



Trans* Vulnerability and Resistance in the Ballroom: The Case of *Pose* (Season 1)

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11.1 INTRODUCTION

“New York City. 1987”. This text, which opens the pilot episode of *Pose*, leads the spectator to a fictional world populated by LGBTQ+ Black and Latinx characters who are part of the ballroom community and look for success and praise competing in the ball scene. The series focalises the two main elements of the 1980s ballroom culture—houses and ball competitions—through the House of Abundance, dictatorially led by Mother Elektra, and the House of Evangelista, led by Blanca, one of Elektra’s children who, tired of continuously being despised and humiliated by her haughty mother and after being diagnosed as HIV-positive, decides to leave and create her own family as a way to find a purpose in life mothering others in love and care, something neither Elektra nor her biological

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mother was able to offer her. In this new adventure, she is accompanied by Angel, Lil Papi, Damon and Ricky, all of whom will live as her children, and by Pray Tell, master of ceremonies in the competitions and Blanca's close friend, who persistently offers support and advice in all her decisions.

First aired on FX 3 June 2018, *Pose* became almost immediately a worldwide phenomenon thanks to its presence in streaming services such as HBO and Netflix. Created by the prolific team of producers Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuck, together with Stephen Canals, “[i]t is the first American series where much of the core cast is not only transgender, but played by trans actors” (Seitz 2018, n.p.), making visible an up-to-now silenced community that is given a voice not only in the story but, more importantly, in the telling of that story.¹ Apart from the cast, the community is also present in the board both of scriptwriters (Janet Mock and Our Lady J) and directors (Janet Mock in “Love is the Message”).

This chapter discusses the way ballroom culture is represented in the first season of the series paying especial attention to its two main constituent parts as sites of not only protection and shelter, but also self-assertion and empowerment for a variety of vulnerable subaltern identities who have been deprived of a livable life in both homo and heteronormative communities. It starts with an analysis of the situational vulnerability and the precariousness an important part of the Black and Latinx LGBTQ+ populational segment in the U.S. lives in and then offers an insight of the way houses and balls operate as strategies of survival and resistance for gays and trans women who have gone through experiences of discrimination and stigmatisation in society at large and in their own ethnic communities. The ballroom offers them a possibility of expressing their own subjectivities in terms of ethnicity, sex, gender and sexuality and, at the same time, prepares them for resisting the physical and psychological attacks they persistently suffer from heteronormativity. The last part of this chapter focusses on the transitional and interstitial nature of the ballroom, a social space which, in reproducing the neoliberal fantasy of getting success and wealth, simultaneously questions the real nature of such a goal presenting it as just a performative repetition of an unreachable phantasmagorical ideal.

11.2 VULNERABILITY AND PRECARIOUSNESS IN THE BLACK AND LATINX LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY

Though vulnerability can be understood as an ontological condition (Butler 2004, 2016; Mackenzie et al. 2014), it does not affect all human beings in the same way. Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds take into account “situational” sources of vulnerability that are “context-specific” and “may be caused or exacerbated by the personal, social, political, economic or environmental situations of individuals or social groups” (2014, 7). Humanity as a whole is ontologically vulnerable, but certain social groups and individuals are much more exposed to particular sources of vulnerability than others due to the precarious condition of their own lives: “there are ways of distributing vulnerability, differential forms of allocation that make some populations more subject to arbitrary violence than others” (Butler 2004, xii).

The Black and Latinx members of the ballroom scene who “come from families, communities, and neighborhoods in which they have had to navigate the often difficult terrain of the streets, which means facing homophobic and transphobic violence and abuse, homelessness and hunger, insufficient education, under- and unemployment, and general sociocultural dispossession” (Bailey 2013, 7) deeply suffer from this situational vulnerability. Their circumstances make them suitable to be considered as part of the “precariat”, a new “*class-in-the-making* [text italics]” (Standing 2011, 7) that, in a globalised neoliberal world, comprises a vast amount of quite heterogeneous people whose only point in common is the systemic obstacles they find when trying to get a certain economic and social stability: “to be precaritated is to be subject to pressures and experiences that lead to a precariat existence, of living in the present, without a secure identity or sense of development achieved through work and lifestyle” (Standing 2011, 16).

The precarious living conditions of this populational segment have important physical and psychological consequences, exacerbated in the case of the trans members of the community who have to face a triple stigmatisation: (a) by society at large for being Black/Latinx; (b) by their own ethnic community for their gender nonconformity and (c) by the gay male community for being women. Bailey writes about the existence of an either explicit or implicit deal in families of colour “that requires one to hide (suppress) or dispense with one’s nonnormative genders or

sexualities in order to remain a full-fledged part of the biofamily and the biohome and to benefit from the shelter, clothing, food, and other resources that family and home are believed to provide” (2013, 86–87) and, he continues, “[f]or Black LGBT youth in particular, noncompliance, more often than not, results in him or her being forced to live in intolerable and unstable housing conditions or utter homelessness” (2013, 87). This is the situation Blanca has to face in the series: She was expelled from home when her mother discovered she was transgender, lived in the streets until rescued by mother Elektra, who introduced her in the ballroom culture, and later, when her mother dies and she decides to attend her funeral, she is violently confronted by her brother Manny who, addressing her as if she were a gay man, reminds her that she is not welcomed in the family: “Nobody wants you here, child molester. I know all about how you fags corrupt kids” (“Mother’s Day” 35:18–35:22). This kind of discrimination and stigmatisation also comes from within the LGBTQ+ community at large as proved by the refusal to admit trans women in general, and trans women of colour in particular, in gay bars²: Blanca meets Lulu, a child from the House of Abundance she wants to recruit for her own house, at a gay bar in Manhattan and when they ask for a drink the bartender clearly states that they are not welcomed there: “We don’t like women in here. This is a gay bar” (“Access” 22:24) and when Blanca asks to talk to the manager, this one just sentences: “The New York City nightlife is segregated” (“Access” 23:33) refusing their admission.

This triple stigmatisation, together with the difficulties they find to get access to a stable job and a regular income due, among other factors, to their poor educational credentials, illustrates the extreme vulnerability and precariousness they go through. Louis F. Graham et al., in their study on the importance of social support for Black transgender women in Detroit, confirm the severe difficulties they find to overcome this vulnerability on an individual level:

The limited data available suggest that access to health care and availability of social support are low, while drug use, homelessness, unemployment, discrimination, prevalence of HIV seropositivity, engagement in sex work, experiences of violence, depression, and suicide are high among transgender individuals and may be even greater among African American transgender individuals. (2014, 101)

Pose acknowledges sociological evidence showing how prostitution and drug dealing are the only sources of income for many members of the community.

But vulnerability requires recognition first to be overcome. Individuals must accept their vulnerable condition and must acknowledge interpellation by an Other who, in turn, recognises that very same condition in him/herself. Following Jean-Luc Nancy's reasoning, it is only in that interaction between a Self and an Other that the Self is constituted as an autonomous and isolated entity. In the Preface to his *Inoperative Community*, he states that:

the mode of existence and appropriation of a "self" (which is not necessarily, nor exclusively, an individual) is the mode of an exposition in common and to the in-common, and that this exposition exposes the self even in its "in itself," in its "ipseity," and in its own distinctiveness, in its isolation or in its solitude. Only a being-in-common can make possible a being-separated. (1991, xxxvii)

In his discussion of a contemporary concept of community, Nancy rejects the liberal conception of the subject as autonomous individual and proposes instead a relational subject (being-with or being-in-common) who can only be constituted as such in the very act of sharing with others. Judith Butler seems to agree with this same perspective about the Self in relation to the Other when, discussing the question of mourning, she states:

For if I am confounded by you, then you are already of me, and I am nowhere without you. I cannot muster the "we" except by finding the way in which I am tied to "you," by trying to translate but finding that my own language must break up and yield if I am to know you. You are what I gain through this disorientation and loss. This is how the human comes into being, again and again, as that which we have yet to know. (2004, 49)

The human (and non-human) being, as stated by Carrasco-Carrasco in her chapter in this same volume, is necessarily a being-with, a being-in-common and only in that relational axis individuation appears. When that mutual dependency is acknowledged, vulnerable bodies, far from assuming a passive position of victimhood, can start acting as an autonomous and assertive "inoperative community" regardless of age, provide parental (Nancy 1991) that comes into existence in the very exposure of the commonality of its constituent selves.

11.3 BALLROOM CULTURE: A COMMUNAL SPACE FOR PROTECTION AND COMPETITION

Ballroom culture defined as “a community and network of Black and Latina/o women, men, and transgender women and men who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, straight, and queer” (Bailey 2011, 367) functions as such an inoperative community. Starting in Harlem in the 1920s,³ the ballroom has always been considered a protective space for Black and Latinx individuals who felt stigmatised both by society at large and by their own ethnic community due to their gender and sexual expression. The two main components of this culture—houses and balls—provide a livable life, understood as a normatively sanctioned life (Butler 2004, xv), for those who feel deprived of it:

Houses function as families whose main purpose is to organize elaborate balls and to provide support for their children to compete in balls as well as to survive in society as marginalized members of their communities of origin. Houses offer their children multiple forms of social support, a network of friends, and a social setting that allows free gender and sexual expression. Ultimately, houses within the ballroom community constitute figurative, and sometimes literal, “homes” for the diverse range of members involved in them. (Arnold and Bailey 2009, 174)

Apart from Blanca, as explained before, Angel and Damon were also expelled from home by their biofamilies when coming out as a trans woman (Angel) and as a gay man (Damon). The three of them come from very traditional Latinx and Black families that do not accept their sexual and gender presentation. Consequently, they have to leave their homes and live in the streets until they find a shelter and new opportunities in the world of the balls and houses. Damon’s story is presented in the first episode: he is a young boy living in Allentown, Pennsylvania who loves dancing, but has to conceal that passion from his father who is laughed at by his co-workers for having a sissy son who is a dancer. When his father finds him dancing in his room and questions him about his manliness, Damon proudly declares that he is a dancer and gay. He is then violently beaten and immediately expelled from home and family, after hearing from his father: “You’re dead to me” (“Pilot” 10:53–14:19). Disowned and kicked out by those who supposedly should have protected them, these characters have to earn their living alone, homeless and without any kind of economic and social support.

This is precisely what the houses fight against when offering protection and encouragement for personal and communal fulfilment: “Houses are led by mothers (Butch Queens, Femme Queens, or Women) and fathers (Butch Queens, Butches, or Men) who, regardless of age, provide parental guidance to numerous Black LGBT people who have been devalued and rejected by their blood families, religious institutions of their childhood, and society at large” (Bailey 2013, 92–93). They function as “alternative families” (Bailey 2011, 367) that try to redress the emotional, economic and social imbalance their members endured after being repudiated by their biofamilies:

House members consider themselves a family and carry out a whole host of activities together to fortify their kin ties, such as taking trips, holding family dinners and reunions, celebrating birthdays, shopping for a ball, bailing each other out of jail, and even fighting with and for one another. Although the ties that bind members together in the Ballroom community are not biological, kin ties are, nonetheless, viewed, undertaken, and experienced as real. Unlike Ballroom members’ blood families, emphasis is placed on the labor involved in developing and maintaining relationships that add meaning to the house. (Bailey 2013, 95–96)

Houses somehow reproduce the structure of biofamilies with a maternal and, at times, a paternal figure who take care of their children and encourage their autonomy and self-esteem both in the competitive world of the ball scene and in society at large; and, in a similar way, ball competitions reproduce the regimes of ethnicity, sex, gender and sexuality sanctioned by heteronormativity. In both cases, the subject has to be able to convey realness to the role they play. It is not enough pretending to be; the performer must really be, so that he/she can be read as what the others expect him/her to be: “to be ‘real’ is to minimize or eliminate any sign of deviation from gender and sexual norms that are dominant in a heteronormative society. In other words, the person must embody the so-called markings of femininity or masculinity” (Bailey 2011, 378). As a consequence, femme queens are the only ones who compete in feminine categories and assume maternal roles and butch queens do the same with masculine categories and paternal roles.⁴

Realness demands a complete adherence to heteronormative sexual and gender norms, and so it could seem that, far from dismantling the gender

binary, ballroom culture, in both houses and balls, insists on perpetuating it. However, realness can also be read as a strategy for survival and resistance, as “the efforts of [the ballroom community’s] members to avoid discrimination, violence and exclusion” (Bailey 2011, 377). In the ballroom, a person both expresses his/her gender and sexual identity and his/her sexual and gender presentation which is the one offered to be read by the others, and these two positionalities do not necessarily coincide. In brief, this community, in its inclusivity, encourages gender bending, the free movement in the interstices of the gender and sexual binary.

The ballroom is consequently a place for protection and reassertion but also a contesting place, a transitional locus that both anchors its members to a reality imposed by heteronormativity and frees them from that same stigmatising reality. The ball scene offers its members’ transmogrified bodies the opportunity of (un)becoming other(s) (Sullivan 2006). Transmogrification, defined as “strange or grotesque transformation: transformation that is characterized by distortion, exaggeration, extravagance, and, as the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* puts it, ‘unnatural combinations’” (Sullivan 2006: 553), aims hence at both strangeness and identity since, on the one hand the trans body attempts to become real through transgressive corporeal modifications while, on the other, strongly endeavours to be real in an essentialist way.

Angel and Elektra exemplify this issue in *Pose*. Both identify themselves as women though, at the beginning, none of them have transitioned through gender confirmation surgery. Angel, while exposing her body to her client and later lover, Stan Bowes, tells him: “saving up to have my little friend [her penis] removed” (“Pilot” 38:05). Elektra, on the other hand, eager to become, in her own words, a “complete woman”, asks her man, Dick Ford, for money in order to get her operation, expressing a feeling of shame and disgust for her body similar to Angel’s. Dick, however, wants her the way she is and threatens with abandoning her if she is reassigned (“The Fever” 17:10–19:22). At the end of the season, Angel remains a woman with a penis while Elektra finally goes through surgery, paying the price of loneliness and poverty since Dick abandons her and stops paying her luxurious way of life. These two characters epitomise that idea of (un)becoming other(s) since, even though with different endings, their womanhood’s expression is simultaneously real and strange, embodied and disembodied.

The title sequence of the series, through the slogan: “the category is...live, work, pose”, focalises the interconnection and coexistence of realness and strangeness. The title, *Pose*, suggests a world of fantasy and make believe: a pose for passing, a pose which pretends to be real; but that pose, far from being a fraud, becomes a way of life that requires work, a recurrent performance that creates the illusion of authenticity.⁵ In its performative action, that pose turns real and not just a pretence. In line with the analysis proposed in this volume by Carrasco-Carrasco on posthuman subjectivities in popular Science Fiction cinema, what at first sight can be read as a subaltern parallel world which tries to emulate, in the case of *Pose*, the glamour of the white, wealthy and heterosexual upper class in the United States (the world exemplified by Dick Ford, Stan and Patty Bowes and Matt Bromley, Stan’s supervisor and enemy at Trump Tower) becomes a substitute in its own right, offering itself not as a mirror of that other reality, but as realness itself. What apparently can be considered as a simple subordinate imitation of an outer reality brings to the fore the iterative and performative nature of that same outer reality. For the white heteropatriarchal eye, the racialised ball scene can be a fraud populated by subjects that pretend to be, but, in its own (un)productive emulation, the scene exposes the very unnatural nature of the middle-class way of life of white suburbia.

Stan clearly reverses that mirror-like structure when comparing his fraudulent existence with the authenticity Angel represents:

Stan: I don’t fit in anywhere.

Angel: You thought living on the fringes of society was gonna be some kind of picnic and roses?

Stan: I just thought it would be easier than being a fraud.

Angel: That’s ‘cause you’re a white boy from the suburbs.

Stan: I just wanted a taste of what you have, one moment of being true in my whole goddamn life. But I can’t. (“Pink Slip” 37:34-38:20)

“Live, work, pose” becomes, as a consequence, the motto for both the ballroom and the heteronormative world of predatory Wall Street wolves Stan and his co-workers at Trump Tower belong to.

The ball scene can then be read as a mimicry of white upper class heterosexual society, and in its mimetic reflection it inherently questions and resists that society: both male and female heterosexuality are feigned in and out of the ballroom in the same way as womanhood, ethnicity, social status and social institutions are mere simulacra in a never-ending process of (un)productive repetition. Understood as “a desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as *a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*, [text italics]” mimicry “must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” (Bhabha 1984, 126), and it is precisely in that excess and difference where resistance resides.

The ball scene can be supportive, but, as it is the case in society at large, it is also competitive. In this sense, both the alpha male world at Trump Tower and the houses at the ballroom share the same feature: feigning a sense of good-fellowship that hides a profound animosity towards possible competitors, but whereas in the first case the animosity ends up in outbursts for domination and control as it is the case with Stan and Matt’s use of physical violence in order to demonstrate their unquestionable hegemonic manliness (“Love is the Message” 42:50–44:10), the LGBTQ+ community turns protective and sympathetic towards its vulnerable members. Elektra, always displaying an appearance of self-confidence, independence and control that makes her despise the other members of her own house and the whole community, ends up accepting Blanca’s hospitality and help after being repudiated by Dick (“Mother of the Year” 32:15–33:22) in what becomes a clear contrast with the individualistic male dominated world to which Stan, Matt and Dick belong.

Similarly, the heterosexual nuclear family the Bowes exemplify breaks up at the same time when the house of Evangelista proves to be a nurturing and protective family giving shelter to all those individuals who had been kicked out by their biofamilies. As mentioned before, Blanca endeavours to fulfil the role of mother for her children (Damon, Ricki, Lil Papi and Angel) offering them a proper livable life outside the circuits of drug dealing and prostitution. A representative example of this contrast between the biofamily and its alternative model is the Christmas’ dinner in episode 3. Stan and Patty’s dinner, an occasion that supposedly gathers the whole family together in love and harmony, turns out a messy celebration full of jealousy and the conventional quarrelling with the mother-in-law, forcing Stan to break his promise of visiting Angel after dinner for their own intimate celebration. In the house of Evangelista, things turn the other way round. What at the beginning seems to

be a disastrous dinner, after Angel feels betrayed by Stan and Blanca accidentally burns the turkey (the symbol for family and tradition), ends up as a joyful celebration in the Chinese restaurant where the empathy and love felt among all the members of the house overcome any other kind of inconvenience (“Giving and Receiving”). The institution of the family is strengthened and reassured, but this is not the nuclear family claimed by heteronormativity. On the contrary, it is a family of outcasts, of those subjects who are not welcomed in America, the leftovers of the official Christmas’ party. Angel’s trauma with red pumps, originated when her father slapped her for stealing and trying to wear them when she was just a six-year-old little boy, makes her always melancholy and sad at Christmas’ time, but that trauma with the season is now healed when her new mother, Blanca, gives her a pair of them as Christmas’ present (“Giving and Receiving” 55:00–56:15): The wrongs of the heteropatriarchal family are amended by the rights of the (new) trans family.

11.4 THE BALLROOM AS A TRANS* SPACE

Ballroom culture, with its world of balls and houses, can be defined as trans*. When using this term with the asterisk, questions of sex, sexuality and gender come inevitably to mind, but the reference is not limited to these issues. Trans* “is not a thing or being, it is rather the processes through which thingness and beingness are constituted. In its prefixial state, trans* is prepositionally oriented—marking the *with, through, of, in* and *across* to make life possible [text italics]” (Hayward and Weinstein 2015, 196). The asterisk, in the shape of a starfish with multiple arms, points, precisely, at those processes, at a plurality that implies movement and change and, in consequence, an impossibility of fixation and taxonomy, a propulsion towards incompleteness and openness, a perennial utopia (in the sense of no-place) rejoicing in the very notion of the journey, far from any point of departure and far from any point of arrival: “trans* is the expressive provocation, the ontologizing movement itself” (Hayward and Weinstein 2015, 198) and that is precisely what ballroom culture implies: a perpetual movement in and out the underground and the mainstream, a looking glass which allows Black and Latinx trans* people to make real their fantasy of becoming wealthy and successful superstars, at least for a while and for a limited audience—that of the balls—before returning to their much less glamorous existence of discrimination and stigmatisation.

But trans* means also embodiment for the trans subject, though devoid of the rigidity imposed by the gender binary. Blanca, Elektra, Angel and the other sisters in *Pose* are trans* bodies who resist a linear and teleological reading, women who do not fit within the requirements of heteronormativity. Quoting Lilly Wachowski:

To be transgender is something largely understood as existing within the dogmatic terminus of male or female. And to “transition” imparts a sense of immediacy, a before and after from one terminus to another. But the reality, my reality is that I’ve been transitioning and will continue to transition all of my life, through the infinite that exists between male and female as it does in the infinite between the binary of zero and one. We need to elevate the dialogue beyond the simplicity of binary. Binary is a false idol. (qtd. in Bailey et al. 2017, 75)

And it is precisely their resistance to accept a place within this pattern what turns them into failures from a heteronormative perspective. Angel and Elektra are vulnerable characters, extremely dependent on Stan and Dick, as mentioned before: both have an apartment paid by their men, and both try to create a permanent and somehow stable sentimental relation with them, but finally they fail and are abandoned. Due to their economic and emotional dependency, both women are then forced to return to earn their living as prostitutes and consequently get depressed, a depression that will only be overcome thanks to the help of the house of Evangelista and the protective role performed by Blanca, the mother.

Within an obvious fairy-tale atmosphere, princess Angel and queen Elektra long to be rescued and saved by their princes charming who will lead them to the glamorous and wealthy world of white upper class hetero-normality. This fantasy is, however, thwarted, a deception that triggers not the expected negative response of victimisation, but, on the contrary, a positive one of self-assertion and empowerment. The house of Evangelista will function as that transitional space that nurtures its children giving them the opportunities denied by society at large.

The trans* condition, then, is simultaneously one of contingency and permanence, a journey towards something else and a final point of arrival. Vulnerable subjects, ejected from their origins (family, ethnicity and gender) find a new sense of belonging in the act of (un)becoming other(s) in the world of houses and balls. Following J. Halberstam (2011), the

ballroom fits within the queer culture of failure: a culture posited off-track, out of the patriarchal dictum of (re)production. But failure is not necessarily something negative. On the contrary, it can be claimed as an out-of-place starting point, a vindication of difference and deferment, a perennial transitional space which enables the vulnerable subject to resist. Read this way, failure allows trans* subjects to be reassured in their nonconforming identity.

11.5 CONCLUSIONS

The ball scene in *Pose* is depicted, in the end, as a symbol of family and home for the homeless, an alternative Garden of Eden where all its members live happily in good-fellowship expressing trust, loyalty, care and love for each other. At the end of the season, Blanca, the Cinderella-like character, who renounces sex to care for her children, is crowned “Mother of the Year” in the ball competitions, a closing moment that highlights the idea of success for both her and her house thanks to the communal effort of this new queer extended family. The trans* body, in summary, is constructed as a neat expression of personal and collaborative success, making real the fantasy all these characters pursue along the 8 episodes of the season.

Such a finale offers a very soft vision of ballroom culture, a vision that reinforces, to a certain extent, the validity of the American dream for the dispossessed.⁶ In this sense, *Pose* is not as ground-breaking as described in enthusiastic reviews.⁷ Unlike *Paris is Burning* (1990), a darker documentary film on the ball scene of the 1980s directed by Jennie Livingston, which served as inspiration to Stephen Canals when devising *Pose*, the TV series seems to glorify the rewards which effort, self-sacrifice, hard work and persistence procure and thus sanctions trans experiences as in-different from heteronormativity.

Nevertheless, the fact that, as said at the beginning of this chapter, it casts a large number of gay actors and trans actresses of colour and tells the story from the Black and Latinx LGBTQ+ community’s perspective, makes *Pose* a risky bet in the world of transnational and globalised streaming services. Offering such a positive view of the ball scene, *Pose* brings racialised trans* America to the fore and, under the taffeta cover of a fairy-tale storytelling, it shows vulnerable subaltern subjectivities who resist stigmatisation and marginalisation thanks to the social support

provided by the inoperative community the houses and ball competitions constitute, while, at the same time, it confronts the spectator with the contradictions inherent to transsexuality and transgenderism and the complexity implicit in questions of ethnicity, gender, class and sexuality.

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NOTES

1. This is, in fact, the strongest criticism former attempts at representing this Black and Latinx underground culture received from Afro-American critics. bell hooks considers that Jennie Livingston’s *Paris is Burning*, the documentary film *Pose* is based on, uses the personal testimonies of people of colour just as a way to provide a spectacular vision of ballroom culture and criticises that sort of appropriation:

At no point in Livingston’s film are the men asked to speak about their connections to a world of family and community beyond the drag ball. The cinematic narrative makes the ball the center of their lives. And yet who determines this? Is this the way the black men view their reality or is this the reality Livingston constructs? Certainly the degree to which black men in this gay subculture are portrayed as cut off from a “real” world heightens the emphasis on fantasy, and indeed gives *Paris is Burning* its tragic edge. That tragedy is made explicit when we are told that the fair-skinned Venus has been murdered, and yet there is no mourning of him/her in the film, no intense focus on the sadness of this murder. Having served the purpose of “spectacle” the film abandons him/her. The audience does not see Venus after the murder. There are no scenes of grief. To put it crassly, her dying is upstaged by spectacle. Death is not entertaining. (1992, 154–155)

Pose redresses that wrong, giving voice to members of the community as actors and actresses, scriptwriters, producers and directors.

2. Marlon M. Bailey writes about this racial segregation: “Black LGBT people, who live among Black communities, are largely excluded from or oppressed

within these Black geographies, particularly their Black homes and families of origin. At the same time, white gay communities and the spaces they create and inhabit are unwelcoming at best and outright hostile at worst to Black LGBT people” (2014, 494).

3. No precise date has been found. Michael Cunningham (1995) states that houses grew out of the underground drag balls which started in New York City in the 1930s. Tim Lawrence (2011) traces drag balls and voguing back to the second half of the nineteenth century. Marlon M. Bailey, on the other hand, considers that: “it was during the 1920s that a Black LGBT subculture began to take form. This history coincides with my interlocutors’ assertions that Harlem is the birthplace of Ballroom culture” (2013, 89).
4. Marlon M. Bailey establishes the following gender system in ballroom culture:

Three Sexes.

1. Female (a person born with female sex characteristics).
2. Male (a person born with male sex characteristics).
3. Intersex (a person born with both male and female or indeterminate genitalia).

Six-Part Gender System:

1. **Butch Queens** (biologically born males who identify as gay or bisexual men; they are and can be masculine, hypermasculine or feminine).
2. **Femme Queens** (transgender women or male-to-female (MTF) at various stages of gender reassignment; i.e. hormonal or surgical processes).
3. **Butch Queens up in Drag** (gay men who perform in drag but do not take hormones and do not live as women).
4. **Butches** (transgender men or female-to-male (FTM) at various stages of gender reassignment, masculine lesbians or a female appearing as male regardless of sexual orientation).
5. **Women** (biologically born females who are gay, straight-identified or queer).
6. **Men** (biologically born males who live as men and are straight-identified or not gay-identified).

House Parents:

1. **Mothers:** Butch Queens, Femme Queens and Women.
2. **Fathers:** Butch Queens, Butches and Men (2014, 492).

5. Anson Koch-Rein, Elahe Haschemi Yekani and Jasper J. Verlinden read this motto in a different way: “the series reflects on the history of trans

representation as much as on the current conditions of Black and Latinx trans survival (Live!), resilience (Work!), and community (Pose!) in the context of violence and increasing visibility, which, in the TV series, is represented by the popularity of voguing” (2020, 2).

6. The perpetuation of such a dream seems to be a recurrent motif in many transnormative narratives, a perpetuation criticised as somehow reactionary by trans scholars who see in such a device a new attempt by neoliberal heteronormativity to impose its own criteria on the lives and experiences of nonconforming trans individuals who do not identify themselves with this assimilationist project. Cael M. Keegan, when analysing *Transamerica* and “My Body is a Cage” from the series *Degrassi: The Next Generation*, states such a preoccupation:

The liberated trans subject supplies the affective matrix for a new form of ideal citizenship that the audience moves to achieve through sympathetic absorption of trans difference. Through the salvational transnormative subject, the democratic project is redeemed and therefore saved. The display of the transgender “journey” out of dysphoria and into authenticity and acceptance now also becomes a quintessentially American journey, forward into the nation’s expanding democratic future. (2013, n.p.)

7. Janet Mock, interviewed by E. Alex Jung for *Vulture* considers that: “*we did something revolutionary and strange and different and never seen before. It exists now, and no one can take it away (text italics)*” (2018), and Alex Rayner wrote enthusiastically about the series in *The Guardian* (August 25, 2018).

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