

## GUIDO: FASHIONING AN ITALIAN-AMERICAN YOUTH STYLE

by Donald Tricarico

Modern urban society leaves ample room for the elaboration of youth subcultures. Age is a broad principle of social stratification, filtering a national culture to age-peers. Youth, in particular, are marginal to roles and relationships in the family and to the occupational system that defines and validates adult identity. Within a "subordinate structural position," youth cultivate "meaning systems, modes of expression and lifestyles" in "response to dominant meaning systems" (Brake, 1985:8). Since "subcultures address themselves to structural problems," they are subject to extended development by lower status youths in a "symbolic escape" from the frustrations and monotony of school, work and the home (*Ibid*: 26; Hebdige, 1977:132).

Metropolitan New York City offers a wide array of youth cultural options including Hip-Hop (or Rap), Preppie, Punk, New Wave, Metal, Skinheads and Deadheads. With the possible exception of some Skinhead factions, they are focused on "cultural and recreational activities" and on relationships with the opposite sex (Eisenstadt, 1966:234). They look to the popular culture, especially to the entertainment industry represented in the mass media, to define an expressive character, in particular a subcultural style; for more oppositional groups like Punk and Skinheads, this is an ironic and adversarial relationship. Mass media representation (e.g., on MTV) both reflects and facilitates national and international stature.<sup>1</sup>

Ethnicity plays a varied role in the youth scene. Hip-Hop, or Rap, is strongly identified with Black youth, although it has entered the commercial mainstream (thus, the show, *Yo! MTV Raps!*), and there has been "crossover" by Whites. Race sets a broad parameter for White youth options; while race is not explicit, subcultural elements (e.g., "Heavy Metal" and other rock music genres) have little appeal for Blacks and Hispanics. The Skinheads who advocate a racialist (i.e., White supremacist) ideology and program are a conspicuous exception, earning pariah status in the mass media culture.<sup>2</sup>

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One White youth subculture is explicitly defined in terms of nationality background. Known as "Guido," or "Cugine" (the names are used interchangeably, although there are differences in meaning), it specifies a youth subculture that is distinguished by the ethnic Italian ancestry of its actors or proponents.<sup>3</sup> It has a predominantly expressive character; it is not committed to any ideology or political program. It flourishes in heavily Italian-American areas of the outlying boroughs of New York City--areas identified as "Italian," and ranging from largely blue-collar districts like Bensonhurst in Brooklyn with a substantial immigrant population to middle-class suburban sections like Howard Beach in Queens. Although Guido does not have a recognized niche in mass media culture, in contrast to Rap and Heavy Metal, popular cultural images are mined for the expression of a group style.<sup>4</sup>

Guido poses some interesting questions for the study of ethnicity in modern American society. Guido does not fit the pattern for immigrant ethnic youth culture predicated on mutually exclusive choices between a "romantic attachment" to a traditional ethnicity and sanguine "Americanization" (Eisenstadt: 175; Child, 1970; Cavello, 1967). Guido neither embraces traditional Italian culture nor repudiates ethnicity in identifying with American culture. Rather it reconciles ethnic Italian ancestry with popular American culture by elaborating a youth style that is an interplay of ethnicity and youth cultural meanings. When ethnicity is viewed as a variable and adaptive phenomenon (Royce, 1982), these only apparent contradictions may be resolved.

With this in mind, several issues will be addressed:

- 1) What is Guido? Guido is posited as an urban youth subculture, comparable to Hip-Hop and Metal, primarily engaged in the "spectacle" of style (Hebdige; Ewen, 1988). Distinguishing style characteristics will be delineated, along with principal social settings, fundamentally referencing Guido to American youth culture.
- 2) What is the significance of ethnicity for Guido? Ethnicity communicates a relatively unambiguous identity that is rooted in urban social structure and in the youth scene. It is a cultural resource that youth actors manipulate to enter urban style worlds.
- 3) What is the nature of Guido ethnicity? Guido elaborates a "new," nontraditional ethnicity. It is expressed in youth cultural symbols and meanings.

The research for this paper was based on the observation of Guido youth, especially in their characteristic social stages. It also relies on the perceptions and interpretations of youth actors in and out of the Guido scene. These accounts

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include 1) a written questionnaire, consisting of 13 open-ended items, distributed to self-identified Guido youth, ages 15-19, in the borough of Queens in the Fall 1988 (N=30);<sup>5</sup> 2) written responses of Queens community college students (N=116), in the Spring and Fall of 1989, to the question "What is a Guido?"; 3) essays volunteered by Queens community college students (N=14), in Fall 1988 and Spring and Fall 1989, on the subject of "Guido" for an assignment on "youth subcultures."

### GUIDO SUBCULTURE

Youth subcultures are characterized by a "meaningful symbolism" and "modes of expression" that coalesce as "style" (Brake:8). Brake contends that "style is usually a predominant defining feature of youthful subcultures"; it is comprised of "dramaturgical statements" that inform "an identity outside that ascribed by class, education and occupational role" (12). Ewen (1988) similarly defines style as a "managed image" (22) fashioned out of "surfaces and commodities" (83), in contradistinction to "traditional imagery" that "stood for an unchanging and cyclical world" (23). Hebdige (1977) sees style as the "loaded surfaces" (18) and "expressive artifices" (19) that make up the "spectacle" of youth culture; "obviously fabricated," these "spectacular" ensembles are in sharp contrast to the "natural" looks of mainstream social actors (101).

Guido, above all, designates a distinctive youth style. Both proponents of the scene and significant youth others define the subculture in terms of elements of style. Thus, a Guido is "A person who is up on the music and current styles in clothes, shoes, etc." (Guido youth) or "An Italian who listens to a lot of disco" (youth other). Guido style is dramatized via symbols that have meaning within popular youth culture. Even ethnicity, which is a salient group marker, is interpreted in light of style elements.

This section will delineate the style configuration that currently distinguishes a Guido subculture. Guido style will be analyzed as symbolic paraphernalia and as behavior, or demeanor. Discussion will then turn to the youth social settings in which a Guido style is enacted.

### SYMBOLIC PARAPHERNALIA

As with other modern identities, Guido is dramatized. This depends heavily on visual cues that can be readily acknowledged by significant social audiences. A Guido image is managed in the areas of grooming, cars, and music--all quintessential youth cultural concerns. The first two are at the heart of its "visual vernacular of style" (Ewen:73), while the latter adds sound track.

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A Guido grooming style is focused on hair, clothing and gold jewelry. Hair is a "prime symbol" for all social groups (Synott, 1987:400). It is one of the more distinctive Guido markers. Males wear their hair close-cropped and slicked back with mousse or spray; the tight, swept-back look is referred to by others as "90 m.p.h. hair." The back may be worn long in a D.A., and the sides shaved (the latter originally made prominent by Black youth). Except for an occasional moustache, males are clean-shaven.

In sharp contrast to the male style, females, or Guidettes, wear their hair long. It is made even more conspicuous by teasing which, when lacquered, is arranged high on their heads ("bouffed out," "tall" hair). Hair spray is thus an essential item in their toilette; handbags have to be sized to accommodate the aerosol cans. Guidette hair is complemented by heavy make-up, featuring black eye liner, and long fingernails polished in bright colors (by contrast, Preppie girls are characterized by cosmetic minimalism).

Guidos wear sweat pants and athletic shoes common to other youth. However, the pants are rolled up or cut off to the knee and worn with extra-long sweat socks. The look also features tank tops and sweaters; males typically dress to accent their muscularity, a central peer group value ("muscleheads"). They will often don a turtleneck shirt and a cardigan sweater with black dress pants when "going out," although they are known to "dress up" in casual settings (e.g., "hanging out").

Guidettes wear tight-fitting Spandex pants, in contrast to sweat pants, that expose bare ankles (an occasion for ankle bracelets) and oversized tops. Attire is decidedly more glamorous and risqué when making the club scene. The current fashionable Guidette is outfitted in designer jump suits.<sup>6</sup>

Both sexes prominently display gold jewelry. Males favor heavy neck chains and pinky rings; females wear large earrings and ankle bracelets which are sometimes worn on a chain about the neck. Jewelry is worn in both casual and formal settings; thus, it is a primary subcultural marker. It is acquired as gifts from family members and exchanged within dating relationships. One 16-year-old Guido had a reputation for bestowing gold jewelry on his girlfriends--a proprietary claim and not mere generosity ("this girl is taken"). Chains worn around the neck allow for the display of charms and medals that symbolize peer group values: a Playboy bunny, an Italian "horn," an automobile logo. Gold is also a dramatization of wealth.

Cars are a major "vehicle" for expressing Guido (male) identity. A "Guidomobile" (also "Cuzmobile") is ideally a large, late-model American make in the luxury class such as the Cadillac Eldorado, Seville and Coupe Deville (Guidos are conversant with the distinctions) and the Buick Riviera; to a lesser extent, it

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refers to smaller, racy American models like the Camaro (IROC Z) and Trans Am (in both cases, there is a contrast to customized Japanese cars identified with Black youth).<sup>7</sup> As with their personal adornment, the cars are "loaded" with group symbols. These include ethnic insignia, such as an Italian flag decal for the rear bumper, or red, white and green streamers for the rear-view mirror; garter belts stretched around sun visors and Playboy door locks; disco paraphernalia like blinking lights in the rear window and a "disco ball" attached to the rear-view mirror; gold chain license plate frames.

Popular music is often a stamp of youth subcultural identity and a key to the entire style (e.g., Heavy Metal "Headbangers," Punks, New Wave). The music of choice for Guido is disco, or dance, music and, more recently, Rap. Both genres are prominently identified with Black and Hispanic producers, or artists (e.g., Gloria Estefan, Jodi Whatley and Kool Moe Dee, Bobby Brown) and audiences; Rap, in particular, is established as a distinctly Black musical medium. However, this does not signify that Guido identifies with Black and Hispanic youth cultures. Dance and rap music contribute something to Guido. Dance music holds the "promise" of "escape into another world, generally of heightened sensuality, from which time and its consequences are banished" (Leland, 1989; Orman, 1984: 163). Rap music furnishes lyrics that portray masculine swagger and pounding bass lines that make even Cadillacs "go boom" [a lyric expression from a contemporary Rap song].

### BEHAVIORAL DIMENSIONS OF STYLE

Styles are also dramatized by behavior and demeanor (Brake:12). The self that Guido youth present to the youth scene has salient features, making it possible to outline a group persona as "managed image."

Both sexes are regarded (by themselves and youth others) as very "fashion-conscious" and "up on the latest styles." Despite a "macho" image, males seem to be rather fastidious in arranging their look, their shoes freshly polished and "every hair in place." Youth others are quick to perceive this as Guido cockiness; in this respect, Guido recalls the British Mods of the 1960s among whom "vanity and arrogance were permissible" (Hebdige:54). These traits are not unique to Guido but are also found in the strutting narcissism of Rap (Black) and Heavy Metal (White) masculinity. Guido arrogance is expressed in a materialistic bent (i.e., the prominent display of gold jewelry, the luxury cars). Once again, this is an integral part of other contemporary youth subcultures (e.g., the Rap lyrics, *You've got no money; You've got no car; You've got no girl; And there you are*).

Macho Guido masculinity is manifest in an aggressive attitude toward the opposite sex--the disposition to "hit on" or "come on to" desirable females

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(Guidomobiles are bedecked with Playboy paraphernalia; a question mark painted on the front passenger door is an open invitation). An "underground" tape of a song by two Bensonhurst Italian-American rappers, "Guido Rap," boasts of numerous sexual conquests and prowess among Guidettes, who are seen as decorous sex objects.

Relations with males outside the subculture are informed by physical intimidation. This is signalled by the posturing of groups that "hang out," establishing rights to turf and females. It is also communicated by scowls and verbal taunts ("What are you looking at?"), muscle shirts and a "pumped up" gait, and imposing automobiles with powerful sound systems--"Guido Rap" proclaims Guidos to be "ruler of the roads." Cultivating violence as style, if not substance, may explain allusions to "the Mafia" among Guido males; thus, "Guido Rap" refers to fathers who "never leave home without their bodyguards" and to having "serious friends."

While Guidettes are not violent, they do possess a hard, tough look. In general, they are defined more by a visual image and a relationship to Guido males, the main protagonists of this subculture (Guidettes are described as a "sideshow" in "Guido Rap"). These qualities are probably attributable to the teased hair, heavy dark make-up and even idiosyncrasies, such as gum-chewing ("Guidettes just chew gum"). This look earns them a reputation within the youth scene for being easy ("look kind of slutty"; "I may look like a slut to you but I'm not"). They are also stereotyped as having a low level of intelligence ("tall in hair and short in brains"; "airheads").

Staging Guido entails a jargon, although it does not have the integrity and inventiveness of Rap, or Hip-Hop, argot. The main stem appears to be a streetwise vernacular associated with lower-class ethnic populations in the urban Northeast. Guidos and youth others identify it as "a Brooklyn accent" (and jargon) perfected by Italian-Americans in Bensonhurst--an observation corroborated by mass media culture (e.g., the personas portrayed by the actor Tony Danza in the TV sitcoms *Taxi* and *Who's the Boss?*). To Guido youth in Queens, a Brooklyn accent makes one "more Italian" and, thus, "more Guido." Speech is flavored with phrases, such as "Get outta here" and "Forget about it" (both can be expressed with wonderment or a gruff disdain); "Let me tell you somethin'" (an assertive opening to discourse); and the common greeting "'Sup" (from "What's up?"). It also includes shards of immigrant Italian dialects (e.g., "gumba [*sic*]"). More recently, it has been enriched with Rap words and expressions (e.g., "chillin' out"). Male speech is spiked with vulgarity, often in Italian.

EXPRESSIVE SETTINGS

Guido style is displayed in "spectacular" social settings (Hebdige: 101), or "lifestyle scenes," on the part of "self-conscious actors" (Irwin, 1977:30). The fundamental social matrix is the group of age peers articulating with a "loose crowd" (*Ibid.*: 72) of similarly-styled youth. Style is both a parameter and medium for youth activities, featuring relationships with the opposite sex.

Dance clubs comprise a prominent, and especially glamorous, Guido scene in sharp contrast to an often drab and monotonous workaday world (the local disco radio station, "Hot 97," celebrates every Friday afternoon, the arrival of the weekend and the club attractions). Guido youth patronize certain clubs within friendship cliques, deriving an identity from a club affiliation. Several clubs have designated a weekday evening as "Italian Night." "Italian Night" does not signify an evening of Italian music for immigrant youth from Italy. Instead, it connotes a Guido scene accompanied by contemporary dance music; the ethnic reference is a signal to Hispanic youth (they will get their turn on "Latin Night") as well as Guidos.

The only other major public "spectacle" is the automobile. Like "greasers" and Chicano "low riders," Guido is strongly identified with "cruising"--driving alone or with friends in cars for entirely expressive purposes. As in other cruising scenes, Guidomobiles converge on meaningful locales such as a park or a stretch of avenue; in the process, rights are established to a piece of turf (a public place is privatized). Cars pass through the circuit, moving at a relatively slow clip to maximize expressive possibilities. All along the route, cars are parked or idled, and youth "hang out." Their sociability remains tied to the automobile as source of music, topic of conversation, furniture, and signal to other cruising youth.

The quintessential cruising spectacle takes place in Bensonhurst along a commercial street that is framed overhead by elevated subway tracks (the "el"). Cars begin cruising by 10 p.m. and continue into the early morning hours, attracting Guidos and Guidettes for a rendezvous before or after a club appearance. In pleasant weather, the strip is congested with cars and youth posing in style.

Since the cruising scene is predicated on style, cars are required to display a certain look. Thus, the favored models have privileged status (e.g., Eldorado, Seville). In addition, the Guidomobile is adorned with symbolic paraphernalia like cascading ribbons, disco balls, blinking lights and ethnic insignia. Disco and rap music provide an insistent sound track; amplifiers and "woofers" that produce a lot of bass make the cars throb ("go boom"). Guidos have elaborated a distinctive driving style which requires steering with the wrist, typically with the right arm stretched out across the head rest of the front passenger seat. Exaggerating this posture, the driver lists over to the right, sometimes so sharply that his head is barely

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visible from a position outside the car. Known in youth circles as "the Cugine Lean," it suggests a relaxed attitude toward driving, perhaps befitting "the rulers of the roads." The "lean" acquires an acrobatic dimension, especially when the left leg is extended out of the driver's window.

Within the cruising scene, the automobile becomes a "surrogate self" (Ewan:76) for the Guido male. Cruising is a ritual that showcases the car rather than the passenger, although prestige redounds to the latter. The dark tinted windows, a signature style element, make it impossible to see the driver; this may explain attempts to personalize the vehicle, for example, the owner's name stenciled on the car and the "personalized" license plates. At the same time, this is another manifestation of the car as extension of the self and the merging of man and machine (Guido and Guidomobile). Thus, the car also "wears" an Italian horn on the rear-view mirror and gold chains around the license plate. Paralleling the attention paid to personal grooming, the car receives frequent washing and waxing. The merging of personal identity with the automobile was perhaps best reflected in the nickname of one youth: "Robbie Eldorado." It only follows, then, that one's automobile affects status in the male peer group and is a major bargaining chip in attracting Guidettes. It was believed that one could "hook up" more easily if one drove a Caddy.

## **GUIDO AS AMERICAN YOUTH CULTURE**

Guido is fundamentally referenced to popular American youth culture. Historical antecedents can be traced to an urban, working class youth subcultures known as "greaser" or "hitter"--labels that were probably applied, with derogatory intent, by middle class youth ("collegians" or "preppies"). This is suggested by group markers like teased hair and heavy make-up, the D.A. (mousse has been substituted for "grease"), aggressive masculinity and the iconic use of the automobile ("carheads"). Indeed, Guido origins are associated with neighborhoods where "greaser" prevailed in the 1950s and 1960s. There is widespread belief that its roots are in Bensonhurst which supported a large gang known as "The Golden Guineas" into the late 1970s. The gang was heavily involved in defending turf, scrawling graffiti on buildings and staging fights with gangs from neighboring areas.

In a plausible scenario, the gang activities that characterized greasers were sublimated within style concerns; in other words, gold jewelry and coiffure became more important than defending turf. This followed a similar development among Black youth where, for example, graffiti, "break dancing" and "rapping" were substituted for fighting. Just as the South Bronx is believed to have spawned Hip-Hop and Rap music, Bensonhurst, in particular the "Golden Guineas," may have

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given birth to Guido (the gang's name suggests that "gold" jewelry may have served as an element of style).

The development from greaser gangs appears to have been mediated by the emergence of the "disco scene" in the late 1970s. This was choreographed through mass media culture: films like *The Lords of Flatbush* and *Grease*, and TV sitcoms like *Happy Days* portrayed the greaser in nostalgia and sanitized him for middle-class consumption (Fonzie is even adopted by a middle class family in the Midwest). Disco culture was established by the film *Saturday Night Fever*. The youth protagonists in these productions were Brooklyn Italian-Americans. It is quite possible that a subculture style was constructed by Italian-American youth in response to these mass media images.

Disco imparted glamor to urban, working-class youth subculture. "Do Wop" was sung in alleyways and bathrooms for acoustic reasons; disco was installed in glittering dance palaces with exotic names. Clothing styles and hairdos became stylized, recalling the "fastidious" and "flashy" youth who made the English "Mod" scene in the 1960s (Hebdige: 52), a subculture that was also characterized by "glamorous" dance clubs and uncommitted music (Brake:24). Like Mod, disco offered a glamorous escape to youth from blue-collar, ethnic backgrounds like "Tony Manero" in *Saturday Night Fever* (Sembroff-Golden, 1980:92-93). Also, whereas greaser was denigrated and marginal to dominant youth culture (e.g., hippie scenes like Woodstock and Haight-Ashbury) in the 1960s and early 1970s, disco re-aligned these youth with mainstream popular cultural trends; the "disco craze" may have provided an escape from the socioeconomic reverberations of the "oil crisis" and double-digit inflation. Proclaimed as "the Kings of the discos" in "Guido Rap," Guidos are the true descendants of "Tony Manero."

A Guido identity appears to have originated as "Cugine," a vernacular version of the Italian word for "cousin." As such, it may be viewed as expressing ethnic solidarity comparable to the Black term "brother." Guido may be a derivative term imposed by others who attached derogatory meanings, as with the youth cultural labels "Burnout" (White youth noted for frequent drug use) and "JAP" (privileged Jewish-American youth).<sup>8</sup> Italian-American youth have embraced "Guido" to identify their group style, imbuing it with positive meanings.

Despite the ethnic salience of "Cugine" and "Guido," the principal cultural referents are American (even "Cugine" becomes "Cuz"). This is a common response for ethnic youth: the peer group leading the way toward identification with the new culture. Adoption of the style by more Americanized second and third generation youth reinforced a native cultural orientation. Any youth culture brought from Italy is likely to have been substantially influenced by American sources, especially through popular music.

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Owing to the inherent instability of mass media inspired style and its spread from original centers, modifications continue. There have been borrowings from other youth subcultures, including Punk and New Wave (e.g., spiked hair and earrings for males). There has been extensive poaching and refracting of Black youth style elements, notably in matters of jargon, dress, and music. While these developments promote blurring, boundaries among youth subcultures remain more or less distinct. Identification with Guido may be quite explicit. "Guido Rap" exhorts: "So anywhere you choose to go, you tell 'em you're proud you're a Guido!" Others also have confidence in labelling Guido; whether or not there is conscious identification, style should be dramatized advisedly. Boundedness is also the result of invidious distinctions and antagonism between youth groups (Guidos call others "dirtbags").

### THE ETHNIC CHARACTER OF GUIDO

Although referenced to popular American youth culture, Guido is prominently identified with Italian-American ethnicity and Italian-Americans within the youth scene; in fact, "Guido" and "Italian," or "Italian-American," are synonymous. On a basic level, Guido is ethnic as a result of "labelling," a "cultural process crucial to the construction of ethnicity" (diLeonardo, 1984:23). However, several issues are pertinent here. In modern urban society, "ethnic identity is only one of the many identities available to people" (Royce:1). It is necessary, then, to consider why and how ethnicity is "invoked" (*Ibid.*: 1-5) in the case of Guido. The other considerations are the ethnic meanings involved, in particular, what does "being Italian" mean for Guido?

Guido does have a basis in social structure; it is rooted in predominantly Italian-American neighborhoods like Bensonhurst and Howard Beach. Locality is a major parameter of youth sociability and identity, especially when it is working class (Suttles, 1968). However, even youth actors are not locked into ethnic status; Italian-American youth can choose among other options (e.g., Metal, New Wave). On the other hand, Guido youth declare Italian-American ethnicity within the youth scene.

Ethnicity seems to be dramatized for a combination of reasons. Ethnic identity is available as one of the more unambiguous and "primordial" identifications. Not only is it built into the larger social structure, it defines youth cultural options, the most notable being a Hip-Hop subculture among urban Black youth. Italian-American youth invoke ethnicity in response to this situation.

In formulating an ethnic youth identity, Italian-Americans may be following the Black example; they too have ethnicity, which is converted into social capital

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within the youth scene. At the same time, ethnicity informs a "contrasting strategy" (Sollors, 1989). This is especially important since Guido has appropriated Black and Hispanic youth styles. On their side of the boundary, Italian-American youth can appropriate elements like Rap music and jargon; this is seemingly accomplished without identifying with minority youth. Indeed, an ethnic boundary is a way of excluding these groups (e.g., "Italian Night") from their social scene. Ethnicity even crystallizes a style challenge. "Guido Rap" appropriates the musical idiom of Black youth subculture to "rap the Italian way," audaciously challenging the "homeboys" to "bust," or top, Guido rhythms.<sup>9</sup>

Having Italian-American ethnicity is necessary to be "a real Guido"; this sustains invidious distinctions regarding "wannabe Guidos" who have the wrong ethnic background. Guido youth in Queens highlighted their Italian ancestry; a 15-year-old girl underlined the fact that her parents were "just off the boat," claiming prestige for what historically has been denigrated as "greenhorn." Where being Guido depends on being Italian, youth manipulate the ancestral record; a 17-year-old began calling himself "Salvatore" in lieu of his given "American" name and substituted his mother's maiden Italian surname (his parents were divorced) for the family's Irish name.

Moreover, ethnicity is dramatized as part of a Guido image; it has to be "presented" to others within the youth scene. This may be achieved by ethnic insignia like Italian flag decals. There are also objects that are believed to have ethnic value, like gold jewelry imported from Italy and Italian designer clothing (e.g., "Z. Cavaricci" jeans and "Sergio Tacchini" jump suits). Grooming also communicates ethnicity; thus, girls are said to color their hair black to "look more Italian." Finally, behavior like macho masculinity and speech (e.g., a Brooklyn accent) convey Italian ethnicity; a 17-year-old from Queens drops Italian words in his "line" with girls to appear more authentic. Youth with questionable ancestry may resort to more exaggerated "impression management."

Guido youth trade on ethnicity for youth cultural purposes. When asked, "What makes you and your friends Italian?" Guido youth point to visual elements of style: "The way we dress, the haircut, gold and cars." Ethnicity was also accorded implications for sexual status ("Girls see more in Italian guys"; "The mintest girls are Italian") and boundary interaction with other youth ("Nobody f---s with you."). Finally, being Italian is a highly valued personal attribute that is rewarded with peer group popularity. Asked what they "like(d)" about being Italian, Queens youth said:

*"Your [sic] more socially accepted."*

*"People look up to you."*

*"Its [sic] cool being Italian."*

*"It is in."*

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*"Its [sic] the best."*

A valued ethnicity, being "Italian" (an identity that is "more Italian" than "Italian-American") gives Guido standing in the youth scene. "Guido Rap" tells fellow ethnic youth to "Stand tall and proud, 'cause we're Italian." However, this entitles them "(allowed) to rock this joint"--to assert their status in terms of youth "party" values. The song ends with an avowal of Guido identity: "So anywhere you choose to go, tell 'em you're proud you're a Guido!" In the end, "Guidos are the best," although "Italians started it" (the words of a Queens Guido).

While youth actors may present a Guido self, significant others also label youth "Guido," invoking ethnicity in the process (e.g., "An Italian who drives his father's Cadillac and likes disco"). These identifications, largely interchangeable, are inferred from appearances, or "surfaces"--characteristic style elements, especially a "look." Since ethnicity is not always declared by Guido actors, this presupposes a familiarity with the symbolic meanings of popular cultural elements like teased hair and gold chains. Reading ethnicity into visual style can be misleading, as a college student discovered when on closer inspection, "a guy who looked Italian" was wearing a Star of David.

Mass media others have engaged in extensive labelling of Italian-American youth identity and style, creating the stuff of powerful stereotypes in the popular culture. Pre-Guido greaser and disco youth have typically been Italian-American, and in the films *The Lords of Flatbush* and *Saturday Night Fever*, they were from Brooklyn--a point that underlines their ethnicity.<sup>10</sup> Guido has been implied in the recent films *Spike of Bensonhurst* (1988) and *Cookie* (1989), both about Brooklyn Italian-Americans. For the latter film, the actress who played the role of the Italian-American teenager "Cookie" went to "live for two weeks with an Italian-American family in deepest Brooklyn" in order to observe local peer group styles; she was particularly impressed with "the guys wearing medallions and the girls with long nails and hairspray, chewing gum" (Nightingale, 1989). The film *True Love* (1989), about Italian-American youth in the Bronx, also portrays Guido subculture. Indeed, in the casting, the filmmaker notes that "Even the Italian guys came in and did Guidos" (Laurindo, 1989:22).

These mass media images find their way into the youth scene where they frame Italian-American youth. Thus, youth others liken Guidos to "Spike [from Bensonhurst]" or portray them as "modern versions of Tony Manero." That Guido youth are not immune to these images is suggested by the Guidomobiles with "Italian Stallion" (the fighting name of "Rocky Balboa") stenciled on the driver's door, or the car horns that play the first 12 notes of the musical theme from *The Godfather*.

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In the view of others, Guido is often taken as a manifestation of Italian-American ethnicity (i.e., as in the blood or culture). In this sense, a Guido is "not necessarily an Italian," but can be "someone trying to be Italian."<sup>11</sup> It invariably dredges up familiar ethnic stereotypes of Italian-Americans. This was evident in a mordant satire published in a local community college newspaper entitled "How to be a Cugine in Seven Easy Steps"; the author recommended that the initiate "hang as many ornaments as possible from the chains," using the word "axe' instead of ask," and "telling friends you're going to study in the 'liberry'" (Baer, 1986).<sup>12</sup> Here, Guido, and Italian-American ethnicity, are denigrated as vulgar and assigned a low status rank.

One of the more prominent stereotypes used by others to frame Guido ethnically made reference to Italian-American organized crime. Other youth note family connections ("Their fathers are in the Mafia.") and maintain that Guidos emulate "the mob." There is some evidence that the latter is a positive reference group. One Guido asserted that "Kids look up to the mob and there [sic] Italian"; another claimed that he "wanted to work for the Mafia." Where organized crime is a "queer ladder of mobility" (Bell, 1961), it would not be surprising if the lifestyles of organized crime figures were found desirable; drug dealers enjoy comparable status among some Black youth. Still, Mafia references on the part of Guido youth are probably a ruse, a way of dropping names to intimidate other youth. Everyone may be responding to mass media images like "Spike" who cultivates a mob patron, and "Cookie" whose father is a gangster.<sup>13</sup>

"Mafia" became the dominant frame when a Black youth was shot and killed in Bensonhurst by a group of young Italian-American males in August 1989. The alleged murderer was portrayed as "a typical Guido" (Dobie, 1989). News reports maintained that the boy who allegedly fired the pistol had been whisked into hiding in Sicily; it was said that there was an uncle "in the mob." A newspaper columnist (McAlary, 1989) branded the Bensonhurst youth as "wiseguys and wannabe gangsters" who have "no greater role model than John Gotti," the prominent head of a local crime syndicate. Drawing on a recent Hollywood movie about Italian-American mobsters, *The Village Voice* saw the "wiseguy wannabes" as "Married to the Mob" (9-5-89).<sup>14</sup>

The Bensonhurst incident propelled Guido out of the youth scene and into wider public discourse where it was linked to stereotypical Italian-American moral panic. It also framed young Italian-American males as the shock troops of White racial bigotry in urban society; Bensonhurst seemed to confirm a similar episode in Howard Beach, which became the subject of a television movie in the Fall 1989. This dimension was graphically portrayed in images of Blacks marching in Bensonhurst to protest the killing, being taunted with watermelons by "young males"

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who "twirled the Italian green, white and red banner" (Broderick and Newkirk, 8-28-89). While *New York Post* columnist Pete Hamill (8-29-89) characterized "Guidoville" as a degenerate "state of mind" displayed by a handful of "punks" and "wiseguys," Guido had already become a label applicable to a whole category of Italian-American youth with an identifiable style; in a subsequent writing, Hamill (October 1989) himself describes John Gotti's son as wearing a "trim Guido haircut." Indeed, a *New York Times* Op-Ed piece (Weisman, 9-5-89) attributed the Bensonhurst incident to a fundamental ethnic pathology manifest at other times and places. Guido was having reverberations for a basic Italian-American group identity.

### ITALIAN-AMERICAN ETHNICITY AND YOUTH CULTURE

Guido is a contemporary youth subculture comparable to Hip-Hop, Metal, New Wave, etc. As "youth culture," it is a "solution" to the "contradictions" of age and class status in modern urban society (Hebdige:73-86; Brake:8-26). It is also a response to the tensions of immigrant ethnicity--to the low status assigned Italian-Americans on ethnic grounds within the American system of ethnic stratification.

These structural contradictions are worked out as style concerns--style being the defining feature of expressive youth subcultures (Brake: 8-12). Evolving from greaser and disco, Guido stakes a claim for Italian-American youth in prestigious youth style markets. It is an assertion that they have style ambitions and, in their view, have achieved style success--a reward that is grudgingly accorded in the modern metropolis (Wolfe, 1989).<sup>15</sup>

Ethnicity plays a prominent role in securing status for Guido. In the first place, it is viewed as a first class identity resource that has a basis in the larger social structure (the 1989 New York City mayoral election was perceived in the local print media as a contest between the Black Democratic candidate, David Dinkins and the Italian-American candidate, Rudolph Giuliani). For Italian-American youth, ethnicity furnishes a relatively unambiguous focus for subcultural identity. Moreover, a recently revamped Italian-American ethnicity (Tricarico, 1984; 1989) lends prestige in its own right. Converted into currency for the youth scene, it is now "in" to be Italian. This contrasts with the "in" ethnicity of Black youth. This is noteworthy since Guidos want to be able to incorporate Hip-Hop elements without identifying themselves with Black youth and without including them as part of their scene. Assertions of ethnic distinctiveness may intensify "as the apparent similarity between forms on each side of the boundary increases, or is imagined to increase" (Cohen, 1985:40).

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Guido ethnicity does not refer to traditional imagery, "something known or transmitted by custom" (Ewen:23). Although several youth evidenced some awareness of "traditions" (e.g., "food, holidays"), they are offstage and not relevant for the youth scene. To this extent, Guido may be perceived as a glamorous alternative to an Old World Italian culture ("La via vecchia") based on the family and a scarcity economy (Gambino, 1974).

Devoid of traditional meanings, Italian-American ethnicity is interpreted in light of youth culture. Above all, it is a "visual vernacular" that is of the moment and fashioned out of images and commodities found in popular American culture. Ethnicity, then, is enlisted in the management of youth cultural impressions. It is tailored to the rigors of "self-conscious acting" on the modern urban stage (Irwin:228), not for a "community of memory" (Bellah et al., 1985). While Italian ancestry is valued, an "Italian look" is prerequisite, an "image" that can be achieved through the "inventory of looks and expression" available in popular "style markets" (Ewen:72). Indeed, matters of ethnic "substance" may be waived if the correct "surfaces," or appearances, are evidenced (e.g., "anyone who drives a Monte Carlo, listens to disco . . ."). Ultimately, the meanings intended are more properly "youth culture" than "ethnic"; this is evident when "being Italian" means "being cool" and "up on the latest styles" and in stating it rather plainly, "being a Guido" ("Guidos are numero uno"). As youth subculture, Guido ethnicity takes on "fresh meanings" (Brake:60). Moreover, ethnic ancestry is "decontextualized" (Bar-Haim, 1989), located in the youth peer group rather than in the family.

Can ethnicity be expressed as "surfaces" that are "skinned" from popular culture? Guido communicates ethnicity within a particular social context, the youth scene, where style is the key to individual identity and social boundaries. Thus, ethnicity is expressed in the vernacular of trendy youth style markets; it is symbolized by dress, haircuts, music, etc. and interpreted in light of youth cultural attributes (e.g., "cool," "mint"). While Guido ethnicity does not have the "substance" found in the repertoire of traditional groups like the family, an Italian "look" may suggest (give the appearance of) a substantive ethnicity beyond the youth scene. In any event, Italian ethnicity is read into Guido style; within youth circles, "Guido" is synonymous with "Italian."<sup>16</sup>

Guido ethnicity embodies a "symbolic challenge" (Hedbdige:133) to, and even a "symbolic reversal" (Cohen:60) of, prevalent conceptions of Italian-American ethnicity. In particular, it subverts images of a proletarian, low-status ethnic group with a style that is predicated on consumer affluence; it is a youth cultural reflection of the ethnic group's arrival within consumer capitalism. "Guido Rap" brags about the possession of "credit cards" ("We never carry cash") and the habit of "always buying gold." Asked what she "like[d] most about being Italian," a 15-year-old

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Guidette said "Being rich." Youth others have a similar perception ("They have the best of everything"; "Their parents are well-to-do").<sup>17</sup>

Guido is also a challenge to a historically contaminated ethnicity. Ethnic identity is prominently displayed (e.g., Italian "horns" and flag decals), presented as badges of prestige within the youth scene. "Guido Rap" exhorts the audience to be "proud because we're Italian." The song opens, rather surprisingly, with the chorus, "Hey Guinea, Guinea." However, it goes on confidently to mock this slur by celebrating Italian ethnicity and Guido in the manner of "The Golden Guineas." In a reversal, others are contaminated ("dirtbags") and envious ("wannabes").<sup>18</sup> Invoking the label "Guinea" may, in fact, be a provocation aimed at a system of ethnic stratification in which the Italian "race stock" was regarded as "inferior and degraded" (Lord, Trenor, and Barnes, 1905:17). It may simultaneously be a barb for an ethnic ancestry and culture that elicited such stereotypes. Indeed, there may be a parallel to the symbolic challenge represented by the image of a "bad (talkin') nigger" in contemporary Black youth culture.<sup>19</sup> This is reflected in the intimidating posture of rap groups like Public Enemy, with its militant "minister of information," and N.W.A. (Niggers With Attitudes). Guido evokes the image of a "bad Guinea"; like "Guinea" and "nigger," "Guido" is a label that outsiders who do not subscribe to the reversal of symbolic meanings, must use with discretion (i.e., behind "their" backs). Guido references to the "Mafia" may be a way of sustaining a reputation for being "bad." This impression has been acknowledged by others. Thus, Guidos have been characterized as "Italian boys with attitudes." This image was present in the "wise-guy" label which appeared in the press in response to the Bensonhurst incident.

Guido ethnicity is also a challenge to other youth who compete for prestige in the youth scene. Black youth are especially targeted as style leaders. This reflects the structural similarities of urban Black and Italian-American youth (both groups have street culture traditions) and contact points, as segments of distinct ethnic populations. Black youth culture has probably also been absorbed through the mass media; Black film maker Spike Lee was "treated like a celebrity" in Bensonhurst several days after the killing (9-21-89) and was asked "to 'Bring Michael Jordan and Flavor Flav down,' and 'How 'bout making a movie in Bensonhurst?'" (Lee has made TV commercials with Jordan in the "Mars Blackman" character of an earlier film *She's Gotta Have It*).

Black styles are generously appropriated for Italian-American youth culture. They are even imparted an "Italian" character; "Guido Rap" invites the audience to "listen to rap the Guido way . . . listen to Italians without delay." They can be "cool" too, drawing on a "cool" ethnicity. Indeed, "Guidos are the best!" In "Guido Rap," this becomes an explicit style challenge issued to Black youth: "I hate to wake you homeboys up out of your dreams, but us Guidos got the cars that cause the screams."

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Claiming to have "a whole lot of rhythm," the Guido rappers even call on homeboys to beat their raps. Resisting identification with Black youth, Guidos bite the hand that feeds them style. However, style competition may represent the sublimation of "turf" antagonism, even allowing for the Howard Beach and Bensonhurst incidents. Despite the putdown of Black youth style, the Guido rappers make a point of not advocating racism: "Don't get us wrong, we ain't prejudiced . . ." <sup>20</sup>

As a youth subculture offering a recognizable style, Guido may be short-lived; as an element of style, ethnicity may become "obsolete" or "used up" (Ewen:42). For the individual, Guido will likely be temporary, abandoned when dominant meanings are embraced in adulthood. These are matters related more to the volatility of style and socialization processes than to a "decline of ethnicity" (Sandberg, 1974; Steinberg, 1981).

Further, popularization may make boundaries porous; "visual clichés" are readily available in the marketplace (Ewen:13). Guido may appeal to ethnically diverse White youth because it offers "cool" Black styles on the other side of the racial boundary. However, this could dilute the ethnic character of Guido, precipitating an identity crisis. Finally, images of moral panic in the mass media may deflate the status of Guido within the youth scene; labelled as a moral problem, in the manner of Black youth defined by "wolfpack" violence and "wilding" episodes,<sup>21</sup> it may be difficult to sustain the claim that it is "in" to be Guido.

On the other hand, Guido can expect nourishment from the persistence of a demographic base in neighborhoods like Bensonhurst, with a large immigrant population, and suburban Howard Beach; this is an aspect of the structural character of Italian-American ethnicity in New York City (with Rudolph Giuliani having run as an "Italian" candidate against the Black candidate David Dinkins, the Italian-American vote was monitored in the polls). Ethnicity will likely continue to inform a dialogue with Black and Hispanic youth culture.

Guido may retain its appeal in the absence of meaningful alternatives; it may even be able to assimilate youth with the wrong ethnicity who can "look" Italian (i.e., "pass"). Meanwhile, others will probably continue to invoke ethnic labels in the same way that Jewish-American youth are identified as "JAPS."<sup>22</sup> Italian-American youth styles are still prominent in the mass media and may even appear as a glamorous option to youth actors. Mass media coverage of the Howard Beach and Bensonhurst incidents may put an edge on both peer group and ethnic boundaries, perhaps spurring an attempt to regain control over images and identity. Ethnic assertion figured in the response of the "young males" displaying Guido style to the protest march in Bensonhurst.

Italian-American youth may feature more ethnic symbolism to consolidate the style and strengthen boundaries. Now that Hip-Hop has entered the

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commercial mainstream, with "cross-over" to White youth, African symbols have become more salient within Black youth culture.<sup>23</sup> For example, Rap groups, "associated with the fad of large gold jewelry, now wear African-inspired jewelry and hats during their performances"; during the summer of the movie *Batman*, a T-shirt appeared displaying "an emblem showing Africa with bat wings" (Williams, 7-30-89). "Up on all the styles," Guidos may take note.

As a final note, it would appear that ethnic expression in contemporary youth culture best fits a model that emphasizes the dynamic, adaptive character of ethnicity (Barth, 1969; DeVos and Romanucci-Ross, 1975; Yancey et al., 1976; Royce, 1982).<sup>24</sup> Thus, Guido reconciles ethnic Italian ancestry with the commodities and images lifted from popular American culture and which may have value in youth style markets. This reflects the interests and values of a particular segment of the ethnic population (i.e., youth peer groups); different and conflicting identity frameworks have been articulated.<sup>25</sup> It is also in ethnicity that is sensitive to the labelling of significant others (di Leonardo: 23).<sup>26</sup>

Ethnicity may be especially suited to the "expressive artifices" of modern urban society (Ewen:19; Irwin).<sup>27</sup> Ethnic identity has been viewed as a construct involving techniques of "collective impression management" (Lyman and Douglas, 1973) and "fictitious accounts" (Shibutani and Kwan, 1965:43). Although not as volatile or trendy as style, ethnic cultural referents are variable; Royce (147) has even proposed that the term "style" be used in place of "tradition" to give proper emphasis to the ongoing "development" of ethnic culture. In Guido, ethnicity is fashioned into the "surfaces" (i.e., "managed image") that serve as the idiom for the "spectacle" of urban youth culture.

### NOTES

1. Youth subcultures are "partial," rather than "total" cultures in that they do not exist apart from mainstream society, nor completely oppose it (Gans, 1974:95).
2. Recent, Third World immigrant groups are ethnically visible within certain youth scenes (e.g., Asian youth within "New Wave").
3. An ethnic label has been applied to Jewish-American youth; the term "JAP" designates a Jewish-American "Princess" and, now, "Prince." However, unlike Guido, this identity has not been embraced by ethnic youth themselves. Youth others use the term in a derogatory manner, drawing a boundary that

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- separates Jewish youth from youth scenes. For example, if they were not labelled "JAP," they would be considered Preppie.
4. Essential elements of Guido style are displayed in a teenage dance show broadcast from the Philadelphia area on the USA cable TV network in New York City. In fact, it is the only style on display. It is not known whether this is an expression of "Guido," or otherwise referenced to Italian-American ethnicity. Nevertheless, it can be construed in this way by a viewer in New York City.
  5. I would like to thank a former student, Jennifer Eagan, for mediating the Guido survey and otherwise contributing invaluable insights to the research.
  6. Designer, or brand, names can become a subtle basis for subcultural distinctions. Thus, a Guidette pointed out that her group preferred jeans by "Z. Cavaricci" in contrast to the "Guess?" jeans worn by "JAPS."
  7. The top of the line car within Black youth culture, however, is the BMW or Mercedes, makes that are closely identified with "Yuppies."
  8. Castiglione (1989) maintains that "'Guido' is contemporary East Coast slang for a stupid, uncultured person." The view in this paper, however, is that Guido is a youth subculture. Castiglione is focusing on a label imposed by certain others.
  9. The Spike Lee film *Do The Right Thing* (1989) comments on the cultural similarities and conflict between Blacks and Italian-Americans in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood; the relatively minor film *Spike of Bensonhurst* (1988) does the same for Italian-Americans and Puerto Ricans in Brooklyn, although with a harmonious outcome (i.e., Spike's marriage to a Puerto Rican woman). In a critical scene in the Lee film, *Buggin' Out* demands that the photos of Italian-Americans on the wall of Sal's Famous Pizzeria be replaced with photos of Blacks, an act that would impart the ethnic character of the local Black community to an Italian ethnic symbol.
  10. A link to greaser is suggested in Thomas Boyle's novel, *Only The Dead Know Brooklyn* (1985:180): "The guys . . . the *cugines* . . . they got fancy cars, gold chains, comb their hair a lot, fight a lot, do a lot of uppers and downers."

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Italian-Americans have been prototypical greasers in popular American culture, although Chicanos hold this distinction in the West. "Grease" has been a prominent metaphor for the ethnic group, setting it apart as unclean, and issuing in derogatory labels like "greaseball."

11. In a similar manner, according to a 19-year-old college freshman, "All JAPs are not Jewish. In fact, the word 'JAP' is just a boundary to separate a specific group of people who all dress, act, and talk in the same manner" (i.e., a "JAPpy" guy or girl). This can be read to mean that, like Guido, JAP has essential ethnic characteristics which can, nevertheless, be appropriated by others. However, Guido youth regard those with the wrong ethnicity who affect the style as second-class "wannabe Guidos."
12. The article was called to my attention by Angela Danzi. Pete Hamill's column on the racial killing in Bensonhurst (8-28-89) took the opportunity to ridicule "The few words and phrases that make up the language of Guidoville: 'Whassa matta wit you? . . . Huh mudthuh tell huh to be home oirly, I says ta huh . . .'"
13. The mass media has made current crime boss John Gotti, who lives in Howard Beach, a celebrity, especially for his natty attire (e.g., \$1,000 suits) and his ruthlessness ("The Dapper Don").
14. Italian-Americans were being explained by mass media images. The Voice also referred the incident to the Spike Lee film *Do The Right Thing* ("Do the White Thing"). Lee himself drew parallels with the film in a column for *The Daily News* (9-21-89): "Pino, the racist son in *Do The Right Thing* tells Sal, his father, 'We should stay in Bensonhurst and the niggers should stay in their neighborhood.'" Lee's prescient screenplay reworked some of the details of the Howard Beach episode in December, 1986.
15. Suttles (1968:65) specifically described Italian-American youth in the Addams Area of Chicago as unstylish and "provincial," in direct contrast to "hip" Black youth: "More than any other group, they ignore the fads and fashions that attest one's place in the forefront of urban life." Guido is not "in the forefront," but waiting in the wings--based, not in Manhattan, in the outlying boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens. Asian youth have recently been accorded style success (Hirsch, 1-2-89) with a "distinct look" that features "cropped haircuts" and "stylized accessories such as stove-pipe felt hats and

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- oversized sun glasses." Moreover, credit redounds to their ethnicity: it is "in to be Asian."
16. Hebdige (36-37) maintains that the religious "cult of Rastafari" was transformed, or "refracted" in Britain into a "style" for West Indian youth, combining visual elements like dreadlocks and a musical idiom. Reggae, however, retained an ideology and political program oriented toward "blackness," and "openly antagonistic" to Whites.
  17. This frame suggests that Italian-Americans are acquiring the status badges that mediate Jewish ethnicity. Indeed, the stereotype of a "Jewish-American Princess" now has an Italian-American version (noted on a sign in a car window). The mass media has portrayed the arriviste consumption styles of urban Italian-Americans in films like *Easy Money* and *Married to the Mob*.
  18. An interesting example of reverse chic in the assertion of group identity was revealed by a bumper sticker on a car with Texas license plates: "Oil Field Trash and Proud of It."
  19. A Black rap artist interviewed on MTV (11-29-89) called Black rappers "the first generation of talkin' niggers." Defiant rap styles feature dark sun glasses, black leather jackets, L.A. Raider team apparel (the Raiders appointed the NFL's first Black head coach in 1989), and surly glances (see Toop, 1984: 116-125).
  20. Hebdige (29) argues that "post-war British youth culture" has to be seen "as a succession of differential response to the Black immigrant presence." The close relationship between urban Black and Italian-American styles can at least be traced back to the 1950s when both groups had an impact on Do Wop music. "Dion and the Belmonts" took their name from an Italian-American section of the Bronx.
  21. These metaphors were in response to an attack and rape of a young White woman identified as a "yuppie" by Black and Hispanic youth in New York's Central Park in April 1989.
  22. It appears that "JAPs" would otherwise be "Preppies" if they were not labelled by others on the basis of their Jewish identity.

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23. Brake points out that West Indian youth in England introduced ethnic symbols to distance themselves from White youth attracted to Ska and Reggae music. In the United States, it is obvious that Black youth have cultivated an ethnic style mediated by "surfaces and commodities."
24. This view is in direct contrast to the model delineated in the theory of "straight-line assimilation" in which ethnicity is the property of the immigrant generation and can only "decline" as subsequent generations become more assimilated and upwardly mobile (Steinberg, 1981; Crispino, 1980; Alba, 1985). For a fuller exposition, see Tricarico, 1984; 1989.
25. Ethnic expression reflects the "varieties of experience" within ethnic populations (diLeonardo:229). Thus, affluent, college-educated, adult Italian-Americans have cultivated identity frameworks based on romanticized images of Old World "contadino" and immigrant culture and classical Italian civilization (e.g., Renaissance art). These frameworks (Aversa, 1978) were in response to the cultural and political climate of the "new pluralism" of the 1970s.
26. Others apply an ethnic label to Italian-Americans in and out of the youth scene. A relative of President Bush recently wrote a letter to *The New York Times* (12-13-89) in which he defended the politically troubled Senator Alfonse D'Amato of New York as "an American of ethnic origin."  
The cultural meaning of ethnic labels may be ambiguous. However, when individuals or groups are so labelled, differences that are manifest (e.g., a youth style) can be attributed to ethnic factors on both sides of the social boundary (see Cohen, 1985).
27. Modern society has undermined virtually every traditional identity and culture (Bensman and Vidich, 1971). To this extent, ethnicity has to be constructed to be viable. "Straight-line" theory dismisses nontraditional expressions of ethnicity and "fictional" and "dishonest"; mere "image-making" (Aversa:51-54; Steinberg:62-63). Perhaps its real gripe is with a society of "self-conscious actors" and "lifestyle scenes" (Irwin, 1977).  
Gans' (1979) concept of "symbolic ethnicity" proposes "corrections" for straight-line theory by allowing for meaningful ethnic expression among "middle class adults" in later generations. It takes the form of a personal "feeling" focused on elements that are "abstracted" from the ethnic "heritage"

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(e.g., ethnic art) as "symbols." However, this does not explain developments like Guido which is dramatized with the help of fresh symbols and meaning and informs real differences between groups. It is also noteworthy as a youth phenomenon.

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