a typically invisible community of people, the sneaker aficionada community in America: women, like myself, who have an overwhelming level of interest in and knowledge of sneakers and sneaker culture. In my past personal experiences of meeting other sneaker enthusiasts at sneaker events, exhibitions, or even inside sneaker stores in the United Kingdom and the United States, I have often found that I am the only female amongst a collective of male “sneaker heads” (another term, like ‘aficionado’, used to describe participants in sneaker culture) and when I meet other female “sneaker heads” at such events, they are almost already acquaintances - and this familiarity reflects the comparative smallness of the female community. Although I have been able to engage with and witness a large number of male aficionados in person at events, or through social media, I have never witnessed a large presence of women in the subculture. Men are by far the majority of participants in the subculture.

When discussing sneaker culture, it is impossible to do so without mentioning black music: the two are inextricably linked. Both sneaker culture and black music represent the importance of style and substance within Hip Hop culture, and one could not exist without the other. Hip Hop music created and added the element of style. It was important for break-dancers to look “clean,” to look “fresh” and have their attire complimented by their sneakers. People started to wear sneakers not only for the way they matched their clothes, but how they allowed them to perform to the bass and beats of Hip Hop music. Led by crews of break-dancers, sneakers became a highly valued component to the Hip Hop aesthetic. Style and substance were important because you had to look the part, as well as have the skills to be regarded as credible in Hip Hop culture. This is particularly true in the case of African Americans and Latin Americans who were the early adopters of Hip Hop culture: they took pride in both. They saw Hip Hop culture as an expressive, loud and vibrant

movement where looking “fly” and being “cool” was valued. Where being regarded as having an “ill” outfit or “mad skills” was of important significance to those who were in the lower socio-economic background.¹ A result of this was immense pride in sneakers, and sneaker enthusiasts tried to preserve the colour of their sneakers by painting on new stripes, or carrying a toothbrush around to keep them clean because they couldn’t afford to buy a pair of sneakers regularly.

Sneaker culture itself is explicitly linked to African Americans and the development of their distinct cultural worlds. Rooting its origins in slavery and its abolition in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, African American ghettos in urban centres such as Harlem thrived on the development of separate and distinctive identity to that of White America, using the concept of the “cool” to illustrate this difference. Enslaved African Americans initially harnessed this concept of ‘the cool’ allowing them to use their relationship with expressive and vibrant cultures as resistance against their oppression. Cultural resistance to slavery and the adoption of a distinct identity which would later become “the cool” manifested itself through various means, included clothing, style and music. Enslaved peoples found solace in creating their own music through humming and singing while they worked in the fields or in the woods where they worshipped. The sounds of “Negro spirituals” and work songs filled the spaces of the plantation and enslaved African Americans used the rhythmic music to either communicate to each other or their emotions of sorrow, praise, joy or sadness. Alan Rice argues that through the creation of black music, African Americans were able to ‘maintain [their] cultural heritage once the relationship to the black rural south ha[d] been stretched thin.’² During the period of the great migration from 1900-1970, an estimated five million African Americans left the south in favour of the north and made their homes in cities such as New York. They brought with them their musical transitions and cultural practices, leading in time to the

¹ Just For Kicks: A Documentary About Sneakers, Hip-Hop & The Corporate Game, directed by Lisa Leone & Thiabaut de Longville (2005, Image Entertainment, 2004.)

² Alan Rice, *Radical Narratives of the Black Atlantic*. (London: Continuum, 2003)

Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s. As the generations of African Americans changed so too did their music, and the beats, rhythms and ‘funk’³ of black music developed from the call and response, to the negro spirituals, to rhythm and blues, to jazz and finally hip hop music, which was played throughout “the hood.” Writing about the potency of black music, Rice maintains that music, liberates black people ‘from mental chains’⁴ and ‘establishes a communication system which exists parallel to, but distinct from Anglo-American society.’⁵

As well as music, black fashion and style evolved during the antebellum period through the adoption of particular items of clothing and dress. Historians Shane and Graham White in their study of African American expressive style argue that because the body was denigrated in America through the brutal system of the slave trade which disregarded them as humans and understood them as property, African Americans sought to to change the imposition of bondage on their bodies through clothing and fashion.⁶ Enslaved peoples managed to show agency and combat their oppressive state through which appropriating Euro-American clothing, adding a visible and distinctly African twist, creating a ‘culturally distinctive aesthetic display.’⁷ Their vivid arrangement of colour which was described as, ‘clash[ing] violently’ by ‘jangled white sensibilities’ coupled with their penchant for different fabrics, all contributed to their striking visual presentation in antebellum society.⁸ In clothing, they found resistance, as White and White explain: ‘the vivid, visual presence [slaves] established was an emphatic repudiation of their allotted social role.’⁹

³ Ibid, p. 148

⁴ Ibid, p. 148.

⁵ Ibid, p. 148.

⁶ Ibid, p. 146.

⁷ Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin’ African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (Cornell University Press 1999)

⁸ Ibid, p. 23

⁹ Ibid, p. 35

Moreover, ‘there was an edginess underlying the white response to this black style, a sense that white control was, at least obliquely, being challenged.’¹⁰

Linking this to hip hop music and sneaker culture, the foundations of the black cool are set here. In the early twentieth century when mass populations of African Americans settled in Harlem, developing a ghetto of African American inhabitants, where blues music played out of bars, poets took inspiration from walking down the streets and men styled their hair using conk whilst wearing their zoot suits, a vibrancy which emerged made New York especially a “hip and happening” place. It evolved to be a mecca for style, where African Americans resolved early to not dress like their actual socio-economic status but to look “cool” and “fly” always. The cool came to not only define your attire but also your attitude. Jazz historian Ted Gioia linked the term directly to African Americans saying, ‘we should not be surprised that the new meaning, like the attitude it describes come from the African American community.’¹¹ He heralds, the “blacks, beatniks and bohemians” as groups of people who managed to work through their socio-economic position through their style. When Hip Hop music started in New York it was built around four elements: breakdancing, dj-ing, mc-ing and graffiti and the element that ties it all together is style. Content and ability had to be matched by style, and Hip Hop culture was all about being good and looking good. Besides being labeled “cool” black culture is also regarded by both black and white onlookers as authentic, because it represents a break from the typical dominant culture. According to Andrew Ross, ‘blackness has been taken up as a symbol of authenticity in white American popular culture.’¹² Its uniqueness, the way it was created and its novelty attract and surprise people, mostly because African Americans could develop a culture of their own but also because it is a break from the

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 35

¹¹ Ted Gioia, *The Birth and the Death of the Cool*, (Speck Press 2010) p. 48

¹² Ingrid Monson, The Problem with White Hipness: Race, Gender and Cultural Conceptions in Jazz Historical Discourse, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol 48, No 3 p. 396-422 (1995) accessed 23 February 2014, (<https://www.amherst.edu/media/view/91528/original/Monson%20-%20The%20Problem%20with%20White%20Hipness.pdf>)>

norm. The cool and black authenticity is often regarded as non-commercial or underground, and it is through this that you can see how sneaker culture emerged in America, as a niche sub-culture in the boroughs of New York City. It was an authentic culture and a way of expression that existed in black and Latino communities before becoming mainstream and global. The cool as a cultural concept encompasses style, resistance, dress, music, sport and sensibilities – it offers a platform where African Americans can perform their inventiveness and distinct culture. Certain voices throughout my dissertation allude to the influence of Hip Hop culture and black music on sneaker culture and as being a factor in why they adopted the culture, as it was in their “hoods” that they began and through their historical past that sneaker culture is a continuation of past style.

I had never really considered my position within the subculture, or the implications of being a woman in a subculture with such little representation, until I met G.H in 2010, in Harlem, New York City. At the time I was undertaking research for my undergraduate dissertation, “The Symbolism and Meaning of Sneaker Culture to African Americans,” which followed a similar technique to this dissertation in the format of a series of ethnographic interviews and focused on the personal attachment African Americans had to Air Jordan sneakers. My encounter with G.H was rather impromptu, as I had originally entered the Harlem sneaker store she worked in to look at what was for sale. Whenever I am abroad, I make it a priority to visit at least one sneaker store, particularly in America where the stores are abundant. I began a conversation with G.H that day, which in turn developed into two interviews on separate occasions. G.H was the first woman I ever interviewed for my research and our conversation became the model for finding other women similar to her whom I believed existed in the subculture, albeit in marginalised positions. Previous to meeting G.H, all participants I had interviewed for my undergraduate dissertation were male, and had either been recommended to me or I had sought out due to their considerable status within sneaker culture, their knowledge, the size of their collection or internet presence. The four men I interviewed were regarded and respected as aficionados, and being an authentic voice in the

subculture. They were sneaker collectors, editors of sneaker websites, storeowners, or senior staff at footwear brands. There was a single trend linking them together- all four were men.

I began my interview with G.H, an African American woman in her mid 30's who worked as a Sales Assistant, as I had done with every interview: I wanted to hear the stories of why people started collecting sneakers. So I asked her how she began collecting sneakers and a conversation about her identity developed from there. G.H's reply stood out to me instantly. She addressed the uniqueness which she both feels and creates from wearing and collecting sneakers, and contrasted herself with women in mainstream society. G.H acknowledged her style which she explained as having, "swag with you" and that "everything gotta be fresh."¹³ She emphasized just how fundamental sneakers were to constructing her identity, noting the specific colours and materials that matched her outfit that day and also how wearing sneakers is part of her reflecting the "urban culture" she grew up in. The outcome of my conversation with G.H was a definite impulse to locate other women who were so obviously passionate about sneaker culture and who, like her, and like me, saw it as a "form of expression [and a] passion."¹⁴ I wanted to connect women sneaker enthusiasts with one another and focus on the lifestyles and collect their stories about why they participated in a male-centric subculture. What I found however, throughout the course of my month-long trip to the United States, was an active community of women who were just as passionate as men about buying, collecting and trading sneakers. These women were more than "sneaker heads" - which I believe to be a generic and casual term used to describe anyone who is a member of the subculture no matter what they know about the history or how many pairs of sneakers they have. These women were most definitely more, they recognised their position in the

¹³ G.H. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, May 18 2010.

¹⁴ Ibid.

subculture they faced interrogation and denial by aficionados and by other women. Even so, they came together to create an all female movement, and in doing so built a support network of women who refer to themselves as “sole sistas” and whom I believe deserve the label of ‘aficionada’.

I chose to use the term aficionada throughout my work because it acknowledges these women’s worth as subcultural participants, as true connoisseurs of the subculture. The feminine ‘a’ on the end, recognises their status as women in this prestigious role. My aim throughout was to gather these women’s stories and discuss the lack of recognition they receive. However, the project surpassed its original goals and developed into a discussion on different levels about how they use the sneaker as an object for resistance and that was crucial to their bricolaged identity. The premise for my research of locating a marginalised body of women within a subcultural space can be linked to the larger feminist inquiry into the role gender plays in subcultural spaces. As a starting point I used the questions Jenny Garber asks in her essay *Girls and Subcultures*¹⁵ for understanding the categories women could be grouped into when assessing their existence in subcultures. Garber asks five questions concerning the roles of women:

1. Are they present but invisible?
2. Where present and invisible, are their roles the same, but more marginal than boys, or are they quite different?
3. Is the position of girls specific to the subcultural option, or do their roles reflect the more general social subordination of women in mainstream culture?
4. If subcultural options are not readily available to girls, what are the different but complementary ways in which girls organise their cultural life?

¹⁵ Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2000) p. 14.

5. Are these, in their own terms, subcultural?¹⁶

Garber's questions are useful in terms of providing a foundation and possible framework to proceed with my inquiry into women's roles and invisibility in subcultures because the word subculture, or any discussion of a youth culture, is so often an investigation of activity involving males only. She introduces the notion of female invisibility within the subcultural space which encourages the reader or researcher to locate a woman's presence as well as challenge the traditional view that subcultures are inclusive separate communities that subvert traditional mainstream values. Garber questions whether mainstream values and ideals such as, femininity, patriarchy and gender differences are presented within the subcultural space created by its participants. In response to her first question: 'are they present but invisible' - the aficionadas were not invisible to one another, however in response to Garber's last question asks, 'are these, in their own terms, subcultural?'¹⁷ I began to focus on how a male-centric space could instigate the creation of a separate subculture for women, and also whether there was something different about the existence of women within a male-centric space, this question prompted me to focus on how these women I found appropriate the subculture.

As an insider to the subculture, I surround myself with anything sneaker related - sneaker news on popular websites, sneaker history, articles and even documentaries about sneaker culture. Through popular websites within the community such as *Nice Kicks*¹⁸ and *Size?*¹⁹ I am able to see the latest releases by various brands. Through being active on social media, for example on the

¹⁶ Ibid. p.14.

¹⁷ Ibid. p.14.

¹⁸ Nice Kicks, "The most read source for sneaker news, release dates & history." accessed 6 August 2013, <<http://www.nicekicks.com>>.

¹⁹ Size?, "Shop for Men's footwear, clothing & accessories | Trainers, t-shirts, jackets & more." accessed 6 August 2013, <<http://www.size.co.uk/home>>.

photo app, Instagram, I am connected virtually to a group of sneaker aficionadas and aficionados worldwide who upload and share pictures of what they are wearing that day or even of their entire collection of sneakers. If you like the image, you acknowledge it, or write a comment below the picture. Texts such as *Sneakers The Complete Collectors Guide*²⁰ and Bobitto Garcia's book, *Where'd You Get Those*²¹ are favorites amongst sneaker collectors. However, despite the various outlets of knowledge and ways of sharing and showing you are a part of the subculture, what is apparent is the considerable lack of attention paid to female participation and the denigration of the knowledge of women who do take part. As I recollected anything I had either read or seen in the past about sneaker culture, there had often been little or no attention paid to the aficionada community within the subculture, and the majority of experiences documented or highlighted are all male. Sneaker consumption has been consistently been documented as a male pastime, and shoe consumption - high heeled shoes particularly - as a woman's pastime and obsession. In the past, sneaker culture has been analysed through different lenses in order to assess and understand its connection to popular culture. Janice Brace-Govan and H  l  ne de Burgh-Woodman study sneaker culture in relation to post colonialism and class, in their article 'Sneakers and Street Culture: A postcolonial analysis of marginalized cultural consumption'²² and Thomas Vanderbilt takes a more economic approach with a full comprehensive study of sneakers and the footwear industry in *The Sneaker Book*.²³ However, gender has never been the primary focus of any study, and I aim to redress this through my dissertation by providing a documented insight into the lifestyle of sneaker

²⁰ Unorthodox Styles, *Sneakers: The Complete Collectors' Guide*, (Thames & Hudson, 2005.)

²¹ Bobbito Garcia, *Where'd You Get Those? New York City's Sneaker Culture: 1960-1987*, (Testify Books, 2006.)

²² Janice Brace-Govan and H  l  ne de Burgh-Woodman, *Sneakers and Street Culture: A post colonial analysis of marginalized consumption*, *Consumption Markets & Culture*, Vol. 11 Issue. 2 p. 93-112 (2008), accessed 6 August 2013, <<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10253860802033639#.UgC2NhaYffY>>.

²³ Thomas Vanderbilt, *The Sneaker Book: Anatomy of an Industry and an Icon*, (The New Press: New York, 1998.)

aficionadas in the United States.

It is my aim that the voices of the women I met in 2012 during a research trip to America (traveling to New York, Philadelphia, Washington DC, Miami, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Portland and Boston) come to the forefront. The group of women I was fortunate to interview were dedicated to the subculture, they possessed expansive sneaker collections with some collections in excess of 250 pairs. They were women who wore sneakers everyday, who used them for breakdancing or were involved directly in the designing and marketing of sneakers, or women who owned their own sneaker stores. Their voice is the core of my work and is an authentic insight into the multifaceted nature of their lives, and the subculture they belong to. Throughout these pages their accounts of why they belong to the sneaker culture, how they utilise a pair of sneakers for expression and resistance, and how they use sneakers to play with the conventional definition of femininity and create their own, are evident.

Feminist Research

Central to my research are the voices of women in the sneaker community, and I focus on their experiences throughout. I am a woman undertaking research about women, and as such I hope, as Sotirios Sarantakos says, to provide a space to 'empower them and give them a voice to speak about social life from their perspective.'²⁴ One aspect of feminist research is to acknowledge that women exist in a patriarchal society and that men have been privileged by women's silence. Male experiences are therefore considered more 'mainstream' than women's and as a result women are excluded and denied subjectivity in spaces dominated by men. Feminist research aims to dismantle this model by highlighting the work and experience of women in an attempt to, as Sarantakos goes

²⁴ Sotirios Sarantakos, *Social Research Third Edition*, (Palgrave Macmillan: Hampshire, 2005), p. 55.

on to say to, 'displace [their] ignored and silence [position as] women.'²⁵ As well as acknowledging women's marginalization, the feminist research framework gave me the impetus to listen to the aficionadas and also to provide a framework that could prepare the ground for change at two important levels: the bottom level - within the subculture, and the top level - with the footwear brands. Both areas are male dominated and continue to marginalise women and underrepresent them. In both these spaces a comprehensive understanding of the aficionadas' lifestyle and identity is essential in order to fully understand and not assume why they wear sneakers. I chose to focus on women who because I wanted to show people within the subculture and the business, the subculture through a female-centric prism.

There are a number of theoretical concepts that weave throughout this dissertation, such as gender performativity, material culture, resistance and the body, which at times I refer to directly or are implied through the voice of the aficionada. Imagining masculinity on the female body and how aficionadas are able to interplay between both masculinity and femininity in their presentations of themselves is connected largely to Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity and her definition of "undoing gender," which allows men and women to shift between genders.²⁶ Butler's concept combined with Judith Halberstam's reenactment of masculinity on the female body in her study *Female Masculinity*²⁷ also is used as support for, my notion of the bricolaged identity of the aficionada, whose appropriation of masculinity is a resistance to typical gender norms. Bricolage, and a focus on the subcultural bricoleur who remixes and re-appropriates images into a unique style of their own, is a term developed by Dick Hebdige in his study *The Meaning of Style*.²⁸ His

²⁵ Ibid. p. 55.

²⁶ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, (Routledge: New York, 2004.)

²⁷ Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, (Duke University Press: United States, 1998.)

²⁸ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, (Routledge: London, 1979.)

comprehensive study of white working class Britain and the various subcultures they engaged in was important in understanding the essence of style. The notion I outline below, of understanding the sneaker as an object imbued with mythical qualities, and also as a signifier of a subculture and of unspoken conversations between those in the subculture, is closely related to Roland Barthes'²⁹ study of mythologies. Ideas about the social life of things and the communicative elements of object are related to Arjun Appadurai's³⁰ study on cultural objects which are bought and traded. Jean Baudrillard's³¹ understanding of objects, was also useful here in understanding the sneaker as essentially something more, an object that had communicative power. Lastly, Thorstein Veblen's³² theory on conspicuous consumption offers another way of responding to the social significance of material objects. Theories on the body, largely that of Susan Bordo³³ and Michael Foucault,³⁴ framed my discussion on women's bodies historically being denied transcendence. Here, however, their sneaker wearing was a way of enacting their agency. There were an abundance of theoretical perspectives I could pull from, in order to support my dissertation. However, the ones I choose to focus on assist in amplifying my discussion about women's agency and how they define their identity and their femininities.

The women I interviewed were from diverse and different backgrounds encompassing a mixture of ethnicities, ages and social-economic statuses. This gave extra richness to my research,

²⁹ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, (Vintage Classics: London, 1993.)

³⁰ Arjun Appadurai, *The Social Life of Things Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1986.)

³¹ Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, (Telos Press Ltd: New York, 1980.)

³² Thorstein Veblen, *Conspicuous Consumption*, (Penguin Books: London, 2009.)

³³ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and The Body*, (University of California Press: California, 2003.)

³⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge: The Will to Knowledge V.1* (Penguin Books: London, 1998.)

and raises some interesting questions in relationship to the dynamics between race, class and gender that run throughout my research. The majority of people I interviewed were either African American or Latina American women. In line with how much African American and Latin American influence has impacted the creation of sneaker culture. However, my interviewees did also include, White American, Chinese American and Persian American women which arguably demonstrates how universal sneaker culture is. Sneaker culture is heavily embedded in African American and Latin American cultures however; it has gained global significance in recent years and therefore includes a wider spectrum of people than ever before. The other dynamic of ages as well shows this: as it wasn't just a younger demographic who were sneakers, women in their mid 30s and even 40s were aficionados also. In terms of the socio-economic status, they were either working or middle class. It was interesting to hear that in some cases women had favoured buying a new pair of kicks over paying an electricity bill, or other who made sure they saved the right money ahead of sneaker releases so they could get a pair. The different stories show how much conspicuous consumption was a factor in their decisions, favouring purchasing a pair of sneakers over their utilities. Race and class did not create a divide amongst the women in the subculture. They were able to unite together as women foremost, recognizing the struggle of being a female sneaker collector first, then sometimes as mothers, businesswomen, tomboys and so on. Their backgrounds in this respect seemed to have a similarity, particularly when learning about how they began collecting sneakers and when it developed into a passion for them.

Method of Recruitment

All participants were enlisted either by word of mouth or through social media sites such as Twitter, and my own personal website³⁵ created solely for the purpose of my research trip and active only during the months prior to and during my travels. Social media was the best method of

³⁵ Invisible Women Project, www.invisiblewomenproject.com.

communication, because the aficionada community regularly uses social media to connect with each other across America and globally. I designed a poster announcing my tour through America with prospective dates and cities of travel, combined with a brief description of my project and a contact email address. I was able to reach a larger scope of participants through the social media medium Twitter. The direct marketing tool gives you 140 characters to communicate, and I summarised the main points of my research and gave a link to the website. Through Twitter my project was able to spread rapidly due to a function of Twitter called RT, which is the ability for someone to copy and paste your message in their timeline. Mass emails were not used to recruit participants. Those wanting to participate in my research had to confirm that they were over the age of eighteen when they filled out a web form and provide me with their name, email address, number of sneakers in their collection, and an anecdote about their favourite sneakers (see Appendix B.)

Participants

A total of 75 people responded to my methods of recruitment and volunteered to be interviewed for my dissertation. Due to the expansive geography of America and the total time of my trip, I devised a schedule that would help me interview the most people in each place. Cities with the most respondents were places I would go to. All the participants were from these cities in America: New York, Philadelphia, Miami, Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Portland. I then selected at random twenty-five women aged between 18-40 to participate in my research. I conducted interviews with twenty-five women, seventeen of which are featured in this dissertation. Participants were a range of ages, racial demographics and total number of sneakers owned. However, personal details such as those were not my concern. The participants' income, sexuality, social class or profession was not a requirement, nor was it relevant for this study. I wanted to focus as much as possible on the women and their sneakers, and my preset questions show this. It was important for me to provide a comfortable environment for the participant and personal, intrusive questions by someone they had just met would not have been appropriate.

Because my interviewing style was conversational, and was led by what the women themselves disclosed, sometimes in a follow up question demographic issues such as income and class may have been addressed. However, I did not probe further. I make reference to and use two other voices in this dissertation, which were from my earlier undergraduate work, and also use four voices who are male. The three male voices also present in this dissertation are participants who work at footwear brands. I found a greater presence of men in the footwear industry than women and these men were often the senior staff in their respective positions and when I interviewed them we discussed women's invisibility at a subcultural and business level. It is important to include their voice, although the dissertation primarily focuses mainly on women's experiences, their voices give my work another perspective and balance.

All participants' names have been anonymised to protect their identity. Names appear as two initials, for example: A.K or S.D. I was required to make the participants' identity anonymous due to ethics regulations set by the School of Social Work and Psychology at the University of East Anglia. I believe that this took away some of the power and overall purpose of my dissertation, particularly with a dissertation concerned on highlighting the voice of the aficionada and letting her tell her own experiences. The women were willing and forthcoming in contacting me to take part in this research, and although they signed the waivers (see Appendix B) they were not concerned with the anonymisation procedure. Rather, they wanted their names to be published by their words. I felt that by not including their first names or carefully constructed pseudonyms which reflect their aficionada status, I was playing a part in perpetuating their invisibility. All questions were asked by me and are shown as LLP, where the interviewee responds I use their anonymous initials.

Data Methods

To undertake this research I chose to use qualitative research methods as a design frame and for gathering data. Qualitative research is by nature interpretivist; it is concerned with how the

social world is understood and experienced. Qualitative research recognises that, as Gary Thomas says, 'we are interested in people' and that, 'we have to look closely at what people are doing by using our own selves [...] we have to immerse ourselves in the research contexts in which we are interested.'³⁶ This method of inquiry was ideally suited to what I was trying to achieve. It allowed me to take a more nuanced, detailed and flexible contextual approach. It acknowledged that I was also a participant in my research as well as the researcher, and that I understood the subculture as an insider before I understood it as an academic investigator. According to Gary Thomas, I have a responsibility as an insider to 'recognise [my] position - [my] social background, likes and dislikes [...] class, gender and ethnicity.' Therefore as a female Black British, middle class aficionada with over fifty pairs of sneakers myself, I 'shouldn't deny this position. On the contrary, [I] should use it', and in using it I 'should be fully aware of it and acknowledge it.'³⁷ I began my obsession with 'trainers', as they are referred to in the United Kingdom and most of Europe, at a young age. I played basketball, a sport which values sneakers, and my passion for the different models, brands and styles grew from there. I have taken part in 'campouts', where you sleep outside a retail store for a number of nights in order to secure your purchase of a certain trainer. I slept three nights outside a trainer store in Covent Garden to purchase one of a thousand pairs of a limited edition Nike and Kanye West trainers. In my social life I have created friends from sneaker events and advise other friends about trainers. Because they know my interest friends often ask my advice on the latest models available, and about the most popular styles. I also am approached by footwear brands on market research projects relating to women's footwear.

Observing, interacting and understanding a culture from an insider perspective comes under

³⁶ Gary Thomas, *How to do your Research Project: A Guide for Students in Education and Applied Social Sciences*, (Sage Publications: London, 2011) p, 75.

³⁷ Ibid. p. 76.

the discipline of ethnography. Historically ethnography was used to classify differences in mankind. Anthropologists treated humans as scientific objects, for example identifying their skin colour or skull size as signs for their inferiority. However, as Thomas suggests now 'the new ethnography aim[s] to get to the heart of people's understandings of life through fieldwork *with* people rather than supposedly objective study *on* them.'³⁸ This ethnographic approach influenced my style of interviewing greatly. Although the correct term to describe what happened in America between myself and the aficionadas is an interview I felt it was more relaxed and conversational than the conventions of research would suggest. The interviewing style I adopted could be described as semi structured because it, 'combin[ed] the structure of a list of issues to be covered together with the freedom to follow up points as necessary.'³⁹ Although I had a list of previously arranged interview questions, all of these questions were open-ended, allowing participants to expand if they chose to. The style of a semi-structured interview allowed me to deviate at times from a specific order and the questions worked to remind me what I needed to cover. I was able to extend the discussions and gather rich and nuanced material by following this procedure. The less rigid structure encouraged an open dialogue between myself and the participant. I was able to probe further with statements such as, "tell me more about that", "how so?" "go on" and, "really, how so?" These probes encouraged the participant to expand. This allowed for a wider breadth and depth of answers and raised many ideas I was yet to consider. The style of a semi-structured interview also worked well for the time-scale and situation; I was visiting America specifically for these interviews and these conversational interviews allowed a large volume of data to be collected.

Recording the interviews using a dictaphone allowed the naturalness of a conversation to occur. The size of the dictaphone was discreet enough not to be noticeable or to distract the

³⁸ Ibid. p, 118.

³⁹ Ibid. p. 164.

participant. It was placed on the table before every interview began and left on until the interview was complete. I preferred to record the interviews because I could then return to them afterwards to regather my ideas and transcribe particular accounts. Also, by using a dictaphone I was able to maintain more eye contact with the participant, something I would not have been able to achieve through written note taking. I felt physical gestures such as eye contact was important for reassuring the participant and being receptive to their answers. With the exception of two interviews, a simultaneous conversation with J.V and A.M and S.D and B.M all interviews were one-on-one.

Ethics

All participants were required to be over 18 to take part. I obtained either verbal or written consent from each participant at the beginning of the interview (see Appendix B.) The consent form made clear who I was, the university I attended, and gave a brief outline of my research. All participants had to then agree to eight questions concerning the use of the interview for example: though they had the right to withdraw their interview could still be used and published. All participants signed the form or gave recorded verbal consent to me. After the interview was conducted I also gave participants a debriefing form which thanked them for their involvement and also stated that I may need to contact them after for further clarification. However, whilst maintaining the correct steps to ensure that the rights and anonymity of the participants prevents any harm that could affect them as a result of their involvement, the women I interviewed were very forthcoming and wanted to participate under their well-known monikers or real names. They were adamant to get their voice out there, and this was clear from the many statements they declared to me throughout the interviews. Some of the women interviewed have appeared in previous publications that show their pictures and real names. These women are not ashamed or afraid of what they have to say about the female sneaker experience and community, and have been praised in the past for having such views. I gained acceptance by the women for traveling to America to conduct my research as well as choosing to write about their experiences. I was accepted into the

community because I was an insider and a person with shared interests with the women I interviewed.

The majority of interviews were recorded using a dictaphone and then transferred onto my personal computer which is protected by a password that only I have access to. I did not interview any vulnerable groups or access any other personal information and data. I discussed with my academic supervisors, Dr Rebecca Fraser and Dr Sarah Garland, the potential risks for my research trip. We agreed that for my personal safety all interviews should be conducted in highly populated public places such as cafes or bookshops. I informed my supervisors before and after I conducted each interview and was in regular contact with them throughout my trip. I also informed close friends and family members who are American citizens of my well-being before and after each interviews also. At no time throughout my research trip was my own, or the participants', safety or well being compromised.

Self-Reflexivity

It was important to recognise my insider status was to this project. It had allowed me a certain level of personal insight into these women's lives as there wasn't a fear or level of mistrust that I was going to appropriate or misinterpret their lives. There was a considerable amount of mutual respect between the women and myself. They were excited for the potential of the project and that I had chosen them to be interviewed. They were also amazed at how I could detail the subculture at an academic level. To see the excitement and engage in conversations with these women was inspiring and filled me with a sense of duty to promote their authenticity and represent them faithfully throughout my work. I was extremely grateful for their time and insights into the subculture for which I am indebted to them. I was very clear from the beginning what the interviews would be used for. I removed the distant and objective nature typically associated in the participant-researcher dynamic which is reflected overall in my interview style, and at times ability

to divert naturally from the topic. By the end of the interview we had had a thoroughly engaging and enjoyable conversation, which was a great moment to capture and share with an aficionada. Not only did I acknowledge my insider status which meant, being regarded as a sneaker collector too, and an inference that I knew specific models, but I also had to acknowledge my position as a postgraduate research student from the United Kingdom. This created an extra dynamic of not necessarily being from the country where sneaker culture originated, and indicated the level of theorising I would ground my argument in. However, I found that particularly with my level of education it was considered admirable that I was choosing to study the subculture so intently, and my location in the United Kingdom reaffirmed the global nature of sneaker culture. I was able to talk to certain women about the nature of European only sneaker releases and vice versa, as well as share information on sneaker shops on both sides of the Atlantic. I was also able to use my insider status when I shared stories with the aficionadas about how I got into sneaker culture, or what my favourite pair of sneakers were. These were great opportunities to share my stories with the women and it all happened in a very fluid way. Overall I was incredibly proud, and still am, to have met such a phenomenal group of women who share my passion for sneakers. Our conversations, both undocumented and documented, serve to advance the level of exposure given to aficionadas. It was also great to become a member of the network of women who support, share and swap stories daily.

Chapters Overview

In the first chapter I explore the beginnings of sneaker culture and how it emerged from the creative music of hip hop and street basketball subcultures during the early 1980s, and outline it as a style aesthetic employed by the African American and Latin American youth. I also discuss how women are typically excluded from studies on subcultures and how their efforts are often marginalised within the movement. In the second chapter I explain how sneakers are important to the “get up” and identity of the aficionada and how their sneaker wearing is tied to a much larger project of self-expression, and represents a resistance to the typical feminine ideal of women. The

third chapter, details the influence of “the hood” and how the aficionadas’ bricolaged identity comes into being. I describe “the hood” and “the corner” as ‘staging arenas’⁴⁰ for masculinity, and for manhood to play out. It is the interaction of the body in this geographical site that fosters the braggadocio and swagger which aficionadas borrow from and fashion onto their own bodies. In the fourth chapter I expand on the resistance women find in sneakers as well as the opposition to their appearance by aficionados. I also focus on the female network and community that connects the aficionadas. In chapter five, I shift my focus from viewing the aficionada at the bottom level on the streets, to the top level of the footwear industry as I identify the disconnect in how the aficionada is understood and marketed to by footwear brands. There is also a link that connects aficionadas to women who work in the footwear industry which I discuss. The sixth chapter is my conclusion where I collate my research as well as discuss the implications of raising awareness of the aficionada community. All the chapter titles are extracts from interviews with the aficionadas, which maintains the integrity of their voice leading the discussion throughout the dissertation.

⁴⁰ Elijah Anderson, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*, (W.W. Norton & Company, Inc: New York 1999) p. 22

Chapter 1

“Your Shoes Are Your Foundation”

-W.S

Sneaker culture is global. Its influence stretches around the world, and can be seen in cities far away from its point of origin in New York, in countries such as, Hong Kong, France and South Africa, where men and women assert that they are part of the subculture of buying, collecting and trading sports footwear. Sneakers, trainers, kicks or tennis shoes as they are sometimes called are made up of a light canvas or leather upper, which is then glued to a rubber sole. Yet, the very basic construction of a sneaker is counterbalanced with a high level of detail and the technical specialization which is offered to suit each sport. There are specific parts such as: the toe box - an area at the front of the sneaker, the eyelets - the holes through which shoe laces go, and the side panel, where the manufacturer branding is typically placed. In addition to the physical parts of a sneaker, its importance lies in the symbolism and meaning the consumer imbues the product with: how, as A.J, an African American male Sales Director from Portland, explained, “the consumer makes the ultimate decision for its meaning;” how, “their translation, their use of it, defines its meaning” and how, “at the end of the day, the consumer decide[s], the meaning, they decide the value, they decide how they are going to use it.”⁴¹

In this dissertation I analyse and interpret the meaning and the value a group of women sneaker aficionadas find in sneakers and how they use them in their lives. I look at how aficionadas wear sneakers as bricoleurs (appropriating another range of commodities by placing them in a symbolic ensemble) who pastiches certain borrowed tropes from the presentation of masculinity,

⁴¹ A.J. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. Portland, May 20 2010.

onto their own bodies, which in turn creates a “harder edge”⁴² that can be seen as a personal negotiation between the presentation of masculinity and femininity on the female body. I examine how the aficionadas wear sneakers as an object of resistance, used to combat both subcultural and mainstream norms regarding femininity. I also uncover how these women challenge their marginalised position within the male-centric subculture by building a community and network of other women who share the same passion as them. Moreover, I document how the aficionadas I found use their sneakers as their voice, to communicate, to connect and to counter-balance impositions that deny their being in the subculture as an authentic sneaker connoisseur.

The aficionadas’ use of the sneaker is markedly different to that of male aficionados, because although sneakers have been regarded as an object that is tied to class and race it has unified in a community of people passionate about sports footwear, it falls short of showing the roles of women in the subculture, and women in less economically developed countries, in plain sight. The sneaker community I focus on has reduced women’s involvement in the subculture to the point of invisibility: the male aficionados in the subculture disregard their knowledge, dedication and question their identity. Yet, I was able to find a vibrant, active and passionate group of women in the United States of America who challenged these presumptions about them and while I found an inclusive female community within a male-centric sphere the concept of community does not include all women. My research does not focus on the women whose labour produces the sneakers and who provide the aficionada with their beloved pair of kicks. This line of inquiry into sneaker culture is not what I write about here; it is too large a topic to cover in my work and would need a separate study dedicated to it.⁴³

⁴² S.R. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, April 3 2012.

⁴³ Discussing sneaker production and communities from the position of those who make the sneakers is a project larger than the word count allows. Whilst, I do acknowledge that there is a community of women, who are removed from a discussion that fully encompasses women and subcultures. I am focusing purely on the top down, bottom up

To date, subcultures have been read through a male lens, only detailing youth male experiences in subcultures and omitting the voices and experiences of women.⁴⁴ Anita Harris discusses the tradition of gender bias regarding the scholarship produced about subcultures saying, 'subcultural theory has been widely criticised for exclud[ing] the experiences of young women by focusing on the publicly visible subcultures, populated by young men.'⁴⁵ As although a subculture is defined as a 'quasi political space [...] shaped by their own terms,'⁴⁶ subcultures are not entirely separate from the mainstream, and visible gender, racial and class differences do exist. Subcultures as defined by Ken Gelder are characterised by the 'excess or exaggeration [in] behaviour, styles and dress [and] consumption' which when 'contrasted with the restraints and moderations of 'normal' populations'⁴⁷ appear abnormal. For example, some of the aficionadas interviewed have over two hundred pairs of sneakers: one particular aficionada, A.K, has every Air Jordan model ever released in her size (which is approximately 600 pairs of sneakers.) This makes the questions of why women participate in this subculture; from an insider of the subculture's point of view, this question might be phrased as one about when did they started collecting or what is their favourite pair is. Anita Harris argues that the extent to which we study traditional feminism and feminist resistance must be widened, in order to identify new ways in which women are enacting resistance. She proclaims that, 'new ways [women have] of [tackling] politics and culture that may not be recognisable under more

relationship between the aficionadas on the bottom or street level and the top and corporate level of the footwear industry.

⁴⁴ Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2000)

⁴⁵ Anita Harris, *Next Wave Subcultures: Feminism, Subcultures, Activism* (Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group: New York, Oxon, 2007), p.2.

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 2.

⁴⁷ Ken Gelder, *Subcultures: Cultural Histories and Social Practice* (Routledge: New York, Oxon 1997), p. 4.

traditional paradigms.⁴⁸ I therefore present a community of aficionadas who wear sneakers for subversive qualities such as the agency, resistance and freedom sneakers give them, women who consciously wear sneakers as a way to negotiate their identities and challenge the construction of femininity in society. Aficionadas utilise their sneakers to create social bonds in the form of an exclusively female community and network of women who they at times refer to as their “sole sistas.” Through their use of sneakers, this group of women challenge their invisible status in a male-centric space. By subverting the use of sneakers and the subculture on their own terms they highlight their agency within a subculture, as opposed to their assumed passivity and non-existence.

Existing cultural histories, both in and outside of the subculture, such as websites, magazine articles, documentaries and scholarly articles on sneaker culture are all focused on the male voice and experiences. There is a visible gap in the existence or construction of a woman’s perspective. Within the subculture, few books are valued as being a concise and authentic account of sneaker culture as much as, *Where’d You Get Those? New York City’s Sneaker Culture: 1960-1987*⁴⁹ by Bobbito Garcia, whose testimonies and photo documentary on sneaker culture from 1960-1987 remains the most valued account of the subculture from someone who grew up in the apex of sneaker collecting. A variety of websites also exist that are trusted sources for sneaker news and history such as, *Crooked Tongues*,⁵⁰ a London based website and *Nice Kicks*⁵¹ based in Texas. Another valued source is the documentary *Just For Kicks*⁵² by Thiabault de Longville, which

⁴⁸ Anita Harris, *Next Wave Subcultures: Feminism, Subcultures, Activism*, p. 1.

⁴⁹ Bobbito Garcia, *Where’d You Get Those? New York City’s Sneaker Culture: 1960-1987*, (Testify Books, 2006.)

⁵⁰ Crooked Tongues, “Selling Soles Since 2000.” accessed 6 August 2013, <www.crookedtongues.com>.

⁵¹ Nice Kicks “The most read source for sneaker news, release dates & history.” accessed 6 August 2013, <<http://www.nicekicks.com>>.

⁵² *Just For Kicks: A Documentary About Sneakers, Hip-Hop & The Corporate Game*, directed by Lisa Leone & Thiabaut de Longville (2005, Image Entertainment, 2004.)

discusses sneaker culture and its importance to music, sport and its accession to a business in corporate America. All the examples given above feature interviews from male sports journalists, musicians, sneaker aficionados and celebrities, with little or no women being present to give their account. Women remain voiceless in all methods used to spread the history and promote the importance of sneaker culture.

The first, and so far only, book to show women as “sneaker heads” was written by Lori Lobenstine, a sneaker collector, youth worker and basketball coach from Boston. In her role as a youth worker and basketball coach, she is connected daily with a multitude of young women who tell her repeatedly that they are not represented in the media. Her own book, *Girls Got Kicks*⁵³ and her website, *Female Sneaker Fiend*⁵⁴ was her opportunity to change the existing narrative that removed women from the sphere of being present within the subculture which even author Bobbito Garcia acknowledged in the book’s blurb: ‘*Girls Got Kicks* [...] filled the void for what all efforts prior, including mine, failed to uncover.’⁵⁵ Lobenstine explained in an interview with *Interrupt Magazine* that, ‘the first narrative I had of myself was a tomboy, being a little kid who liked to play kickball and then baseball. I wanted to be the first girl in the major leagues and then basketball, so because I didn’t see myself in the media, the first goal for myself was to be a photographer.’⁵⁶ The absence of young girls and women like her urged her (as it did me) to create her website and book which brings women together across America, and the world: South Africa, London, Brazil and documents their experiences. Lobenstine explained that:

⁵³ Lori Lobenstine, *Girls Got Kicks* (Levellers Press: Massachusetts, 2011.)

⁵⁴ Female Sneaker Fiend, accessed 6 August 2013, <www.femalesneakerfiend.com>.

⁵⁵ Lori Lobenstine, *Girls Got Kicks*. p.46

⁵⁶ Interrupt Mag, “You need to meet Lori Lobenstine”, accessed 6 August 2013, <<http://interruptmag.com/?p=470>>.

“Female sneaker fiend is a social intervention. It’s using the image and an existing subculture to change the assumptions that we make about our lives and about who we are. We need a community where we are recognised because the media doesn’t see us. There’s all these articles and books that we’re not in. Girls and women are not in the sneaker websites, we’re not in the sneaker books. So you got this excuse you keep telling me we don’t know where we are, you’ve never known one, I’m the only one you know. I’m like OK, no more excuses, *femalesneakerfiend.com* now you know where we are.”⁵⁷

Her response is assertive, and encapsulates the voice of the ‘badass females’⁵⁸ we both found have a passion for sneakers. On every page of her book, women and some children are photographed “rockin” their favourite “kicks.” They’re surrounded by boxes filled with sneakers piled up to the ceilings, or laid out on the front porch to show the full extent of their collections close up (see Figure 1.)⁵⁹ The photographs of aficionadas re-enforce their status as authentic collectors, women who own all their sneakers and know every detail and history about them. The women featured are depicted because of their collection first and foremost, and are presented in less stereotypical and sexualised ways, where often women are often pictured wearing sneakers in scantily clad clothing. Lobenstine declares that the women within the pages of her book and even those who are not featured, ‘rock kicks [as] an exclamation point to who we are’⁶⁰ and ‘how theses

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Lori Lobenstine, *Girls Got Kicks*, p. 46.

⁵⁹ Appendix A

⁶⁰ Ibid. p.4.

sneaker lovers push beyond stereotypes, using kicks to be both athletic and sexy, hip and tomboyish grown and youthful as they define who they are - and who women can be - on their own terms.⁶¹

She brings into focus the topic of resistance, of how women wear sneakers to attack the assumptions made about their appearance and the unrealistic ideal of femininity. Moreover, she shows how sneakers facilitate the interplay between a masculine and feminine identity saying, 'just as tomboys use sneakers to demand respect on fields and courts, girly-girls use them to demand freedom from any assumptions that they need to be rescued.'⁶²

In recent years the innovation and technology input into sneakers has been outstanding, and aficionados and aficionadas are currently in a time period where running sneakers are constructed from threads of yarn and fabric,⁶³ where basketball sneakers weigh less than ten ounces⁶⁴ or sneakers cause mass riots when they are released.⁶⁵ Yet before the subculture was created, before sports companies began to release more than one model and more than one colourway (colours used) of a sneaker, the sports shoe came about as a reaction against waste, when rubber companies used excess rubber on the soles of shoes.⁶⁶ This development made it possible for new types of sports shoes used not only for running but for basketball, football and skateboarding too. Heavily influenced by the cultural and social changes in society, today's sneakers are deeply connected to popular culture, most notably because of their inseparable relationship with sports and music. The

⁶¹ Ibid. p. 185.

⁶² Ibid. p. 46.

⁶³ Nike Inc, "Nike Engineers Knit For Performance", accessed 11 August 2013, <<http://nikeinc.com/news/nike-flyknit>>.

⁶⁴ Nice Kicks, "Adidas Unveils The Adizero Crazy Light 3", accessed 11 August 2013, <<http://www.nicekicks.com/2013/07/02/adidas-unveils-the-adizero-crazy-light-3/>>.

⁶⁵ ABC News, "New Nike Air Jordan XI Concord Causes Shopping Frenzy", accessed 11 August 2013, <<http://abcnews.go.com/Business/nike-air-jordan-xi-concord-shopping-frenzy/story?id=15220618#.TvS7SnrYF-l>>.

⁶⁶ Academia.edu "Thomas Turner, The Origins of the Modern Training Shoe, 1945-1975", accessed 27 August 2013, <http://www.academia.edu/3094323/The_Origins_of_the_Modern_Training_Shoe_1945-1975>.

modern sneaker is regarded as a cultural icon. Sneakers have been transformed from an object used primarily for function, to that of fashion. They are street staples and signifiers that show you belong to a particular subcultural tribe that places emphasis on their footwear consumption, a group of people that communicate messages and engage in non-verbal conversations through their footwear, as my interview with L.M, a male sneaker aficionado originally from Puerto Rico who writes a sneaker blog, L.M, a male sneaker aficionado originally from Puerto Rico who writes a sneaker blog, reveals:

L.M: Obviously because me and you are in the culture and are quote unquote sneaker heads we tend to focus on the sneaker part of it. That unspoken conversation between sneaker heads when we're saying oh man this guy has SB dunks on, or Air Jordans on. Is this that type of person? He might be a sneaker head, he might be a basketball player. I definitely think if we both walk out with a pair of Air Jordans on or are walking out with a limited pair of Nikes or SB Dunks on you're trying to say I got these and you don't or I got these and I'm trying to look fly and I'm a sneaker head. You're trying to say something positive about yourself and show off, you really are. You know when I saw you, as I was walking up to the store and I saw that you were wearing True Blue III's. In my head I said OK, I know what I'm prepared for now, I knew that this interview wasn't a game and that you knew your stuff.⁶⁷

L.M mentions the instant judgment that “quote unquote sneaker heads” have between one

⁶⁷ L.M. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, May 18 2010.

another. The unspoken conversation L.M refers to, between the person wearing the sneakers and the other “sneaker head” which he points to as me on the day we met for our interview, can be tied to Roland Barthes theory of the signifier, signified and the sign.⁶⁸ In this case, the sneaker is merely a functional object. However, ‘if I weigh it with a definite signified’ - for example a pair of sneakers used to commemorate a social cause or cultural moment such as Black History Month or Breast Cancer Awareness Month⁶⁹ - ‘it will become a sign.’⁷⁰

New York City break-dancer Doze Green explains that, “New York in itself was a mecca for shoes, it’s all about shoes in New York [...] when we’re on the train we’re always looking down, you know what I’m saying, nobody has eye contact everyone is looking at people’s feet.”⁷¹ As New York is the mecca of sneaker culture motivated me to begin my research trip there. Whenever, I travelled “uptown” to Harlem, or to the Bronx and Manhattan on my many sneaker hunting expeditions, I would always find within the space of four walls the “illest kicks” some “new freshness”, or “butter” - terms used to describe a pair of sneakers. As an aficionada you are instantly drawn to spaces like these where you can indulge in your addiction to sports footwear. In the beginning sneakers were primarily worn by African American and Latino American youth who lived in the New York boroughs of the Bronx or Harlem, during the period of 1970 - 1985. The two groups used sneakers in a new context, giving the object a new meaning tied to their aesthetic and

⁶⁸ Roland Bathes, *Mythologies*, p.113.

⁶⁹ Nike Inc, “Nike Pays Tribute To Black History Month”, accessed 12 August 2013 <<http://nikeinc.com/news/nike-pays-tribute-to-black-history-month>>.

Nice Kicks, “Think Pink: A History of Lebron’s Breast Cancer Awareness Shoes”, accessed 12 August 2013 <<http://www.nicekicks.com/2012/09/05/think-pink-a-history-of-lebrons-breast-cancer-awareness-shoes/>>.

⁷⁰ Roland Bathes, *Mythologies*, p .113.

⁷¹ Just For Kicks: A Documentary About Sneakers, Hip-Hop & The Corporate Game, directed by Lisa Leone & Thiabaut de Longeville (2005, Image Entertainment, 2004.)

personal identity as well as the concept of “the cool.” The break-dancers and basketball players that wore sneakers placed a high degree of emphasis on a pair. to not only signify their subcultural style, but also to disguise their low socio-economic status. For them, sneakers became an object through which they could create symbolism and meaning. They could take control over its inert properties and inject their own style into them. They could use sneakers to display their identity as a “baller” or a “breaker” but also to navigate and negotiate their own social positions in society. As DJ, street basketball player and author Bobbito Garcia explains, ‘a lot of us that grew up and created this whole crazy sneaker culture were not people of means [...] you had people stretching out their sneakers for the economic reasons, but the mindset of that created cleaning your sneakers which is a whole culture unto itself, people carrying around toothbrushes and putting their sneakers in the laundry and people painting their stripes to give their sneakers a new life, these were all things out of necessity as people wanted to give their sneakers a new life but you didn’t have the funds to buy them all the time.’⁷² Sneakers were their ‘foundation’, as W.S, aged 34 who grew up in New York during the rise of sneaker culture and he now worked for a sports brand in Portland told me:

W.S: You’re known by what people see on you so your shoes are your foundation, you could have the worst clothes on but if your sneakers were right that’s the first place people look. People usually looked down and we’re like ‘Yo what size you wear’ because they were about to steal them. They would put their foot beside yours and say they look like my size but if you had good shoes it was the first place people looked, they didn’t look at you from head to toe, they actually looked from the bottom up. If you had shoes with holes in them,

⁷² Ibid.

cats were like yo you're poor but if your shoes were right, people would bypass your clothes. Most times back then most people spent their money on your shoes, they were your way of getting round. It was your foundation. It's like if you build a house and everything you build upwards comes from the strength of that foundation.⁷³

Sneakers rose to prominence during the New York summer times, when masses of people would gather around their local outdoor basketball court for the highly competitive summer league series, where neighbouring teams would venture to the local courts to compete in the five-on-five game. The local street basketball players, or “ballers” as they were commonly referred to, were the first people to lace up a “fresh” pair of kicks, which was usually given to them by prospective College basketball coaches as a way to entice players to pick their teams when they left High School. When local basketball legends such as Clyde Frazier or Pee Wee Kirkland attended the summer league events, onlookers craned their necks as they sat on the bleachers, on top of rooftops or peeked through the chain link fences to see their local sporting heroes “go to work” on the court. They watched on with intensity, as the players passed the ball behind their backs or “alley-ooped” the ball (an offensive team play in basketball where one player throws the ball to the perimeter of the rim, and their team mate catches the ball mid-air and scores a basket) to the tall reach of a player who leaped into the air only to slam dunk it down through a chain link net.⁷⁴ The audience remained captivated, and watched on attentively not only to keep up with the fast paced style of play in an action filled game, but also to see what new and exclusive coloured sneakers the players had on

⁷³ W.S. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. Portland, May 20 2010.

⁷⁴ Huff Post Live, “Streetball Legends in New Documentary” accessed 22 February 2014, <<http://live.huffingtonpost.com/r/segment/5187d3c62b8c2a152900052b>>

their feet.⁷⁵

During the 1970s New York was rapidly becoming a hub for cultural expression. The influx of Caribbean immigrants, combined with the African American culture brought 'up south' with from black migrants, created a pulsating mix of different food, music, culture and people all together in the milieu of the inner-city. At that time too, Hip Hop music and culture was born and sneakers crossed over from the arena of street basketball to another group of performers who were formulating their entire identity and placing importance around what they wore on their feet. The B-boys and B-girls that congregated on street corners with their linoleum cuttings, or make-shift dance floors from flattened out cardboard boxes, wore sneakers as they glided into their freeze poses and matched the colours in their sneakers, with their clothes. The graffiti artists too, who could be found "bombing" the side of derelict buildings or the New York Metro Subway late at night, and the MC's and DJ's who performed at 'block' parties, all used sneakers as the foundation for their street style aesthetic. Both groups of performers and artists wanted to look "fresh" or "dope" at all times, espousing what Michael Eric Dyson describes as 'the black cultural nuances of cool, hip and chic.'⁷⁶ Dyson's concept, which I translate into 'beats', 'blackness' and 'basketball', further reinforces how much this time period in American cultural history was significant to underpinning the notions of black cool and style. As well as the notion of resistance, what underpins the aficionada identity is the African American cool, a notion which has influenced the greater American landscape in all realms of cultural expression. Jazz historian Ted Gioia argues that, 'like the attitude it describes, comes from the African American community [and] we [...] find this connection between coolness

⁷⁵ Bobbito Garcia, *Where'd You Get Those? New York City's Sneaker Culture: 1960-1987*, (Testify Books, 2006.)

⁷⁶ Michael Eric Dyson, "Be Like Mike? Michael Jordan and the Pedagogy of Desire," accessed on 20 February 2013, <<http://www.courses.vcu.edu/ENG-snh/dyson.htm>>.

and blackness again and again'⁷⁷ and, moreover, that 'the black community play the key role in disseminating the cool into mainstream society.'⁷⁸

Prior to becoming of importance in sneaker culture, the concept of the cool - always looking good, being expressive in your clothing, having a distinct 'swagger' or demeanor about you - and thereby bypassing your current socio-economic status - is evident in earlier enslaved African American communities. Historians Shane White and Graham White in their study of African American expressive visual style through clothing argue that, 'the bodies of slaves (and later of free blacks) was contested terrain, the sites on which a struggle between racial groups was often destructively played out.'⁷⁹ The African American body was denigrated in America; those of African descent were not considered a full human being in society. This was confirmed through the law following the ruling during the Philadelphia Convention of 1787 where it was decided that African American slaves were to be regarded as three fifths of a person for representation purposes. Black bodies were bought, sold and traded like cattle, and exploited for their manual and reproductive labour. African Americans managed to show agency and combat their oppressive state through appropriating Euro-American clothing, with a visible and distinctly African twist. They fashioned a, 'culturally distinctive aesthetic display.'⁸⁰ Their vivid arrangement of colour which was described as, 'clash[ing] violently'⁸¹ by 'jangled white sensibilities'⁸² coupled with their penchant for different

⁷⁷ Ted Gioia, *The Birth (and Death) of the Cool*, (Speck Press: Colorado, 2009) p. 48.

⁷⁸ Ibid. p. 51.

⁷⁹ Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin' African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginning to the Zoot Suit*, (Cornell University Press: United States, 1999) p. 4.

⁸⁰ Ibid. p. 4.

⁸¹ Ibid. p. 31.

⁸² Ibid. p. 23.

fabrics, all contributed to their striking visual presentation in antebellum society. The African American aesthetic in the New World, which originated from African culture, was a way for them to negotiate their lives and exert control over their bodies during enslavement. In clothing, they found resistance, as White and White explain: 'the vivid, visual presence [slaves] established was an emphatic repudiation of their allotted social role.'⁸³ Moreover, 'there was an edginess underlying the white response to this black style, a sense that white control was, at least obliquely, being challenged.'⁸⁴ The similarities shared the female aficionada community and enslaved African Americans in terms of using clothing as means of resistance is evident. The separate community created by enslaved African Americans, could be situated as subculture in itself: it existed separate from the mainstream and developed its own codes and signifiers. Also, the struggle for ownership of their own bodies by enslaved African Americans and the resistance they found through clothing shows parallels with the aficionadas' use of sneakers. However, although the history of the cool within African American is significant within subcultures, gender has played a divisive role in structuring the hierarchal order of the subculture of sneakers and in Sarah Thornton's analysis of subcultural capital she argues that, 'after age, the social difference along which subcultural capital is aligned most systemically is, in fact, gender'⁸⁵ She writes that young girls in subcultures either, 'acknowledge their subcultural hierarchy and accept their lowly position within it' or 'emphatically reject and denigrate the feminized mainstream.'⁸⁶ Women do exist in predominantly male subcultures and in sporting activities connected to male pastimes (such as Harley Davidson

⁸³ Ibid. p. 35.

⁸⁴ Ibid. p. 35.

⁸⁵ Ken Gelder, *Subcultures: Cultural Histories and Social Practice* (Routledge: New York, Oxon 1997), p. 204.

⁸⁶ Ken Gelder, *The Subcultures Reader: Second Edition* (Routledge: London, 1997) p. 204.

motorbike riding which Diane M. Martin discusses in her article *Claiming The Throttle*,⁸⁷) as well as in video game culture.⁸⁸ How they negotiate their identity and show their resistance against imposed conventions changes the paradigm of their assumed invisibility and voicelessness. In the case of the aficionada community I predicate this research upon, they are invisible to male aficionados who both deny and test their authenticity, knowledge and identity. Nonetheless, these women are not invisible to one another and assert their knowledge, encouraging each other's shared identity and participation together in this subculture. The aficionada community challenges their invisibility through their knowledge and community, but most of all through their style and portrayal of both a masculine and feminine identity on their bodies. The aficionada community changes the assumed role of women as invisible or passive and present themselves as the 'doers' of things, the ones with agency who organise and who they lead from within a male-centric space, as well as the 'un-doers' of things, who break down the gender binaries and manipulate them for their own gain. Their actions are connected to a larger project of contemporary feminism, and to how women view the spaces they occupy and the atypical resistance they have.

⁸⁷ Diane M. Martin, John W. Schouten, James H Alexander, *Claiming The Throttle: Multiple Femininities in a Hyper-Masculine Subculture*, *Consumption Markets & Culture*, Vol. 9 Issue 3 p. 171-205.

⁸⁸ The Independent, Laurie Penny, "A woman's opinion is the mini-skirt of the internet. For criticising neo-liberal economic policy making, it was suggested I should be made to fellate a row of bankers", accessed 7 December 2012, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/laurie-penny-a-womans-opinion-is-the-miniskirt-of-the-internet-6256946.html>>.

The Guardian, Vanessa Thorpe and Richard Rogers, "Women bloggers call for a stop to 'hateful' trolling by misogynist men. Anonymous trolls regularly threaten female writers with rape," accessed 10 September 2013, <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/nov/05/women-bloggers-hateful-trolling>>.

Chapter 2

“Without It My Whole Get Up Wouldn’t Even Be Right”

- G.H

In the hip hop community a cypher is the setting for improvisational rap battles. Within the group of people, lyrics are exchanged back and forth between opponents until the crowd decides, through a round applause or raucous noise, who is the winner. The lyricism and wordplay of a rapper is significant because, according to DJ Grandmaster Caz, ‘lyrics are what hip hop is all about’⁸⁹, they are, ‘rhymes that paint pictures for people.’⁹⁰ One person within the hip hop cypher may mimic the sound of the snare and bass of a hip hop beat with their mouth for the MC’s to rap over, or a DJ will “rock” the “1s and 2s” meaning spin the records on the turntables. The cypher is a place for MC’s to prove themselves and display their verbal talent in the art of rapping. Conversely, the term cypher in a lifestyle context also represents the selected elements which make a person’s presentation individual and unique. For example, as Erin Patton explains, ‘particular brands of sneaker, apparel, cell phone and car can make up your individual cypher.’⁹¹ The cypher in this context pertains to the elements of a person’s wardrobe or their “get up”⁹², as G.H calls it. It is what

⁸⁹ YouTube, “The Art of Rap trailer” accessed, 6 August 2013, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2YqIp5PynOA>>.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Erin Patton, *Under The Influence: Tracing the Hip-Hop Generation’s Impact on Brands, Sports, & Pop Culture*, (Paramount Publishing Inc: New York, 2009), p. 35.

⁹² G.H. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, May 18 2010.

comprises their identity. Throughout this chapter, I will refer to the cypher in both contexts - of the sphere of Hip-hop and of a person's identity - in order to bring together the importance of personal performance and style. Both the space of the cypher and the personal "get up" of the aficionada has been used by the aficionadas as a way of resistance and creation of a separate identity. In the cypher of the aficionadas I detail how sneakers are the starting point and foundation for their outfit.

Furthermore, it is through their sneakers that they are able to engage "feet first", it is where they begin their daily presentations of themselves and through which they want their voice to be heard. Two singles in particular, one by Pittsburgh MC Mac Miller in which he raps, "Nikes on my feet make my cypher complete"⁹³ and the single "The World Is Yours" in which New York MC Nas says, "suede Timbs on my feet make cypher complete"⁹⁴ not only show the link between sneaker culture and hip hop that we see time and time again,⁹⁵ but both MC's also confirm how central to their "get up" their sneakers are. Sneakers are essential to your ensemble and bring an outfit together in a subculture which values your footwear, and also reflects a distinctive hip hop style and aesthetic. What the MC's assert in their songs is similar to what New York City aficionada T. told me of how she picks her sneakers to wear in the morning stating, "I get dressed from the bottom up."⁹⁶ Similarly, G.H related in her interview that, "without my sneakers my whole get up wouldn't

⁹³ Rap Genius, "Mac Miller, Nikes On My Feet Lyrics" accessed 11 June 2013, <<http://rapgenius.com/Mac-miller-nikes-on-my-feet-lyrics>>.

⁹⁴ Rap Genius, "Nas, The World Is Yours" accessed 11 June 2013, <<http://rapgenius.com/Nas-the-world-is-yours-lyrics#note-4148>>.

⁹⁵ AZ Lyrics, "Nelly Lyrics, Air Force Ones Lyrics" accessed 11 June 2013, <<http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/nelly/airforceones.html>>.

Rap Genius, "Run-D.M.C, My Adidas" accessed 11 June 2013, <<http://rapgenius.com/Run-dmc-my-adidas-lyrics>>.

⁹⁶ T. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, April 3 2012.

be right.”⁹⁷ Although the male rappers give praise to the sneaker, to the female wearer linked to their get up is their resistance to conventional norms of femininity and as the object through which they negotiate their identities. In that sense the sneaker to the aficionada is more than an accessory, or a casual part of their outfit, is essential to their identity. The undertones of both T and G.H statements reveal an extra level of worth and importance that they place on their sneakers: for T constructs her entire outfit from the bottom to the top; and G.H’s attitude and demeanor would not be correct if she never wore sneakers: it is as if it would betray her identity to wear anything else. My interview with G.H underscores this reading further:

LLP: What does sneaker culture and your sneakers mean to you?

G.H: Unfortunately [...] without it my whole get up, you know my set up wouldn’t even be right. I need the right kicks to go with whatever it is I decide to rock. Ultimately, I collect kicks and I hold on to them for years at a time. I even collect baby sneakers, the baby Jordans I have tons of them I’ll even buy them and keep them in storage because I feel like if I ever decide to have children I want them to know what mommy knows and respect what I respect. I always love a sneaker because I fall in love with the color or the mindset behind the person who decided to design the sneaker. I’m very specific with the things I decide to like. It’s the aesthetics, the combination of the materials they decide to use, the cross colors because if you put the right colors together, it will make a sneaker look magnificent, it could be even the shoe laces or could it just be the uniqueness of the sneaker and me knowing that no one else could possibly have that

⁹⁷ G.H. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, May 18 2010.

pair of kicks for me it's multiple things that make me feel oh I gotta have those right there you know what I'm saying?⁹⁸

G.H's answer reveals the intense appreciation she has for sneakers, even amassing baby pairs so she can pass on her passion to her future children. She is in awe of the materials, and colours they use on sneakers that contribute to her attraction to them and feels that without them she wouldn't be complete. Her next answer is more concerned with her gender, and how, as a woman, her participation brings a unique element to sneaker culture. Also, she reveals how others question her personal cypher:

G.H: As a female there definitely is a boundary between men and women, but the only good thing about me is that other females tend to do different [...] because most females would choose, most women are more so into like Louis (meaning Louis Vuitton) [...] whereas me I'm more to the urban culture. Champion, which has been around for ages [...] Levi's which I was wearing when I was in diapers and Jordans, when I was five years old, I used to watch his games you know what I'm saying. Yes, yes absolutely there is a sort of pressure to be a female and do this but as long as I'm being true to myself I couldn't kinda care less what anyone else thinks about me. You know what, I see a lot of people with the same thing and ultimately everybody wants to feel like there's something unique about them you know and I like to think that I'm

⁹⁸ Ibid.

unique you know. I dress kind of unique I don't see every girl walking down the street dressing like me and I like that, so if I find a pair of kicks that has that same attitude they attract me and I have to have them. I have some people that come in all the time and um, why would a pretty girl like you dress like that and I'm like why wouldn't I, I'm me. I'm my own person and I try to find my uniqueness in this crazy society that forces us to be a part of everybody else and wear uniform because ultimately down the line it forces you to think you need to be a part of that, or ultimately it makes you think you don't fit but sneakers it's a form of expression, it's a passion of mine.⁹⁹

Both the above conversation with G.H and the comment by T reveal how needed sneakers are to these women's identity, and to their presentations of themselves as aficionadas. Within their own cypher women are acceptable to each other however, they challenge or contradict other women who favour a more feminine and typically perceived appearance and identity from women. Yet, as G.H says, her style and identity is linked to the "urban culture"¹⁰⁰ to the Hip-hop, basketball and "the cool" mixture of influencing factors I previously outlined. You can identify her like for the "urban get up," as an attempt to regain her body from the expected presentation of women of how they are meant to appear and act which is reflected in the comments from casual shoppers in the store she works in. Her appearance however is authentic and stays true to the urban culture she grew up in. G.H's account here, of why she wears sneakers directly goes against the assumed reasons why women chose to participate in this subculture because she links it to an experience tied to the subculture of sneaker collecting. The widely circulated assumptions about the aficionadas' existence

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

in the subculture, aim to discredit her agency and position of power through the knowledge she possesses. This attitude illustrates how aficionadas are not regarded as cultural producers in the subculture, and are thought to possess little or no agency to be able to legitimately participate. As S.D, a mother of Latin American descent, who works two jobs and studies full time commented:

S.D: With me and a lot of other women they feel that female sneaker heads are either stereotyped as the girl who just gets the shoes coz her man buys them, the girl who wears sneakers all the time and dresses baggy because she wants to be a dude, or the girl who kind of knows about sneakers but wants to be part of something she doesn't know anything about and she's just trying to fit in. I hate [it] when people say we're not a real sneaker head because of this, like what does that have to do with anything or the passion you have for the shoe.¹⁰¹

F.D, a female artist (from New York and of African American heritage) who paints unique designs on to custom sneakers further elaborated on these kinds of assumptions:

F.D: I don't like when I go to a sneaker show and the ladies come out and they have some dope kicks on you know it goes from, in an instant it goes from her kicks to the body, in an instant. For a guy, the way that he equates it, he evaluates the female, not even that he loves sneakers why didn't he say your sneakers are hot [...] they take it from there to there and they need to stop that. If this is sneaker culture and you have

¹⁰¹ S.D Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. Chicago, April 12 2012.

sneaker love, and you see a chick that has a pair of sneakers on that are hot compliment her about that, start a conversation about that you never know who that female is and what she could bring to sneaker culture you know, you never know.¹⁰²

In this interview with F.D, an artist from New York City, she explained an encounter she and fellow other aficionadas from their all female crew, Female Sneaker Fiend (FSF) had at an annual buy, sell and trade event sneaker event. These events represent the largest grouping of “sneaker heads” where they come together in different cities across America or countries with the hope of buying or trading a new pair of kicks. The events are often highly publicised, such as Sneaker Con in New York City¹⁰³ where authorised sellers set up tables and lay out their offerings, and traders roam between the halls with the sneakers in full sight trying to sell or trade them. F.D expressed the instant curiosity and suspicion on part of male aficionados toward aficionadas when they are in attendance at such events. There is the looming feeling that a woman’s presence has interrupted the guarded male space. Here she explains what happened to her and the other aficionadas:

F.D: When we go set up at Sneaker Pimps or Dunk X Change¹⁰⁴ we kill dudes. There’s no denying we have heat. First of all they’re gonna come over to the table because it’s a bunch of girls, but once they get to the table.

¹⁰² F.D. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York, April 3 2012.

¹⁰³ Sneaker Con, “The premier sneaker event”, accessed 28 August 2013, <<http://sneakercon.com>>.

¹⁰⁴ Sneaker Pimps, “Global Sneaker Culture”, accessed 28 August 2013, <<http://www.sneakerpimps.net/home.php>>.

Dunk X Change, “Since 2005”, accessed 28 August 2013, <<http://dunkxchange.com>>.

L.L.P: Would you say the intrigue level as to why you're there rises?

F.D: Definitely, definitely because it's a sneaker show and yeah half of the time it's like what are they doing here? Ok let's see what they have on their feet or on their table and then when they see what we have on the table and we have our own branding, we have our own t-shirts, we have our own damn book that you're not in and um it's a preconception first, when they initially see us, then they come over and then a lot of guys they try to mind pick, they try and see if we actually know about sneakers you know and that's when most of the time if all of us are together most of the time F.W will step up and she'll just drop bombs on them and they'll end up standing there all night with us and sometimes it changes and he then carries that back. Its taken a while to change perceptions but we still don't get recognition.¹⁰⁵

F.D's mention of "drop[ing] bombs" refers to her fellow aficionada demonstrating her sneaker knowledge, another salient point on which they are questioned, as S.D mentioned above. She also went on to say that there is no status given to women in sneaker culture because of their gender: "there's no respect there. They look at it just coz we're females we don't know."¹⁰⁶ My interview with R.K a 19 year old college student from Chicago revealed a similar issue about the aficionada's knowledge being questioned and her having to state vehemently that, "I'm not gonna walk around with something not knowing what they are."¹⁰⁷ A.K, a mother of one from the Bronx

¹⁰⁵ F.D. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, April 3 2012.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ R.K. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. Chicago, April 13 2012.

who works in the automotive industry continued to tell me that she “get[s] made fun of because I’m into the Jordans [and] I’m into the urban look.”¹⁰⁸ She expanded on this, saying:

A.K: Because of the fact that I wear Jordans with jeans but everybody assumes, they make the assumption that one that I don’t really know about the shoe and I’m just wearing it because it’s cool and they’ll start to ask me things like what shoe is that then I tell them. When people try to tell me what the name of a sneaker is and I’m looking at them like that’s not what it’s called [and] most men do not respect female sneaker heads because they automatically assume that we are all doing it for they hype, all just doing it because we’re trying to be cute and take half naked pictures in our sneakers, and that exists I don’t mind but that’s not me, because you’re making the rest of us look bad. Men are so quick to be like you don’t understand or it’s not hard for you like it is us. Yes it is or it’s like you have like 250 pairs of sneakers that’s cool but do you know about them. Sit there ask me about every fucking shoe you want and I will tell you.¹⁰⁹

Also in the inter-connected male arena of street basketball, female players are also made to feel like their authenticity and legitimacy are always subject to interrogation by men. Aficionada from Miami C.M, a twenty-something broadcasting manager who owns over 200 pair of sneakers and is of Latin American descent explained to me the encounters she has when she plays basketball in her hometown:

¹⁰⁸ A.K. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York, April 3 2012.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

LLP: Have you ever been called out or told you can't play because you're a woman that plays ball?

C.M: Um I mean that happens on a daily basis not so much you can't but they won't pick you up or um you could just go off on the court one day and then the next day it's like they never saw you, like "Who are you again"? So [...] constantly I think and that helps as a motivator to every night just go out and kill it every night, coz you have to prove it to them. If a girl makes a mistake on the court once you're never touching the ball again like that's just, that's it but a dude can make a thousand mistakes and he's touching the ball every second and shooting and still putting up bricks and building houses out there you know and he still gets a dap you know? Coz good game you know? So it's a little frustrating but it definitely fuels your fire coz it makes you wanna go hard every time, that in turn makes you aggressive.¹¹⁰

In the same way F.D uses the term "drop bombs"¹¹¹ to describe the abundance of knowledge her fellow aficionada F.W imparts, here C.M explains that she "goes off" on the basketball court. Both comments demonstrate the reaction from these women to being told they cannot play or having their knowledge tested. In the case of C.M, when she is not picked to play on a team, even after she has previously shown she is more than skillful at the game, she internalizes the discrimination and uses it as a motivating factor to play harder, to be better and to prove that her skills on the court should be respected. Further, she shows how male players are favored over

¹¹⁰ C.M. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. Miami, April 10 2012.

¹¹¹ F.D. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, April 3 2012.

women, even if the male player makes mistakes when she says that male Streetball players “make a thousand mistakes” and continue to “shoot [...] put up bricks”¹¹² (which means shots that rebound off the backboard of the hoop) are praised in the form of a “dap” (hand gesture made with your fists to signal friendship or a greeting) for their poor effort in comparison to hers. This spills into the aficionadas’ mentality as not only having to “know [their] shit” but also in their sneaker collections being phenomenal too. This was outlined by A.K:

A.K: Every female sneaker head is completely different and that’s what I love about them the most, just a bunch of women that do different things. You know you have the women like me that have hundreds, or those that have fifty but it’s those fifty that they are most in love with. For me I just can’t get enough, I need more sneakers every weekend I need to get a pair. Some girls have more sneakers then I do, but now there’s a whole bunch of women that I can connect to like J.X is literally my sister, she has over 300 pairs of sneakers Jordan’s she likes Nikes, she gets into everything she loves it all, she’s really about the sneaker life. Me it’s about ninety-five percent of my life is Jordan the other five percent there’s some “Chuck’s” there’s some Adidas but for me it’s like Jordans or nothing.¹¹³

As a testament to the above statement by A.K, noting the dedication and expansive collections of the aficionadas, her “sister” J.X started a project on the photo app Instagram where

¹¹² C.M. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. Miami, April 10 2012.

¹¹³ A.K. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, April 3 2012.

she took a picture every day of the year of her wearing a different pair of her own sneakers (Figure 2)¹¹⁴ proving her collection amounts to, if not exceeds, the total number of three hundred and sixty-five. Within these two arenas, basketball and hip hop culture, sneakers were used for scope and movement and sneakers also complimented your style, with its wearers placing importance in their sneakers and making a conscious effort to match what they wore on their feet to their entire clothing ensemble, of perhaps a Kangol hat, a pair of Levi jeans or a sports tracksuit. Sneakers thus constituted a staple style and visible component in the early hip hop aesthetic. As a result of the growing popularity of sneakers, style began to work hand in hand with performance and people were drawn to the functional and aesthetic benefits of sneakers. For example, when a young rookie for the Chicago Bulls basketball team named Michael Jordan repeatedly wore his banned coloured sneakers (the NBA banned his sneakers because they did not adhere to the correct team colours of his team jersey) night after night as he wowed crowds with his tenacity. Jordan was fined a total sum of \$5000 for by the National Basketball Association (NBA.)¹¹⁵ He caught people's attention with his playing and with his personal style. In Madison Square Garden one night, a sold-out audience gathered to listen to music of the Bronx trio RUN DMC, who rapped over powerful bass-lines their ode to the German sports shoe, *My Adidas*¹¹⁶ the Adidas shell-toe sneaker that was popular amongst break dancers. The sneaker's humble beginnings as a by-product of excess rubber had dramatically changed; and it was now a cornerstone of popular culture, cementing the worlds of basketball and Hip-hop culture together. The benefits of sneakers are obvious: they give the wearer

¹¹⁴ Appendix A

¹¹⁵ Nice Kicks, "This Day In Sneaker History..." accessed 10 September 2013, <<http://www.nicekicks.com/2010/10/18/day-sneaker-history/>>.

¹¹⁶ YouTube, "My Adidas - The Music Video by RUN DMC" accessed 27 August 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dA8DsUN6g_k>.

something flexible in which to maneuver in. In the game of basketball, sneakers could take the impact of the gritty asphalt on an outside basketball court as well as negotiate the smooth hardwood gym floor, and a pair of sneakers could slip, grip and slide on the linoleum floors used by break-dancers. The sneaker's utilitarian function comes to the forefront, and both movement and mobility are essential to understanding social and subcultural benefits of the sneaker. You could navigate the landscape of the inner-city better, as well as move up the social ladder, and lastly, in the case of the aficionada, you could use the sneaker to move the imposed gender binaries and oppose the notion of femininity with your own style and identity which encapsulates both elements of street style and street performance.

In contrast, the history of women's footwear and clothing has restricted women's movement and agency. Patricia Campbell Warner argues that post World War II 'casual clothes' and 'pants and [other] easy, carefree pieces'¹¹⁷ became a permanent fixture in women's wardrobes. This was extremely significant in Western history and, 'for women to wear trousers, the symbol of masculinity [...] openly [and] acceptably [...] it gave women freedom in their dress, unbound from the societal and physical restraints of the past.'¹¹⁸ The "get up" of early sports clothes is far removed from the later Hip-hop and sporting lifestyle that promoted fluidity and expression and is closely connected with the virtue of protecting a woman's modesty, virtue and feminine appearance. The history of women's footwear has been designed to deny the wearer the freedom and scope provided for men in terms of their footwear for traditional male sports. More obvious feminine footwear, such as a pair of high heeled shoes, for example, can be understood through Susan Brownmiller's

¹¹⁷ Patricia Campbell Warner, *When The Girls Came Out To Play: The Birth of American Sportswear*, (University of Massachusetts Press: Amherst, 2006) p. 4.

¹¹⁸ Ibid. p. 4.

comparison of the lack of functional qualities of women's clothing with the greater agency allowed in men's clothing. She explains that women's clothing 'has never been designed to be functional [because] functional clothing is a masculine privilege and practicality is a masculine virtue.'¹¹⁹

The ancient practice of foot binding in China, where young girl's feet were broken and bandages were applied tightly around them to restrict their growth, whilst having the long-term and disastrous effect of crippling the women, made them more desirable to wealthy suitors. Although, foot-binding was outlawed as an illegal practice in 1912, many women continued to break their own feet in private as small feet were considered to be a 'status symbol [which] would bring honour upon the entire clan.'¹²⁰ Foot binding is a reflection of the larger issues of female virtue and modesty as well as functionality, movement and male dominance. Louisa Lim suggests that foot-binding made Chinese women more dependent on their husbands, as their restricted movement prevented chastity as women with bound feet couldn't stray far from their homes to commit adultery. Applying this interpretation of foot-binding being a restrictive process, the aficionada community locate in the sneaker an object to express themselves and challenge the restrictive histories associated with women's feet. The appropriation of sneakers by women marks a leap into the cypher of street style, into movement, into functionality and into practicality for women. They have taken back a part of their body that was historically controlled, albeit it in another culture and been able to change their position. In the process the aficionadas have created new meanings for their bodies, and a new definition of femininity through their unconventional consumption of sneakers. Their participation and passion reasserts the atypical resistance of their consumption. As Emjee explains, 'it's like for girls, girls are expected to dress up nice all the time [...] but the sneaker

¹¹⁹ Susan Brownmiller, *Femininity* (Ballantine Books: New York, 1994) p. 86.

¹²⁰ "Painful Memories for China's Foot binding Survivors." Narrated by Louisa Lim. NPR March 19 2007, accessed 10 September 2013, <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=8966942>>.

thing is a little bit different, because it's a different sort of freshness. It's not a freshness out of societal expectations.'¹²¹ Emjee believes that society dictates that women should wear more feminine clothing or footwear, not an object which is the main signifier for a male subculture or connected to inalienable male virtues of freedom, mobility and agency which A.K also testifies to, "since I was little men and boys could do whatever they want and everyone says it's cool, they can run and jump and have it not be a thing."¹²² Furthermore, T.S, who is Asian-American college student and b-girl from California explained the pressure and expectations of women to wear high-heeled shoes and not sneakers:

T.S: I think it's just like stereotypes and like the expectations that women should be like you know career women or like take care of the home and it's just like expectations that women should wear heels [...] I always feel like women are always meant to wear fancy high heels but when you see women in sneakers and a certain style it's different.¹²³

T.S's comment that a woman, "in sneakers and a certain style [is] different"¹²⁴ and also Emjee's use of the word "freshness"¹²⁵ (an urban colloquialism used to describe how good someone looks and that their appearance stands out) draws us to understanding the aficionada as a rarity, if not unique. As A.K explained:

¹²¹ Lori Lobenstine, *Girls Got Kicks*, p. 4.

¹²² A.K. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, April 3 2012.

¹²³ T.S Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone Recording. San Francisco. April 16 2012.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ Lori Lobenstine, *Girls Got Kicks*, p. 4.

A.K: Like when we do things, when we do it it's unique. Fine guys they'll put on a hat or they'll put on a t-shirt but we just literally make those shoes look like they're worth a million dollars on our feet, coz' we get that right accessory, we get that right accessory and you're gonna see with some of the women when you meet them, some of them are the flyest sneaker heads I've ever met, you'll see them in their little leggings, their nails are always spectacular, they're always smiling but there's other who may not be girling it up but their collection is ridiculous, they make a lot of men look like nothing and a lot of men can only hope to have the collection they have but we are humble, we want to be cool with everyone.¹²⁶

The "freshness" that Emjee describes goes against society's expectations of what women should wear. She explains that the suggested appearance of women is to 'dress up nice all the time' which suggests that their bodies are meant to be prepared and ready for constant display. However, her sneaker wearing, and that of the many aficionadas just like her, subverts this image. A number of the aficionadas I spoke to drew a clear division between shoes and sneakers for women. When dropped in conversation, the term 'shoes' is used as another term for sneakers - alongside kicks, trainers - which was not difficult for me to understand. However, the aficionadas spoke more to the fact that they are expected to wear shoes and not sneakers, the former meaning more feminine, and not masculine, footwear. Shoes are what society wants women to wear, and sneakers are what the subculture and cypher demands them to wear. High-heeled shoes for aficionadas are only worn at

¹²⁶ A.K. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, April 3 2012.

select times, and they prefer to be seen in a pair of sneakers day-to-day as it constantly reflects their lifestyle. The aficionadas stress the impracticalities of high heeled shoes and prefer sneakers for the freedoms they allow, and that high heels do not.

High-heeled shoes are a visible representation of a more conventionally feminine ideal. They evoke a more sexualised impression of a woman. This is explained by documentary film maker Thierry Daher who said the high heeled shoe, “forces a much more sensual look and walk.”¹²⁷ Daher, who has made two documentaries on the topic of shoe consumption, *Just For Kicks*¹²⁸ a detailed account of male sneaker collecting, and *God Save My Shoes*¹²⁹ about women and their obsession with high heels, declared that, “ladies [are] the undisputed world champion”¹³⁰ of shoe culture. Daher claims that male consumption is dwarfed by women’s consumption specifically “American women [who] buy two or three pairs a year on average [which] represents sixty five percent of the [footwear] market [and is] fifty percent more than men and kids put together.”¹³¹ Among the statistical evidence Daher uses, he focuses specifically on the behaviour and feelings of women’s bodies when they wear high heels. He indicates the shift in popular culture during 1950s and 1960s when America embraced a woman’s seductiveness and women were persuaded to go against ‘the feminine mystique.’¹³² During this time according to Daher, the high-heeled shoe

¹²⁷ YouTube, “Shoe Culture, Pop Culture & Brand Content” accessed 6 August 2013, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=endscreen&NR=1&v=GMAqOehKeB8>>.

¹²⁸ IMDb, *Just For Kicks: A Documentary About Sneakers, Hip-Hop & The Corporate Game*, directed by Lisa Leone & Thiabaut de Longeville (2005, Image Entertainment, 2004.)

¹²⁹ IMDb, *God Save My Shoes*, directed by Julie Bensara (2011, Caid Productions, 2010.)

¹³⁰ YouTube, “Shoe Culture, Pop Culture & Brand Content” accessed 6 August 2013, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=endscreen&NR=1&v=GMAqOehKeB8>>.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, (Penguin Classics: London, 2010.)

became symbolic of “newly liberated, sensual woman.”¹³³ However and coincidentally, Daher’s opinions play into the idea of femininity and the heightened sexual agency of women, rather than to her subcultural participation and adaption of an object in a male dominated space. Julie Bensara who co-directed the documentary *God Save My Shoes*, further reaffirms the connection of a high-heeled shoe to the archetype of a woman who wants to be more sensual, vulnerable and seductive. In an interview with *NY Mag* she was asked: ‘Why do you think women wear high heels?’ To which she replied:

I think it’s a combination of two things when you ask a woman why do they love their heels so much? Two words come up: sexy, empowered. Because women feel sexy in their high heels, they feel empowered.¹³⁴

When asked to expand on this Bensara said she believed that heels, ‘empower women because you feel more feminine, you feel that you have more power. Also, you’re taller. When you feel taller, you feel stronger, you stand out. You feel more vulnerable too, you cannot run, you cannot walk fast. It’s not practical obviously, no. A pair of shoes doesn’t change a man physically. High heels literally change you physically the buttocks comes out, the legs are more muscular-looking, and you have to walk slower.’¹³⁵

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ NY Mag, The Cut “The Meaning Behind Women’s Obsession With Shoes,” accessed 6 August 2013, <http://nymag.com/thecut/2011/09/the_meaning_behind_womens_obse.html>.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

Bensara's response depicts heel wearing as empowering even though she, also highlights the impracticalities rather than positive attributes of high-heeled shoes. She admits that it's 'not practical obviously' but more so, her use of the word 'vulnerable' and her admission that, 'you cannot run, you cannot walk fast' further stresses this. The attention she places on the bodily attributes of women, 'the buttocks comes out' reinforce heels as an object that promote sexual pleasure and attention from others rather than the sneaker which is an object that promotes expression and movement which is reclaimed by the wearer.

As an example, the American drama series, *Sex and The City (SATC)* shows the lead protagonist, Carrie Bradshaw, in an episode where her shoes, a pair of silver high-heeled Manolo Blahnik's, were stolen at a friend's baby shower. For Carrie, these are not any ordinary pair of shoes, they are her Manolo's, a high-end shoe brand known for their expensive styles. When Carrie is unable to find her shoes, she is given a pair of sneakers to walk home in and she is not best pleased with having to do this. As she walks home through the streets of New York, the camera pans down her body towards her feet as she waits to cross the street. The viewer is drawn to her elegant dress, and then down to her sneakers, which, in her opinion, represent a fashion faux pas.¹³⁶ This entire image is coded as a juxtaposition between chic couture and street culture, showing that the two don't mix. Yet, from an aficionada's point of view they do mix and the juxtaposition can demonstrate a mixture of masculinity and femininity, rather than the loss femininity altogether. Speaking with A.K, she stated that, "I've heard my entire life that this [meaning sneakers] isn't for girls and that it's not the girly thing to do."¹³⁷ In our conversation below she explains why she loves sneakers and how she views the balance between masculinity and femininity:

¹³⁶ IMDb, *Sex and the City*, "A Woman's Right to Shoes," accessed 6 August 2013, <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0698609/>>.

¹³⁷ A.K. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, April 3 2012.

L.L.P: How do you balance that interplay between masculinity and femininity?

A.K: For me it's a lot of masculinity with a little bit of femininity, because I look like a girl and I cook, and I can do all the motherly things but my sneakers [are] different. I do the opposite in them. They are the most comfortable things ever. Yes ok a stiletto is sexy but I mean really it's not that versatile. [With] sneakers, I wear anything with these sneakers. You can put on a dress with a pair of Jordans, I've seen many people, including myself and some of the people I follow on Twitter they wear cute little spring dresses with Jordans I mean who else does that like you can wear them anywhere. When sneakers were even first made it was for men that were into the whole athletic thing but sneakers are my thing, I guess it's pretty much the meaning of me is my shoes because my clothing is normal but I'll wear a stand out pair like now I'm wearing my Bordeaux's (Figure 3)¹³⁸ or I'll match my nails to my sneakers. When I wear my elephant print threes (Figure 4)¹³⁹ I'll make an elephant print on my eyes. I always match every little detail that I can, but to me the shoe makes me.¹⁴⁰

However, Carrie Bradshaw's wearing of a pair of sneakers is portrayed as a drop in her social status and an appearance not typically associated with a New York fashionista and socialite. This stands in stark contrast to aficionadas' opinions, who identify that other women wearing sneakers is counter cultural and deserve the recognition to affirm their personal choice. As S.C

¹³⁸ Appendix A.

¹³⁹ Appendix A.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

explained to me, “I like every girl that I see wearing sneakers [because] you wearing that sneaker is doing something for [other] women wearing sneakers.”¹⁴¹ The aficionadas are a group of women who are passionate about their style and identity, but also are a group of women who want to use their sneakers to recover from society the imposition of a strict gender performance. They want to break away from the ‘societal expectations’ that Emjee spoke of. This issue in particular, has wider repercussions, not just within the aficionada community, but in mainstream society. The aficionadas’ opinions offer a positive social message for young girls who may feel they transgress from the norm in their appearance of tastes. S.C, who is a student from Philadelphia studying science in college and she also works part time in a sports store, identified the larger benefits of promoting women who wear sneakers:

S.C: Ideally if this can be highlighted more, I think it can be a message to all the girls in society not just with sneakers but do what you want, wear what you want, be who you want don’t let people tell you who to be. And I think that’s one, one of the reasons I took off with my little sneaker obsession it was my way to kind of say, just kinda I’m gonna do what I want and if this is what it is, I’m not going to let society tell me that I’m not supposed to do it and I think that this being highlighted is just another way to show other girls that might not be able to realise that, that you can be who you want, do what you want, and not worry about what you’re expected to do.¹⁴²

S.C went on to tell me a story about her co-worker at a sports store, a young girl who was

¹⁴¹ S.C. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. Philadelphia, April 5 2012.

¹⁴² Ibid.

unsure of whether she could wear sneakers because of what others might say:

S.C: Like there's a girl, there's a little associate that I work with one of the girls that works with me, she's like a junior in high school she's a cute little nugget, she's like sixteen [or] seventeen. She works there and obviously she just started to get into sneakers and like [...] when the Cement IV's came out she was like "I really want to get them but no one in my school wears sneakers and I don't want people to be like weirded out by it" and I was like "Amy do you like them?" and she said "I think they are so cool and I said then get them and she said well I just don't know, I don't think I can pull them off, I'm just a little white girl" and I said "what does that mean" and I said "listen, if you like them you can pull them off [...] You wear what you want, you like what you get" and that's that and she was like "yeah" and I can just see when she got them she put them on and she got that face [...] you know and she's kind of doing her thing now and she said, "I wore these sneakers to school the other day and everyone said something about them" and she was happy about it. She was like it's cool I can do it and I was like "yeah man do whatever you want" it doesn't matter if you don't think people will wear them too, like that's not the point. That's what it's all about being who you want to be and if this is your thing [...] it's all about your identity being who you want to be and needing someone to tell you it's OK. I think its a huge problem especially in America but especially [...] because in theory we're a minority a lot of the times girls are just scared to do what they want and unfortunately we are super influenced by the media, and standards and this and that and what your parents told you [but] girls, women [...]

need to stop and be who you are. [...] I think this is just another little niche that kind of displays that people tend to avoid what isn't allowed or isn't the norm and instead of doing that you should do what you want and if what you want is the norm then that's fine but just be who you are.¹⁴³

S.C connected her obsession with sneakers to the much larger subject of how much society influences women's perceptions of themselves through her example of the conversation with her colleague and the uncertainty of whether she could "pull them off", which I view as whether she could pass as authentic in the subculture. Her opinion is shaped by ideals of what constitutes a feminine appearance. S.C states the importance of "just be[ing] who you are"¹⁴⁴ which is closely related to the urban philosophy to "do you" or "doing you" which means doing what is best for you and not focusing on other people's opinions (and is reminiscent of the famous footwear brand Nike's moniker - Just Do It). My conversation with G.H further revealed the above notion to me, when she said, "you just gotta do you"¹⁴⁵ and she told me how she had confidence from her peers, who had reinforced that her sneaker obsession was fine: "I was fortunate enough to be around dudes that were like, G.H you good just being you."¹⁴⁶ This, in turn, boosted her confidence and she declared to me that, "I'm me, I'm my own person and I try to find my uniqueness in this crazy

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ G.H. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, 2010.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

society that forces us to try to be a part of everybody else.”¹⁴⁷

Carrie’s footwear choice in *Sex and The City*,¹⁴⁸ and, more generally, a woman’s choice to wear high-heeled shoes, take her away from being grounded. High-heeled shoes elevate her posture, they give her height. Afionadas are more concerned with staying grounded, and “be[ing] down” with the subculture they “rep”, which is how they gain allegiance and recognition. The women who love and collect high heels, that Carrie Bradshaw and Julie Bensara represent, are not my focus, they are not present in the cypher of sneakers, basketball and Hip-hop music. There is a difference in the purpose of their consumption and their interest in shoes as it does not have any subcultural ties. It is not rooted in a subculture built on expression and street style, where participants can affirm themselves and feel part of a larger and historical movement. As T.S told me:

T.S: Not a lot of people get it either. A lot of people [...] ask me why I’m into sneakers don’t really understand, they just think that I’m a girl so I’m into shoes but I’m like sneakers and shoes are like different for me you know? I’m not just another female into shoes I’m into sneakers. [...] I feel are more like [...] it’s its own culture.[...] Shoes are more like society and sneakers are more like its own culture in a sense and maybe it’s like coz I’ve seen the culture that I see it as like two separate entities.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ IMDb, *Sex and the City*, “A Woman’s Right to Shoes,” accessed 6 August 2013, <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0698609/>>.

¹⁴⁹ T.S. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. Los Angeles, April 16 2012.

Her above comment was a response to a man she met who began questioning her on why she wore sneakers, and he attempted to conflate the experiences of women wearing shoes and women wearing sneakers as the same thing: “he made a comment that of course you have lots of shoes, you’re a girl.” T.S responded adamantly, “they’re not shoes, they’re sneakers.”¹⁵⁰ Sneaker consumption by women such as T.S, S.D, S.C and Emjee is a resistance tactic to the constant pressures of how and what should constitute a girl or woman today. The women I interviewed showed me that being authentic and identifying as a connoisseur in the subculture was first and foremost a priority. In that particular episode of *Sex and the City*¹⁵¹ when Carrie fails to find her shoes, she is given a pair of sneakers to go home in, and in an indirect way is subtly given an opportunity to walk the streets of New York in more suitable footwear. Yet, Carrie interprets this negatively. This is in contrast to B.M, a Latin American woman in her mid 20s who was studying landscaping and who ran a vintage clothing and sneaker store with her husband, whose daily experience of living in Chicago influences her sneaker wearing but is the complete opposite of Carrie’s:

LLP: How do sneakers fit into your lifestyle?

B.M: I could go to work in “gym shoes” but that’s not the point. The point is I’m walking in the city, all day, I’m taking the train that’s my active lifestyle [...] so I don’t wear heels and I don’t like to be dressy because I’m an active person you know and I’m always walking around

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ IMDb, *Sex and the City*, “A Woman’s Right to Shoes,” accessed August 6 2013, <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0698609/>>.

the city [...] so like I need my gym shoes because I could not last two blocks in heels, flats or flip flops even, I can't even wear flip flops. To me it's rugged, running around [...] being outside a lot.¹⁵²

In the cypher and “get up” of an aficionada, high-heeled shoes and other obvious feminine footwear do not fit. Following Bensara's account of high-heeled shoes, they have no place in this particular discussion because they confirm rather than break away from the conventional expectation of a woman. Wearing high heeled shoes does not allow aficionadas to become what Susan Bordo defines as ‘masters of their [own] lives;’¹⁵³ to be agents and the ‘doers’, not the ones ‘done to.’¹⁵⁴ This shows a negotiation of the ideals of femininity and masculinity that aficionadas have to contend with. Their sneaker wearing moves the metaphorical posts put in place and realigns the traditional understanding of femininity by allowing the wearer to connect actions traditionally associated with both femininity and masculinity on their own body, through the appropriation of a pair of sneakers. Umberto Eco declared that ‘I am speaking through my clothes’¹⁵⁵ which invites an enquiry into the communicative phenomena of clothing, and, even further, the mythologies that they may hold. In the same vein, A.K's assertion, which is the title of my dissertation that, “if you wanna hear my voice, look at my feet”¹⁵⁶ positively states again the worth women find in sneakers, how it is their voice used in the many unspoken conversations between “sneaker heads.” Through

¹⁵² B.M. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. Chicago, April 12 2012.

¹⁵³ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and The Body*, p. 182.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.* p. 22.

¹⁵⁵ David Robey, *Structuralism an Introduction* (Oxford University Press: United States of America, 1976) p. 59.

¹⁵⁶ A.K. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, April 3 2012.

her sneakers, A.K is therefore able to change the way she is 'read.'¹⁵⁷

As I demonstrate women's subcultural resistance through sneakers, Jessica Pabón does so too through her research on women graffiti artists around the world. Pabón argues that upon first glance graffiti art is ignored as destructive act of vandalism, rather than seen as a discourse and visual communication method embraced by women to signify their presence, a push for social change and a literal marker of their voice. During her TEDxWomen talk, Pabón explained to her audience how female graffiti artists are, "reclaiming public space they're asserting their presence."¹⁵⁸ Their tags, which are can sprayed signatures on walls, and also their street murals which Pabón says announces to the world that "I was here, and here and here and here."¹⁵⁹ Her repetition of the word "here," is in reference to the number of graffiti tags the women write and that appear all over the cities they live in. Pabón discussed the character of female graffiti artists she interviewed as "creative [...] confident, and determined." She recognised that in a male-centric subculture, "women have to be doubly so" and that, "they have to be tough, they have to be relentless."¹⁶⁰ Her distinct personality traits which she uses to describe her female graffiti artists cross over to the aficionadas I interviewed: a group of independent, creative, knowledgeable and overall multifaceted women who emit confidence and pride in their collections and who also are asserting their voice and experience in the subculture. Pabón admits that while the actions of female graffiti writers may involve some criminality, because of the often derelict spaces they choose to tag, she has commissioned several

¹⁵⁷ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, p. 10.

¹⁵⁸ TEDxWomen, Jessica Pabón at TEDxWomen 2012, accessed 19 June 2013, <<http://tedxwomen.org/speakers/jessica-pabon/>>.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

art projects globally which aim to show the public the extent to which these women are talented artists and how their ownership of a space to portray their own image is a larger project of contemporary feminism and feminist resistance in their day-to-day lives.

In the cypher of hip hop music female artists have also had to challenge preconceptions and assert their literal voice. This example shows the interplay between women's voices in sneaker culture and hip hop music again, which further reinforces the inter-connectivity of the two expressive forms. Both instances show what Anita Harris explains as the 'young women's own gender politics and the space of subculture beg[inning] to coalesce.'¹⁶¹ American rap artist Queen Latifah and native London MC Monie Love are two women who refused to let their voice be left out of rap music, and whose presentation of themselves does not conform to the overly sexualised depictions of women in hip hop. Their single '*Ladies First*'¹⁶² both announces and celebrates their experience and presence in a genre heralded as giving voice to the trials and hardships of the black male experience.¹⁶³ On their single "*Ladies First*" Queen Latifah raps to perfection within four beats per verse structure in hip hop music, accompanied by the usual sounds of a snare beats manipulated by an MPC machine (electronic drum machine) Queen Latifah's rhymes are introduced by a choir of singers who repeat the lines "Ladies first, ladies first, ladies first."¹⁶⁴ She then 'spits' (a rapper's way of describing their performance of lyrics) the first verse:

¹⁶¹ Anita Harris, *Next Wave Subcultures: Feminism, Subcultures, Activism*, p. 6.

¹⁶² Rap Genius, "Queen Latifah Ladies First Lyrics" accessed 29 April 2013, <<http://rapgenius.com/Queen-latifah-ladies-first-lyrics>>.

¹⁶³ bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, (Routledge: New York, 2004.)

¹⁶⁴ Rap Genius, "Queen Latifah Ladies First Lyrics" accessed 29 April 2013, <<http://rapgenius.com/Queen-latifah-ladies-first-lyrics>>.

The ladies will kick it, they rhyme that is wicked

Those that don't know how to be pros get evicted

A woman can bear you, break you, take you

Now it's time to rhyme, can you relate to

A sister dope enough to make you holler and scream.¹⁶⁵

Her opening verse demonstrates not only her verbal skills as a rapper but the distinct feminist message attached to her song. She explains that, "some think we can't flow [but] stereotypes they got to go!"¹⁶⁶ Additionally, the visual images in the music video of notable black females such as Sojourner Truth and Angela Davis show the strength, courage and power of black women in history, who have often been overlooked in favour of men, and makes an allusion to how Queen Latifah would like to be considered: as a powerful woman whose contribution for social justice and change is equally, if not more important, than that of a man. Queen Latifah's lyrics call is for more recognition for female rappers, which is why she includes MC Monie Love on the single. Monie Love raps that, "believe me when I say being a woman is great [...] strong, stepping, strutting, moving, on rhyming, cutting."¹⁶⁷ The range of adjectives Monie Love uses in this line in particular, which she uses to describe her body movements, outline her power and her agency as a woman and can be connected to the descriptive movements of the aficionadas who continually voice the importance of being active, being able to move, of being comfortable and being able to perform in

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

their footwear, as we see in the following remark: 'If you a cool chick who has a cool sneaker game, it says something. Like you can run, you can get hurt, you can fall, you're ready for shit. It says something about you.' ¹⁶⁸

The song lyrics of 'Ladies First' reveal what is valued by women in subcultures and indicates how they reject the claims about their passivity and their invisible status, how they counter conventions of femininity by acting, by doing and by being assertive in the male-centric spaces they exist in. This is also as argued by Lauraine Leblanc who told the story of how she 'use[d] the punk subculture to construct various strategies of resistance to both mainstream and subcultural norms of femininity.' ¹⁶⁹ Within punk culture she found 'a place to be assertive and aggressive, to express herself in less 'feminine' ways than other girls.'¹⁷⁰ Both the female lyricists and the aficionadas demonstrate their skills in voicing their agency, either through their raps or sneaker wearing. Through their catchy, lyrical wordplay, and by wearing "dope" and "fresh" sneakers that "says something about"¹⁷¹ they stay true to the street subculture they are passionate about. Both groups of women are able to create their own space and conversation, to challenge dominant stereotypes that exist. Women who wear sneakers constantly exercise tropes of masculinity, the privilege and freedom that male sneaker wearers take for granted, as their cypher is acceptable. Their resulting bravado is evident, and is something that women cannot acquire if they wear a pair of high-heeled shoes that remove them and elevate them above the subculture. The sneaker aficionada thus creates their own cypher with their own rules and ways of negotiating their identity in contemporary

¹⁶⁸ Lori Lobenstine, *Girls Got Kicks*, p 46.

¹⁶⁹ Lauraine Leblanc, *Pretty In Punk: Girls Gender Resistance In A Boy's Subculture*, (Rutgers University Press: New Jersey, 1999) p. 8.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid. p.8.

¹⁷¹ Lori Lobenstine, *Girls Got Kicks*, p 46.

society. They use sneakers as part of a larger quest for feminist resistance to dominant ideologies. It makes their “get up” complete as a group of multifaceted women, who can communicate an authentic and alternative experience in sneaker culture. Therefore, the pair of Nikes worn on the feet of aficionadas make their own unique, subversive and resistant cypher complete, because in the sneaker they locate all the qualities they need. Elucidated through rap music or a tag on the wall, a pair of sneakers are the aficionada’s voice.

Chapter 3

“It Started In the Hood”

- S.A

Sneaker culture did not occur in a vacuum, and its inextricable link to hip hop culture which engulfed and subsequently gave rise to it is evident. However, in this chapter I want to shift my argument to the gender performances by women as a result of growing up in these sites which then influence their body performance and further prompt support their negotiation between masculinity and femininity. The known definition of a ‘site’ relates to a physical area such as “the hood” and “the corner”, however, Susan Bordo’s definition of the female body as a ‘site’, upon which culture is inscribed and resistance is played out is also relevant here. In her article, ‘Queering the Space of the Public toilet’¹⁷² Crystin Davies uses the example of public bathrooms to discuss how space dictates a certain type of gender performance. Using Judith Halberstam’s experience of being mistaken for a man whilst using the women’s toilets in a Chicago and Denver airport, Davies focuses attentively on how, ‘bodies are read, misread, written and rewritten’ and questions whether, ‘gender is a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint.’¹⁷³ Her article primarily argues the performativity of gender, a theory taken from Judith Butler in her book *Undoing Gender*.¹⁷⁴ The concept put forward by Butler and argued by Davies is what I draw from to show how the meaning of “the corner,” a predominantly male-centric hub for activity in inner-city neighbourhoods, causes the male body to have a distinct posture, as well as fostering a deep connection to sneakers. The

¹⁷² University of Technology Sydney “Crystin Davies, Queering the space of the Public Toilet,” accessed 27 August 2013, <http://www.dab.uts.edu.au/conferences/queer_space/proceedings/beats_davies.pdf>.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*.

actions and fashioning of the male body at this site contributes greatly to how the sneaker aficionada borrows, remixes, and remaps masculinity onto their own bodies, thus creating a negotiation between femininity and masculinity. Susan Bordo's eloquent discussion of the female body in her book *Unbearable Weight*¹⁷⁵ details the trajectory of the female body as ever changing through the 'pressures of cultural, social, and material change.'¹⁷⁶ Bordo's use of the poem "The Heavy Bear Who Goes With Me" by Delmore Schwartz¹⁷⁷ at the beginning of her book allows readers to envisage women in the role of the bear. Bordo subsequently describes how women are 'weighed down [...] by it'¹⁷⁸ - 'it' referring to the weight of their own bodies. Bordo's description reinforces the extent of how the female body has been seen to, 'lack [...] agency.'¹⁷⁹ Her analysis on the changing role and status of the female body evidences the marginal power women can claim in the public arena through the spaces their body inhabits. Adopting Michel Foucault's theory on resistance, that where there is power, there is resistance, Bordo writes that, 'the female body historically was a colonized territory, not a site from individual determination.'¹⁸⁰ Yet, this is arguably changing, as women have historically, and in the contemporary world, been demonstrating their agency and transcendence through such things the bloomers in the 1850s, through to sneaker aficionadas in the twenty-first century. She argues that 'even as young women today continue to be taught traditionally "feminine" virtues [...] they must also learn to embody the "masculine" language and values of that arena - self-control, determination, cool, emotional discipline, mastery, and so

¹⁷⁵ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and The Body*.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. p. 4.

¹⁷⁷ Poetry Foundation, "The Heavy Bear Who Goes With Me" by Delmore Schwartz, accessed 29 August 2013, <<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/171348>>.

¹⁷⁸ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and The Body*, p. 4.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid. p. 11.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid. p. 21.

on.¹⁸¹

Together the approaches of these two theorists, Davies and Bordo, can be applied to reveal how the aficionadas refashion a masculine gender performance on their own female bodies as a site of resistance and empowerment. “The corner” and “the hood” are positioned as a space of freedom for men, their “cool”, their self-determination and mastery feeds into “the corner” and “the hood” being, ‘a space [for] anxiety and heightened performance[s]’¹⁸² as Davies explains. It is an arena which cultivates masculinity. It is an arena where men prove they are “manly,” and where women are made to look on or are also confined to the home. Yet, the aficionada emerges on this site as a human actor, who can confidently demonstrate how their ‘performance of gender challenges normative readings of exactly how gender should be played out.’¹⁸³ In my jointly conducted interview with J.V, in her mid 30s of Latin American descent who works as a baggage controller in John F Kennedy airport in New York and, S.A, an African American woman in her mid 20s, they describe their “hood.” They both stress the importance of the subcultural origin of where the subcultural origins of sneakers:

LLP: Talk about how you got into the culture, where does it stem from? Is it playing basketball and liking Jordan or your area, the music, what?

J.V: It was a little bit of everything but mostly my area. I grew up in Brooklyn, East New York and really that’s what it was all about it was just the plain old sneaker

¹⁸¹ Ibid. p. 171.

¹⁸² University of Technology Sydney “Crystin Davies, Queering the space of the Public Toilet,” accessed 27 August 2013, <http://www.dab.uts.edu.au/conferences/queer_space/proceedings/beats_davies.pdf>.

¹⁸³ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and The Body*, p.2.

culture, that was it. You either played ball, you was out playing handball [...] that was all part of the culture.

S.A: It started in the hood.

J.V: [With] Hip Hop, exactly!

S.A: It started in the hood and that's my beef.

J.V: And it always started with that.

S.A: Right and what she's saying, that's my beef with all these shoe-celebrities.

J.V: Exactly.

S.A: All that wack ass shit, all these lower east side skinny jean wearing transplant people coming in here thinking that um they know so much about the game like they run shit like they know the whole hood. The whole sneaker culture came from the fucking hood. Like I don't give a shit where you are in the United States [...] East, West, North, South it started in the fucking ghetto, it started in the hood.

J.V: Its authenticity stems from there. When we were growing up literally, we had park games. In the park you'd grab a street light hooked up [inaudible] from your house, cables, wires, we had DJ equipment out, and it was always that we came out b-boys, girls, breaking, popping, dancing. The core of that whole generation was always that we were all connected to our sneakers.

LLP: So you didn't get into it any other way, you grew up with it?

J.V: No we was that.

S.A: I was born into it.¹⁸⁴

J.V and S.A refer to their community as, “the hood” which is interchangeable with the term, “the projects” - government owned housing in America typically found in lower-income and ethnic neighbourhoods. Michael Eric Dyson situates his argument against brand appropriation of sneaker culture, hyper-materialism, and of black masculinity here at street level in “the hoods,” where he describes young black men existing in a subcultural world of illegal activity, and “the hustle” where sneakers are the prize for all their endeavors. Dyson attacks the ‘African American aspects of Michael Jordan’s game’ which he identifies as, ‘edifying deception’, ‘stylization of the performed self’ and ‘the will to spontaneity’ as being, ‘indissolubly linked to a culture of consumption and the commodification of black culture.’¹⁸⁵ Dyson links Michael Jordan’s success as a black basketball player to the creation of his brand, *Air Jordan*, through which the tenets of his success develop into mythologies in his product which passes through to the minds, heart and feet of the consumer. This mythology adds to its allure for aficionados who claim Jordan as being the reason they got interested in sneaker culture:

LLP: You mentioned that you fell in love with the many aspects of Michael Jordan’s game first, how did that then develop into you owning over 600 pairs of Air Jordan sneakers?

¹⁸⁴ J.V and S.A. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, April 4 2012.

¹⁸⁵ Michael Eric Dyson, “Be Like Mike? Michael Jordan and the Pedagogy of Desire,” accessed on 20 February 2013, <<http://www.courses.vcu.edu/ENG-snh/dyson.htm>>.

A.K: Yes. In 1986 my father was watching a Knicks (New York Knicks) vs Bulls (Chicago Bulls) game and I'm only four years old at the time and everyone question I had was why, what, who and I didn't know anything, and he just said just sit down and watch this. So I'm sitting there next to him and all I said is, because he kept clapping every time Michael Jordan did something and I'm like who's that and he said that's Michael Jordan he's new, you have to watch him. That's all I remember from that conversation and all I remember is whenever the bulls played the Knicks I was sitting next to my father watching them and God bless his soul he's pretty much the one that opened me up to Michael Jordan and then on my own I would just sit there waiting for a Knicks game because there wasn't any cable, and you would only see him when he played the Knicks. [...] it's just watching him play, watching the veracity when he plays he is just hungry for every single point that he got and he was the first one trying to make sure that everyone else scored too then I was always looking at his feet like what are those! I was like what are those and my father told me "those are his sneakers, they're called Michael Jordan's" and I said "I want some" and he said those are a little too expensive by this time I was about six or seven and I'm like "they come for kids" and he said "they do but they are a little too expensive for you" [...] so it took me a while I would always ask for them and he was like "no you can't have them" [...] at the age of seventeen was when I got my first pair of Jordan's.

LLP: What did you get?

A.K: The uh black and brown chutney 13s [...] and that was because I said daddy "I need those" and he said "you just got straight A's in school so you know what go

ahead we'll get them for you" after that he said "whenever you bring me straight A's you can have any sneaker you want. I was well behaved [...] so I got whatever I wanted. [...] they said "you're old enough to wear them and take care of them" [...] my Jordan's I would wear them and as soon as I get home I took them off I would clean em and put them back in the box, to this day and monthly I will take every single sneaker from my room put them all along the hallway and sit on the floor and clean every pair just to ensure that they're still good.¹⁸⁶

A.K's experience is shared between aficionados who connect their passion for sneaker culture and collecting to Michael Jordan too. In some cases, as the example with L.M shows, it is connected to class and his father attempting to elevate the social status of his family, through acquiring a pair of Air Jordan shoes, typically priced at one hundred dollars in the 1980s:¹⁸⁷

L.M: My first pair of Jordans and what that signified in my family's progression, as a familial unit because we were you know, I don't want to say broke or poor but we were obviously not well off so when my family could finally afford a pair of Air Jordans, after working so hard for them that signalled a change in our future. After that point, we moved out of, it sounds like a fairy tale but we moved out of where we were currently living which was the low income type situation to a much better part of the neighbourhood and a much better building. So it's like my family buying the Air

¹⁸⁶ A.K. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, April 3 2012.

¹⁸⁷ The average price of a pair of brand Air Jordan sneakers now (September 2013) is £130.00.

Jordans actually signalled a change in my family's financial future. So that's much more to me than rubber and laces and all that - it's a big turning point in the history of my family.¹⁸⁸

Dyson associates sneakers to a whole range of issues in the black community such as crime, class, consumption, style, identity and economic status when he writes, 'at the juncture of the sneaker a host of cultural, political and economic forces and meanings meet, collide, shatter and are reassembled to symbolise the situation of contemporary black culture.' Dyson connects the sneakers to the 'black urban realities' of hip hop music and crack dealing, two arenas where the sneaker emerges as a reward for young black men who took part in both 'legitimate and illegitimate forms of work.' The most salient point in Dyson's analysis of sneaker culture directed at African American men is the effect it has on the, 'young black men [who] rule over black urban space.'¹⁸⁹ These 'young black men' are my focus here and it is their interaction with the 'black urban space' they rule over that produces a distinctly gendered performance. Dyson's lengthy analysis does two things: firstly in drawing our focus to the 'ruled over urban black space', which is crucial to my understanding of "the hood" as a metaphorical space and highlighting the importance in the construction of urban masculinity amongst black youths and secondly in drawing attention to the body movements and actions in these spaces.

Elijah Anderson's ethnographic studies of the life of inner-city communities such as his a

¹⁸⁸ L.M Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone Recording. New York City, May 13 2010.

¹⁸⁹ Michael Eric Dyson, "Be Like Mike? Michael Jordan and the Pedagogy of Desire," accessed on 20 February 2013, <<http://www.courses.vcu.edu/ENG-snh/dyson.htm>>.

study of a bar in Chicago¹⁹⁰ aims to communicate the sense of a community which residents find in the local buildings and with people in the neighbouring area. Anderson brings to the forefront the emotional connection to a space that provides the community that resides there with 'sociability and [...] a sense of self-worth.'¹⁹¹ In his study of the streets of Philadelphia, Anderson identifies a 'code' which runs throughout the city. He defines his hometown, and other urban areas similar to the East Coast location, as a staging area, a 'hangout where a wide mix of people gather for various reasons'¹⁹² and writes that, 'it is here that campaigns for respect are most often waged.'¹⁹³ In his descriptive account of driving through the 'staging area' of Philadelphia he observes the 'young boy[s] appear[ing] dressed in an expensive athletic suit and white sneakers' noting that the sneakers are, 'usually new' and that 'some boys have four or five pairs.'¹⁹⁴ He then describes more of the scenes he encounters saying, 'on certain street corners or down certain alleys, small groups of boys pass the time in the middle of the day. They profile or represent, striking stylized poses, almost always dressed in expensive clothes that belie their unemployed status.'¹⁹⁵ What Anderson witnessed on his drive around the city is the, 'assertion of a young boys masculinity.'¹⁹⁶ As David Schulz explains that boys, 'strive to achieve a "rep" on the street.'¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁰ Elijah Anderson, *A Place On The Corner* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1981.)

¹⁹¹ Ibid. p. 1.

¹⁹² Elijah Anderson, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*, (W.W. Norton & Company, Inc: New York 1999) p. 78.

¹⁹³ Ibid. p. 78.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid. p. 29.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid. p. 29.

¹⁹⁶ David Schulz, *Coming Up Black: Patterns of Ghetto Socialization* (Prentice Hall, Inc: New Jersey, 1969) p. 59.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid. p. 59.

From their 'staging arena'¹⁹⁸, on "the corner", young men can see up and down their "block." They know all the intricate back alleys and main of "their hood", and keep watch for police cars or new faces and turn a blind eye to drug deals that may occur. In "their hood", young boys "post up", with one foot on the wall (much like the picture used on the title page) and they project a hard image to onlookers and in and amongst their peers because they do not, for a second, underestimate the arena for competition and conflict they live in.¹⁹⁹ Under the influence of their peers, young boys begin the process of manhood. Young boys are given guardianship and form fictive kin ties with other men, who then in turn introduce them to the code of the street. In contrast, the experiences of women are marked by a different path and constitute a life of responsibility, restricted to the home and care giving of younger sibling or other dependent family members. As David Schulz explains 'while the feminine role is associated with respectability, dependability, the family, and the home, masculinity is more often associated with the reverse of these and its locus is in the street.'²⁰⁰ Young men begin the posturing of older men, and quickly learn that manhood is contested and fought for in "the hood." "The hood" therefore demands a certain edge, certain behavior, and, at times violent physical actions.

Visual imagery of "the hood" and the 'staging arena'²⁰¹ Anderson describes can be seen in the American television show *The Wire*,²⁰² which is based on David Simon's book *Homicide: A Year*

¹⁹⁸ Elijah Anderson, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*, p.22.

¹⁹⁹ Hypebeast, "Chi-raq by Will Robinson Scott" accessed on 10 September 2013, <<http://hypebeast.com/2013/8/chi-raq-by-will-robson-scott>>.

²⁰⁰ David Schulz, *Coming Up Black: Patterns of Ghetto Socialization* (Prentice Hall, Inc: New Jersey, 1969) Ibid. p. 59.

²⁰¹ Elijah Anderson, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*, p.22.

²⁰² IMDb, *The Wire*, (2002-2008), HBO, accessed 17 June 2013, <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0306414/>>.

on the *Killing Streets*.²⁰³ Black men in “the hood” are shown as being in a constant tussle with the law enforcement of the city of Baltimore and they are cast as heroic and fearless street hustlers who are respected or indeed feared by the local community. They are constantly working on upholding or achieving their “rep” which is measured by the look out positions they hold, the “hits” and deals they do or for not “snitching,” meaning to talk to the police. Here is the setting in which Dyson places the sneaker as a highly valorised object. His argument does indeed cross over to the UK; as in British television drama *Top Boy*,²⁰⁴ which has been compared to *The Wire*,²⁰⁵ the show’s lead character Dushane, played by Ashley Walters, explains what he is going to spend his share of his profits from a lucrative drug deal on to his business partner Joe, played by David Hayman:

Joe: How you gonna spend it, you got any plans?

Dushane: I might buy myself some trainers.

Joe: Trainers?

Dushane: Yeah, it’s the first thing women look at innit.

Joe: Your trainers.

Dushane: Yeah.

Joe: What is this, some kind of fetish?

²⁰³ David Simon, *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets* (Canongate Books: Great Britain, 2009.)

²⁰⁴ IMDb, *Top Boy*, (2011-), Cowboy Films, accessed 10 September 2013, <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1830379/>>.

²⁰⁵ The Independent, “TV Review: Top Boy, Channel 4 - Britain’s answer to The Wire is so much more than guns and gangs” accessed 29 August 2013, <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/reviews/tv-review-top-boy-channel-4--britains-answer-to-the-wire-is-so-much-more-than-guns-and-gangs-8776986.html?>>.

Dushane: You got the trainers, you got the money.²⁰⁶

The effect of the gendered performances in the site of “the hood” is visible in two main female characters in *The Wire*: Detective Kima Greggs played by Sonja Sohn, and Snoop played by Felicia Pearson. Both women are characterised as queer characters of colour. These women are not home dwellers, as the patriarchy of “the hood” which Schulz outlines would demand, but they exist in the midst of “the hood” action. Their appropriation of masculinity can be seen, and is a direct result of, the site of their interaction with “the hood.” When author David Simon was questioned on how he wrote his female characters - their masculine style and queer identity is often commented upon - he said, ‘I tend to suspect that my female characters are, to quote a famous criticism of Hemingway, men with tits.. [...] Kima Greggs is based on a couple lesbian officers I knew, but largely, I write her as a man.’²⁰⁷ His answer points to a deep stereotype of the butch lesbian, however it is the identity and agency these women have which is important. Even his queer male character, Omar, played by Michael K. Williams, who is a gangster feared by many on the show as he walks through the streets of Baltimore brandishing a shotgun stealing from the leading drug dealers, is a homosexual man embodying the stereotypical characteristics of masculinity. In both these examples the characters all reveal the performative nature of gender, as well as the connection to the physical

²⁰⁶ YouTube, 40D Drama “Top Boy : 20 Aug 2013, Series 2 Episode 1, accessed 29 August 2013

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UupP24oDWm8&oref=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv%3DUupP24oDWm8&has_verified=1>.

²⁰⁷ Mystery One Bookstore, Interview with David Simon by Jon Jordan, accessed 17 June 2013, <<http://www.mysteryone.com/interview.php?ID=658>>.

site of “the hood” or ‘staging arena’²⁰⁸ where all the action plays out. The three characters in *The Wire* challenge the media’s typical white, heterosexual relationships on television screens and reveal the interaction and ‘relationship between bodies and spaces, or bodies and architectural design’²⁰⁹ that Crystin Davies elucidates.

Combining the approaches from Elijah Anderson and David Schulz and linking them back to Michael Eric Dyson and his perspective on what ‘the sneaker reflects’²¹⁰, it can be argued that sneaker are inextricably tied to black street culture, and therefore to a black male experience. A pair of sneakers are presented as a prize for the hustle and are held up as an icon of social status and wealth, which all suggest that the sneaker is an object tied to the collective experience of men first, and women second. With masculinity and manhood being reinforced around them, black males turn to the media as another referencing point, which also reinforces their rebellious nature and surrounding as it is scripted onto the bodies of Michael Jordan, the player who took the fine from the NBA for wearing banned kicks. Alongside the “clean cut” Jordan, Philadelphia Sixers basketball player Allen Iverson, also known as A.I or The Answer, aesthetic and entire “get up” was that of someone directly from “the hood” (Figure 5.)²¹¹ Men in “the hood” referred to Jordan and Iverson as their “brothaz”, and they were used as poster boys for successful black men who escaped their surroundings. They were bodies to live vicariously through, their actions imitated on basketball courts throughout the neighborhood and worn in and amongst the streets with every pair of endorsed sneakers by the two basketball players they purchased.

²⁰⁸ Elijah Anderson, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*, p.22.

²⁰⁹ University of Technology Sydney “Crystin Davies, Queering the space of the Public Toilet,” accessed 27 August 2013, <http://www.dab.uts.edu.au/conferences/queer_space/proceedings/beats_davies.pdf>.

²¹⁰ Michael Eric Dyson, “Be Like Mike? Michael Jordan and the Pedagogy of Desire,” accessed on 20 February 2013, <<http://www.courses.vcu.edu/ENG-snh/dyson.htm>>.

²¹¹ Appendix A

Aficionada A.K, who grew up in the Bronx, commented on the daily image of seeing men on her 'block' wearing sneakers and being told by her mother that sneakers were not to be worn by girls:

A.K: Back then it was like why are you wearing sneakers that's what boys do. That's not what girls should do, we're supposed to be wearing shoes. You would see guys back then would wear them and I would just walk down my block and be like that's not fair I want some and then a lot of times even my mom would be like but you're a girl and I'm like but what does that have to do with anything?²¹²

What emerges here is the distinct gendering of sneakers. Sneakers are for boys and men, and shoes are for girls and women. A.K recognised this and went on to say that, "as girls you're not meant to have that tomboyish love with sneakers that guys have."²¹³ However, surrounded by a society saying no, and seeing the stylized performances by men in their neighbourhood, women were encouraged to reflect on their surroundings, and also to pay homage to their basketball idols. Sneaker culture was not something they wanted to be removed from but to be included in, as it was a part of their childhood too: it was the 'staging arena'²¹⁴ for their identity too, it occurred in their "hoods" on their street "corners." Women were drawn towards sneaker culture as a way to express

²¹² A.K. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, April 3 2012.

²¹³ Ibid.

²¹⁴ Elijah Anderson, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City*, p.22.

“rep” where they came from, and express their “full self”, as B-girl T, an African American in her early 30’s who teaches street dance said when she explained what her wearing sneakers meant to her:

T: It’s expressing my feminine side and embracing my masculine side really comfortably. It’s not like I’m putting on an act, and trying to fit it. I’m genuinely embracing my full self.²¹⁵

This combination of masculinity and femininity on the female body reflects the bricolaged identity of the aficionadas. The braggadocio, the swagger, the cocked leg on the wall, the reaction and interaction of male bodies in this particular site, all set up the image of the male as having power, legitimacy and freedom, which is what the women take from and use. In this light, we truly have to refer to the aficionada as a subcultural bricoleur. John Clarke’s definition confirms this. Clarke wrote that, ‘the bricoleur re-locates the significant object in a different position within that discourse, using the same overall repertoire of signs, or when that object is placed within a different total ensemble, a new discourse is constituted, a different message conveyed.’²¹⁶ It is the aficionadas ‘re-locat[ion] of the object’ using the ‘same overall repertoire of signs’ - the street style, authenticity and hip hop culture ‘in a different total ensemble’ on their bodies and on their feet through which ‘a new discourse is constituted [and] a different message is conveyed.’²¹⁷ In the case of T, she clearly expresses how she assembles her identity, and how it is made up by borrowing from people:

²¹⁵ T. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, April 3 2012.

²¹⁶ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, p.104.

²¹⁷ Ibid. p. 104.

T: I star[e] at so many women's outfits and gay guys and really star[e] at their outfits and understand why do I like this outfit and then I'm going to see if I can find a shirt like that. I pick out what I like and make it my own.²¹⁸

Her approach intersects somewhat with theories on queer identity and fashion in respect to those who blur gender lines with their appearance and their deviation from social scripts. Kate Bornstein explains her transgendered style and her sexual identity as a 'collage.'²¹⁹ '[Y]ou know - a little bit from here, a little bit from there? Sort of a cut-and-paste thing.'²²⁰ Bornstein's interpretation is similar to T's assertion that she takes elements from others before "mak[ing] it [her] own."²²¹ T links this to her sneaker wearing which she previously identified as showing both her feminine and masculine side admitting, "I have to have both, and mix it up a little and sneakers are that option for me."²²²

The 'repositioning and recontextualising [of] commodities'²²³ by the aficionadas creates what sneaker boutique owner, S.R, who is in her mid 40s and of Jewish American descent, describes as a "harder edge" - a fluidity between both masculine and feminine gender performances. That S.R refers to her establishment as a sneaker boutique also shows the fluidity too: sneaker is a

²¹⁸ T. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, April 3 2012.

²¹⁹ Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, And The Rest of Us* (Vintage Books: New York, 1995) p. 3.

²²⁰ Ibid. p. 3.

²²¹ T. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, April 3 2012.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, p. 102.

word with masculine associations, and boutique is feminine. S.R describes what she terms as the “harder edge” as being most apparent in “city girls”, in women that live in “Detroit, Chicago” and her hometown of “New York.” She says the “New York sneaker girls” in particular possess a “harder edge”²²⁴ when it comes to their identity:

S.R: There are a few girls that like to look harder and look street and more basketball looking and they wear a jersey and stuff. I don't think that's what we're looking to, that's like a different person. I think what we are looking to do in the sneaker world is take a woman or a girl and just not have it to be so soft, you know? The girls in New York City we're harder girls, we're street girls, [...] not in that sense of the word, but we're harder, we're grittier you know? That's one thing about New York much more than [...] L.A, New York is known for that. We're harder, there is an edge to us, there's more fashion around us we're not afraid to wear colors, we're not afraid to put things together oddly. I think the New York City girl has an edge over a lot of other girls and that's what they're talking about when they say street. Something that makes it different and unique it can be feminine and it can be hard at the same time.²²⁵

S.R's analysis of the street style of the New York City girl, an identity which she describes as “different and unique”, which can be “feminine and it can be hard at the same time”²²⁶

²²⁴ S.R. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, April 3 2012.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Ibid.

encapsulates my portrayal of the aficionada as embedded in that “harder edge” is maleness - mobility, freedom, confidence, and a privilege of not being the ‘heavy bear’²²⁷ but instead the privileged male, unquestioned in their participation in sneaker culture, never judged for their appearance. That “harder edge” is also a response to the geography of the site, and how it influences their performance of gender. It is something that not only S.R identified as pertaining specifically to the East Coast, I also noticed it was apparent when I travelled to New York, Philadelphia, Washington D.C, Miami and even to the Mid-West in Chicago, in contrast to the West Coast cities of Los Angeles, San Francisco and Portland. In New York and cities that trickle down the East Coast and in Chicago, there was more of a utilitarian need to wear sneakers, as we saw with B.M’s explanation of her lifestyle as a “city girl”²²⁸ who needs sneakers to get around. Moreover, as we saw above, woven into the cultural tapestry of the inner-city, particularly New York is the history of hip hop culture. Here it is more authentic: it is the starting point for a cultural revolution. The gritty streets of the city influenced the style, mentality and attitude of its inhabitants, with rapper Jay Z famously proclaiming:

Welcome to the melting pot.

Corners where we selling rocks.

Afrika Bambaataa shit.

Home of the Hip-hop.²²⁹

²²⁷ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and The Body*, p. 182.

²²⁸ B.M. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. Chicago, April 12 2012.

²²⁹ Rap Genius, “Jay Z, Empire State of Mind Lyrics”, accessed 15 August 2013 <<http://rapgenius.com/Jay-z-empire-state-of-mind-lyrics>>.

In contrast, the West Coast has a more individualistic identity. It is more built around ideas of self-preservation rather than of community. It is perceived as reacting more to the hype, rather than having the foundations of an authentic movement. This was apparent in meeting aficionados from that area, it was harder to locate women on the West Coast as opposed to the East. S.Q and T.S confirmed this to me in our interview:

S.Q: There's only two girls I know out here that have social media and do something with it. The coasts in general besides the sneakers are completely different and that's exactly it. In New York everything is family. Here it's very cliquy and here it's a lot of politics and "she's not a real sneaker head her boyfriend is just getting her kicks." Like in general besides kicks out here, they just don't feel that sneaker-hood in them.

T.S: I kind of feel like I'm all by myself too because I don't know anyone that's into sneakers particularly females, I don't know any girls in person that are into sneakers. I'm all isolated by myself. I think it's location too; I'm not really in L.A I'm in the outskirts.

Overall in subcultures and in spaces where men typically 'act' and women 'appear',²³⁰ aficionados subvert traditional paradigms of the subculture in an act of resistance, and a direct attack of their invisibility. S.C responded to this and described the subliminal meaning in her sneaker consumption. It was her way to say, 'fuck you' to society and to the subculture who do not

²³⁰ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Penguin Classics: London, 2008), p. 47.

respect and acknowledge her:

S.C: If you ask anybody that knows me the first thing they mention is my sneakers.

If I go to a release or I'm waiting in line for something I feel the need to be wearing something that's legit, because if not people will be like, "What are you doing?" Just because I am a girl, and that annoys me but at the same time I'm gonna do it because it's my middle finger, because regardless of what you think I'm not gonna do it anyway and I don't care if you like it or not because [...] it's kind a part of my identity it's what I do, it's what I wear!²³¹

Aficionadas want to "flex," meaning show off their collections which they are proud of. S.C's opinion is similar to other aficionada whom I met and who stressed the need to "rock" - meaning to wear their kicks and show off their collection. They link it to a much larger project of their ability to control and present their own identity:

S.D: I try to flex as much as I can because I have a collection and if you're dedicated you will find a way to incorporate it into your life.²³²

²³¹ S.C. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. Philadelphia, April 5 2012.

²³² S.D. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. Chicago, April 12 2012.

Afionadas re-situate many aspects from the site of “the hood” and masculinity into their identity as an aficionada. They use the sneaker, a masculine object which was already a marker for a masculine identity in the sphere of hip hop and in “the hood”, in their own lives to challenge normative expectations and gender roles, with an amalgamated style and interchangeable gender performances. In the spaces of “the hood” women mix between a masculine and feminine performance and identity, so that when they appear in these spaces, “when [they] step out [they] rep the culture, [they] look on point.”²³³ The ‘urban black space’²³⁴ that Dyson introduces us to is built on patriarchy and a woman’s presence clearly disrupts it, their existence is a resistance. Understanding the creation of masculinity in the site of “the hood” and the role it plays in solidifying male relationships helps us to understand why it is such a guarded space, and also why and how women use this to their own advantage.

²³³ F.D. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, April 3 2012.

²³⁴ Michael Eric Dyson, “Be Like Mike? Michael Jordan and the Pedagogy of Desire,” accessed on 20 February 2013, <<http://www.courses.vcu.edu/ENG-snh/dyson.htm>>.

Chapter 4

“It’s All About Being Who You Want To Be.”

-S.C

Aficionadas have to negotiate between the ideal of femininity and what their masculine sneaker consumption means to them. However, they are not viewed as the subcultural bricoleur that I present them as, and their sneaker wearing is not viewed as a resistance because, of the lack of understanding regarding the aficionada as an authentic and active participant of the subculture. As a result of this grave misunderstanding the aficionada is criticised for her appearance, which often is the base for assumptions about her sexuality. Overall, they are continually ignored within the subculture as people passionate about the subculture and whose lifestyle reflects the phenomenon of sneaker culture. The actions and appearance of the aficionada ‘invites objectification’, to use Iris Marion Young’s explanation of women in sporting performances. She argues that when women extend their bodies it warrants more suspicion and commentary: ‘to open her body in free active open extension and bold outward directedness is for a woman to invite objectification.’²³⁵ Society is not familiar or comfortable with viewing the female shoe consumer or aficionada in this way. Here S.D explained what assumptions she has heard as a result of her appearance. S.D’s comments are followed by S.E, from Chicago (White American and in her mid 30s who manages a street wear clothing store in Chicago) who has had her sexuality questioned because she wears sneakers and her appearance reflects a more urban look:

²³⁵ Iris Marion Young, *Throwing Like A Girl and Other Essays In Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory*, (Indiana University Press: Indiana 1990) p. 45.

S.D: They see a girl [wearing] looser fitting jeans and a button up, and she's lesbo all of a sudden. You know, she has to have her hair done or her makeup done for her not to be considered that type of girl. It's tough because just because you wear sneakers and you wear a hoody, it doesn't mean you're one type of person, it just means you like sneakers and you like hoodies. With me and a lot of other women [we] feel like female sneaker heads are stereotyped.²³⁶

S.E: I've always been a very big tomboy. I dress out of comfort and I'm just more comfortable wearing baggy jeans, sneakers and hoodies and hats and fitteds [colloquialism for American baseball caps.] So when I moved here, me and my boy would go shop. I'll leave this shop unnamed I guess, and I walk in and one of the [sales assistants] nudged my boy and said, "What's up with your girl? She's really cute but she's gay right?" and he was like "Na man, she loves dudes!" It's just so silly but I just got always pegged as a lesbian because of how I dress. Like I'm comfortable in boys jeans and boys sneakers and boys everything, basically the only thing I wear that's women's is pants and bras and underwear. They thought that about me because I'd walk in the store and go straight to the men's section and I'd be like "Yo, you got this in a small like, what's the smallest size you got this in?" And every store I went to they would always ask me that, 'are you a lesbian?' I even went to New York [...] same

²³⁶ S.D. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. Chicago, April 12 2012.

thing. I don't know any other girls in this city that are on some tomboy shit like me.²³⁷

Below J.X, (a woman from Miami who is in her early 20s and runs monthly sneaker buy, sell and trade events in Florida) spoke about how her participation in a group of aficionadas particularly disrupts the ideal of a male-centric space:

J.X: It's been questioned more when like FSF goes out, something like that because then they see a bunch of girls together and then they're like I've gotten the question, disrespectful questions like "oh are all of you lesbians" like so because we're in a group together and it's all girls and we're all into kicks that automatically makes us lesbians, explain to me how. If they see me by myself that's not a question, but if it's some of us together then we're automatically something that we're not, and you know some of us might be but just because you know they don't know us we're automatically just judged. I mean everyone judges at the end of the day but it's just one of the other trials that we go through.²³⁸

J.X's expression "it's just one of the other trials that we go through" is reflective of the multiple barriers and questions against women being in a male-centric space. They feel, "stereotyped" and viewed as, "something that we're not." S.E asserts that not a lot of girls, "are on

²³⁷ S.E. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. Chicago, April 14 2012.

²³⁸ J.X. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. Miami, April 9 2012.

some tomboy shit like me” which is an indication of the aficionada’s individuality, but she also points out the influence their childhood has had on their identities as aficionadas and on their presentations of themselves. S.E’s mention of the notion of being a “tomboy” is present in interviews with other aficionadas such as T who mentioned that, ‘I dress like a boy all the time, and sometimes I try to dress a little feminine but still me’²³⁹ or A.K who said, “all I ever did was play with boys, I played football, I played baseball, I played basketball. As soon as I got to school, I was jumping over the boys in a skirt, I didn’t care.” This may be seen to relate to Kerry Robinson and Cristyn Davies’ research on childhood constituting a queer space and time for young boys and girls. Davies and Robinson argue that there is a panic in ‘adults’ readings of young boys’ performances of gender [which has] lead to disproportionate attention to boys’ future sexual orientation’ and that ‘girls’ and women’s performances of non-normative gender seem not to be viewed with the same panic.’²⁴⁰ Yet, what the aficionadas’ testimonies above reveal is contrary to this; as they are viewed with a suspicion which Davies and Robinson suggest is reserved for young boys and men. However, what the aficionadas do show is that their identities ‘undermine binarised understandings of gender, representing more fluid performances of masculinity and femininity in young girls.’²⁴¹ Their remarks relate back to the portrait of the bricolaged aficionadas that I describe, whose identity and appearance are taken from urban masculinity and repositioned on their own bodies. Here, S.Q of Persian-American descent in her mid 30s, and from Los Angeles, explained the transition in her life from appreciating “kicks” at a young age, then growing up and stopping her tomboy nature,

²³⁹ T. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, April 3 2012.

²⁴⁰ Kerry Robinson and Cristyn Davies, *Tomboys and Sissy Girls: Young Girls’ Negotiations of Femininity and Masculinity*, *International Journal of Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood*, Vol. 5 No. 2, 2007. p. 18.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.* p. 18.

because she thought she couldn't be wholly feminine through her consumption of sneakers.

However, she ended up reverting back to her love of wearing sneakers:

S.Q: For me growing up I loved kicks. I loved everything about them of course like any sneaker head would tell you, but in that sense I was a tomboy, I played sports and stuff. As I grew up I realised I wanted to bring my feminine side out. I didn't want to be a tomboy anymore and I thought that that meant I couldn't wear kicks so I dropped it all I didn't really buy much, if I bought stuff it was for working out and stuff. It wasn't until a couple years ago that I realised and I was like fuck that basically, what am I doing, this is so stupid and like I mean for me personally I love heels, I love shoes all around but I dropped it and I started to want to get my love of sneakers back into my life so I got on Twitter, contacting people, talking to them about sneakers. [...] I loved it and I missed it so much that I wanted to dive back into it.²⁴²

Judith Halberstam's research on what she defines as female masculinity, stresses the possibilities of imagining masculinity on a female body. Halberstam argues that masculinity should not be reduced and read through the male body, or indeed the white male heterosexual body. Masculinity produces a series of effects which she identifies as 'power, legitimacy [and] privilege'²⁴³ which are dominant tropes of masculinity and contribute to it being seen and imagined on the bodies of other genders, races or sexualities. Halberstam urges us to distance our

²⁴² S.Q. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. Los Angeles, April 17 2012.

²⁴³ Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, p. 2.

understanding of masculinity being solely about men and rather, how 'the idea of masculinity engages, inflects and shapes everyone'²⁴⁴ including women. Her argument is particularly important in further understanding 'childhood as a queer time and space'²⁴⁵ where, 'children subvert dominant discourses of childhood [and] when children take up different and new ways of performing gender.'²⁴⁶ Being a tomboy, and playing the boy, is an aspect aficionados want to extend into their adult life, as we have seen with S.Q who fell back in love with sneaker collecting and wearing. In childhood tomboyism allows young girls an avenue for escapism in the ability to be a new gendered person, and to engage in activities they are typically meant for young boys and men. One representation of what I describe is the 2011 film *Tomboy*²⁴⁷ by Céline Sciamma. The movie tells the story of ten year old Laure who moves to a new town in France with her family. Away from where her identity as a young girl is known, Laure decides to reinvent herself as a boy called Mickael when she introduces herself to the local children. Laure's short hair, underdeveloped body (in comparison to other female character, Lisa,) and choice of clothing - a vest and shorts - make her performance as a young boy all the more convincing. Laure is able to pass or "play the boy" as her mother scolds her when she later finds out she has been imitating a different gender. Nevertheless, Laure is able to pass as a boy, as her appearance and, more importantly, her actions, are assumed to be natural to a boy. Judith Butler explains that, "we act and walk and speak [...] in ways that consolidate an impression of being a man or woman." Moreover, "we act as if that being of a man or being of a woman is an internal reality or something true about us - a fact. When

²⁴⁴ Ibid. p. 14.

²⁴⁵ Kerry Robinson and Cristyn Davies, Tomboys and Sissy Girls: young girls' negotiations of femininity and masculinity, *International Journal of Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood*, Vol. 5, No. 2. 2007. p. 19.

²⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 21.

²⁴⁷ IMDb, *Tomboy*, directed by Céline Sciamma (Hold Up Films, arte France Cinema 2011.)

actually it's a fact that is being produced [...] all the time."²⁴⁸ Butler's explanation further highlights the performative aspects of gender, as an element that we produce daily rather than a biological concept. In a scene by the football pitch, Laure and Lisa are clearly bystanders who both watch on as the boys play a game of football. Lisa turns to Mickäel and says, "you're not playing?" Mickäel replies, "no I like to watch" to which Lisa agrees, "me too, anyway I don't have a choice they don't want me to play they say I'm useless."²⁴⁹ Laure watches on with intensity and the cameras zoom in on the actions of the boys playing football as if it was through her own eyes. She watches them as they run, spit, tackle and push each other around the makeshift concrete football pitch. She is initially fearful to take part: however as Lisa is branded as "useless" because she is a girl, Laure soon realises that if she does not join she will be branded as "useless" too which could lead to her deception being exposed. Already passing as Mickäel, Laure chooses to work on transforming her actions overnight. She practices and 'perform[s] [her] femininity and masculinity, in order to 'do it right' in front of [her] peers and others.'²⁵⁰ Laure spits in her bathroom sink, flexes her muscles in the window and rubs her hand over her flat chest to test its legitimacy. The next day she joins in playing football not only scoring goals but spitting on the asphalt and taking her top off just as the other boys do. At the end of the game the other boys say "well played", the ultimate compliment for her and a sign that they believe she is one of them. Laure's instant confidence in her role of Mickäel is evident as her 'performance of gender in front of [her] peers [is] reified.'²⁵¹

²⁴⁸ Big Think, "Your Behaviour Creates Your Gender:", accessed 27 August 2013 <<http://bigthink.com/videos/your-behavior-creates-your-gender>>.

²⁴⁹ IMDb, *Tomboy*, directed by Céline Sciamma (Hold Up Films, arte France Cinema 2011.)

²⁵⁰ Kerry Robinson and Cristyn Davies, *Tomboys and Sissy Girls: Young Girls' Negotiations of Femininity and Masculinity*, *International Journal of Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood*, Vol. 5, No. 2. 2007. p. 18.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.* p. 19.

In relation to aficionadas, their sneakers are what blur the gender lines. They imbue the wearer, particularly women with the authority and the ability to perform in masculine spaces such as their “hoods” or in breakdancing and basketball, as well as to navigate the landscape of the inner city. The aficionadas’ expression in this way is a resistance against to the concept of femininity that aims to restrict them, as I have previously outlined. Furthermore, it constitutes a rebellion. Femininity creates a tension between the immanence - the state of being within, and transcendence - existence or experience beyond the normal or physical level. The negative use of the word feminine and femininity means women are continually caught between the bind of immanence and transcendence. Women are judged, or rather, critiqued, for the way they throw a ball and play sports, as well as for why they choose to wear sneakers. The above tension has a dramatic negative effect on women and their self-esteem. They view their bodies as a burden, since their gender is always used as a barrier against their participation in subcultural spaces. As Young explains, ‘woman is thereby both culturally and socially denied by the subjectivity, autonomy and creativity that are definitive of being human and that in patriarchal society are accorded to man.’²⁵² However, female sneaker aficionadas reclaim the term femininity, counter their subjectivity and engage in transcendence. They push to be judged as authentic aficionadas of this subculture. They push for their passion not to be reduced to being viewed as a phase in their lives, or as a subculture they were introduced to by a man. Rather, they want to express their sneaker wearing as an aspect crucial to their personal identity. Their push, quite literally, feet and sneakers first, for inclusion in the subculture and also for recognition. It shows how the aficionada community has the power and ability, as described by Young, to ‘unsettle the order of respectable functional reality’²⁵³ through their “kicks.” They express the desire to “walk good” in their kicks. The undercurrent of “walk

²⁵² Iris Marion Young, *Throwing Like A Girl and Other Essays In Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory*, p. 144.

²⁵³ *Ibid.* p. 144.

good” is confidence and agency within a space, as well as authenticity. The aficionada takes a chance and a risk to create a ‘space for negation,’²⁵⁴ through their subversive or rebellious consumption of sneakers. R.C, a twenty year old female African American college student from Las Vegas explained this in her interview with me:

LLP: What do you mean when you say that women like yourself wearing sneakers is a rebellious culture? Could you tell me more about that?

R.C: The name, rebellious culture it’s like people view us already as oh you’re being rebellious, you’re going against the grain coz’ you’re not buying heels, you’re not buying lip gloss and things and they’re like you’re rebellious, because I wanna be part of this space this culture that’s for men. Because we wanna be a part of a culture that society views for men, that says this is not for you, but this is what I love, so I’ll be that. I’ll be the rebellious face for that, to let women know, young girls especially, like be content with yourself.²⁵⁵

R.C’s description of her consumption of sneakers as, “going against the grain” in society can relate to Susan Brownmiller’s description of femininity, which she described as, ‘a rigid code of behaviour defined by do’s and don’t do’s that went against her rebellious grain.’²⁵⁶ The “rebellious” nature of both accounts, is also indicative of the push back by women - it is a way of showing their

²⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 74.

²⁵⁵ R.C. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. San Francisco, April 20 2012.

²⁵⁶ Susan Brownmiller, *Femininity*, p.14.

agency and rejection of the norms that are imposed on their identity. R.C went further to explain how that same “rebellious” spirit drives her even more, and how her passion should override all skepticism about her participation:

R.C: Like a female doing what you like, what you love regardless of what anyone has to say or what someone, or society says is acceptable or correct, just being you, and I feel at times it was kind of discouraging because you got older women who's not in tune with the culture, they're on the outside looking in like what is this young girl doing with all these men like attending dunk exchanges and things like that like, why are you trying to be involved in what men are involved in when really in actuality it's not about [...] going against what's right as a woman it's just I love this as well this is my passion.²⁵⁷

Aficionadas use sneakers not just in personal identity but in other areas connected to sneaker culture such as break-dancing and basketball as B-girl and sneaker collector T explained. In her opinion, breakdancing, “really connects you with your sneakers” because, “you gotta be able to slide, or they gotta let you spin, or you gotta be able to grip the floor.”²⁵⁸ Here again, her use of sneakers in her day-to-day life contrast with the assumptions of passive, restrained women in subcultural spaces and sport. Rather, the women I spoke to show the complete opposite. In particular, T explained how she became interested in sneaker culture, and how it connected with her love of breakdancing:

²⁵⁷ R.C. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. San Francisco, April 20 2012.

²⁵⁸ T. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, April 3 2012.

LLP: How did you get into sneaker culture?

T: I came into sneakers, I always loved sneakers. It really took another direction because I'm a B-girl so you know it has to do with style and being able to dance and everything like that. As a B-girl I start with my kicks [...] I think from really little I always loved kicks, like I always loved kicks like that's just it. I don't know if it's because I'm a Pisces and my body part is my feet though.²⁵⁹

Similarly, C.M explained that, "sneakers and basketball have a lot to do with each other coz' when you're out on the court, people are checking for what you have on."²⁶⁰ She witnessed this first hand on the street basketball courts in Miami which in turn influenced how much attention she then gave to being aware of sneaker culture and her love for the subculture: "to be playing ball with grown ass men, and seeing what they had on definitely had me checking for what I was gonna wear next time I was on court."²⁶¹ Sitting on the sidelines, often not picked or picked last in pick-up basketball games, C.M was physically marginalised from taking part in the social activity. She remembers that "it was all men, there were never any females out there" on the basketball court and although she assured me that it was "fine" as she preferred "playing with men [it] molded the way I played thereafter."²⁶² Not only are women made invisible in male-centric spaces, they become

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ C.M. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. Miami, April 10 2012.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Ibid.

onlookers too. As an onlooker C.M could observe movement and then through playing allow it to “mold” the ways she played. She explained that, in her opinion:

C.M: Men are a lot more in tune with the game. I feel that by playing with a dude you pick up on a lot more, like if you’re around it long enough you start picking up on certain things and you technically start to play like a dude. You just have the movements and the females I think definitely play different. They play a lot more guarded and I think it has a lot to do with the aggressive nature of how men play and stuff but you know, you learn from that and you keep on evolving your game. I think it definitely has to do with being able to go out and just not care and let any sort of emotion ride out. I like the game because it demanded so much more emotion and it’s a pretty liberating thing.²⁶³

I heard the voice of rebellion, repeatedly from aficionadas such as S.C who asserted that:

“I’m not going to let society dictate anymore. Sneakers are just a part of me. It’s all about being who you want to be.”²⁶⁴

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ S.C. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. Philadelphia, April 5 2012.

Her words, “who you want to be”²⁶⁵ have helped foster the female-centric community and global network of aficionadas. This is a group of women who are rebellious together, but who have also been able to build a positive and supporting network of women. In the case of J.V from New York, the aficionada community has reassured her on a much more personal level, and the “comradeship” and “sisterhood” she has gained from being connected to women who share the same passion as her is very important:

J.V: What I got out of sneaker culture is definitely the comrade and the sisterhood and the understanding of the definition of unity. Twitter actually helped me a lot. I personally grew up with and still deal with generalised anxiety so I’m very much an introvert, shy. I talk now thanks to this, the sneakers, the culture, the love for it that’s what’s helped me that’s what’s helped me as far as meeting her, meeting you, because I’m behind the scenes always, that’s me but when there’s a specific passion for something I can actually open up and put myself out there and let my voice be heard and interact with everybody. Normally [I’m] home, but there’s certain things that clicks in the brain and it helps a lot. This with the sneaker community it’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me, it’s awesome.²⁶⁶

My interview with S.D and B.M, two women who had become best friends through sneakers

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ J.V and S.A. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, April 4 2012.

also underlines the community and network created through women loving sneakers:

S.D: These women have set a precedent for us to demand respect, they know we're not on bullshit and they know we are really into this. I always put that I'm part of FSF in any type of bio, because it is a title, they have set precedence for us to just demand respect you know these women know we're not on bullshit. These women know that we know each other, that we are really into this, they know that we've camped out, they know that we've spent money on sneakers, before we paid phone-bills and gas bills.

B.M: We were really lucky, we carved our way in it you know because we were the people that a girl in Alabama, or Texas or St Louis is probably like there's that group of women that like sneakers, there's FSF you know because we wanted to make our events we wanted to make our blog and um you know like before it was like to each their own and FSF was a lot in New York and I thought why can't people in Chicago do that. So I started meeting people and telling them, we're into it and there's a lot of stories here, and this is my friend and this is my other friend and with that being said, it really unified us to feel like we're sisters. So I can honestly say that S.D is my sister.

S.D: These aren't just my sisters, these are my sole sisters, and when I say sole sister I mean s, o, l, e. These are my sole sisters because they know. These are relationships that we wouldn't have had if we didn't have sneakers.

B.M: It is a great network.²⁶⁷

For the aficionadas, their passion and connection to each other represents something bigger. It extends into the personal lives of the women, with the friendships they make with each other at times across state lines and even countries. The aficionada community's level of outreach is a constant reassurance that lets older women and younger girls know that their consumption, appearance and love of sneakers is acceptable. This can be shown through liking an image on popular social media outlet Instagram, or by the hashtag #FF (which means follow Friday), and alerts the aficionada community with who to "check out" that week on Twitter. F.D also told me of the larger part the aficionada community plays in supporting one another which involves outreach. She spoke exclusively about the FSF community she belongs to and its benefits:

LLP: How important is it for you to connect with younger and older women who are into kicks like you?

F.D: It's very important because Female Sneaker Fiend was based on and founded on girls looking for other girls that love sneakers. Connecting that little girl in Florida who has Jordans but doesn't know the other girl down the block who has a ton of Air Max's. So Female Sneaker Fiend is important because it bridges the gap and lets females know that other females loves sneakers, but are sometimes doubtful and unsure of themselves because it's a guy thing, but we tell them nah it's alright those are dope. Yo, it's all good. You're repping, you know what I'm saying you're out here you're repping. You

²⁶⁷ B.M and S.D Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. Chicago, April 12 2012.

good!

Q: What does that comradeship mean to you?

F.D: To finally find some females that are just like me that have over fifty pairs of sneakers just because, and that continue to add to their collection, it was a defining moment, it was like this is what I belong to. Anyone that knows me knows I rep the Female Sneaker Fiend brand. I call them my “kick sistas.” It’s definitely a support system, you know when you cop something they’ll celebrate it with me. A lot of the time we’re not together but we know that everyone is out there doing their thing and that’s a wonderful thing to be a part of. Sometimes it doesn’t matter that we’re not major, we have that connection it’s all heart felt [and] the ladies are stepping out because we know we have a voice now [...] the book [*Girls Got Kicks*] solidified that.²⁶⁸

F.D’s comments that, “sometimes it doesn’t matter that we’re not major”²⁶⁹ may be an expression of a desire to keep the female aficionada community a niche. My conversation with J.V and A.M shows how important the mere existence of a female community is to them. They note the friendships built as a result, which mirrors the conversation I had with S.D and B.M. Here, J.V and A.M told me of the role the social media plays in their interaction, and how important it is for them to be able to connect through this medium:

²⁶⁸ F.D. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, April 3 2012.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

LLP: How did the community start, how did it become what it is now?

J.V: On Twitter, that's the way I've learned from them. I started learning from the other women who are down to earth and know their stuff.

A.M: What Lori has done, she's actually the first, the only female to have her own sneaker website and then it spawned other sites. We try to keep in contact with them because they wanna build, because they share our same views and struggles like we brought up. I mean the Internet has helped a whole bunch in uh uniting the female sneaker community.²⁷⁰

The importance of social media as an easy and fast way to communicate also allows and demonstrates to women how they might own or reclaim the virtual space which they are also sometimes denied. Women have often been subjected to sexual harassment online; as women cannot escape gender stereotypes either virtually or face-to-face. In August of this year, Walthamstow MP Stella Creasy was subjected to threats of rape and violence after she supported Caroline Criado Perez who campaigned that Jane Austen should be on a British bank note.²⁷¹ Despite this, women have managed to explore and create a unique space on the Internet which in this case is an extension of their community even though the 'the social construction of the computer [and internet is] as a male domain [...] one in which women are not encouraged to

²⁷⁰ J.V and S.A. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, April 4 2012.

²⁷¹ The Guardian, "Twitter under fire after bank note campaigner is target of rape threats" accessed 21 September 2013 <<http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2013/jul/27/twitter-trolls-threats-bank-notes-austen>>.

The Standard, "We'll rape you: Twitter trolls target Walthamstow MP Stella Creasy" accessed 21 September 2013 <<http://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/well-rape-you-twitter-trolls-target-walthamstow-mp-stella-creasy-8736400.html>>.

venture.²⁷² The aficionada community engage daily online through various social media outlets - it is a way for them to showcase their collection of sneakers. A.M and J.V spoke about how important it was for women to come together in a unified way because it dismissed assumptions about how women interact with each other. A.M described the “for self” element of male participation in the subculture, and how important it was as “a minority” for women to unite:

A.M: Like I said before we’re a minority the more of us there is, the more that we can show these companies and these dudes that we’re into sneakers too and hey we’re not going anywhere, you feel me? So it’s definitely important to have a united front.

J.V: It continues to grow because, a lot more girls are probably thinking the same thing you know, it’s a boy thing this that or the other, or maybe they might be afraid you know but with all the girls collectively it continues to grow and it’s literally a sisterhood because now, making friends online it’s literally become a family it’s a major sisterhood so anyone else that thinks that oh they’re just flakes or this that or the other. They’re just here for the meantime that we just wanna show off [...] no! This is here to stay and it’s growing.

A collective is also important to A.K who spoke to me about the unity amongst the female community:

²⁷² Jocelyne Voison, “Women’s Virtual Communities: Utopia or Dystopia” accessed on 10 September 2013, <<http://mud.co.uk/dvw/womensvirtualcommunities.html>>.

A.K: We are way more united. We are really making a movement it's not just about men anymore. Us girls, we'll talk to each other all day, like where did you get those, good for you, where did you find them. Like a friend got me these cement fours (Figure 6)²⁷³ she didn't want them anymore and gave them to me. The girls are so helpful to each other we are united at the end of the day if you're a girl that has twenty pairs of Jordans and has the passion that I have, it doesn't matter that you don't have them all. It matters that you have the ones that you wanted and like the girls are more open, we're more open towards each other with that. It's like you've got three pairs of shoes, do you really like them. Because that's wonderful whereas the guys are like you only have that much, you're not shit.

Q: Do you think the community goes against the stereotype of how women are meant to act together?

A.K: They think we are going to be at each others heads all the time and just acting like complete children but it's not like that at all.²⁷⁴

Despite the restrictions imposed against them, the aficionadas “rebel” against assumptions by forming a separate community. The formation extends itself as a support network, which connects women in the subculture across typical lines of exclusion. Particularly in their reclamation of virtual

²⁷³ Appendix A

²⁷⁴ A.K. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, April 3 2012.

spaces on the internet, another space where women are marginalised, they have carved out their own way and have begun to communicate with each other and also to use the web as a way to extend the movement and female community globally. The aficionadas assert a level of confidence in their display and their identity. They embrace their tomboy identity which is heavily connected to their passion of sneakers, and wanting to “play the boy.” Moreover, seeing the expression and freedom young boys and men have in their daily lives and how acceptable sneaker wearing is for them, their tomboy identity gravitated towards that. That their tomboy identities occurred in their childhood, and is something they are adamant about pursuing, further reinforces the benefits they pull from masculinity and femininity as well as how they negotiate their created identity in society. The aficionadas show they are more fluid in their gender performances than aficionados and that they have the ability to switch and mix and match between identities and performances. The aficionadas actively promote the message of acceptance and community amongst each other, which has larger repercussions in terms of a support network which aficionadas on the street level can go to and be reassured by. This is also another indication of how their sneaker consumption means more than just consumption, it is crucial not just for their identities, but in terms of the creation of a wider community.

Chapter 5

“It’s a Boys Club”

- S.R

In this chapter I analyse sneaker culture and the aficionadas exclusion from another level - the top. So far, I have analysed it at the bottom level and told of the experiences of the aficionada on the front lines of the subculture. However, there is a collective experience happening that encompasses both the aficionadas at the bottom and the women at the top who work in the business of the footwear industry. Within the very male dominated business of the footwear industry, the invisibility of women also exists, and so does their ability to have to negotiate their identity within this space. At the top level, as is visible with the aficionadas on the bottom level, are questions directed towards women about their knowledge and their authenticity. Furthermore, at the top level, the aficionada is not recognised for her subcultural capital or for the conscious decision she makes to wear sneakers. At the top level, it appears the aficionadas are grouped into the category of women who buy and wear sneakers for the fitness reasons, and with women who do not have an enthusiastic interest in sneakers for lifestyle and subcultural reasons.

The assumption that aficionadas are not authentic in their participation, or interested in the subculture, feeds into the product creation and marketing process by footwear brands, whose footwear is tailored towards men or to the stereotype of a woman who will wear a pair of sneakers for performance. It is not tailored to the atypical consumer who uses it for self-expression. From the perspective of a footwear brand, the marketing and advertising of footwear to women for fitness is an easier task. However, I suggest there is a detachment between the footwear brands and the aficionada on the street. Women’s footwear divisions do not recognise the aficionada as a viable consumer, who belongs to a subcultural community and who will buy sneakers as a tool for self-expression, and as a sign of resistance. Furthermore, as a consumer who values their sneakers

because it allows expression, rather than a tool only for fitness and sport. The attempt by footwear brands to appeal to the lifestyle and subcultural part of a woman's love of sneakers is a slowly changing trend and brands such as Nike, Puma and Adidas are just beginning to create product for the aficionada market, for the women who use sneakers for less typical reasons and utilise them as part of a larger project of their personal and collective identity. As an example in 2011, American based director and designer Vashtie Kola became the first woman to design an Air Jordan sneaker for the illustrious basketball brand (Figure 7.)²⁷⁵ The announcement by Jordan Brand stated that they wanted to, 'pay homage to the ladies that are rocking Jordan kicks on the daily.'²⁷⁶ The brands' admission was a definite nod in the direction of the aficionada community and women who have an overwhelming amount of admiration for brand Jordan especially. However, when speaking to the aficionadas themselves, they criticised the availability of these particular sneakers and how quickly the brands' interest passed over such a monumental opportunity to connect with the aficionada market after having an aficionada design a sneaker for aficionadas. The "quick little movement"²⁷⁷ as described by F.D may represent the transient interests by footwear brands into the women's market. In recent times, female celebrities such as pop artists as Rihanna and celebrity Kim Kardashian have been spotted wearing reputable sneakers, and media outlets outside of the sneaker world have reported on this (Figure 8.)²⁷⁸ Yet, these women are not "about" the culture, and are not

²⁷⁵ Appendix A

²⁷⁶ Vashtie Kola, "Did Vashtie Design A Jordan Making Her The First Female To Collaborate With Jordan?!" accessed 26 August 2013 <<http://www.vashtie.com/blog/2010/09/21/news-did-vashtie-design-a-jordan-making-her-the-first-female-to-collaborate-with-jordan/>>.

²⁷⁷ F.D. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, April 3 2012.

²⁷⁸ Appendix A

The Shoe Game, "Yeezy Taught Kim Kardashian About the Air Jordan 3", accessed 30 August 2013 <<http://theshoegame.com/articles/yeezy-taught-kim-kardashian-about-the-air-jordan-3.html>>

Sneaker News, "Rihanna Sneaker News", accessed 30 August 2013, <<http://sneakernews.com/tag/rihanna/>>.

viewed as authentic members by actual aficionados. Largely due to their celebrity status, it is considerably easier for these women to get the latest sneakers. They do not have to “hunt”, meaning search for, or “camp out”, which is sleeping outside retail stores to get their hands on the releases they desire. They often have a team of stylists who compile their look for them, which although it widens the visibility of women wearing sneakers, means that these women are not necessarily aficionados. In my conversation with F.D we spoke about the perception she believed brands hold about the aficionada community:

F.D: How they think about us, it's not perceived as women being street, but we are in the streets everyday we have to do this, we have to do that, we do way more than men on a day to day basis but it's still not street enough. We have a little quick movement around people like Vashtie Kola, but I was disappointed. I mean it did sell, but if it was a women's release why wasn't my size available so I could support? I wasn't able to support. I don't have any kids, I don't have a daughter where I was able to buy her a pair to support. When it comes to the women, it's like if you have a big foot you're not gonna get anything [inaudible] if you have a small foot you're not gonna get a colourway that's hot, so what is the go between for us? What is the go between? We go with the guys shoes but then all that does is for corporate make them see that guys sales are like this.

LLP: Sky rocketing up without seeing whose buying them...

F.D: Exactly you know, so it's just like hitting the brick wall sometime.²⁷⁹

In order to widen the market to appeal to women who wear sneakers, certain brands have made obvious attempts to connect sneakers to women by creating a wedge sneaker (Figure 9)²⁸⁰ that has a visibly feminine appeal. The wedge sneaker has had an instant appeal amongst female consumers for its range of colours however, it has a distinct embedded heel which raises the wearer's foot, in a way a high heel would. Widening the range of women's sneakers that exists at present could be achieved in other less stereotypical ways, such as using less feminine colours on most sneaker models and making sneakers in smaller sizes to accommodate the average women's foot size. The footwear business could be positively affected if brands were to listen to the rich and nuanced explanations from women about how and why aficionados wear sneakers that have been voiced in this study. Using women's stories in the product creation process, or having their lifestyle at the forefront of the brands' agendas, would go a significantly long way to change the perception that brands have of aficionados, and also the perceptions aficionados have of brands. This lack of understanding between both entities is connected to the voice and visibility of the aficionada. Aficionadas need their lifestyle to be made apparent. They need to be heard by people at the level where change can happen. It doesn't diminish their activism in their own community but rather continues their mission to raise the awareness and global connection and continuation of the aficionada community.

My argument above concerning the footwear industry is directed at the colours used on women's-only sneakers, and the sizes available in women's sneakers, rather than considering how

²⁷⁹ F.D. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, April 3 2012.

²⁸⁰ Appendix A.

the aficionadas are taking a masculine sneaker and making it their own. What I discuss below is how the aficionadas are presented with a limited range of sneakers for them to wear and purchase, and as a result have to wear men's sneakers. Although I argue that aficionadas appropriate a masculine object into their lives, one that allows them to perform both a masculine and feminine identity, it is still important that women's footwear becomes more diverse and less bound up with archetypal image of a woman. It is still important that women get a range of colours, as opposed to the very gender specific colours currently used, for example: pink, lilac, purple and that there are more models available in their size. As F.D noted, during our interview "every release it's pink [but] I have nothing that is pink, we both have on nothing that is pink."²⁸¹ Lastly, it is important that it is not always assumed that women use sneakers as a tool for fitness only and for nothing else. The below conversation with S.R is an example of the insights that could be gathered from women when the bottom and top level of sneaker production and consumption coincide. S.R's experience of attending a meeting held between other male storeowners and brand representatives is a regular occurrence for her as a storeowner, however, at this particular meeting the male store owners' girlfriends' were present. S.R spoke of the separate conversation that took place between her and the owners girlfriends' who showed an obvious interest of sneakers and began to voice what they wanted from brands. Her example shows what could be gained by brands listening to women who want more from their sneakers:

S.R: We went to a tastemaker thing and the one conversation we had was the guys said, "our girlfriends are asking like can you do something for me?" And there are a lot of women

²⁸¹ Ibid.

saying we want something and they're not really sure where to get it. So all the guys had their girlfriends with them and I was the only female store owner, the only female owner there and the dynamic is kinda funny, I've been in the business for over thirty years, I've been doing footwear for the past eight and I'm in a man's world and they kinda look at me odd, but they know that I'm in the game, that my store is relevant, they know that I get the right product and I know how to sell it, and their kinda looking at me like maybe she's not that wrong with understanding women. If all the companies could see women trending they will see that they will bring market share, their sales will increase but the guys have to be more open. So we started a conversation and [the men] could see we were interested, all their girlfriends were holding up men's shoes and [...] saying we would like to change this on it or change that, put leopard print or another colour here, and we were talking and whatever and then they were like "where did my girl go, she's actually over there looking at something?" They were surprised because now she has a voice, and now she is excited about something. A lot of the girls were younger and the guys were looking on like what is going on over there, and us girls we're louder, we're chatty, we're talking and they're like looking over and saying "my girl likes it" all surprised and now the brand is like well maybe your girl has to come to more meetings, or maybe we need more female buyers.²⁸²

What S.R's experience reveals is a missed opportunity by brands to connect more with women, and indeed aficionadas, about sneakers in order to gather their insights on future products, the colours, models and stories, and discuss how it can reflect their lifestyle. The women that S.R

²⁸² S.R Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York April 3 2012.

mentions clearly have an interest in sneakers which is demonstrated by the suggestions they would make and the way they are talking about sneakers. Particularly interesting is how this is somewhat unexpected and astonishing to their partners. Moreover, what the example from S.R shows is a problem at the top level, not just in the gap that calls for brands to create something more diverse for women, a sneaker with, “leopard print” on it for example, but for people in the retail industry to buy the sneakers and sell them in their stores. S.R reveals this concern by insisting “they have to be more open.” S.R acknowledges her position as an insider saying “I’m a woman, I’d know what I’d want”²⁸³, but, more importantly, she knows the context women would wear their sneakers in and how, through building a reliable relationship with her female customer base, women who are mainly aficionadas, know that she represents their footwear needs. S.R’s description of the “harder edge” is more and more significant here, as this is what footwear brands should draw their attention to. Her ideal of the “harder edge” reveals her passion for sneakers and her combined identity for something that is, “fun, functional and funky.”²⁸⁴

S.R: I wear sneakers, I’m older but I’m not a jock, I’m not a sports girl, I used to run but I use it as fun and I wear it when I’m bopping around, I wear my sneakers. I’m not wearing a pink pair of kicks. I need something fun and functional and funky and hot so what we all started doing was buying the men’s - we buy um anything that has a harder edge to it and we’ll wear it all differently, but we still have that basis that we want a little bulk to it, we don’t want a skinny skinny thing. You want to have a diverse range and our spending dollar is huge but

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

they're giving us sparkles, they're giving us lavender and come spring they are giving us pastel colours, but what I've found is I can sell the sneakers that come in denim, or with studs, the ones for the men. I can sell those out in smaller sizes before I sell my men's, because we bought them in small sizes.²⁸⁵

Here, S.R alludes to the point F.D made earlier about women purchasing men's sneakers because they come in their sizes, and typically have the better colourways. However, this only adds to the increase of sales in men's footwear, rather than showing that women are buying them for themselves. However, S.R is a rarity. From another industry perspective, former footwear design director D.P mentioned how women, in his words, "don't exist" in the actual footwear industry and as a result the women's sneaker business is an "afterthought" by brands. He explained that women's footwear is something made "to be in line with the business,"²⁸⁶ meaning that production of women's footwear is made to follow existing business plans only. In this excerpt D.P, an African American footwear designer from Los Angeles who currently teaches footwear design in Portland gives his insight into the footwear industry and the absence of women in high positions, and tells how brands do not consider women during the product creation phase, as consumers of sneakers:

LLP: Talk to me about women who work in the industry.

D.P: Don't exist. This is a male dominated industry first of all and I'm talking to you

²⁸⁵ S.R Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York April 3 2012.

²⁸⁶ D.P Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. Portland, April 24 2012.

from a design point of view ok, a quote unquote industry point of view. It's male dominated. Women are there but maybe not even 10%. Um now people of colour, I personally know about twelve in the whole industry. I'm sure I don't know everyone but I doubt if it goes past twenty. So for me it's alarming it's pretty rare because we [meaning black people] just don't exist in this industry.

LLP: Do you think the lack of women and women of colour in this industry affects the products made?

D.P: It's an interesting dynamic because even if you create a product for an athlete, a basketball player. Let's remove the colour part out of the equation. If you're creating a product for them, a person who actually plays the sport or activity they will have a different perspective on it than someone who isn't, who doesn't. They will have a more of a keen sense of functionally playing the activity and they know what intuitively could or could not work or what's good and what's not good. You would think the same thing would apply for if you're designing for different cultures. Where you know you would think that if you grow up in this certain environment, you better understand those people and the culture so there's a higher likelihood that you would create something that appeals to them instead of having to figure it out.

LLP: How then does this impact the women's footwear category?

D.P: It's this big elephant in the room, like ok we have to design women's product now. They know it's revenue but you got a bunch of dudes sitting around the table trying to figure it out then you get one token female in the room and they ask, "What would you do?" and she has to speak for the entire female culture. So it's, I think the industry as a

whole is behind, way way behind the times which to me then translates into product at retail. If the industry that is creating the product doesn't, I wouldn't say not respect, but doesn't acknowledge them, the women as a force and as a true opportunity to for not only knowledge but to create better products for your company. Then it just translates into the product that just shows up at retail. So there is a level of frustration by the women that they go into the store and there's nothing really for me, they have to scrape and find it well that's because women aren't creating it and I think for me I would love to see more of an emphasis for women, same with people of colour to stop being consumer and try to figure out how you're gonna change that round, how you're gonna change that paradigm.²⁸⁷

D.P is arguing for more women to be present at the top level. He has first-hand experience of how it affects the business if women are not there to make crucial decisions or offer their input. A pervading unequal gender bias exists against women in leadership positions, not only in the sneaker industry and not only in the US. The documentary *Miss Representation*²⁸⁸ discusses the portrayal of women in the American media to show the negativity towards women in powerful positions and the destructive repercussions on the self-esteem of young girls. *Miss Representation* presents statistics to show the lack of women in leadership positions. In the case of footwear brands, published figures by Nike show a lack of women at the top. The company asserts that their 'global workforce is half male, half female' yet the gender breakdown at more senior positions differs greatly. Nike's board of directors also shows a huge disparity; as the percentage of women present

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

²⁸⁸ IMDb, *Miss Representation* directed by Jennifer Siebel Newsom (Girls' Club Entertainment 2011.)

is a small fraction of the men (Figure 10.)²⁸⁹ Women featured in *Miss Representation*, such as Condaleeza Rice and Katie Couric, discuss the negative portrayals of women in power by the media. Women in these positions are either seen as the “bitchy boss,” the “cat-fighting female” or the woman who “wants to be a man.”²⁹⁰ The stereotype outlined above is extremely limiting and so far removed from the worth, the experiences and the talent that women would bring to the role. These negative assumptions all combine to delimit the women’s position in a male dominated arena.

D.P also suggests what I read as a considerable detachment between footwear brands and the aficionada community, which then leads to a disinterested approach in creating women’s footwear with a more lifestyle focus. D.P views this as a failure on the part of brands to “acknowledge [women] as a force and as a true opportunity [...] for not only knowledge but to create better product for [the] company.” As a consequence of this, and also of the notion that women do not constitute a “force”, their lifestyles are often not considered in the product creation process at all. Using D.P’s analogy of a basketball player to show that a person who plays that particular sport would have a better idea of how the product should function, and have a clearer idea on the context it would be used in, and linking that to women in the footwear industry to suggest that without their input, the product is lacking the correct input and understanding of how it should look or function is important here. His example of a basketball player, being involved in the product creation process is very apt because in the “sneaker world” the partnership between athlete and designer that is heavily documented. For example, Oklahoma City Thunder basketball player Kevin Durant and the design relationship he has with his Nike designer Leo Chang’s is well documented in interviews on sneaker websites, as is the relationship between Michael Jordan and his lead

²⁸⁹ Appendix A

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

designer Tinker Hatfield, and that of Eric Avar and basketball player Kobe Bryant.²⁹¹ However, from the perspective of women's footwear, that type of relationship and level of insight from the female athlete is considerably absent, as is the aficionadas' insight. I spoke with a female footwear designer at a renowned American brand who revealed her career experiences of often being overlooked as a "big deal" and female footwear designer. C.N was often the co- or sole designer for several basketball sneakers, yet she had never received credit for her work in the publications or websites used within the subculture. We named specific models of basketball sneakers, and she told me that when the writers of the magazines often visited her offices they often walked past her desk and straight to the desk of the male designers. The fact that they ignored her presence confirms the invisibility of women in the footwear industry.

The context in which aficionadas intend to use the product is not apparent to brands, thus creating a separation between what aficionadas *do* use the product for, and what brands *think* they use them for. It appears that it is a business mandate that footwear brands create a women's footwear line, however, D.P admits that women are not, "acknowledge[d] [...] for [their] knowledge [...] to create better product." In my opinion, at this level it appears the aficionada does not exist. It also confirms how much, in contrast, male aficionados are catered to and recognised by brands as there are more options in stores for them. A.K explained her view on brands. She distinguishes herself from the "regular wom[an] who wear[s] sneakers" as the woman who wears them "as part of

²⁹¹ YouTube, "Kevin Durant and Leo Chang Discuss the Nike Zoom KD IV," accessed 29 July 2013, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LmAy8YA1W6U>>.

Nice Kicks, "Tinker Hatfield Discusses Design Relationship with Michael Jordan" accessed 29 July 2013, <<http://www.nicekicks.com/2012/03/09/tinker-hatfield-discussed-design-relationship-michael-jordan/>>.

YouTube, "Building A System: Kobe Bryant and Eric Avar Discuss Design and the Kobe VII System Supreme" accessed 30 August 2013, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qXQD1iCeSiw>>.

[her] personal style.”²⁹² She expands her argument as to why she believed footwear brands do not associate women with belonging to the sneaker community. Her comment here especially reveals the topic of authenticity and also the aficionadas’ invisibility, and also confirms that brands have a propensity to cater towards male aficionados first:

A.K: They think women aren’t really into it, women aren’t really that serious. So when it comes down to, “let’s market a pair of sneakers, they’re thinking what men will like this first. What guy is gonna wear this? It’s never, hey can I have a girl that’s gonna wear that.”²⁹³

Her view is supported by S.R’s opinion of how brands view the “sneaker girls”²⁹⁴, as she refers to them. As I outlined earlier, S.R described the aficionada as possessing a “harder edge.” The “harder edge” she mentions is more reflective of a niche aficionada community, and not the mainstream female sneaker wearers, as S.R indicates below:

S.R: There is a woman that wears sneakers, we wear boots, shoes, pumps but we wear sneakers too. Where mainstream America only wears pink but New York City girls, L.A girls, Atlanta, Chicago, Detroit those girls are city girls and they’re harder and there

²⁹² A.K. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, April 3 2012.

²⁹³ Ibid.

²⁹⁴ S.R Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, April 3 2012.

definitely is a market that no one is addressing or cares to address. They don't have designers designing for the girls on the street. They are trying to do mass merchant whereas they don't do that for the men's, the men's footwear is very specific but why won't they do that for a girl? Why won't it be out of the box? Why does it have to be mainstream? Why does it have to be so commercialised with women and why does it have to be you will give me an aerobic shoe but you're not gonna give me a basketball shoe? There's nothing being offered to this girl - the typical girl yes but not a sneaker girl. She isn't opposed to saying she wants a dope sneaker.²⁹⁵

At the top level discussed here, the aficionada I predicate my research on is not respected for their style and insight because their buying power and sphere of influence is so small and in the eyes of the brands, too niche. They do not constitute a large proportion of the market which affects. Brands are not considering them as consumers who are doing something different with their sneakers, rather women are, as S.R puts it, "dumbed down"²⁹⁶; they are metaphorically put in a box and their lifestyles are as a consequence ignored or assumed. Much of the issues surrounding aficionadas not feeling valued and therefore not visible by brands have a lot to do with the options made available to them. Two of the main issues, as aficionadas see it, center on the sizes available to women and the colourways and shapes (the aesthetic) used. The overall design of sneakers is constantly evolving as brands strive to push innovation and style forward, but these innovations only reach women through the men's market. Despite such a range of sneakers aficionadas are still excluded from participating because of the sizes made available. Aficionadas A.K commented that,

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

“guys always have the dope colorways” and S.D says that in order to get the great colourways, “sometimes we have to buy boys’ [sizes] to get our kicks.”²⁹⁷ This is frustrating for aficionados who are focused on expanding their collection and who cannot get certain pairs: “there’s so many pairs I want but I just can’t get them [because] they don’t come in my size.”²⁹⁸ S.R talked about the matter regarding the lack of smaller sneaker sizes for women:

LLP: What’s the issue with the sizes available and colour of women’s sneakers today?

S.R: Everything is either dumbed-down with the product, and what I’m finding is that even if it is offered to women, the buyers of the store are not buying it, and there’s not that market because number one, sneaker stores are owned by men and if you ask them will they buy a particular shoe in a small size they will think of the man first. They won’t put the extra size allocation into a girl’s size, not realising that there’s a girl out there that wants to wear it. They don’t want to invest into that. The guys aren’t interested and they’re not interested in selling it. If you ask[ed] any of the guys here months ago if they care about what we like, they don’t, they’re like “that’s nice, you’ll get excited” [...] but now what my guys have found working here is that there are girls that get as excited, and there are girls that want that and it’s interesting because their perceptions are changing to think that a girl will buy that.²⁹⁹

²⁹⁷ A.K. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, April 3 2012.

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

²⁹⁹ S.R Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, April 3 2012.

She went on to talk about how saturated the men's market is in comparison to the women's.

S.R thinks this opens up more room in the women's market for opportunity:

S.R: What I've found is that they are slowly looking at women because there's only so much you can squeeze out of men. What hasn't been done before with [a] man's quick-strike sneaker [exclusive and limited]? So for women it's almost like this untapped market and they're having to think outside the box [because] we can start a conversation about kicks, we can be interested too.³⁰⁰

The reiteration from aficionadas that footwear brands have to "think outside the box"³⁰¹, links directly to the more diverse use of colours on women's sneakers. The choice of colours on women's sneakers is always a topic of dispute amongst aficionadas, who identify the colour pink as being the most overused and the biggest misrepresentation of what a woman would like on a pair of sneakers. A.K expressed her dislike of pink coloured sneakers:

L.L.P: What about specific colours used on women's sneakers?

A.K: Not all of us want fucking pink.

LLP: Is it just that colour that annoys you?

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

A.K: I think that's my major comment is when they make a pink shoe and say it's for women. No why can't we fucking have some fucking blues like I don't fucking wear Easter egg colours like I'm not a fucking bunny, like I'm a fucking grown woman and I'm not gonna walk around in baby pink shoes. What am I, eleven?³⁰²

A.K's reply is echoed by numerous aficionados who lament that, 'the industry still thinks that the only way of making a cool girl's sneaker is adding pink and glitter, and they don't realise that we're much more than a color.'³⁰³ Furthermore A.K's comments supports the notion that the colour pink is connected to a young girls childhood experiences and to socialisation to that colour. It may be used as a way of confining women to this stage of their lives. In an interview with F.W, an African American female teacher from Philadelphia. F.W made a similar comment about how to her, overtly feminine colours used such as pink are signs for a much younger age group of sneaker wearers:

F.W: I'm grown. I look at some kicks and I'm thinking is this for a kid? I know they think because I'm a female and I'm petite, I should like sneakers in pink or other feminine colours with satin laces or kicks with a skinnier profile but I like bulkier things, like Nike Air Forces, things with 3M and runners.³⁰⁴

³⁰² A.K. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, April 3 2012.

³⁰³ Lori Lobenstine, *Girls Got Kicks*, p. 168.

³⁰⁴ F.W. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. Philadelphia, April 5 2012.

F.W's preference is for "bulkier things" and she highlights the Nike Air Force, a sneaker with a huge cult following in the hip hop and basketball world³⁰⁵ has an obvious larger build to it and is one of her favourite models (Figure 11.)³⁰⁶ Recently, an online petition emerged arguing in favour of F.W and A.K's earlier points that there should be more variety in women's sneakers. The online petition created by Purple Unicorn Planet (P.U.P)³⁰⁷ directly targeted the brand Nike for selling certain sneakers that are not available in women's sizes. The online movement wrote an open letter to the brand calling for action on the part of the company to make particular models of "kicks" in their size.³⁰⁸ P.U.P state that, 'we want to make all the awesome trainers on our website in all girls' sizes' and their aim is to, 'spread the word all the way to the Swoosh HQ and get Nike to make all the trainers on our website in girls 3 - 5.5.'³⁰⁹ Releasing their letter in the form of a poster through social media outlets such as photo app Instagram and Twitter, the campaign was able to have a wider reach. What P.U.P, as well as the aficionadas I interviewed on this specific topic show, is how they want to be valued as a multifaceted female consumers who are not limited by the lack of choice, size and stereotypical colours used to market sneakers to her. The aficionadas' passion for sneakers is connected to a much larger operation of breaking away from the conventional image of a woman, what she wears and likes. Their existence in a male-centric subculture is a way for them to negotiate new spaces and boundaries, to resist and to interpret the

³⁰⁵ YouTube, "History of the Air Force 1 Part 1" accessed on 20 August 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nw8EC9_hSvM>.

³⁰⁶ Appendix A

³⁰⁷ Purple Unicorn Planet, "Men's Trainers In Women's Sizes" accessed 27 August 2013, <<http://purpleunicornplanet.com>>.

³⁰⁸ Dear Nike, Why are all the trainers for girls always so bland? Somewhere in swoosh there's been an oversight. We don't mean to be all down on the swoosh, it's just we want all the awesome colourways the boys get in sizes we can wear too. Girls, if you agree then embrace the internet with this letter. Boys you can help us too. Share it, tweet it. #Pleasejustdoit Till Nike can't ignore it.

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

culture for themselves. Yet, sneakers that only use the colour pink and are coded as female, consequently feed back into the conventional image of a woman. The childish connotations of pink also further confines their consumption of sneakers to a specific time and place in their lives where they have no authority or agency.

However, despite the resistance from the bottom level, at the top level of the industry using the colour pink is regarded as a “business initiative” by those who work there:

LLP: Why is pink used so much on women’s footwear?

R.R: It’s a business initiative because pink will always sell more and the retailers know that. Even though pink may not speak to the core girl. Pink is going to speak to five other types of chicks that might not even have paid attention to the brand. So it is one of those things that you kind of need to do to check the box, and make sure your area of business is being covered.³¹⁰

R.R, an African American product manager in her early 30s, originally from Virginia but currently working in Portland, explained the use of pink as more of a necessity, and a way to include mainstream women into the culture of wearing sneakers. She admits that it may not appeal to the “core girl” - who I translate as the aficionada but it does appeal to “five other types of chick”³¹¹ which I understand to be mainstream consumers who gradually become more interested in sneakers. Yet, whilst R.R reveals a glimpse into why pink is used, her statement also shows how

³¹⁰ R.R Interviewed by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. Portland, 24 April 2012.

³¹¹ Ibid.

insignificant the aficionada community is viewed as being. Here D.J, a Phillipone American footwear and clothing sales director for a brand who is in his early 30s explains how he views the size of the aficionada community, and as a result how ineffective their resultant spending power is:

D.J: When you think of a broader scope, women only make up so much. You're not the majority, as a sneaker head you're the minority. To your point we do women's quick-strikes but they never sell, and just like anything if you don't come and speak with your dollars (purchase in store) you're not gonna get heard and if it ain't ringing at the registers you ain't getting heard, because brands say look we did make one in your size and we had to sell it at thirty dollars and [they] paid fifty dollars for that shoe. So the retailer gives that feedback back to [the brand] and they say well we're not gonna make anymore because the retailers are mad they're wasting money.³¹²

D.J's argument here is primarily about profit margins. Money is a factor because the footwear industry relies on the basic principal of supply and demand. Women aficionadas are not a big enough cohort of consumers to generate profit for brands; the number of women who buy sneakers at their own leisure for fitness, or indeed in comparison to male consumers, are greater. Aficionadas recognise their position as a minority in the eyes of brands. As B.M told me: "we're such a small group of women, they realise it's such small community, it's not enough money for

³¹² D.J Interviewed by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. San Francisco 19 April 2012.

them.³¹³ The above thoughts by B.M underlines my original view that to brands, the aficionada community is a niche community and their focus leans more towards women who wear sneakers for self-improvement rather than self-expression. Yet, aficionadas want to be understood by footwear brands as authentic cultural participants, to be recognised as consumers who could provide insight and help change the direction of the business. There should be more transparency and opportunities for aficionadas and women to excel in this area and to change the unequal paradigm that seems to permeate both mainstream society and the subculture.

What connects the aficionadas at the bottom level with those women working in the sneaker industry at the top is the creation of a separate community - for women by women - and the ways in which this feeds into how women negotiate a male-centric space. Although there is an absence of women in the senior positions, where women do exist they are actively encouraging to other women that are “coming up.”³¹⁴ S.R in particular understands the impact a lack of female producers has on the footwear industry. She already promotes how important having women in the footwear business is and how influential women have the potential to be, in order to have a greater connection to the aficionada consumer. S.R also extends her support to other women who want to be storeowners or progress in the industry. She admits that, “there’s not a lot women in the business, because it’s a boys club.”³¹⁵ When I asked why this was so, as well as acknowledging the male dominated nature of the footwear business she mentioned how motherhood could be a significant factor too:

S.R: There’s not a lot of women in the business, because one, it’s a boys club and two,

³¹³ B.M. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. Chicago, April 12 2012.

³¹⁴ S.R. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, April 3 2012.

³¹⁵ Ibid.

when you own your own business you give up a lot, I'm here twenty four seven and I go home and I work I do stuff on the computer. So why don't I think there's a lot of women owners and I think that a lot of women owners you have to balance your time and especially for women owners you really gotta balance your time you're giving up time with your family, I did it at this point in my life because my daughter is older and she understood but I didn't open up when she was four I couldn't dedicate my time to it.³¹⁶

S.R also admitted how a woman may have to adapt her personality to be in the business, which reflects that "harder edge" that she espouses. S.R admits that the footwear industry is "not a cushy place, you have to have a little edge, little bit of street side to you"³¹⁷ which illustrates how women have to navigate predominantly male-centric spaces with a more masculine approach because it makes you fit in if you can play the boys at their own game. S.R extends her support to other women trying to have a career in the footwear industry, which highlights the larger project of community and support the aficionadas have with one another:

S.R: I think for women coming into the business it's hard, and I'm trying to support any woman I know that's doing it just to talk and I say you gotta get out there and do it. I'm very open about my business. I'm very much into women doing other things and being empowered in any aspect of their businesses but also to show the world that we're here and how do they address that and how do we have that voice, how do we implement to

³¹⁶ Ibid.

³¹⁷ Ibid.

move things forward so that companies listen and we change that.³¹⁸

Women in the footwear industry recognise just how important it is to pave the way, to support and connect with one another by instigating their own networks. Here D.P recalled to me four women in particular who currently work at a footwear company who started informally mentoring another:

D.P: There's four of them but G.K she used to work with me at [brand name] she's from Miami one of the first actually females of colour in this industry as a designer, she introduced me to C.N, C.N introduced me to P.A, P.A introduced me to P.M. They're all from Miami and uh what's cool about it is G.K was kinda the pioneer in that whole process of leaving Miami and being a female and being a designer and she passed it on and they you know C.N found out about her and they started mentoring, well G.K started mentoring C.N. C.N started mentoring P.A and P.A started mentoring P.M. That's the part that for me but um that's rare, it's pretty rare because we just don't exist in this industry.³¹⁹

At the top level in the footwear industry a failure to understand the lifestyle and identity of the aficionada is visible. Women who work at this level see a crossover of invisibility and a lack of recognition for their talent and insights as the aficionadas do. It is a connected struggle between women at the top and the bottom to continually prove their worth and show why and what they

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ D.P. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. Portland, April 24 2012.

wear sneakers for.

Chapter 6

“Wanna Hear My Voice, Look At My Feet”

- A.K

L.L.P: How would you describe your position or status in the subculture? Do you think you are recognised?

A.K: We are invisible women [and] invisible women to me is that this culture is now known worldwide everyone knows what sneakers are, everyone knows the definition of them, everyone knows the hype behind them, everyone knows how important they are and how popular they are but one thing that is left out is that there are women who can do it better than most of the men can. You know like most of the women on FSF (Female Sneaker Fiend) we have just as much passion as men do, we are just out there as the men, but there's so much missing that the men are like the women aren't into it, the women aren't that serious. So when it comes down to let's market a new pair of sneakers they're thinking what men will like this, what guy is gonna wear this. It's never hey can I have a girl that's gonna wear this, we're invisible in this culture. Fine you know it is great that there are women that are actually working for Nike and working for Adidas and actually have a say in what happens, but there aren't enough because when we go out there and we're like we know about this stuff too you know, take us serious, a lot of guys are like no you don't you're a girl, you don't know about it, you're not passionate like I am, and it's like I'm more passionate than most people about these

shoes. You wanna hear my voice, look at my feet that's it right there.³²⁰

A.K begins the above vignette acknowledging her invisible status within the subculture. She mentions the global exposure the culture has received, “this culture is now known worldwide everyone knows what sneakers are.” Yet, no matter how much “hype” sneakers have, and no matter how “popular they are”³²¹ the potential of women to be viewed on a global scale and recognised as a community of authentic collectors and knowledgeable enthusiasts is not happening. Her remark that there’s “so much missing” is what I have tried to capture throughout this dissertation, along with an insight into their consumption and the identities they form through sneakers. The aficionada community I found want to be taken seriously, viewed on the same level, and given equal exposure to the aficionados. In response to their “invisible status” which A.K outlines, and which was theorized by Jenny Garber about women in subcultures more generally, they have been able to create their own community, their own female-centric space where they can exist and “be major” to one another first, where they can be viewed as the authentic participants and aficionadas that I describe them as. Where their collections, their presence is acknowledged and their identity not questioned or surmised.

A.K’s closing statement, “you wanna hear my voice, look at my feet”³²² is her personal declaration against the assumed lack of agency and disregard she receives in the subculture. By directing the attention to her sneakers, whatever striking pair she may be wearing, A.K, along with the other members of the community of aficionadas I interviewed have found their locus point of

³²⁰ A.K. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, April 3 2012.

³²¹ Ibid.

³²² Ibid.

resistance, and their voice at the same time. They communicate through their sneakers, displaying to the subculture their own unique and subversive method for tackling sexism and their “invisible” status within the subculture, and to the mainstream as well. There is a noticeable gap between the visibility and attention given to men in comparison to women in sneaker culture and as a result the cultural histories created on the topic, the insights gathered to create sneakers, and the wider understanding of the transformative complexities aficionados acquire from sneakers, remains “invisible” and will continue to do so if the cycle continues.

The current understanding of women in sneaker culture that delimits their participation as women who do not possess the accurate knowledge, who collect sneakers to be “cool” or who do it to emulate a man is at odds with the women focused upon in this research and is wholly incorrect. Their ‘being like a man’ in the subculture is largely misinterpreted - the aficionados wear sneakers in order to connect themselves to the urban culture they grew up in as well as refashion certain tropes and gesticulations of masculinity they witness. In this identity they create for themselves they are able to embrace a part of their tomboy identity and counteract it to oppose the limiting impositions of femininity. Through their sneakers, and on their bodies, they switch between masculinity and femininity creating a new bricolaged identity. The aficionada community I witnessed and interacted with are conscious of how their sneaker wearing is a break with convention that the norms of femininity dictate. Their actions and construction of their identity is an example of how gender is a phenomenon being reproduced all the time. Their pastiched urban masculinity, the male freedom of wearing sneakers, the swagger and automatic authenticity that comes with being an aficionado in the subculture, is taken and re-appropriated into their own identities as aficionados. The aficionados prove also in other aspects related to their sneaker wearing - such as in the musical genre of hip hop and expressive body art of breakdancing - that they are not guarded and not reserved, not women who need protection through male led authority. Rather, through their sneakers they show how they adapt and interact within a male centric space, creating

new ways of engaging with the culture which are led by their own terms.

The aficionada community are not women introduced to a subculture by men, and who want to remain invisible, but rather they identify in sneaker culture an area of expression, a way to be limitless, and to be something other than what society dictates and expects. They don't exist in the subculture on their own, their self awareness is connected to a community of women who share a common goal of letting their sneakers be their voice, who want to be regarded as true connoisseurs. Their strength, their confidence and awareness as a understood "invisible" sect of people, who are unrecognised for their contribution to the culture, motivates their cause even more, as they push to highlight how acceptable their identity and their consumption is throughout a varied community of women who vary in age, sexualities, ages and class positions. Their presence in a male-centric subculture shows women taking control over the presentations of their bodies. Their interaction with the subculture changes the paradigm of how women's existence in subcultures should be understood.

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S.R. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City April 3 2012

L.M. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, May 13 2010

M.L. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. New York City, April 2 2012

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S.D. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. Chicago, April 12 2012

B.M Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. Chicago, April 12 2012

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C.M. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. Miami, April 10 2012

S.C. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. Philadelphia, April 5 2012

T.S. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. Los Angeles, April 16 2012

S.Q. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. Los Angeles, April 17 2012

R.C. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. San Francisco, April 20 2012

D.P. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. Portland, April 24 2012

W.S. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. Portland, May 20 2010

A.J. Interview by Lemara Lindsay-Prince. Dictaphone recording. Portland, May 20 2010

Appendix A

Figure 1.



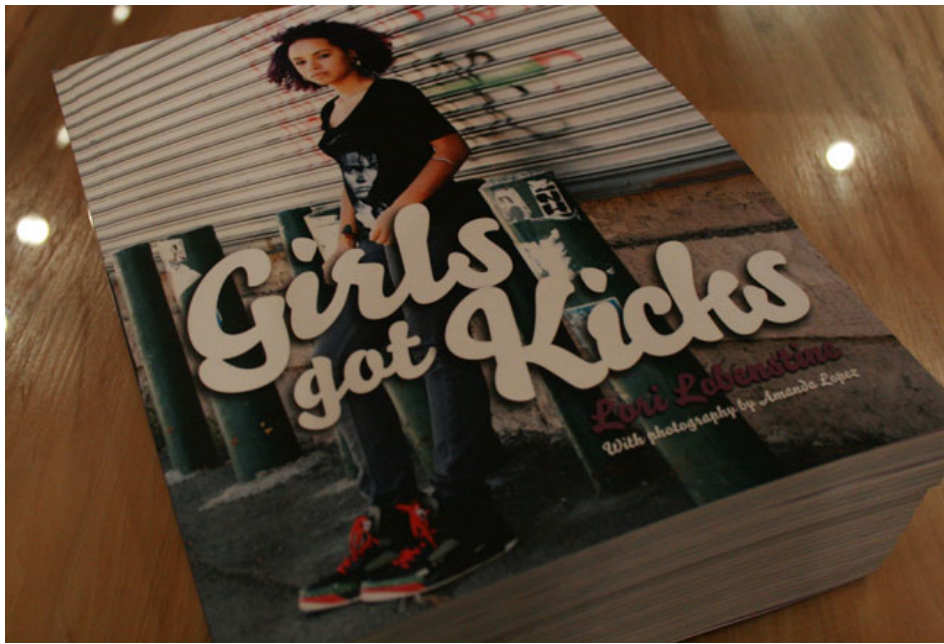


Figure 2.



Figure 3.



Figure 4.



Figure 5.



Figure 6.



Figure 7.



Figure 8.





Figure 9.



Figure 10.

Nike, Inc. Board of Directors Totals by Gender

	FY07	FY08	FY09	FY10	FY11
Female	2	2	1	2	3
Male	9	10	10	11	11

Figure 11.



Appendix B

Annex A



Participant Information Sheet

Research Project: Invisible Women Project conducted by MRes student Lemara Lindsay-Prince, School of American Studies, UEA. L.lindsay-prince@uea.ac.uk

Supervisors: Dr Rebecca Fraser (00 44) 1603 592288 and Dr Sarah Garland (00 44) 1603 592275

Outline:

The purpose of my research project is to document the insights of women who participate in the American subcultural phenomenon of sneaker buying, collecting and obsessing. Sneaker culture is a predominantly masculine subculture and insights about what it is, why people participate and the symbolism and meaning the culture have always been reported from a male point of view.

Women do exist within the sneaker community and are equally passionate about the fetishisation and consumption of sneakers because they have to prove their aficionado status because they are often marginalised within the culture. Women are “invisible” because they exist as a niche within an already niche subcultural movement. Although integrated with the larger community through their love of kicks, they build their own communities reaching out to fellow female sneaker enthusiasts and promote their inclusion, respect and knowledge of sneaker culture amongst themselves.

An insight into the experiences of female sneaker aficionados will build an understanding of why they choose to be part of a this particular subculture has never been documented and captured in an extensive way as this. Women are often not regarded as real “sneaker heads”, the colloquial term given to a sneaker aficionados and the respect, acknowledgement and spotlight that men receive as being sneaker enthusiasts has not been a privilege open option to them and they have had to build a separate community within the culture.

My aim is to research how women defy and bend societal expectations from being active members of hyper-masculine subcultures. The interviews I conduct with various female sneaker aficionados across America will give women sneaker enthusiasts a platform to speak about their admiration for sneaker culture. To discuss how their gender prohibits their inclusion and status as true sneaker aficionados.

I am seeking to interview thirty five women in the United States of America to conduct my research. All interviews conducted will be confidential and any data collected will be treated as confidential and any research outputs made shall be anonymised. At no time shall any real or identifiable names/pseudonyms be used in any research outputs.

You are welcome to take part in this study if you wish to do so. Please contact me (l.lindsay-prince@uea.ac.uk) should you have any queries about this research or if you would like to take part.

All interviews will take place in public locations for the safety of the participant and the researcher and shall last for no more than 1 hour and 30 minutes. Prior to the interview taking place you will be asked to sign a consent form. If you do not wish to sign a consent form you do not have to do so but you will not be able to take part in the research.

You are under no obligation to take part in the research and may withdraw your consent at anytime by requesting such.

Any responses you make will be used in the research project in an anonymised form only but if you wish to you may request that your responses are not included should you withdraw from the study.

Should you have any concerns about this study then please feel free to contact one of my two supervisors whose contact details are identified above for your information.

Many thanks for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Annex B



The Invisible Women Project Interview Consent Form

Lemara Lindsay-Prince is a Masters by Research student from the University of East Anglia who is conducting a research project as part of her dissertation for this course. The project is on the experiences and participation of female sneaker aficionados in America.

The name of the project is: Invisible Women Project

1. I have read the information sheet about this research project and I agree to be interviewed for the project.

2. The purpose, nature and duration of the interview has been explained to me.

3. I understand and agree that the interview may be electronically recorded.

4. I understand that all research publications as a result of this project will only use anonymised data.

5. I agree to allow anonymised statements I made at interview to be published in academic journals, used for conferences and other relevant publications for this research project.

6. I further agree to be contacted after the interview for any necessary follow up that may be needed for clarification.

7. I can confirm I am over the age of 18.

8. I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time either during before or after the interview

9. I understand that I can ask to have any responses I made withdrawn from the study at any time but that if I do not ask for them to be withdrawn anonymised responses I made may be included in the research even if I have chosen to withdraw.

Name of interviewee _____

Signature of interviewee _____

Date _____

I have explained the project and the implications of being interviewed to the interviewee and I believe that the consent is informed and that he/she understands the implication of their participation.

Name of interviewer _____

Signature of interviewer _____

Date _____

The Invisible Women Project: Debrief Notice

Research Project: Invisible Women Project conducted by MRes student Lemara Lindsay-Prince,
School of American Studies, UEA, Norwich, NR4 7TJ ENGLAND.

Tel (switchboard) 00 44 1603 456161

Lemara Lindsay-Prince contact number is

Supervisors: Dr Rebecca Fraser (00 44) 1603 592288 and Dr Sarah Garland (00 44) 1603 592275

Dear Participant

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research project.

Your contributions will be used only in an anonymous way in academic publications. Primarily the results will be included in my dissertation that shall be submitted for examination and available in the University Library for public access after I have completed my degree. (from January 2013).

I may need to contact you again for any necessary clarification for this research project to which you have consented by signing the consent form. If you do not wish me to contact you again then please let me know by contacting me on my American Cell number as set out above.

You may withdraw your involvement at any time but contacting me or my supervisors and requesting to withdraw. If you also ask for any statements you made to be withdrawn we shall do this too but unless you ask anonymised statements may be used in any research publications.

If you have any concerns about this research then please feel free at any time to contact my supervisors. As they are in England, a different time zone, can I please ask that you call at reasonable English times with any queries you may have.

Thanks again for your co-operation

Possible Research Questions:

1. What does the term “invisible women” mean to you? Would you say you are invisible entirely or partially in sneaker culture?
2. Do you think people consider / regard female sneaker aficionados as a novelty?
3. How have you’ve made a separate community of female sneaker aficionados within the larger subcultural community of sneaker culture?
4. Do you think your participation and commitment to sneaker culture is valued?
5. How did you find other female sneaker enthusiasts like yourself?
6. Do you wear sneakers as a way to boost your status / appearance in society today?
7. What do you regard your position within sneaker culture as being?
8. Do you think sneaker culture is a masculine arena?
9. When you were growing up, what were your interests?
10. Do you feel like your femininity or gender is up for interrogation because you wear sneakers?
11. Do people criticize you for wearing sneakers?
12. Do you wear sneakers as a way to express your identity?

13. Do you think there is a constant / obvious obstacle set up in society for women to wear sneakers, be a part of sneaker culture and dress casually?
14. Do people make assumptions about your sexuality because you were sneakers?
15. How do you maintain your “femininity” in a hyper-masculine subculture through what you wear, say or do?
16. What are some of the responses you’ve heard from people when you say you’re a sneaker head?
17. How do female sneaker heads organize, lead and connect with each other? How do you all work together - why is it important?
18. What do other women think of your sneaker addiction?
19. How did you get into sneaker culture?
20. What does sneaker culture mean to you?
21. How do you use the sneaker in your everyday life?
22. How are women portrayed in footwear / sportswear advertisements?
23. Do you think you maintain or lose some of your femininity because you wear sneakers?
24. Do you think female sneaker culture is more diverse than male sneaker culture, is it entirely separate or do you operate within the same limits?
25. Do you think women work harder to prove their positions or worth within this subculture?
26. Do your friends, family, partners find it “weird” “odd” that you collect sneakers?
27. Do you receive criticism because you collect sneakers first or because you’re a woman first?

28. When did you realize that you were not the only female who enjoyed collecting sneakers?
29. How did you find other female sneaker enthusiasts?
30. What do you think is unique about being a female sneaker enthusiast?
31. Describe the female sneaker community?
32. What was the first pair that got you hooked?

Annex E

School of Social Work and Psychology

Research Ethics Committee

Ethical Approval and Risk Assessment Form for Postgraduate Research Students (October 2011)

All students and staff must obtain approval from the School Research Ethics Committee (or an approved alternative for example an NHS research ethics committee or another UEA ethics subcommittee) before conducting any fieldwork. In most cases research students should apply for ethical approval to the SWP research ethics committee. The UEA Research Ethics Check List will help you identify by which route you should apply for ethical approval.

The University, School and BPS take research ethics very seriously and it is important to consider the ethics of your project very carefully. Please take time to complete this form in detail. Forms that are incomplete or that lack necessary detail will be returned to you for resubmission and this will delay the start of your fieldwork.

When completing the form, bear in mind that reviewers must be able to understand what you intend to do, and why. You should therefore give a clear and full account, and include all available information that will help the reviewers reach a well-informed decision. Where possible and relevant, you should add appendices such as draft or final versions of interview schedules, consent forms, letters to participants and debriefing information.

When you have completed the form, submit it to your primary supervisor. The supervisor will then complete the checklist (6.2) and, if approved, sign the declaration (6.3). The form should then be submitted, together with the UEA research ethics checklist, to the SWP Research ethics committee administrator Eve Slaymaker (e.slaymaker@uea.ac.uk). At the same time, please submit an electronic copy of your application to your programme director.

The form and all attachments must be word processed.

Before completing this form you should consult the School's Ethics Committee web pages (<https://intranet.uea.ac.uk/swp/intranet/ethics>) and read the BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct.

<http://www.bps.org.uk/publications/policy-guidelines/research-guidelines-policy-documents/research-guidelines-policy-docum>

Regarding your own safety (4.7 below), see the Module Guide and, for further information, refer to the Social Research Association: Code of Practice for the Safety of Social Researchers:

http://www.the-sra.org.uk/documents/word/safety_code_of_practice.doc

You must not conduct any fieldwork, including piloting, before obtaining ethical approval.

1. The applicant

1.1 Student's name: Lemara Alisa Lindsay-Prince

1.2 Student number: 3568717

1.3 Programme: MA / MSc / MPhil / PhD / Other (please specify) MRes

2. Your supervisors (co-supervisors)

2.1 Primary supervisor: Rebecca Fraser

2.2 Secondary supervisor(s): Sarah Garland

3. The project

3.1 Title:

“Wanna hear my voice, look at my feet!” How Female Sneaker Aficionadas Negotiate their Femininities and Identities Within a Male-centric Subculture.

3.2 Aims / purpose of the study

- The purpose of my research project is to document the insights of women who participate in the American subcultural phenomenon of sneaker buying, collecting and obsessing. Sneaker culture is a predominantly masculine subculture and insights about what it is, why people participate and the symbolism and meaning the culture have always been reported from a male point of view.
- Women do exist within the sneaker community and are equally passionate about the fetishisation and consumption of sneakers because they have to prove their aficionado status because they are often marginalized within the culture. Women are “invisible” because they exist as a niche within an already niche subcultural movement. Although integrated with the larger community through their love of kicks, they build their own communities reaching out to fellow female sneaker enthusiasts and promote their inclusion, respect and knowledge of sneaker culture amongst themselves.
- An insight into the experiences of female sneaker aficionados will build an understanding of why they choose to be part of a this particular subculture has never been documented and captured in an extensive way as this. Women are often not regarded as real “sneaker heads”, the colloquial term given to a sneaker aficionados and the respect, acknowledgement and spotlight that men receive as being sneaker enthusiasts has not been a privilege open option to them and they have had to build a separate community within the culture.
- My aim is to research how women defy and bend societal expectations from being active members of hyper-masculine subcultures. The interviews I conduct with various female

sneaker aficionados across America will give women sneaker enthusiasts a platform to speak about their admiration for sneaker culture. To discuss how their gender prohibits their inclusion and status as true sneaker aficionados.

3.3 Research question(s)

see Annex C

3.4 Methods

3.4.1 Participants or data sources (approximate number, characteristics, method of recruitment, etc).

Participants:

Over 65 people got in contact with me expressing their interest in the project and that they wanted to be interviewed. However, because of my travel arrangements I could not fulfil everyone's request and am now interviewing 35 people across nine cities in America. All participants have given their consent to be interviewed and are aware of my project aims, who I am and what their interviews will be used for. This will however be repeated again for them when I meet them by the provision of an information sheet (attached to this application as annex A) The majority of my participants are women however, I will also be interviewing a handful of men in order to gain another perspective.

3.4.2 Recruitment. How will participants be approached and invited to take part? Include copies of posters, leaflets, letters etc if relevant.

Project website- www.invisiblewomenproject.co.uk (inactive after ground research conducted)

Twitter - www.twitter.com/Invisible_Women (active)

Internet Radio - Obsessive Sneaker Disorder (<http://www.osdlive.com/osd-talk-show/>) (active)

Affiliate Websites - www.femalesneakerfiend.com (active)

- The majority of recruitment to get participants for my research project was achieved through social media.
- First, I created a website which included a summary of the project what I was aiming to achieve and what its purpose was. On the website there was a short questionnaire where participants could submit their information if they wanted to be contacted and interviewed. I have attached examples of the adverts placed on social networking sites.
- The majority of recruitment for my project was through connecting with female sneaker enthusiasts on Twitter. I created an account and followed notable sneaker enthusiasts then engaged with people regularly spreading the information about the project and encouraging people to sign up on the website. Messages were within the 140 character limit that Twitter suggests and asked as an example, whether they were female sneakerheads (term used within the culture for a collector), would they like to be part of a research project dedicated to their insights and to submit with the chance to be interviewed.
- I also received support from affiliate websites who posted information about my research project on their own respective websites. As well being interviewed live on an internet radio show dedicated to sneaker culture.
- Also people on twitter re-tweeted (RT) my message and spread it amongst the sneaker community. This style of direct marketing created a great deal of interest in my project and encouraged people to get involved. As a lot of the sneaker community communicate amongst each other through social media this was the best way for me to get in contact with them.
- I have also been in contact with participants via email to arrange interview dates and times. I

have an email address set up specifically for this research project(l.lindsay-prince@uea.ac.uk) where all correspondence gets sent to.

- I had done this already as I was not aware that I required ethics approval. However now that I have been made aware I shall ensure I comply with all ethics procedures before I take this research any further. I may need to communicate with contacts already made in order to amend interview times pending ethics approval but I shall not meet or interview any participants without formal ethical approval.

It is important to avoid making potential participants feel under any pressure to take part. For example, if others are present during recruitment (e.g., in a lecture room), potential participants might be embarrassed if they were to choose not to take part. Also, your approach must not be intrusive or annoying. For this reason, mass emails must not be used.

Mass emails have not been used for recruitment

3.4.3 Measures, materials or apparatus (include copies of questionnaires, interview schedules, etc.

- I will be conducting a number of in-depth interviews where I will sit down with a participant and ask them questions revolving around what experiences they have had about being a women within the typically male subculture of sneaker buying, collecting and obsessing. My interviews will be very conversational in style and I will be asking questions from the list attached. However, at times I will be asking specific questions based on responses and cues from the participants. All interviews will take place in a public location in constantly busy premises which is why I have chosen coffee shops and books stores as they are in central locations with the city and always have staff present. I have chosen some of these locations as I have prior knowledge of where they are in the respective cities as I have

previously visited all of them.

- Most interviews will be one-on-one and just research and participant. However, on a few occasions particularly in Miami, New York and Chicago due to time constraints and the fact that some of the participants know each other I will be conducting group interviews. I have chosen this particular method of interviewing and collecting my data that way because I want the participants to feel like relaxed and comfortable rather than a strict and stoic environment.
- All participants will be given an information sheet and asked to sign a consent form prior to the start of the group meetings so they are fully aware why I am interviewing them and for what purposes. Considering I am a female sneaker aficionado myself I can relate to my participants and am speaking from within the culture even though analysing it. This makes me relatable to my participants and it will be interesting to see the cross cultural connections we can make being that I am from the UK and they are American yet we both are passionate about the same subculture.
- Participants in groups will be told in advance that anything discussed in the groups session needs to remain confidential within the group and should not be discussed outside of the meeting and also that each participant should respect the confidentiality of the other participants present in the group. The group will be told they do not have to contribute if they do not wish to do so and any and all participation is voluntary. Participants have been told that that the interviews should last no more than 1 hour 30 mins.

Consider carefully whether participants are under 18 or are members of a vulnerable or at-risk population. If you think they might be, discuss the ethical issues with your supervisors.

I shall ensure that I do not arrange to meet with anyone who is under the age of 18 years.

3.4.4 Procedure (e.g., what will the researcher and participants do, what will they experience?)

The participant will experience a conversation and a more relaxed interview as opposed to a strict and rigid interview, which will allow a less stoic environment. They will experience a very relaxed environment.

- I (the researcher) will ask a number of prewritten questions to the participant drawn from my research questions. I will also pick up on cues within the “interview” which will form other questions. I will be conducting in depth interviews and using content mapping and content mining techniques to listen attentively to my interviewee and build more questions from their responses. The interview will be very conversational, relaxed and informal. I know participants will feel at ease to talk to me about their passion for sneaker culture because of the overwhelming response I have had from those willing to be interviewed for my dissertation.
- Since interviews will take place in a public space. I hope the participant and myself will feel relatively safe as I will not essentially be in a secluded place, in a local neighbourhood etc but at relatively well know areas of the cities and at mass chains such as Starbucks, Barnes & Nobles and independent coffee shops situated in well known areas of the city and college campuses.
- Participants in groups will be told in advance that anything discussed in the group session needs to remain confidential within the group and should not be discussed outside of the meeting and also that each participant should respect the confidentiality of the other participants present in the group.

3.5 Proposed start date of data collection

Monday 2nd April when I am in Philadelphia. I was unable due to costs and time to delay my

research trip but I am aware of the need to gain formal ethical approval before I can conduct any interviews and if needed interviews will be rescheduled to accommodate this.)

Ethical issues

Risk:

- I will not be interviewing any vulnerable groups.
- Research questions may ask sensitive topics I have stated herein how I will discuss this with my participants and with my research supervisors.
- No deception will be involved during this research all participants know why they are being interviewed and for what purpose.
- I will not be accessing any personal records or confidential information.
- I will not be accessing any third party data.
- Research is not anticipated to cause stress or anxiety and no pain element is involved however I have discussed herein how I will deal with any unexpected stress to participants.
- No invasive interventions or physical exercise is included in this research.
- Nothing about this research will affect a participant's employment. No personal identifiable data will be used in my research project or any written output as a result of this research. If necessary pseudonyms or ID numbers will be used and any labeling will relate solely to that and not personal data.

Valid Consent:

Written consent will be obtained from all participants prior to the start of an interview or group session.

Assessment of Risk:

- I have visited all the cities previously whilst I was on my academic year abroad in 2009. I chose these cities to conduct research in specifically because I have prior knowledge about them the transport systems, specific neighborhoods / areas where I can hold my interviews as well as people that I know personally who could offer me accommodation and that I can always check in with.
- I have discussed potential risks and my safety with my research supervisors as well as participants, which is why all interviews will take place in a public place and populated areas.
- My supervisors have access to my schedule which includes dates and times of interviews, travel arrangements and accommodation information. They will be notified if any changes occur first. I have identified a family friend or member in each City whom I shall give details of my interviewing schedule including venue, date and times and I will ensure I text that friend both before and after each interview to confirm my safety as well as tweet at the start and end of interviews. If a tweet is not issued within a reasonable time of the completion of a scheduled interview my supervisors and family contacts will work together to ensure contact is maintained and if any concerns are raised the appropriate American authorities will be contacted via 911
- I will minimize risks to my safety by interviewing participants during daylight hours. If at any time I feel like my safety is being compromised I will terminate the interview, seek help or call 911.
- I will be emailing both my supervisors regularly throughout my trip to update them of my travels and how my research is going. They have access to my full itinerary - schedule of

interviews, accommodation arrangements and travel details. I have arranged to Skype them at scheduled times during my time away.

- Meeting and recognizing each other. Although my only prior contact with participants is through social media, there is a picture on my profile so they know how to recognize me, and I will be able to recognize them from pictures on their profile. They will also be given my American cell number - which I will only be using during my time in America and will dispose of after so they can tell me when they are at the venue or if they are going to be late or not able to make our appointment. When I land in America I will be buying an AT&T sim for my American mobile, the number of which I will give to participants, my family, friends and my supervisors. I will also be taking English mobile with me as a back up.
- I will be using public transport to get to and from all interview locations. No interviewees know where I will be staying during my research trip they will only have my American cell number and my picture and the details of the place of our meeting.
- I have travel insurance which covers health insurance also. I purchased Travel Insurance through Marks & Spencer's to cover the full length of my trip. The policy number is NatWest Policy 18539414.

Informing Participants:

- All participants will be informed of the aims of the project, where it will be published or presented and how they can get access to my final write up. I do not oppose to emailing the final document or printing a copy and posting it to them.

- Participants will be told that any report or thesis written about this research will use only anonymous data. Participants will be told that they have the right to withdraw from the interview or group session at any time.
- I will be in further contact with all participants after my research trip to finalise and submit my findings as may be within the two years allowed for this degree.

4.1 Informed consent and briefing

4.1.1 Is informed consent to be obtained from participants? **YES / NO**

If YES, how will it be obtained? (e.g., verbally, signed form. Give details or attach a draft copy of the form)

All participants will be asked to sign a consent form prior to interview or group session. The consent form is attached to this application as Annex E

If NO, why not? Give a full explanation

4.1.2 Is informed consent to be obtained from others (e.g. parents / guardians)?

YES / NO

If YES, how will it be obtained? (e.g., verbally, signed form). Give details. If you are undertaking your project in school or with students under 18, explain how you are obtaining school or college approval (and parental approval, if the school requires this).

I will not interview any participant under the age of 18 and I shall check their age prior to agreeing to meet with them.

If NO, why not?

For observational research describe how local cultural values and privacy of individuals will be taken into account

I shall not be conducting any observational research in this study

Attach copies of invitation letter and consent form if appropriate. Note that consent forms are not usually necessary when consent is implied by completion of a questionnaire.

4.1.3 Will participants be explicitly informed of what the researcher's role/status is? **YES / NO**

All participants will have responded to one of my web adverts, which explains who I am and what I am doing. Additionally at the beginning of the interview all participants will be given an information sheet to read prior to signing their consent form.. Participants are also aware that I am a sneaker aficionado also.

4.1.4 Will participants be told of the use to which data will be put (e.g., research publications, teaching purposes, media publication)? **YES / NO**

This will be clear on the consent form attached.

4.2 Deception

4.2.1 Is any deception involved? **YES / NO**

If YES, describe the deception and the reasons for its use

4.3 Right of withdrawal

4.3.1 Will participants be told explicitly that they are free to withdraw from the study at any time?

YES / NO

If yes, explain how and when they will be told.

They will be told at the beginning of the interview as well as reminded during the interview at appropriate times.

Explain how participants will be told. Ensure that you give them a genuine opportunity to withdraw. For example, someone might be unwilling to complete a questionnaire but feel pressured to do so because students beside them will notice that they are not completing it.

I shall use statements such as “Do you understand that you have the right to withdraw from the interview at any time?” “Would you like me to stop the interview?”. This shall also be on the consent form. If I perceive that the interview is not going as expected and that the interviewee is becoming distressed I shall suggest we terminate the interview and again will ask them if they would prefer to withdraw and make it clear it is entirely up to them whether they wish to participate.

If NO, explain why not

4.4 Debriefing

4.4.1 Will the participants be debriefed? **YES / NO**

If YES, how will they be debriefed (e.g., verbally, debriefing sheet; give details or attach the debriefing information to this form)?

I shall supply a debriefing sheet (attached at Annex F)

If NO, why won't they be debriefed?

4.5 Confidentiality and anonymity

4.5.1 Will the data be gathered anonymously? **YES / NO**

If NO, how will you protect the identity of your participants and ensure that any personal information you receive will be kept confidential?

I shall make it clear in all documentation that the results of the research shall be anonymised and that no identifiable names will be mentioned in any publications made from this research and that I shall use false pseudonyms or ID numbers in my research where it is relevant to do so.

Identifying information should be removed from all data and, if necessary, replaced by ID numbers or pseudonyms. Data should be stored securely (e.g., in a locked filing cabinet).

5. Risk assessment: Protection of participants

5.1 What inconveniences might participants experience?

I don't believe the participants will experience any inconveniences and have made it a priority to conduct the interviews in open and public spaces. Other inconveniences could include lateness due to traffic or other circumstances which would result in the participant waiting for a period of time.

5.2 What steps will you take to minimize these?

Giving myself sufficient time to get to interviews and between interviews and ensuring I keep phone contact with my participants should I need to arrange a date/time or if I am running late..
Choosing safe and public locations for the conduct of interviews and groups.

5.3 Will involvement in the research put participants at risk of physical or psychological harm, distress or discomfort greater than that encountered in their everyday lives?

YES/NO

It is not anticipated that participants will experience any distress during the interviews however should this occur I have detail below how I intend to deal with this.

If YES, describe the nature of the risk and the steps you will take to minimise it

- Be aware that interview questions or questionnaire items might raise issues that are sensitive for individual participants or may create anxiety. Explain what steps you will take to minimize this or to help participants, for example by providing information on relevant support groups or centres in your debriefing sheet.
- The interviews with my participants will concentrate on why they are members of sneaker culture, why they choose to collect sneakers and whether they feel that there is gender inequality within the subcultural community.
- I have attached some questions that I will ask during the interview which I do not think will cause a distressed response. As I have previously stated my qualitative research method will involve content mapping and content mining where I use a few set questions to start the conversation but ultimately listen attentively to the interviewee and develop a conversation from that.
- These interviews are very relaxed and aim to be more conversational than a rigorous interrogation. It is true that they are very wide-ranging but this is the style I am choosing to use in order to get the best possible results.
- However during interviews I will be aware of potential distress using emotional cues and will reiterate that if they do not feel comfortable asking a question they do not have to and should they wish to withdraw at any time they are free to do so. If I feel that distress is there I shall suggest we terminate the interview.
- Although I am not anticipating any distress will occur to participants where it is clear this has happened I shall discuss ensure I discuss with my supervisor before conducting any further interviews and work with him to revise my questions/approach reduce potential stress to future participants.

Should you uncover any psychological or physical problems in a participant who appears to be unaware of them, please consult your supervisors before taking any further action

6. Risk assessment. Protection of researcher

6.1 Does involvement in the research put you at risk of physical or psychological harm, distress or discomfort greater than that encountered in your everyday life?

YES / NO

If YES, describe the nature of the risk and the steps you will take to minimise it

- As I am traveling across America for the most part on my own. My supervisors have expressed a concern that I hold all interviews in public spaces to ensure my own safety. Also that I do not take any expensive technology such as my own SLR camera to interviews as it could possibly draw attention to myself.
- They have also expressed a concern about where I will be staying and I have provided them with my travel itinerary which includes flights, hotels and people I am meeting. I have made arrangements to “check in” with them during my time away to ensure my safety and update them on the project. I will take great steps to ensuring my safety by conducting all interviews in public spaces and ensuring someone always knows where I am.
- As well as not conducting interviews after a certain hour during the night e.g 9pm. I will have both my American and English mobile phone on me at all times and have made arrangements to check in with my supervisors during my travels as well as check in with family and friends of my whereabouts on a daily basis. I will also, following advice, arrange to check in with a close friend or family member in America before and after I conduct an interview.
- All my accommodation arrangements are with close friends or family members who are

expecting me to stay with them for my length of stay in the different cities I will go to.

Furthermore I have obtained Single Trip Insurance with Marks & Spencers for the duration of my time away. (Policy number is Natwest 18539414

7. Other permissions and clearances

7.1 Is ethical clearance required from any other ethics committee? **YES / NO**

If YES, please give the name and address of the organisation:

.....
.....

Has such ethical clearance been obtained yet? **YES / NO**

If YES, attach a copy of the ethical approval letter

7.2 Will your research involve working with children or vulnerable adults? **YES / NO**

If YES, have you obtained an enhanced disclosure certificate from the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB)? **N/A**

To obtain ethical clearance for a project involving children or vulnerable adults you must show the original CRB certificate to your supervisor. You should include a copy with this application and in the appendices of your final submission.

8. Declarations and checklists

8.1. Declaration by student

I have read and understood the relevant sections of the BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct. I am satisfied that all ethical and safety issues raised by the proposed research have been identified here and that appropriate measures will be taken to address them. I will abide by the procedures described in this form. Any substantive changes to the procedures will be discussed with my supervisors and, if necessary, a new application form submitted.

Student's signature.....

Date.....

When you have completed this form, see the supervisor's checklist (8.2) to ensure that you have included all relevant information and appendices. Then submit it to your primary supervisor.

8.2 Supervisor's checklist

		Yes	No	N/A
3.1	Title clear			
3.2	Aims / purpose clear and sufficiently detailed to allow assessment			
3.3	Research questions clearly stated			
3.4.1	Sample / data source, measures and procedure clearly described			

3.4.1	Issues regarding young or vulnerable participants adequately considered and addressed			
3.4.2	Method of recruitment appropriate			
3.4.3	Measures etc attached			
3.4.3	Issues regarding sensitive or offensive measures adequately considered and addressed			
3.4.4	Procedure clearly described and appropriate			
4.1	Informed consent adequately considered and addressed			
4.1	Invitation letter and / or consent form attached			
4.2	Deception adequately considered and addressed			
4.3	Withdrawal adequately considered and addressed			
4.4	Debriefing adequately considered and addressed			
4.4	Debriefing sheet attached			
4.5	Anonymity adequately considered and addressed (e.g., removal of identifying information; secure storage of			

	data)			
5.3	Protection of participants adequately considered and addressed (e.g., information on support groups)			
6.1	Safety of researcher adequately considered and addressed			
7.1	Other permissions reported and evidenced			
7.2	CRB certificate seen and accepted			
8.1	Student declaration signed and dated			
	Form word processed and well presented			

8.3 Declaration by supervisor

In my opinion, the proposed research is ethical and safe, and the student has adequately considered, understood and reported its ethical and safety issues.

(If the participants include children or vulnerable adults): I confirm that the student has a recent Criminal Records Bureau enhanced clearance certificate, and that I have seen the original document.

Supervisor's name.....

Supervisor's signature..... Date.....

PLEASE SUBMIT ONE HARD COPY AND ONE ELECTRONIC COPY OF THIS COMPLETED AND SIGNED FORM WITH ACCOMPANYING DOCUMENTATION AND WITH A COPY OF THE RESEARCH ETHICS CHECKLIST (signed by yourself and your supervisor) TO THE RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE ADMINISTRATOR (Eve Slaymaker e.slaymaker@uea.ac.uk). The procedure will then be as follows: Your proposal will be screened and

if it is low risk and all ethical issues have been adequately addressed the chair of the research ethics committee will approve the proposal.

or

the proposal will be referred to the research ethics committee for full review. You will be notified in writing of the outcome of this review.

You must allow time for ethics review in your research timetable, and you should expect to wait an average of four weeks for your project to be approved. Very complex proposals, and those that require revision, may take longer.