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Ballroom culture (1970-today): intersectionality and performance

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**BALLROOM CULTURE
(1970-TODAY): INTERSECTIONALITY
AND PERFORMANCE**

Raphaël HOARAU

Mémoire de Master 2

Sous la direction de Dr. Ludivine ROYER

Maîtresse de Conférences

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CITATION EN ÉPIGRAPHE

Ballroom has something to say to the world, and it has a lot to teach the world about self-worth, self-expression, community organizing, gender, sexuality, art and design, performance, healing, and justice.

Leiomy Moldonado

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INTRODUCTION

Ballroom culture, also referred to as Ball culture, emerged in the early 1920s in New York City. Ballrooms are talent competitions, where members are divided into groups (or houses) to walk, dance, vogue and pose their way down the runway for trophies and prizes. Ballroom culture thrived without the interaction with the outside world as it was part of what is called the culture. In fact, we can trace the emergence of this movement 30 years prior to the first queer militancy movement (the Homophile movement of the 1950s). At the beginning, the members were mostly white gay men performing as drag queens and for drag fashion shows. Black members of the queer community rarely participated, and when they did, they were expected to whiten their faces (Cunningham).

Faced with racism and restrictions, queer Black members of the community thus decided to establish their own underground culture. In the 1960s, the first Ballroom, as we know it today, was therefore created for people of color - but not only.

We began to speak of culture about these groups when they were socially, ethnically, culturally or legally excluded from modern industrial civilization, and when this exclusion kept them in such a condition that their culture did not develop according to modern forms of mass culture, but gave birth to a new form of popular culture, strange, marginal, at the border of the tolerated.¹ (Klanickzay 285) [My translation]

The Ballroom culture of the 1960s was developed by the queer and Black community of New York, in poor and working-class urban areas. However, at first, the movement had very few members. But, following the Stonewall Riots of 1969, when members of the queer community stood up against a police raid in a bar of Greenwich Village, participation rose.

¹ “On a commencé à parler de culture, à propos de ces groupes, lorsqu'ils ont été exclus, d'un point de vue social, ethnique, culturel ou juridique de la civilisation industrielle moderne, et que cette exclusion les a maintenus dans une condition telle que leur culture ne s'est pas développée selon des formes modernes de culture de masse, mais a donné naissance à une nouvelle forme de culture populaire, étrange, marginale, à la frontière du toléré.” - original quote.

Indeed, the Stonewall Riots - considered as a turning point in queer history and militancy - boosted Ballroom culture as it “changed self-perceptions within the subculture: from feeling guilty and apologetic to feelings of self-acceptance and pride” (Balzer 114). Ballrooms became safe spaces of self-acceptance, pride, and expression for queer members, mainly Blacks and Latinos/Latinas (Latinxs) - but all members were and are accepted.

Since its beginnings in Harlem, Ballroom culture has expanded to almost every major city in the United States: Detroit, Chicago, Los Angeles, Miami, etc. It has also expanded outside of the US borders and has been adopted and adapted in different countries around the world, like Germany, France, China or the United Kingdom, among many others.

At a local level, Ballroom culture was introduced in Reunion Island in 2021. It is not until then that a queer culture in Reunion Island was developed with the creation of the Pride March the same year for instance. Since 2021, the development of a “*Kwir culture*” in Reunion Island can clearly be observed. The Reunionese notion of “*Vivre Ensemble*,” which embraces the idea of multiculturalism, has long left little to no room for queer people. The United States and Reunion Island both share a similar historical context - that of slavery. In both places - affected by their historical backgrounds - queer people of color face common issues regarding representation, mobilization and visibility. In an article entitled *Luna Ninja, Ambassadrice de la Ballroom culture à La Réunion*, Amelie Tresfels explains that the experiences of African Americans and Reunionese people are similar to a certain extent and justify the development of Ballroom culture - a movement of rebellion - in Reunion Island.

This is why the queer community in Reunion Island easily finds itself in ballroom culture in general, as queer, Creole, mostly racialized people, who evolve in a territory marked by its colonial and slave past.² [My translation]

² “C’est pourquoi la communauté queer réunionnaise se retrouve facilement dans la culture ballroom en général, en tant que personnes queer, créoles, majoritairement racisées, qui évoluent dans un territoire marqué par son passé colonial et esclavagiste.” - original quote.

Clearly, Ballroom culture has become global and offers a social sanctuary to people around the world who have been rejected and marginalized by or within their society at large because of their ethnicity and/or queerness.

Ballroom culture has also to be put in parallel with socio-economic issues: most of those who belong to the Ballroom scene come from families, communities, and neighborhoods in which they have to face certain difficulties: queerphobic violence and abuse, racism, poverty, insufficient education, under- and unemployment and sociocultural dispossession. For most people, the Ballroom scene becomes a necessary place and space to share and acquire skills to survive the outside world. But it is also a necessary refuge for various people to affirm, reconstitute and celebrate their identities and lives. This said, this paper will specifically focus on the Ballroom community of New York.

New York is considered by some as one the most prominent centers of queer life and queer movement, given the birth of the Gay Liberation Movement in the 1970s and the Christopher Street Gay Liberation Day. Furthermore, New York is the birthplace of Ballroom culture and thus where Ballroom culture is the most developed and present.

Demographically speaking, New York is a city composed of a large Black working-class population. In addition to the “shared” race and class status of the population there, there are many queer people of color.

You have black people in New York City who are very much embedded geographically in Black communities. New York is a very segregated city, so if you are Black and from New York, chances are you grew up in a black neighborhood or maybe even a Black/Latino neighborhood. Therefore you are not just dealing with coming into your gayness, but it's like finding a space where both your blackness and gayness can evolve in tandem. (West in Butch Queens 7)

Finally, another important reason to focus on the Ballroom scene of New York is the members' resilience and endurance despite the difficult conditions in which they live.

In addition to the geographical frame of this dissertation, a temporal frame has to be added. The focus will be on the Ballroom scene of New York from the 1970s to today. The 1970s are considered as the turning point for queer history by many historians. It is also around the time when Ballroom culture grew immensely thanks to the Stonewall riots of 1969.

As regards scholarship on this subject area, research on queer histories has remained similar in terms of practices through time. Indeed, specialists in queer history such as Eric Marty or Guillaume Marche have highlighted the experience of white queer people in their research. In 2017, Marche wrote and published a monograph entitled *La Militance LGBT aux États-Unis. Sexualité et Subjectivité*.³ In this book, Marche deals with the evolution of the US LGBTQ movement since the 1960s. Over the 60 years, did the movement lose more than it gained? How did the movement evolve? Why do activists engage or disengage themselves from the movement? Those are some of the questions which Marche tried to answer in *La militance LGBT aux États-Unis*. In order to answer them, Marche focuses on the main theme of sexuality: the sexualization and desexualization of the movement. With his book, Marche ultimately wants to show that although the movement has had important successes, it has gradually lost its base - sexuality - and political power. In order to conduct his analysis, Marche draws on qualitative fieldwork that he conducted in New York, Boston and San Francisco. He also uses a set of 32 cases drawn from a database of 187 interviews that he held with a range of LGBTQ activists. His book is composed of two parts, equalling five chapters in total. In the first two chapters, Marche fully accounts for the changes that the mobilizations went through. In the third chapter, Marche's analysis of the subjective experience of activists offers a unique and rich approach to understanding the history of this movement. Furthermore, Marche considers the symbolic importance of small groups, provisional acts and bodily performance in the movement. The last two chapters present forms of activism that stand out for their originality and their affirmation of an

³ The book was translated in 2019, under the title: *Sexuality, Subjectivity and LGBTQ Militancy in the United States*. Ref: Marche, Guillaume, translated by Katharine Throssell. *Sexuality, Subjectivity, and LGBTQ Militancy in the United States*. Amsterdam University Press, 2019.

activism that seeks to disrupt norms. Ultimately, Marche interweaves historical and activist discourses to show that struggles for gay rights were not limited to symbolic victories such as access to marriage or military careers. Marche also suggests possible futures for these mobilizations: now that a certain institutional stability seems to have been achieved, they can turn to less institutionalized, less policed, more subversive initiatives.

However, the book which is based on his fieldwork and interviews is conducted in a disproportionate way, as most experiences and stories discussed are from a white-male perspective. Marche's book will have thus gained more in considering the intersectionality between gender, race, sexuality and social class. In addition, Marche does not even mention Ballroom culture in his research.

But Marche is not an isolated case. In fact, it has been highlighted by some historians that studies on queerness have often put in advance a homogenization of the queer community. But it has been argued by others that such a practice is dangerous.

The pitfall of such a strategy, however, is the homogenization of a group identity that is far from homogenous at all. [...] The essentializing moment of the queer community that describes queer political activism in the present comes at the expense of other aspects of identification, such as race, class, and gender. The result is an either or bind, in which blackness and queerness are treated as separate but analogous identities. This creates a void at the intersection of both that makes queer people of color invisible and does not do justice to their lived experiences, their creative, political, and critical work. (Kiesling)

What Kiesling argues here, and what should be highlighted in this discourse, is that a dangerous turn away from intersectionality prevents a focus on the multifaceted and often overlapping oppressive power structures that are shaped by gender, class, race, and sexuality. Black and Latinx queerness have been rendered invisible in societies and in most queer studies although some scholars, artists, and activists are trying to make a change. Many queer communities of color have thus suffered from such practices, as their creativity, experiences and struggles weren't acknowledged. This can clearly be observed with Ballroom culture.

The public apparition of Ballroom culture in mainstream society took place in 1991 with the release of the documentary *Paris is Burning* by Jennie Livingston. The documentary followed the lives of Ballroom members in New York City, who for the first time gained representation.

But even then, the erasure of Ballroom culture from queer history remained a common practice. Research on Ballroom culture is quasi-inexistent. Marlon M. Bailey is one of the only specialists on Ballroom culture. In 2013, he released a book entitled *Butch Queens up in Pumps: Gender, Performance and Ballroom Culture in Detroit*. In this book, Bailey aims at presenting a genealogy of the contemporary scene's communal practices. Each of the five chapters offers an ethnographic examination of one dimension of Ballroom culture. *Butch queens up in Pumps* is an ethnographic account of Ballroom culture in Detroit.

Since then, Ballroom has gained more visibility with the release of many more documentaries and TV shows: *The Aggressives* (2005), *How do I look* (2006), *Kiki* (2016), *Pose* (2018) and *Pier Kids* (2019). Yet, research, analysis and writings on Ballroom remained mostly inexistent.

Even by putting all the research and documentaries produced on Ballroom culture together, there are still many questions left unanswered. The scale of research left to be done on Ballroom culture is immeasurable.

Indeed, Ballroom culture is a rich source that can be used to study how a community affected by different factors produces and uses gender, subversion and resistance to survive and form a community. Ballroom is also a form of subculture that was developed and hidden from history. It is thus time to give it back its rightful place within queer culture and acknowledge the experiences and lives of thousands and thousands of people of color. But considering the lack of research, to offer a detailed analysis of Ballroom culture is to strive for the impossible within our frameworks. Indeed, the Ballroom scene is huge and complex, expanding throughout the globe.

Thus, this body of work aims at retracing the history of Ballroom culture, its role and importance in the emancipation, representation and struggles of the Black and Latinx queer community, from the 70s to the present day, in the United States, and more

specifically in New-York. Our goal here will be to present Ballroom as a process of visibilization⁴ and mobilization of sexual and ethnic minorities.

A number of questions will be raised, including Ballroom members' militancy, their struggles, the use of performance as a way to survive in what was and somehow remains a hostile world. What attempts were made by these people to gain visibility and recognition? How have they been acknowledged and their lives improved? What about their integration into mainstream society? How does a community affected by different factors produce and use gender, class, sexuality, race, subversion and resistance to survive, forge more livable lives for themselves and develop a community?

This dissertation proposes to discuss the subject through a three-part analysis.

Part 1 examines and delineates the identities and characteristics of the members of the New York Ballroom scene. Firstly, the living conditions of Ballroom members and the Ballroom gender system will be discussed. Other questions will be raised in relation to the identity crises among Ballroom members as well as the hostilities and struggles they encounter; to end this first chapter, the analysis will explore the way Ballroom functions: organization, place, structure and categories. This discussion will help to understand how and why members form a community, how this community functions and will eventually highlight the importance of Ballroom culture in the members' lives.

Strategies put in place by the Ballroom community to respond to and change their living conditions will be examined in Part 2. Firstly, a detailed examination of how Ballroom members use performance as a way to survive in the outside world, thanks to the analysis of *Realness* for instance, will be provided. In a second part, the way categories and balls are used as a means for members to gain confidence and pride will be studied. Lastly, Ballroom's family-like structure: *Houses* will be another subject of discussion. How do members (re)create a community to provide support, kinship and protection? Part 2 will also highlight how the Ballroom community respond(ed) to different crises or events, such as HIV. This chapter will shine a light on the creativity and strategies put in place by members of the Ballroom community.

⁴ Adaption of the French sociological term *visibilisation*. The term refers to the fact of making visible a social group or a social phenomenon that is absent or very weakly present in dominant representations.

Part 3 seeks to gain a critical insight into Ballroom's passage from an underground culture to a mainstream culture. While Ballroom made a major breakthrough in mainstream societies in the 1990s, the living conditions of Ballroom members did not change that much, and members mostly remained invisible at the time. What attempts were made by these people to gain visibility and to have their lives and conditions acknowledged and improved? How did Ballroom reach mainstream culture through new movies, documentaries and social media in the 2010s? In addition to seeking answers to these questions, the chapter will show how Ballroom will be honored and acknowledged, especially through influence on mainstream culture: vogue, *reading/shading*, fashion and (house) music. Ballroom members' inclusion, exclusion or possible illusion of belonging are other related issues that will be examined, including the vital question of the future of Ballroom culture.

In an attempt to analyze Ballroom culture, numerous sources, including cinematographic sources, audiovisual sources, autobiographies, archives, interviews, photos and articles, will be useful to have firsthand insight into this culture and community. Special mention must also be made of Bailey's work on Ballroom culture, as well as on performance studies. Additionally, writings on gender performance by Judith Butler, among many others, were invaluable. Several other queer and gender theories, including Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, have pride of place within our work.

Enfin, this dissertation is an examination of Ballroom culture through the lenses of performance, intersectionality and queer theory in order to acknowledge the lives of the members and the practices of identity, kinship, (in)visibility and community in which they are engaged.

1. BALLROOM CULTURE AND THE BALLROOM COMMUNITY

*There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle
because we do not live single-issue lives.*

- Audrey Lorde

In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw published an essay entitled *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*. The essay centers on three legal cases that dealt with issues of both racial and sex discrimination. In each case, Crenshaw argued that the court was considering both racism and sexism as “single-issues.” In other words, it seemed like the court was forgetting that the black women under trial were both black and female and thus subjected to discrimination on the basis of race, gender, and oftentimes, a combination of the two. It is in this essay that Crenshaw first used the term intersectionality. Intersectionality became a tool used to describe the way multiple oppressions are experienced. Crenshaw argues that intersectionality allows to consider a set of factors - sexuality, gender, race, class and so on - that affect a social individual in combination, rather than considering each factor in isolation.

Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars travelling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in an intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination [...] But it is not always easy to reconstruct an accident: Sometimes the skid marks and the injuries simply indicate that they occurred simultaneously, frustrating efforts to determine which driver caused the harm. (Crenshaw 149)

In other words, intersectionality is a lens that allows to understand how black women, for instance, are affected by both sexism and racism. This analogy can be applied to

almost everyone with the help of specific categories: gender, sexuality, race or ethnicity, social class, religion, etc. In the aforementioned categories, a black, poor and lesbian trans woman could be suffering at the same time from poverty, transphobia, homophobia, racism and sexism, each of them intersecting with one another. This analogy can also be applied to Ballroom members. In order to comprehend and understand what Ballroom is and who Ballroom members are it is important to examine the mutually constitutive relationship between race, gender, sexuality, class and space. Thus, three inextricable features constitute Ballroom culture: the members and their gender system, the hostilities they encounter and the ball events.

1.1 MEMBERS

Most of the people who participate in the Ballroom community of New York live in New York, although they on the whole come from diverse states or countries. The reason why they often find themselves in New York is that it is considered as one of the centers of queer life and queer development given the Birth of the Gay Liberation Movement in the 1970s, the Christopher Street Gay Liberation Day and the creation of ACT UP in the 1980s.

Geographically speaking, most members “live in poor or working-class urban areas” (Bailey, *Gender/Racial Realness* 366) such as Harlem, the Piers or Greenwich Village. The Piers is an important part of queer culture. Indeed, it is the place where the queer community commonly gathers, meets, works, lives and sleeps as can be seen in Jennie Levingston’s 1991 documentary *Paris is Burning*. The reason for this is that most of them do not “freely choose the neighborhoods or urban spaces in which they live or move” (Bailey, *Gender/Racial Realness* 366). Indeed, economically speaking, many members of Ballroom culture are from the working class or belong to the poorest part of the population. They are oftentimes homeless, sex workers or they have low-paid jobs. Nevertheless, those places (Piers, Harlem or Greenwich) allow the different people living in such urban areas to meet, to form a community and thus join Ballroom culture.

Consequently, those places are, among others, what made the development and creation of Ballroom culture possible.

In addition, members of Ballroom culture are generally part of the youth community. Indeed, many members are under eighteen years old. For many reasons, which will be addressed later, many young people find themselves in New York and thus join the community as a way to survive and express themselves. Dominique Jackson in her autobiography, *The Transsexual From Tobago*, explains how she went from living in the Caribbean to New York, and how she was introduced to Ballroom at the age of 17. On top of that, some members don't exceed the age of fifty, due to the hostilities that they face because of their lifestyle. Nonetheless, it can be said that the people who participate in Ballroom culture are from a various range of ages.

Another crucial thing to consider is the ethnicity of the members of Ballroom culture. Most members are part of ethnic minorities: African-Americans or Latinxs. Furthermore, they have a sex and a gender identity: most members are men or women (sex), but there are also many trans members, that is, people whose sex at birth does not align with their gender (male or female). Secondly, they also have a sexual orientation that differs from heterosexuality as most members are gay, lesbian or bi. Therefore, in this context, their ethnicity can not be separated from their gender and sexual identity, as they bear a triple minority. As a result, not only are Ballroom members part of ethnic minorities but they are also queer, which makes them part of the queer gender communities of color. Thus, Ballroom culture is a place where those minorities can particularly exist.

Studies of queer genders or gender and sexual transgressors have privileged the experiences and activities of urban, white queer communities in the United States. By and large, these white, middle-class queer communities are represented as universal, and their experiences and identity claims are posited as the interpretive lens through which the lives of (often) working-class people of color are examined. (Bailey, *Gender/Racial Realness* 375)

As Bailey explains, queer people of color have long been erased or overlooked, having little to no representation in society. Ballroom culture places itself at the margin of that

erasure (of queer people of color). Indeed, not only does Ballroom culture allow the development of a queer-colored identity and expression, that is available to queer men, women and transgenders of color, but it also allows Ballroom members to develop a view of themselves that differs from the one that exists outside of their communities, especially Black communities:

In the quotidian lives of Black gender and sexually marginalized people, the notion that sex, gender, and sexuality are not inherent and fixed is a matter of common sense among members of the community, but not for those with whom they interact outside of it. (Bailey, *Gender/Racial Realness* 371)

Black members of the queer community finally have a place where they can feel accepted and integrated. A place where they can question the dominating views that exist within the Black, Latinx and White communities. However, it should be pointed out that not all members are Blacks or Latinxs, there are also Asians or Whites, although they represent a very small percentage of the members.

Additionally, the Black and Latinx queer people who participate in Ballroom communities have gender expressions, gender identities and sexual orientations that are different from the dominant white, straight and cis-gendered (people whose sex at birth is the same as their gender, as opposed to the term trans) society. The Ballroom community feels enclaved inside the dominant categorizations of gender, sex and sexuality. So, as a need to dissociate from the homonormative and heteronormative views of sex, sexuality and gender, the Ballroom community has developed its own identity system: a six-part sex/gender system. The system itself, however, is more complex and inclusive than its name might suggest. It may be described as followed:

Women: cis-women (feminine lesbian and straight women).

Men: cis-straight men or not gay identified.

Butch queens: biologically born males (cis-men) who identify as gay or bisexual, they can have a gender expression that is masculine, hyper masculine or feminine.

Butch queens up in drag: gay cis-men who perform and compete in drag but who do not live as women.

Butches: female to male transgenders (also called transgender men) - at different stages of gender reassignment -, as well as masculine lesbian, masculine straight women or female appearing as male.

Femme queens: male to female transgenders (also called transgender women) - at various stages of gender reassignment.

These categories of identity are quintessential examples of how Ballroom culture challenges, reconsiders and restructures gender norms. Indeed, the terms *Butch* and *Femme* are used to connote a certain manifestation of gender expression, for instance:

Butch most often describes a woman who appears masculine, it may also describe a gay male who appears particularly masculine compared to his *femme* male counterparts, or a transgendered female. Similarly, *femme* is most often used to describe a lesbian who appears feminine, but it can also describe a gay male who is more womanly or a transgendered male. (Golding 177)

From that description of the terms given by Golding, one can see how the community of Ballroom reappropriated the terms to fit within their systems. By adding the word *queens* to *butch*, it now refers only to gay males - whether or not they are masculine or feminine. The same goes with the term *femme*, which now refers only to trans women. In addition, the term *queens up in drag* refers to what Golding called “femme male.” The term “butch,” in the Ballroom system, refers, as originally, to trans men and masculine lesbians.

Taking from the different existing systems of identity (gender, sex, sexuality, butch and femme) and developing them, the Ballroom community created in the late 1960s early 1970s a system of identification that is unique and groundbreaking. Indeed, the gender system transcends the binary categories in dominant society such as male/female and man/woman. In addition, the system was created in a period when the dominant white cis-hetero society had a dichotomous view of gender and gender

expression, and when the queer community developed a homonormative view of gender and sexuality. The many differences existing within the queer community - masculine gay, feminine lesbian and other forms of sexual and gender expressions - were symbolically erased so as to develop a common social image of the queer community as explained by Marche.

Ballroom culture detaches itself from that common social image, by developing a gender/sex system within which its members could develop their self-expression without being confined to any norms or restrictions. To illustrate further, gay men could live up as masculine in contrast to the heteronormative views of the feminine gay - views that became with time the norm as well for the queer community. As Eckhart Tolle puts it in *A New Earth: Awakening Your Life's Purpose*:

Gender becomes identity. Identification with gender is encouraged at an early age, and it forces you into a role, into conditioned patterns of behavior that affect all aspects of your life, not just sexuality. It is a role that many people become completely trapped in. (33)

Ballroom allows its members to detach themselves from that forced identification and to develop an identity that is not fixed. Members are free to develop and express their gender and sexual identities, as categories are organized around those notions of gender, sex and sexuality. Furthermore, they can live that said sexuality within Ballroom freely. They can have polyamorous relationships, sexual intercourse with multiple partners and they can develop their kinks (sexual practices such as BDSM).⁵ Those sexual practices are stigmatized in the dominant society and became stigmatized inside the queer community. Indeed, in order to allow the assimilation and integration of the queer community, those practices became seen as non-respectable. There has been, as Guillaume Marche explains, a normalization⁶ of the community that tends towards making it respectable and compatible with the norms:

⁵ Abbreviation for Bondage, Discipline (or domination), Sadism (or submission), Masochism; sexual activity that involves, for example tying a partner up, games in which one partner controls another, or giving and receiving pain for pleasure. (Cambridge dictionary)

⁶ Normalization is my adaption of the French sociological term *normalisation*, which describes the action of setting norms for something.

Desexualizing homosexuality thus tends to make the diversity of the homosexual experience disappear, because what about the many LGBT people who do not aspire to either heterosexuality or monogamy? The quest for rights for homosexuals is then based on a definition of collective identity that is no longer very representative and therefore no longer very authentic.⁷ (Marche 96) [My translation]

Members of Ballroom culture are therefore the exception of such desexualization and *normalization*. As a result, the Ballroom community represents a unique group of people who do not obey any norms, which makes them rich in diversity in terms of sexuality and gender expressions.

As well, Ballroom become a place where trans people can exist and prosper freely. It is one of the only places where they hold an important status. Often erased from movements or underrepresented within the queer community, trans people are overrepresented in the Ballroom culture. Indeed, the system created by the Ballroom community gives space for trans people to exist and express themselves. Two categories are even made for them: *Butches* and *femme queens*. On top of that, gender and sex are mutable and malleable in the Ballroom community, while they are often related to biology in the dominant society and even within the queer community as M. Bailey points out in *Gender/Racial Realness: theorizing the gender system in Ballroom culture*:

Most importantly, although categories of sex in dominant culture are understood to be formed through and determined by biology, Ballroom members hold the fundamental belief that sex categories are malleable and that the body can be altered through various means such as reconstructive surgery, hormonal therapy, or padding. (370)

The gender/sex system of Ballroom thus allows trans people to not see their sexuality or gender identity set in stone. They can be male or female, or both if they want to. Gender expression and identity are highly developed in Ballroom culture compared to homonormative and heteronormative societies.

⁷ “Désexualiser l’homosexualité tend donc à faire disparaître la diversité de l’expérience homosexuelle, car qu’en est-il des nombreuses personnes LGBT qui n’aspirent ni à l’hétérosexualité, ni à la monogamie ? La quête de droits pour les homosexuel.le.s s’appuie alors sur une définition de l’identité collective qui n’est plus très représentative et donc plus très authentique.” - Original quote.

However, the system is not flawless. The categories do not “break entirely from hegemonic notions of sex, gender, and sexuality (Bailey, *Gender/Racial Realness* 369). Indeed, what about the many trans women who are masculine or trans men who are feminine? Why isn’t there a category for feminine lesbians or a separate category for masculine lesbians? What about women and men who do drag, regardless of their sexual orientation? It seems that the categorizations are a bit restrictive. If one considers the many different spectrums of queerness as highlighted by many scholars such as Guillaume Marche or Marlon M. Bailey, Ballroom is still anchored in an outdated format. There are no real categories for people who belong outside the dominant forms of sexuality: homosexuality and heterosexuality. In such categorizations, one who is asexual (lack of sexual attraction to others), pansexual (sexual or/and romantic attraction to any sexual identity) or non-binary (neither male nor female) might not feel fully included.

Nevertheless, it should be pointed that at the time of its creation, “Ballroom gender system [allowed] more categories of identity and articulations of gender, and sexuality than those available to members in their lives outside of this sphere” (Bailey, *Gender/Racial Realness* 369). Furthermore, even though the system has not been reworked and rewritten, nowadays every spectrum of the queerness world is integrated within Ballroom culture, although members still have to enter in one of the categories offered by the gender/sex system.

Overall, the Black and Latinx LGBT people who participate in the Ballroom community of New York have access to a six-part gender/sex system that allows more fluidity than outside of Ballroom. Additionally, the members place themselves at the margin of the dominant society, the queer world, and the Black/Latinx community, because they maintain an expression that seeks to disrupt norms.

Undoubtedly, there is an undeniable intersectionality between the categories of sex, gender, race, class and sexual orientation that position Ballroom members as vulnerable to the different hostilities and struggles that exist in the United States: poverty, racism, queer-phobia, sexism, etc.

1.2 HOSTILITIES AND STRUGGLES

Although Ballroom culture offers Ballroom members more fluidity and freedom than the dominant queer, black, latinx and white communities, Ballroom members' lives outside of Ballroom spaces are filled with hostilities and struggles. Indeed, because Ballroom members are mostly Black and Latinx LGBT people who are primarily poor and working class and live in urban areas, it is not surprising that they have a complicated relation to space. Their relationships to public, private and urban spaces are one of violence, exclusion, stigmatization on the one hand and of resistance, negotiation and reappropriation on the other. As I explain in the following pages, Ballroom members are largely excluded and marginalized within queer spaces marked as white, from Black and Latinx heteronormative spaces and from dominant white heteronormative spaces. Additionally, Ballroom members are marked by the socio-economic context within which they live. The often complicated living conditions of Ballroom members are quintessential examples of the difficulties and struggles that most face as queer people of color in the United States, a country deeply affected by racism and queerphobia. Thus, to fully understand the struggles of Ballroom members, the issues of race, sexuality and gender have to be addressed.

The United States is deeply marked by slavery. Slavery, which started in 1619 in America, consisted in the importation of Africans, who lived under harsh conditions and servitude. In 1895, slavery was abolished with the ratification of the *Thirteenth Amendment* of the United States Constitution. Nevertheless, the abolition of Slavery did not put an end to racial disparity. Just after the abolition of slavery, the Jim Crow laws - whose roots come from the belief of the existence of racial hierarchies - were established so as to maintain control over people of color. Indeed, the Jim Crow laws were a collection of state and local statutes that legalized racial segregation. The laws were meant to marginalize African Americans by denying them the right to vote, hold jobs, get an education or other opportunities. Furthermore, during the Jim Crow laws era, African Americans were excluded from public places: public parks were forbidden to them, and theaters and restaurants were segregated. Moreover, the laws forbade

African Americans from living in white neighborhoods. Those who attempted to defy Jim Crow laws often faced arrest, fines, jail sentences, violence or death. Eventually, the Jim Crow laws were legally withdrawn after the signature of the *Civil Rights Act* in 1964 and took full effect after the *Fair Housing Act* of 1968, which ended discrimination in renting and selling houses.

Even though the *Civil Rights Act* put an end to the Jim Crow laws, Black people, and people of color in general, still face exclusion and discrimination. Indeed, since the end of Jim Crow laws, the black body has almost always been framed as criminal. “Black criminality [has] become the most significant and durable signifier of black inferiority in white people’s minds” (Gibran 3). Slavery, the Jim Crow laws and Black criminality have defined what it means to be black in the United States. Alexander explains:

Slavery defined what it meant to be black (a slave), and Jim Crow defined what it meant to be black (a second-class citizen). Today mass incarceration defines the meaning of blackness in America: black people, especially black men, are criminals. That is what it means to be black. (197)

Alexander’s analysis of *blackness* reveals that Black people have been marginalized, seen as inferior, criminals and perpetrators of violence. Thus, Black people, and people of color, have not fully been integrated in society given their different ethnicity from the dominant white society. Ironically, the marginalization from which people of color have suffered in society led to further exclusion from other marginalized groups, such as white queer groups.

The increasing focus on safety and visibility in queer activism led to the construction of a white queer identity and community that positioned itself against people of color who were seen as the most common perpetrators of violence against queers and not the victims of violence. (Kiesling 5)

The Ballroom community makes it in fact extraordinarily clear. Indeed, as Ballroom members are mostly people of color - while not only - they face discrimination, exclusion and racism from the dominant white society and from other white

marginalized communities. Thus, understanding American history helps in realizing the struggles and hostilities that members of the Ballroom community face.

But to racism must further be added queerphobia. First of all, the term queerphobia is an umbrella term used to describe the fear and hatred directed towards anything that is not heterosexual or cisgender, that is to say homosexuality, bisexuality, transgenderism, or asexuality. It can also refer to a general animosity towards anything that does not meet a culture's heteronormative standards. And in every sense of the word, the United States has been undeniably affected by queerphobia.

Indeed, queerphobia stems back from colonialism. During the colonial era of American history, many European nations established colonies in the Americas and brought their laws and religions with them. For instance, Puritanism was imported with the arrival of the Mayflower and Puritans later established themselves in Massachusetts Bay (1629). Puritanism shaped early America and gave birth to a variety of religious movements and experiences that were based on beliefs and values such as hard work, family, respectability and purity.

Additionally, those colonies used pre-existing laws from the United Kingdom against homosexuality. The main sentence used in the colonies was the death penalty under the "Sodomy law." The "Sodomy law" was an act that defined certain sexual practices as crimes. During colonial times, sodomy was considered a "sin against nature" by society at large, whether it was between "man and woman, man and beast or man and man (Weeks 122) and thus punished in the colonies. In addition, the societal belief of the colonial time was that male homosexuality was closely linked to femininity and female homosexuality to masculinity and that therefore a queer lifestyle "involved elements of cross-gender behavior" (Weeks 137). Homosexuality was thus seen as a threat to masculinity/femininity, family and marriage. It was also considered unnatural and was persecuted under the sodomy law. The Sodomy law was used until its withdrawal in 2003 in a case called *Lawrence v. Texas*, in which the Supreme Court of the United States declared that sodomy laws were unconstitutional and could not be used to charge a person with a crime.

However, such ideas and beliefs of cross-gender behavior and unnatural practices prevailed with time and have had a lasting effect on gender norms and expression, as well as sexuality. For instance, male homosexuality is still closely linked to femininity in people's minds. Trans people or non-gender-conforming people have also been rejected on the moral basis that one's gender corresponds to one's sex and that any other thing is considered unnatural or unacceptable under dominant values. Those stereotypes take all queer people to be cast in the same mold, although they have dissimilar identities. As Devereux puts it: "les individus perdent alors leur caractère d'êtres humains hautement différenciés, dans la mesure où leurs identités pertinentes sont réduites à une seule: par là est anéantie leur identité réelle" (254). Those stereotypes have led to their exclusion and has been strengthened by the impact of religion on society. As a result, queer people have become the subject of the "moral panic," that is "a group of persons [which] emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests" (Cohen 9). This resulted in the exclusion of queer people, who faced discrimination, violence, and rejection. For instance, in his book entitled *The Deviant's War: The Homosexual vs. The United States of America*, queer historian Eric Cervini focuses on the Mattachine society of the 1950s. The group became the first organization to protest against the systemic persecution of gay federal employees who were dismissed from their jobs.

Additionally, queer people face violence and discrimination on a daily basis, which often results in uprisings. For instance, the Stonewall riots was a response to the discrimination and the police violence that queer individuals faced.

Similarly, Black queers also face exclusion from Black communities because of their gender or/and sexuality. Indeed, as Marlon M. Bailey puts it:

Black LGBT people are not only subjected to a white supremacist gaze within majoritarian society but they are also seen simultaneously through a heteropatriarchal gaze within Black communities. In both cases, the sociovisibility through which Black LGBT people are seen functions as the behest of a gender and sexual normativity that is racialized and seeks to police and discipline Black gender bodies, identities, and practices both inside and outside of Black communities. (*Butch Queens* 57)

More generally, it can be said that Ballroom members not only face rejection within the dominant white society because of their ethnicity, gender or/and sexuality, but in addition, they face this rejection within their ethnic groups because of their queerness, or within queer groups because of their ethnicity. To put it simply, Ballroom members face social and spatial exclusion from national, cultural, political, heteronormative, dominant and communal forms of belonging. As a result, Ballroom members are particularly affected by queerphobia and racism.

Besides, those issues obviously highlight the fact that their discrimination is based on the way they are perceived by others. To go further, feminist scholar Robyn Wiegman argues that “meaning is conferred onto bodies through a visual epistemology of race and gender” (4). Additionally, meaning is also “conferred onto bodies” through the “visual epistemology” of class and sexuality. This means that someone’s identity is seen through the interpretation of their body. For instance, gender, sexuality or class is understood through the way someone presents itself, that is to say, the way they walk, the way they dress, or the way they act. Usually, a man who wears a crop top will often be classified by the dominant society as queer. Accordingly, one that dresses up in a suit will usually be considered as belonging to the business industry.

Thus, Ballroom members experience different forms of marginalization. Drawing from Michele Tracy Berger’s works, the concept of intersectional marginalization can be used to analyze the Ballroom community. For the Ballroom community, intersectional marginalization refers to the multiple and intersecting forms of exclusion, oppression and marginalization that Ballroom members encounter. This intersectional marginalization is due to their ethnically minoritized status in the United States and to other social factors such as gender and sexual nonconformity.

This marginalization takes different forms in the Ballroom community. However, the most common shared experience among members, before and while they are part of Ballroom, is exclusion from their families. Indeed, to exclusion from society must further be added exclusion from families. Ballroom members often grow up in heteropatriarchal communities or families, whose values and beliefs often go against homosexuality and transgenderism. For instance, Dominique Jackson in her book, *The*

Transsexual from Tobago, recalls how she grew up in a family where young boys are often taught not to show emotions, as it is considered a feminine thing, and where in fact boys are forbidden to participate in anything that might be considered as feminine by the dominant society. Certain practices, such as dance, for instance, are considered feminine activities and thus forbidden to young boys, who will often be encouraged to participate in “masculine” activities, such as football or rugby.

Within Dominique’s story, the concept of “toxic masculinity” can be identified. Toxic masculinity can be defined in different ways. For instance, in a *New York Times*’ article, toxic masculinity has been described as follows:

A set of behaviors and beliefs that include the following: suppressing emotions or masking distress; maintaining an appearance of hardness; violence as an indicator of power. In other words, Toxic masculinity is what can come of teaching boys that they can’t express emotion openly. (Maya Salam)

In *Gender Roles: A Sociological Perspective*, Linda L. Lindsey argues that certain genders have been attributed to toys, clothes and social practices. She also argues that certain gender roles have been created and attributed in family structures, institutions and so on. For Lindsey, toxic masculinity thus involves cultural pressures for men and boys to behave in a certain way. Both definitions reveal that in toxic masculine behavior, “manliness” is perpetuated through domination, queerphobia and aggression, among many other things. Additionally, toxic masculinity does not only affect boys and men, but it also impacts gender and sexual relationships between females, males and queer people.

Therefore, toxic masculinity has had an impact on many queer people’s lives. The aforementioned visions of manliness have accentuated the negative allusion of queerness to femininity, or the lack therefore of femininity for trans men or lesbians. Many young queer people of color, and ballroom members, are brought up in family where certain aspects of toxic masculinity are widely used.

As a sociocultural and a material unit, the Black biological family and the home are bound together by an ideology that fetishizes the heteropatriachal nuclear family. According to Black common sense, the home is the space of reproduction and the maintenance of a (respectable) heteronormative social, gender, and sexual order (Lubiano 1998, 232). (Bailey, *Gender, Place and Culture* 495)

As a result, many Ballroom members have been excluded from or have cut ties with their families because they have decided to openly express their sexuality or/and transgenderism. This exclusion has been accentuated further by the way Ballroom members are perceived by society at large.

This exclusion, however, often occurs when an individual decides to come out by revealing their gender or/and sexuality. This exclusion also occurs when an individual accidentally out themselves or is outed by someone else. Subsequently, this exclusion usually means that this person has to leave, often forcibly, their family's home to find a more fitting place. For those living in different states, this means that they have to find a new place to move into. New York - known for being a city where many queer people live - became one of the first and main relocations for numerous queer people. However, this (forced) displacement allowed the discovery of Ballroom culture by new arrivers and thus led to Ballroom's development. Nevertheless, the precariousness shared by many queer people of color, have left them no choice but to move to the poorest areas of New York, such as Harlem and the Piers. Indeed, many Ballroom members end up living on the streets or in parks for multiple reasons. Usually, Ballroom members (or soon to be members) are young adults or teenagers who have not been able to finish their education because they moved away from their homes and no longer had the financial support of their families. As a result, most members have a hard time accessing high-paid jobs. Additionally, ballroom members are often not able to find cheap or affordable housing. Consequently, most members are homeless at the beginning. According to *True Colors United*, 40% of the Homeless Youth Population are "LGBTQ." In addition, poverty rates among "LGBTQ+" people of color in the United States, according to Human Rights Campaign, tower over those of other groups.

For example, 48% of Latinx transgender adults, as well as approximately 39% of Black transgender adults, are living in poverty.

However, some members are able to live or keep in touch with their family. If it is the case, it is generally due to the fact that they have not come out, or that they have been accepted by their family.

Nevertheless, this new change in most of the members' lifestyle, that is to say homelessness and poverty, results in members facing numerous difficulties. Firstly, the street, and neighborhoods where most members have to sleep and live, are not safe environments. As can be seen in *Paris is Burning*, many queer people living in the streets fear that their only belongings will be stolen or that they will get attacked. Thus, many queer people have to adapt to survive in their new living space. This indicates that queer people, and ballroom members in particular, have to always be aware of their surroundings so as to protect themselves. Additionally, because Ballroom members often live in urban or public places, they are subjected to other people's gaze. Therefore, many of the members fear attacks or aggressions given their ethnicity or their sexuality/gender. On top of that, most of the time, according to Human Rights campaign, those aggressions are not reported, investigated or/and punished.

Secondly, those public places, such as the Piers, are environments where many queer people reunite and stay. Resultantly, many members will be influenced by their surroundings, and turn to alcohol or drugs as a way to cope with their often difficult situations - poverty, homelessness, discrimination, and violence for instance. Correspondingly, let's remember that the queer culture of the 1960s was mainly a bar culture brought to the streets (Marche), for instance, which meant that many queer people reunited and spent their time principally in or around bars. This expansion of the bar culture to the streets, still in vogue today, results in the consumption of alcohol, or other addictive products, by many Ballroom members.

Due to their economic situation, Ballroom members have to find ways to make a living, not only because it is essential to their survival that they can properly eat, and

afford housing, but also because it is also essential for the maintenance of their lifestyle. As a consequence, many have turned to prostitution as a solution. Prostitution is the easiest and most effective way for Ballroom members to make money because they often don't get any other job opportunities. Nevertheless, prostitution is not the safest job, especially for Black queer people. In many reported cases, queer people of color have been murdered or physically abused by their clients. In *Paris is Burning*, one Latinx transgender woman, Venus Xtravaganza, recalls one of her experiences - while working as a prostitute - when she feared for her life:

He was playing with my titties until he touched me down there, he felt it and he has seen it, and he totally flipped out. He said "you fucking faggot, you a freak, you are a victim of AIDS and you're trying to give me AIDS, what are you? Crazy? Cause you're a homo and I should kill you" you know stuff like that and I was really terrified so I just jumped out the window. [sic] (*Paris is Burning* - Venus Xtravaganza 00:03:25 - 00:03:48)

Although she was able to escape from that situation many trans people didn't. Indeed, according to a report by Human Rights Campaign, just in 2021, 57 transgender or gender non-conforming people in the United States were fatally shot or killed by other violent means. Even if she was aware of the danger of being a prostitute as a trans person, she kept working in the field. Eventually, Venus was found dead in a hotel room, although the murder was not investigated, many speculations spread. The belief was that she was killed by one of her clients who discovered that she was transgender. This story is an example of what many Ballroom members go through.

Another important thing to point out from that story is AIDS. Indeed, the United States and the queer community are deeply affected by AIDS. In 1981, the first cases were reported in the United States. At first, the disease was called GRID (Gay-Related Immune Deficiency) but in 1982 it quickly changed to AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome). During the first years of the AIDS era, approximately 27,909 Americans had died between 1981 and 1987, according to the Report Archives from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). However, Ronald Reagan, who was president of the time, had still not spoken on the AIDS issue. ACT UP (AIDS Coalition

To Unleash Power) was created in 1987 as a response to the President's silence. The association protested for research to be held and for patients to be treated. ACT UP protested as well against the church. Indeed, the church interfered in the Public School system and in the media. For instance, John O'Connor (1920-2000), the Archbishop of New York, declared that homosexual activity is sinful and that AIDS is god's punishment (Caronna).

Accordingly, the AIDS era reinforced the stigmatization of queer people who suffered and died from the disease. Ballroom members also suffer from AIDS. In fact, the socio-economic situations of Ballroom members make that they often have sexual intercourse with multiple partners, either because they are experiencing and discovering their sexuality or because they are sex workers, which as a whole increases their risks of contracting and spreading AIDS.

The Ballroom community and the Black LGBT community, in general, have been disproportionately affected by HIV/AIDS. They often find it hard to seek help or to get treated because of the racism and homophobia that they face, as well as the discrimination and difficulties that they encounter due to their socio-economic situations. Indeed, Ballroom members face what is called *institutional homophobia/heterosexism* (Butler Allister). The concept refers to the marginalization of queer people in sociocultural institutions such as education, churches, and family for instance. Ballroom members' lives are disregarded when it comes to addressing the HIV/AIDS epidemic within those institutions. Those struggles reinforce the exclusion that Ballroom members face from society and their community. The psychological impact that AIDS has had on some queer people, has forced some of them to practice what is called Gift Giving and Stealthing. Gift Giving is the practice in which "an HIV-positive person purposely infects an HIV-negative person with HIV, usually with that person's knowledge and consent" (Klein). While Stealthing is the practice in which "an HIV-positive [person] intentionally tries to infect an HIV-negative [person] without the latter's knowledge or consent" (Klein).

In one of her interviews for Hulu, entitled *Defining Moments with Ozy*, Dominique Jackson recalls how she faced Stealthing when she first arrived in New York

and was looking to experience and discover her sexuality. Indeed, as she was about to go with a man, a group of women came and told her that the man she was with was HIV-positive and that he was trying to give it to as many people as he could, so as not to feel alone. Dominique later explained that those women were Ballroom members and that they introduced her to Ballroom - which that day saved her from contracting HIV.

Through time, many associations have been created and developed to help out and assist queer people of color. However, a majority have known or still experience poverty, exclusion and discrimination, according to the latest reports by both Human Rights Campaign and True Colors United. Additionally, in 2015, the United States Supreme Court recognized same-sex marriage in all of the 50 states in the case *Obgerfell v. Hodges*. On top of that, the United States has known some important cultural and social movements such as the *Black Lives Matter* movement, and the *Black Trans Lives Matter* movement. Although it seems that the social and economical climate of the United States has evolved since the early years of Ballroom culture, the issues of race, sexuality and gender are still very present in the United States. Indeed, Human Rights Campaign has shown in their report, *Dismantling a Culture of Violence*, that since 2013, more than 250 transgender and non-binary individuals have been killed in the United States, and that the majority of the victims were Black and Latinx transgender women. Consequently, the United States has been deeply marked by historical events, which have helped to accentuate and justify the marginalization of queer people of color. Thus, the Ballroom community has still been experiencing different forms of marginalization and exclusion due to their ethnic and queer identities.

Nevertheless, the socio-economic background shared by many queer people of color in New York (poverty, prostitution, AIDS) as well as racism, exclusion and queerphobia contributed and still contributes to the development of Ballroom culture.

The Ballroom community is aware of the socio-economic difficulties of its members and has become essential for their survival. Indeed, Ballroom provides its members with a safe place to express and organize themselves.

1.3 PLACE-MAKING AND QUEER SPATIAL PRACTICES

In 2008, Sonjah Stanley Niaah wrote her essay *Performance Geographies from Slave Ship to Ghetto* in which she argues that performance geography helps at highlighting the way that people living in particular locations use strategies of performance to survive the challenges of urban life but also to transform and give new meanings to spacial locations for communal and survival purposes.

The multiple forms of marginalization, that Ballroom members encounter, constitute places of exclusion and marginalization that coerce Ballroom members to fashion their own spaces of inclusion, affirmation, and celebration. Indeed, the Ballroom community challenges, reverse and transforms exclusionary spaces by undertaking the necessary social practices that allow members to revise, redesign and reshape oppressive and violent environments.

The Ballroom community has thus been developing queer and safe spaces. Inside those safe spaces, which are socially constructed, Ballroom members will organize and participate in balls. Usually, Ballroom members will hold balls at separate venues, halls, lodges, or community centers. However, it is often hard for members to find spaces that are available, affordable and safe. Indeed, because Ballroom members often face homophobia and racism at bars and clubs, it is important for them to find a place that is welcoming to queer people of color. But in addition to that, as members mostly occupy low-paid jobs, renting a place can sometimes be difficult. Plus, even when Ballroom members find an affordable and available space, they still need to rearrange the setting of the building in order to have an appropriate space for the ball.

The setting of a Ballroom space is arranged in a particular way. Firstly, the located space will be transformed into what is called a *T-formation*. Indeed, as observed by both Marlon M. Bailey and dance ethnographer Jonathon David Jackson, Ballroom spaces are spatially organized in the shape of a *T*. More precisely, there will be a runway, in the middle of the room, separating the public in two. Such an arrangement is intended to look like the runways used by models at fashion shows. At the front end of the runway

will be located the panel of judges. In addition, next to the panel of judges, at the front of the runway, are located the Commentator(s) and the Dj's Table (see appendix 1).

The spatial arrangement of Ballroom spaces has made the creation of a Performative System possible. In the performative system of balls, each person or group has an assigned role.

Firstly, DJs and music are essential elements of the Performative system. They play an important role as every performance at balls is accompanied by the music created or played by the DJs. Music in the Ballroom scene is highly influenced by Black culture as most members of the Ballroom community are people of color, mainly Blacks. For instance, *House music* was “created mostly by, and to appeal to, poor or working class Black LGBT people” (Currid 165). The Ballroom community has developed and used *House music* during balls in such a way as to perpetuate a Black LGBT music culture, that is unique and that differs from the mainstream forms of music, even Black music forms. Indeed, according to Marlon M. Bailey, house music is one of the most understudied and under-appreciated forms of Black music. However, house music is not the only sound or music used at balls. Other genres, such as R&B, Hip-Hop or Pop are used during ball events. Nevertheless, the most important attribute in the songs that are played is the “beat.” Each song that is used has to follow a certain rhythm. Most often, it will be a rhythm of 120 beats per minute (bpm). This rhythm allows participants to follow the right pace for competitive categories. In addition, certain specific songs are required for particular kinds of performance, such as *voguing* or *walking*. Balls and Ballroom culture wouldn't be able to take place and thrive without the music or the DJs.

Secondly, in the Ballroom Performative system, one of the most quintessential actors is the commentator. At the beginning of the event, commentators will usually announce the presence of prestigious Ballroom members. Commentators are also in charge of directing the course of events at the balls. They will announce each category that will take place during the event, as well as their respective rules. They will also be

the ones in charge of making sure each participant follows the rules. Furthermore, commentators are the ones in charge of entertaining the crowd and the performers. In order to do so, commentators use a typical mode of Black discourse, a particular oral technique called *call-and-response*.

Call-and-response is the spontaneous verbal and nonverbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all of the speaker's statements ('calls') are punctuated by expressions ('responses') from the listener. (Smitherman 102)

Additionally, *call-and-response* can be also used in order to unify a group and maintain order. For instance, during the American Civil Rights movement, African Americans used this technique with songs, such as *We will Overcome*, to rally together (McMahon). This technique also requires those who "respond" to listen carefully. Listeners also gain a sense of belonging by completing or repeating the "call." Thus, this oral technique is particularly helpful for commentators and important within the ballroom community. Indeed, by using this oral technique, commentators maintain control and create a positive and self-affirming atmosphere for all the people in attendance. Consequently, the Ballroom community has perpetuated and developed a unique discourse mode.

Apart from this technique, the orality of the commentators is essential for the performance system. Commentators often have to improvise and they also have to be aware of the particular vernaculars that exist within the Ballroom communities. In addition, the commentators often have to imitate rhythm and beat, or to chant, to energize the participants in certain performances. Additionally, not only are commentators in charge of constructing and directing the balls and performances, but they are also perpetrators and keepers of cultural traditions. They would often be the ones who teach Ballroom rules and history to novices. Thus, the role of the commentator is assigned only to a small group of people, mostly Butch queens. All of the commentators' responsibilities in Ballroom culture grant them an important power. Commentators have the possibility to stop a performance or even an entire ball. The granted power and the identity of the commentators allow for the dominance of Butch queens in Ballroom culture.

The third essential element in the performative system of Ballroom is the panel of judges. The judges' spatial location reveals their importance at balls. They are located in such ways that they can experience and see everything that is happening both on the runway and in the public crowd. Although their spatial position might reveal a certain hierarchal structure, in reality, no groups in the performance system hold ultimate powers. The judges' panel is generally composed of six members. They are usually prominent participants in Ballroom culture, although there are sometimes special guests, such as Barbados singer Rihanna during the *Latex ball* of 2016, for instance. The judges' role is to perform the task of judging the participants. Because judges are experienced participants themselves, they are the ablest to judge the contestants. Thus, with their position comes great responsibility, as they are the ones deciding each category's winner. To do so, they have the possibility to give a "chop" or "tens across the board." A "chop" means that the participant is eliminated, while "tens across the board" means that a participant has won their category. For performances that have two or more contestants facing each other, each judge will point toward the contestant they considered the best until one of them is chosen as the winner. Generally, the judges are supposed to be neutral and to judge contestants in accordance with their performance. However, as certain judges and participants are related, the judges often fail at times to be unbiased.

The fourth element that is essential to the performative system is the audience. Balls are both public and "private" events. In theory, balls can be attended by anyone. However, in reality, balls are "private," in the sense that they are publicized through Ballroom websites, at previous balls, or through "word of mouth." One has to belong to the Ballroom community in order to learn about ball events. The public at balls, therefore, consists of a group of individuals, who are participants, observers or both, and who belong to Ballroom culture in general. In the performative system, the public crowd plays an active role. "Within the performance situation and space, the members in attendance participate in an exchange of energy, voices, and bodies, creating a dialogic and dialectic form of community affirmation" (Bailey, *Butch Queens* 165). Indeed, the audience helps with the chants and assists with the making of the "beat."

They energize the participants by rooting for one individual in the different performances. As with any audience, they play the role of observers, scrutinizers and judges. By their presence, they put pressure on the actual judges, as members in attendance may praise their decisions or else show disdain. Such active exchanges are essential to the dynamic of the performance system and the creation of spaces of expression and affirmation.

The Participants are the fifth and final essential element of the performative system. Marlon M. Bailey points out that it is important to note that “no space is ready for a ball event until the participants arrive and play their roles. The participants are the finishing touch to any ball space” (*Butch Queens* 151). Indeed, the participants are the ones who will enact the different performance categories at the balls. When they are not actively participating in one of the categories, they are part of the audience, waiting for their turn to compete. When participants are performing, or *walking*, they are located in the middle of the room, on the runway. This strategic position reveals that they are located so that they specifically grab the attention of the audience and the judges and are seen by everyone attending the ball.

Consequently, the spatial arrangement of Ballroom spaces indicates that Ballroom members are aware of the White supremacist gaze within majoritarian society, and the heteropatriarchal gaze within Black communities. Indeed, by placing the participants at the center, Ballroom community allows participants to be under the gaze of their peers, by whom they will be judged. However, contrary to the discriminatory gaze that they face outside of the safe spaces created by the balls, they will face an affirmative and non-discriminatory gaze inside the balls. Indeed, outside the balls, participants often face racist or queerphobic slurs, which could ultimately affect their self-esteem. However, inside the balls, participants are often praised by the judges and members in attendance. For instance, a participant could be qualified as being *sickening* or *ovah*. Both terms are used to qualify someone that is exceptional, extraordinary or remarkable. Participants could also be called *fishy*, *pussy* or *cunty*, which are terms used to describe someone that is ultimately and beautifully feminine. The Ballroom community has reappropriated terms, which are generally negatively used, such as *sickening*, *pussy* or

cunts, in order to transform them into positive terms. In such a way, if members are negatively called by those terms in their lives outside of the balls, they could associate them with their created alternative meanings. Thus, the socially reconfigured space of the ball has allowed members to convene new strategies for adaptation and survival.

But for participants to receive such accolades, they must participate in competitive categories. Indeed, competition is one of the key aspects of the balls. The participants' objectives are to "snatch" trophies and cash prizes, as well as to gain recognition and status within the Ballroom world. Indeed, in Ballroom culture, status and recognition are essential to the community. By participating in balls, members grow higher in position within the community order. Each position is arranged in order of importance:

Immortals Icons: founders of the Ballroom scene.

Icons: Ballroom history makers.

Legends: multi-trophy winners with Ballroom history, or viewed as veterans.

Stars: up-and-coming Legends.

Statements: up-and-coming Stars.

Thus, participants take great interest in winning, not so much for money prizes or trophies but for the symbolic, social, and psychological benefits victories imply.

Overall, it seems that balls follow certain rules and need the presence of specific elements in order to be complete. Indeed, Ballroom events follow pre-established patterns that are repeated at every ball. Thus, balls seem to have been ritualized. Rituals, according to the *Cambridge dictionary*, refer to "a fixed set of actions and words" or "ways of doing something in which the same actions are done in the same way every time." In addition, Ritual, according to theater scholar Dale Byam, allows the creation of a specific space, which becomes a "marketplace of community culture, brandished to ensure the preservation of a way of life" (230). In such a way, the ritualization of balls "ensures the preservation" of Ballroom culture.

Furthermore, the performative system of Ballroom culture is configured so that every member who assists a ball has a specific and active role. This particular system reconsiders the socio-economic situation of each member to create a social space where everyone is essential. Outside of those spaces, Ballroom members will often face exclusion and discrimination. However, inside this system, everyone plays a role, and no one is discriminated against or marginalized. Such configuration allows for the creation and strengthening of a united community. Furthermore, apart from the commentators and the DJs, most of the attendees are participants or former participants. Participation in competitive categories allows members to present and express themselves while being under the affirmative scrutiny of their peers. Such a system allows for the creation or development of new identities.

This performative system is allowed thanks to the creation of ball spaces. Those ball spaces are particular queer ethnic spaces, where specific and groundbreaking expressions of sexuality, gender, sex, class, and ethnicity are made possible. Ballroom members have created social spheres “betwixt and between domains that are replete with racism, elitism, sexism and homophobia” (Bailey, *Butch Queens* 151). However, the struggles that ballroom members face - racism, queerphobia, and so on - are not ignored inside the balls or within the community as a whole. Indeed, the performative system and the Ballroom community have reconsidered those struggles and created adaptive and survival practices.

Members of the Ballroom community organize themselves in a particular way. Indeed, the members create family-like structures: *houses*. A house is “kind of an alternative social network for those who have been ostracized from their families or didn’t have people in their families or communities who could understand their sexual identity” (West quoted in *Butch Queens*, Bailey 77). Although this definition does not consider the other forms of identities - gender, and ethnicity - it is indeed, partly, a social network for those who have been ostracized or misunderstood. Many Ballroom members have argued that the construction of such a structure was necessary for them as they suffered from exclusion. “We queers must make our own family. Blood family tends to desert or oppress us” (Corbit 488).

Those houses are constructed in the same traditional way as families usually are. At the head of a house, there will be a *house mother* (Butch queen, Femme queen, or Woman) or a *house father* (Butch queen, Butch, or Man), sometimes even both. They will take under their protection individuals, who will then be part of their house and will become *house sons* or /and *house daughters*.

Everyone in the Ballroom has an origin story of how someone in the community took them into their wing, became their gay mother, father, sister, brother, aunt, or uncle. And nine times out of ten, once they were properly acclimated and had standing in the community, those children then made a habit of extending the same familial kindness to other newbies. (Tucker 90)

Accordingly, Ballroom members construct family branches to develop and extend their houses by adopting, through parents or siblings, new members. Furthermore, as in any “regular” family, members of a house share a common family name, under which members identify themselves. Usually, houses are named after fashion designers. Famous designer names such as Prada, Gucci, Balenciaga, Givenchy, among many others, have been adopted as *house names*. However, such name choices are symbolic. Indeed, the items produced by those brands exceed the economic and social reach of Ballroom members. Thus, the names chosen indicate the needs, aspirations and dreams of the members. In such a way, members appropriate experiences that would otherwise be out of reach for them. However, other houses bear names that represent qualities. For instance, certain houses bear names such as Prestige, Ninja or Icon. Those names are chosen in order, for the members, to emulate the same qualities as the names represent. Whatever the names houses choose, it generally allows members to be and feel empowered.

Furthermore, houses are usually social structures, rather than physical ones, where relationships among members are important. *House parents* will usually provide guidance to numerous members who have been rejected by society at large. Members of a house, also, provide social support to each other. Thus, houses are alternative familial spheres, where a group of individuals has decided to come together and support one another. At times, however, those social structures take physical forms. Indeed, certain members of a house live together as it makes it easier for them to find affordable places

and support each other, both economically and emotionally. More generally, houses are (re)constructed homes and families for members of Ballroom culture.

The Ballroom house is a practice of possibility (Madison 2010) and the means through which members of the community reconstitute the 'home' as a 'house' within a Black LGBT context, performing the labor of kin under the terms and values of Ballroom culture. And regardless of whether or not the 'house' is a 'home' – a building – house members consider themselves a family and do a whole host of activities together to fortify their kinship ties. (Bailey, *Gender, Place and Culture* 497)

Thus, it could be said that houses were created and developed by the Ballroom community as a response to the struggles and trauma they experience in the “outside” world. Houses represent an important social network under which Ballroom members are organized. The ballroom community goes beyond the simple fact of being a community that shares common features. Houses are socially constructed networks that provide support and inclusivity to their members. The Ballroom community has had practices that are, without a doubt, groundbreaking, as they have recreated family structures, based on affirmation, for members who, overall, face different forms of exclusion and marginalization.

If Members are organized into family-like structures, balls can thus be considered as “family reunions.” Members of one house would reunite to meet and compete with other houses during balls. Performance is thus a central component of a house. Indeed, during balls, participants will represent their house and try to bring prestige and honor to it. Members of a house will be trained to perform by parents or *house siblings*. Ultimately, houses that win a lot of trophies and gain recognition reach the status of *legendary* or *iconic houses*. In order to do so, participants, and houses, thus compete in performative categories.

Performative categories, also referred to as categories or performances, play an important role in the performative system and in Ballroom culture, in general. Indeed, Performance is an essential component of the balls, and a unifying element of the community.

First of all, one is meant to *walk* a category. The term *walk*, within the Ballroom community, refers to the action of participating in a category. It is also a symbolic reference to the spatial arrangement of the spaces used: the runways. Participants, *walking* in categories, are like fashion models: they present their bodies to their peers on the runway. In such a way, the naming of the houses, the creation of the spaces, and the categories are all symbolically interlinked in reference to the fashion industry.

Furthermore, the Ballroom community uses a unique gender system within which members identify and which serves as the basis for the categories in which members compete balls. Indeed, all categories are constructed in such a way that gender identities are produced, claimed, rehearsed and concretized during balls. The categories are the means through which members will affirm their identity in the Ballroom community and balls are the place where such affirmation is made possible. The categories are therefore varied but often mix gender, class and physical makeup for members to assume identities different from those imposed by dominant societies.

First and foremost, categories are based on the Ballroom gender system. For instance, there will be a specific category for Butch queens, Women, Men, Butch queens up in drag, Butches, and Femme queens. Members are meant to *walk* in the category that corresponds to their gender. Butch queens will participate in the Butch queens category, for instance.

The primary purpose of structuring the categories based on the gender system is to ensure that members are required to compete in categories with others of their own gender [...] Ballroom members have developed rules and regulations to ensure fairness even though these safeguards fail at times. (Bailey, *Butch Queens* 166)

However, certain categories are not limited to the gender system. There are categories in which everyone can compete, no matter their “chosen” identities. Those categories are referred to as *Open to All* (OTA) categories. Furthermore, certain categories are also exclusive to the *houses*. Indeed, those categories are called *As a House categories*, and are meant to be walked in groups. For instance, some members of a *house* will form a group to compete against other *houses*. *As a House categories* can sometimes be open to certain genders in particular or else to everyone.

The categories are usually announced on flyers, which are available on Ballroom websites or distributed during balls. Those flyers are arranged in a particular way (see appendix 2). Indeed, there will be a list with main titles, or headings, referencing the contestants' gender or simply the kind of category (Butch queens, Open To All...), to inform which contestants they are open to. Then, under the main headings, the types of performance that will be asked of the participants are mentioned. They could be considered as sub-categories, but in reality, they are categories of their own. To put it simply, inside each main category, for instance the Butch queens category, other categories or sets of performances exist. Members may *walk* in one or different categories that are part of the main category open to them. Inside the main categories, some common sub-categories can be found. Although the categories vary according to the contestants' gender, the aim and the goal are usually the same.

Generally, there will often be a *Realness* category. In *Realness* categories, participants are judged on their ability to blend into a group that is not their own. For instance, if a category for a ball is *Executive realness*, the challenge will be to present oneself as a high-class business person on the runway even if you belong to the working class. The key is to really make everyone believe that you are whatever role you are performing in the moment.

Other common categories are *Sex Siren* and *Sex Body*. Those two categories revolve around the notion of *sexiness*. Indeed, the contestants are asked to showcase their bodies, faces and walks. However, they are not judged on how sexual they appear but on their sensuality. Competitors will be asked to perform under certain conditions, for instance, they could be asked to wear a *BDSM* attire.

There are also *Face* categories. In the *Face* categories, contestants are judged on the features of their faces: eyes, cheeks, teeth, nose, and so on. Oftentimes, the *Face* categories will be complemented by another element, asking participants to present an attribute. For instance, in *Face with an attitude* categories, participants are asked to declare "war" to other contestants, to show that no one is better than them in the competition. The main belief behind this category is that anyone is naturally beautiful.

Then, come *Runway* categories. In those categories, contestants are asked to *walk* on the runway platform as fashion models. Each *Runway* category requires the contestants to put together an interpretation of a runway outfit seen at an American or

European fashion show. Creativity and confidence are the two main key elements of the categories and the criteria under which contestants are judged.

Finally, there are *Vogue* categories. *Vogue* is a dance style. Performers are thus asked to dance, or *vogue*, on the runway, and the best one is chosen as the winner. *Vogue* categories are declined into different other categories. For instance, in *Hand* performances, members are asked to perform with their hands. There will also be *Vogue virgin*, for first-time participants in the category. Overall, *Vogue* categories require the expression of one's sexuality, gender and/or class through dance.

Apart from the common categories, there exist certain specific categories open to everyone or to one gender in particular. Butch queens up in drag will perform in Drag performances, for instance. There are also *Best dressed* categories, where a member, contestant, and sometimes even an audience member, will be chosen as the best dressed of the night and be asked to walk the runway.

In each of the categories mentioned previously, members can use *effect* - which in the Ballroom community, refers to props or items that members can use to enhance their performances in the categories. For instance, members can use a mask, sunglasses or a cape to help out with the performance and create dramatic performances.

Overall, those categories, although not exhaustively listed, show that balls are organized into performative categories where a varied and broad range of sexual, racial and gender subjectivities are developed, represented, and expressed. Each member participates in the categories and brings their own interpretation of their gender and identity into play.

On the whole, categories are created spaces of expression. The Ballroom community borrows from other cultural practices in order for their own practices to fit their gender system, the diversity of their members and their socio-economic situations.

Ultimately, Ballroom culture has joined drag performance, other forms of gender and sexual performativity, and a litany of performance categories with a sophisticated kinship

network to develop an entire community practice and a minoritarian social sphere. (Bailey, *Butch Queens* 135)

Balls are thus auspicious places for the development and confirmation of one's gender, sexuality, race and class. Accordingly, the Ballroom community has developed its own unique cultural practices and performances. Although inspired by other forms of performances, the practices are broadly different. Ballroom culture's performances thus differ from other dominant or minoritarian forms of performances.

Altogether, the performative system, the performance categories and the *houses* structure were developed as a response to the struggles experienced by Ballroom members. Indeed, the spatial practices and ritual performances are used together to create a sense of belonging, safety and sociocultural affirmation.

However, the role of each listed element that composes Ballroom culture does not only exist within balls. Indeed, the socially reconstructed spaces of the ball is where the members meet to create new identities, new relationships and new strategies for adaptation and survival. Naturally, the Ballroom community uses the practices developed within the balls for their outside lives. Certain categories, such as *realness* and *voguing*, are performed outside of ball events as survival tools. Likewise, *houses* and balls offer more than just spaces of performance, meeting and expression.

2. SURVIVING THE OUTSIDE WORLD: REALNESS, CATEGORIES AND HOUSES

Survival is the ability to swim in strange water

- Frank Herbert

The poor and working-class people who participate in the Ballroom community of New York do not freely choose the spaces in which they live and move, and even when they do so, they often have to draw upon their creative practices to survive queer phobic or racist violence. Additionally, because the Ballroom community experiences multiple forms of marginalization, members rely on their cultural structures and performances for self-fashioning, affirmation and support. Thus, if the socially reconstructed spaces are one obvious strategy used to negotiate and resist violence, how do members and individuals get through the day in urban spaces? Likewise, how do members forge conditions of safety that are often unavailable to them in other social spaces? How do members develop more livable lives for themselves in New York, and more generally, in the United States society?

In the following pages, I posit that ballroom members use performance as a strategy to cope with their difficulties. In the field of performance studies, performance widely means to carry out, complete, accomplish, and undertake an act. Thus, performance has to be understood as a tool and methodological approach that allows to understand the way social identities are constructed, in particular those relating to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and class. Performance as a prism to study this community allows us to understand the way in which members create new identities, new relationships as well as survival and marginal practices.

Three salient uses of performance can thus be identified: Firstly, performance is used as a tool by members to unmark themselves as queer. Secondly, performance is used as a tool for self-being and affirmation. Lastly, members perform family in ways that reconstitute home and houses.

2.1 REALNESS AND INTERSECTIONAL PERFORMANCE

We're all born naked and the rest is drag.

- RuPaul

Ballroom members are completely aware that their vulnerability is primarily due to the way they are perceived by the outside world. For instance, if the members are easily identifiable as being queer, then they are potential targets for discrimination and violence. The Ballroom community thus had to find ways to avoid facing queerphobia, as well as racism, and other forms of discrimination in their lives outside of Ballroom spaces. As most of those aggressions happen in public places, the safety of the members is an essential aspect of Ballroom culture. If traveling in group is a common solution used by members of the queer community to avoid being assaulted, the Ballroom community has developed a very particular stratagem. Indeed, the Ballroom community uses *Realness* as a way to avoid threatening situations. Realness is rehearsed within Ballroom spaces and practiced in the outside world.

In the Realness categories, the goal of the participants, also called “*realness kids*,” is to be seen as someone/something they are not. The term *realness* itself according to *Oxford Languages* describes the “quality of being lifelike.” Ballroom members thus feel the need to control their image and their bodies to respond to certain norms and stereotypes in order to avoid aggression. In certain circumstances, this will require members to bring changes to their body. Realness can thus be considered as a process of modulation of one’s body and appearance. Indeed, the goal of Realness is to perform, to take on a role, an identity. Realness categories thus serve as a way for members to rehearse and perform different identities in order to prepare for life outside of the Ballroom scene. Clearly, Realness categories rely on the use of performance.

Among the types of performances used by the Ballroom community in the realness categories can be found *Gender performance*, a concept that was introduced by

Judith Butler in 1990 in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Gender performance refers to the ability to take on, enact or revise a gender identity in everyday life. Indeed, Butler considers gender as something inscribed in daily practices, something based on cultural norms of femininity or masculinity that can be learned and performed. For instance, drag queens perform an exaggerated form of femininity by applying heavy makeup and wearing dresses and paddings. More generally, with gender performance, Butler argues that gender is mostly just a performance that is acted to please social expectations and which in return allows a person to be recognized as a “real” subject in society.

The Ballroom community shares a common theory. They believe that gender and sexual identities are performed. Thus, Ballroom members perform gender and sexual identities both inside and outside of the balls to give the illusion of gender and sexual normativity. They do so in order to blend into the larger dominant heteronormative society to avoid exclusion, discrimination, and sometimes even death.

However, many Ballroom members are also aware that their ethnicity plays an important role. They are conscious that their body is affected by *Sociovisibility*, which can be defined as the “consequence of a kind of picture-taking racial gaze that fixes or frames the subject within a rigid and limited grid of representational possibilities” (Wallace 135). As a consequence, Ballroom members also have to consider ethnicity/race within their performances of gender and sexuality. Performance theorist Patrick Johnson proposes the concept of *Racial performativity* as a solution. *Racial performativity* “informs the process by which we invest bodies with social meaning” (Johnson Patrick 9). For instance, the performer will use stereotypical or dominant norms of black masculinity or black femininity to invest their bodies with a racialized and gendered meaning.

In addition, in order to avoid discrimination and exclusion from white and black heteronormative societies, Ballroom members also need to consider the concept of class. Indeed, in order for them to freely move around in the outside world, they have to be able to blend in with any social group. That is to say, members have to be able to be seen as a teacher, an executive, or a student, for instance, whether or not they belong to the said social group.

Furthermore, it is clear that the aims of the Ballroom community are to “identify” and/or “disidentify” from a particular group. José Muñoz’s concept of *Disidentifactory performance* can thus be applied to the Ballroom community. *Disidentifactory performance* is “the strategy of disidentification used by minoritarian communities to negotiate and contend with - working on or against - the ubiquity of dominant gender and sexual norms” (Muñoz 195). For instance, it can be used to mark oneself as queer, or unmark oneself from being queer.

Realness categories thus require adherence to certain performances so as to capture the “authenticity” of particular gender and sexual identities within a scheme of race and class.

Drawing from the works of Muñoz, Johnson and Butler, I would therefore like to suggest considering the performance of one’s identity as not only a racialized, sexualized or/and classed performance of gender but, rather, as an intersectional performance of all the above.

Indeed, the focus on gender which has been put so far in queer studies has strengthened the idea that gender is the main element through which one is judged. But the apparition of intersectionality in 1989 challenged the centrality of the concept of gender. The prioritization of gender as a site of identification at the expense of race, sexuality, and class makes it hard to understand the multifaceted struggles that Ballroom members face. For that reason, using the concept of *Gender performance* to analyze the strategies put in place inside the Realness categories will be misleading. Indeed, by using the term *Gender performance*, one might wrongly believe that gender is the first, and the only thing being performed, while in reality, class, race and sexuality are at times performed ahead of gender itself. Likewise, using each concept aforementioned separately erases the diversity that members showcase and prevent an analysis of the way those performances intersect. Plus, the Ballroom community makes it in fact clear that members are not only affected by gender, but by class, sexuality, and race in an intersectional way. Therefore, I would like to suggest that members do not only perform gender but that they equally perform class, sex and race at the same time.

Thus, it goes without saying that Ballroom members, and the queer community in general, embody *Gender performance*, *Disidentifactory performance*, and/or *Racial performativity* - these performances often intersecting with one another. So drawing from the concept of *intersectionality* - to consider a collection of factors that affect a social individual in combination, rather than considering each factor in isolation - as defined by Kimberley Crenshaw, I have developed the concept of *Intersectional performance*.

To my mind, all identities are performed. Intersectional performance would thus allow us to understand the way gender, class, sexuality and ethnicity are performed in combination, at every level and without an automatic or systematic hierarchical relation. Intersectional performance therefore refers to the ability to take on or revise an identity. In other words, intersectional performance is a performance that allows to act, talk and walk in ways that consolidate or challenge the idea of being for instance a black heterosexual man or a black heterosexual woman. Intersectional performance is thus based on dominant and cultural norms, but, naturally, intersectional performance can also be a performance that goes against those same dominant and cultural norms, which in turn allows for the creation and development of new and marginal identities.

Intersectional performance can be unconsciously used. Indeed, some people can present an identity that responds to dominant norms without realizing that it is a reproduction of those norms, thus a performance. Oftentimes, our conscious and unconscious awareness of gender, class, race and sexuality constraints means that we are always performing to an audience, even an imagined one. But most of the time, intersectional performance is consciously used by people so that they can mark or unmark themselves as belonging to a specific group of people.

In the broader sense, everyone who uses intersectional performance, either consciously or unconsciously, plays with gender, race, class and so on to present an identity. This identity is often one that is created in order to be thought of as someone else. For instance, someone could use intersectional performance to be seen as a straight male teacher, although they might be queer, or not a teacher at all.

Within Intersectional performance, the different set of behaviors or characteristics that marks someone as belonging to a specific group are considered. Hierarchical relationships are also considered. As an illustration, teachers and students are commonly expected to dress and behave a certain way when in a school environment so that one will be able to mark them as such. For instance, certain schools require a dress code that allows people to differentiate students from teachers. Teachers and students, consequently, have to perform their class, their gender, sexuality and so on, that is to say, they have to use intersectional performance to be marked either as a teacher or a student according to fixed norms.

In the case of the queer community, in particular, intersectional performance is often used to unmark oneself as queer. It would be interesting to look at how Intersectional performance manifests itself within the Realness categories and the Ballroom community.

The main basis behind the Realness categories is the way queer people of color are perceived by others, outside of Ballroom places. Those said outside places have established codes and norms according to which the members of the Ballroom community are defined, spotted, or identified.

Ballroom members have thus considered the different norms and stereotypes that mark them as the “Other,” or as non-conforming, as well as the norms that mark the external world as heteronormative. In such a way, Ballroom members have developed what can be considered as the most efficient *Intersectional performance* for them, or to use their own terms, the most efficient way for members to be 'real,' that is “to minimize or eliminate any sign of deviation from gender and sexual norms that are dominant in heteronormative societies” (Bailey, *Butch queens* 58). However, it should be highlighted that it is often based on the personal perception of the participants, and/or the Ballroom community as a whole, according to their own gender, sexual, ethnic and class subjectivities.

As a result, the Ballroom community has developed its own types of *Intersectional performance*. The goal of the *Intersectional Performance*, also differs

according to which part of the six-part gender/sex system members of the Ballroom community belongs to.

When Butch queens (cis-males who identify as gay, can be masculine or feminine) and Butches (transgender men and/or masculine lesbians/women) participate in the Realness categories at the balls or use Realness outside of the balls, their goal is to be seen as cis-heterosexual-males.

When Femme queens (transgender women) and Butch queens up in drag (gay men who perform in drag but do not identify as women) participate in Realness categories at balls and perform them outside of the balls, they have to pretend to be cis-heterosexual-females.

Ultimately, the goal is for each member to have agency in the formation of their own identity, as a way to enhance their quality of life, but most importantly to ensure their safety. Thus, Realness categories allow members to rehearse and perform different identities to prepare for life outside of Ballroom.

Among the Realness categories for Butches and Butch queens can be found the “Athletic man Realness,” the “Thug Realness,” the “Executive Realness,” and “SchoolBoy Realness,” among many others. Each of those categories requires the participants to use *Intersectional performance*.

For the category “Thug Realness,” for instance, participants are expected to present themselves as “a rough straight thug from the street” (Bailey, *Butch Queens* 59). “Thug” masculinity is a racialized and gendered identity. According to Rashad Shabazz, “Thug masculinity” is “characterized by baggie pants, exposed boxer shorts, large T-Shirts, bandana, and tattoos” (287). It is also supposed to “be read and seen as ‘hard’, dangerous, aggressive” (Bailey, *Butch Queens* 57) and thus signify straightness. According to Bailey and Shabazz, this particular black masculine aesthetic emerged from prison culture as a result of the mass incarceration of Black men - the same which has influenced hip-hop culture and quotidian articulation of Black and Latinx heteromascularity. Members thus use *Intersectional performance* in order to present themselves as “thugs.” In the picture provided as annex 3, you can see some members using and recreating the characteristics that are assigned to the thug aesthetic. Members

are showing off their bodies and their tattoos, carrying their large T-Shirt in their hands. They are also standing and walking in ways that allow them to be read and seen as aggressive and potentially dangerous. Ultimately, this type of realness is learned inside of Ballroom and used outside for members to move in places where this Black aesthetic is widely and largely used.

Likewise, within the “Executive Realness,” participants are expected to present themselves as gender-normative straight businessmen. Executive Realness allows one to perform as an academic, a professor, a lawyer or else - which in turn allows members to dress and act according to dominant norms to look for a job or move safely in a business environment, such as Wall Street for instance. In the picture provided as annex 4, two members can be seen wearing suits. Their clothes and facial expression suggest that they belong to a professional sphere, and are most likely lawyers or businessman. In this picture, you can clearly see the way, members perform class, sexuality, gender and race in order to be seen in a particular way.

The same principle is observed for the “Schoolboy Realness” category, in which participants are asked to persuade others that they are in school, whether or not they are “thug,” “nerd” or “prep.” In this particular category, the members are free to choose what identity they will present as long as they are “clockable” as straight students. In the picture provided as appendix 5, members can be seen wearing items that are usually associated with the school environment. For instance, the two members at the front are wearing backpacks, one of them is even carrying a book. The two are also seen wearing glasses, an item often related to the aesthetic of the nerd. In this particular category, members not only cross and intersect categories of sex, gender, sexuality, race and class but they also cross age boundaries.

As for “Femme queens” and “Butch queens up in drag,” they will participate in categories called “Femme Queens or Butch Queens up in Drag Realness.” The goal is for the participants to present themselves as “real” women, that is to say, to be unmarkable as transgenders. The distinction between “Butch queens up in drag” and “Femme queens” is not considered inside the Realness categories, as both are asked to perform female-bodied or cisgender women. The main goal is for them to be able to

move everywhere without being identified as transgender, as to avoid difficult situations. Their flyers often read “can you walk through the roughest neighborhood in your city and not be spooked for being a man?” (Appendix 2). Members will thus be free to perform femininity as they wish, that is to say by taking on an identity that corresponds to different racialized, classed and dominant norms about heterofemininity to move safely in “rough” neighborhoods or elsewhere. In Appendix 6, two participants can be seen showcasing their feminine attributes: they are playing with their long hair, wearing crop tops that allows for their breasts to be seen. Additionally, the nails, make-up and earrings that they are wearing contribute to their performance and enhance a certain idea of a black heterofemininity.

While the focus is mostly put on sexuality for “Butch queens,” for “Butches,” “Butch queens up in Drag” and “Femme queens” the focus is primarily put on gender so as to be unmarkable as trans. Trans members have to be seen as if they were cis. And, in order to do so, trans members can modify their bodies through means of paddings, hormones, or implants.

However, class, sexuality and race still play an important role in the identity that members take and claim. For instance, if someone who has taken the “Executive Realness” role in the outside world moves into a “rough neighborhood,” they might be assaulted because of their social class, regardless of their gender or sexual identity.

Our concept of *Intersectional performance* is thus very important to understand the way in which members of the Ballroom community take on different identities in order to escape the violence to which they are subjected if they do not disguise themselves.

The idea of disguise is a very important one. Members are aware that they perform an identity, that they disguise themselves. This can be observed very clearly and undoubtedly within the Ballroom community. Indeed, one of the Realness categories in Ballroom culture is “Realness with a twist.”

In the “Realness with a twist” category, members are expected to showcase both extremes of masculinity and femininity in one performance. The category is mostly

walked by Butch queens. Usually, participants are asked to walk the runway by taking on a specific Realness category, such as “Thug Realness” or “Executive Realness.” The participants will then be expected in the midst of the performance to change their behavior in order to “queen out.” The term “queen out” refers to the action of marking oneself as queer. The ultimate goal of this category is for the participants to showcase their ability to instantly change their gender and sexual identities from being *uncloakable*, unmarking oneself as queer, to *cloakable*, marking oneself as queer. In the pictures provided as appendix 7, a juxtaposition of the performances of one member can be observed. In the top picture, the contestant has taken a masculine posture and is wearing characteristics of the thug aesthetic: baggy pants and a large T-shirt. In the second picture, the contestant has changed his behavior to be read as more feminine, thus crossing between gender expressions. “Realness with a twist” is the most quintessential example of the role of Realness categories and the way in which identity is played, performed and produced.

Resultantly, Realness categories can not be reduced to simple performative categories like others in Ballroom culture, they have a far more important role. Indeed, Realness allows members to seek agency in shaping how they are viewed by the outside world. Consequently, Ballroom places become places of rehearsal for the members.

Indeed, the Ballroom scene takes a whole other aspect: it is not only a scene, a place for categories to happen and participants to ‘walk,’ but it becomes a ‘place of training’ for its members. The reason why intersectional performance and realness are rehearsed within the Ballroom scene is to ensure that members are convincing in the presentation of their identities. It is then that the practice of these categories within the balls takes all its importance. If the members fail to pass for what they are not, they put themselves at high risk.

While performing within the Realness categories, members allow themselves to be scrutinized by their peers, the public, and the judges. They have to be able to express the standards of the dominant society. They have to be a mirrored image of society, the person or the group they are disguised as. In fact, heteronormative societies must be able to see themselves in Ballroom members. The role of the peers is thus very

important. They will be the ones deciding if the participants are being ‘real,’ that is to say, if the members performed the role asked of them perfectly. Indeed, since the peers know the true identity of the participants, they are the most capable of judging the performances of the *realness kids*. The goal here is for the judges and for the members to be part of a security process. As Dominique Jackson explains in an interview for The Washington Post with Sarah L. Kaufman in the following quote:

In the realness categories, what happens is you walk and your peers judge you, because if you're not able to walk amongst your peers and pass as being cis male or cis female, then it's obvious that you haven't done enough work. They wanted you to be able to go outside and come back home safely.

Thus, Realness and *Intersectional performance* are rehearsed within balls and performed in the outside world. Outside of the Ballroom scene, no one has to know that the members are performing. They have to make one with the performance. Within the balls, performance is almost like a game: *un jeu*. But outside, the performance has to go from *Jeu* to *Je (I)*.

The main idea behind this pun is that members are taking on an identity that has to be seen as their own. They become the performance itself, and they are indissociable. It is only by fully embracing the performance that they succeed in their survival and safety. If for the duration of the performance, the members and the performance have made one, then members have succeeded in blending in. But it is essential that members don't consider it as a game (*jeu*), as within the balls, where mistakes are fine, but rather to consider it has an I (*je*) in order to be more convincing. Although, it does not erase all risks of marginalization, exclusion or violence.

On top of that, the relationships between the performance, the participants and the members are necessary for the survival of the whole community. Balls and Realness categories are clear examples of the solidarity within the community.

Furthermore, the Realness categories are not inscribed in the performative role in the broad sense within the Ballroom scene but are inscribed in a need for security. It is an undeniable system of defense necessary for the survival and safety of Ballroom

members. Realness happens to have been developed and rehearsed within the Balls, but balls mainly serve as places of training, of scrutiny, in order to provide the necessary capacities for Ballroom members to present themselves to the outside world. Thus, Realness is really practiced outside of the Ballroom scene.

However, although Realness categories inscribed themselves within their performative and protective roles, they will also be inscribed in an identification role. Indeed, the criteria used in these various categories will impregnate the identity system within the Ballroom culture. A dissociation between norms, realities and real identities becomes complicated for members of the Ballroom community.

The risks are that members might restrict themselves within these criteria - which overall belong to the outside world, to the dominant heteronormative societies. These criteria will now become part of the Ballroom community and be used as a way of identifying members. For instance, the risk is that members associate manliness and masculinity with roughness and brutality.

Realness categories were created at first with the main optics of escaping discrimination, yet they ended up reinscribing themselves within the same discriminatory process of gender, class, sex, and ethnicity. Indeed, within these categories, members will be judged by other members according to established criteria (stereotypes) and will thus not be considered as 'real' if they do not meet them. For instance, a member might not be considered as masculine, if they do not showcase stereotypical ideas of masculinity, such as thug masculinity or toxic masculinity.

Marlon M. Bailey goes further than that by explaining that within Realness categories and the Ballroom community, femininity and masculinity are closely linked to sexual organs and attributes: penis, vagina, or breast. For a transgender woman to be considered as a "real" feminine woman, she must have the sexual attributes that are associated with the female body. Only so will she be considered as "authentic."

The constant criteria under which members are judged within the Realness categories has impregnated the identity system of Ballroom as Bailey explains:

Realness, then, as both a set of criteria and a way in which Ballroom members apply and adhere to these criteria, often conflates anatomic femaleness with womanhood and anatomic maleness with manhood, and these connotations play into performance and presentation. Members fetishize aspects of the body to represent these characteristics in optimum form when they are attached to specific bodies either physically or symbolically, to signify one's achievement of ultimate femininity or masculinity. [...] members' enactment of realness ends up reinscribing and relying on these same norms to view and judge each other within the community. (Butch queens 68)

Realness categories seem to be both about authenticity and illusion. The criteria used within the realness categories seems to have been adopted by certain members as a way to identify and characterize femininity and masculinity outside of the categories. The ambiguity between authenticity and illusion has thus affected Ballroom members.

On top of that, the competitive aspect of Realness categories can also have a negative impact. Indeed, the risks are that it would eventually lead to self-doubt and self-consciousness, specifically for those who didn't win their categories. If the aim is to appear "real," then does it mean that members were "fake" if they end up losing their categories?

In such ways, Realness categories might showcase a kind of obsession for some members to an extreme gender binary system. Such a system might lead to a confusing and misleading description of what masculinity and femininity truly are. The question being what actually is masculinity and femininity? Consequently, this question has raised debates within the ballroom community about whether or not Realness categories need to be changed. With all the social progress regarding gender identity and expression, the need within the community to adapt Realness categories to the large spectrum of identities has become an essential issue. In an interview for the magazine *Out*, Vjuan Allure, producer and legendary Ballroom DJ argued that the term *Realness* should be dropped because it is confusing and misleading. Additionally, dropping the term would also allow to erase any pressures for members to look "real." For instance, Vjuan argued that for the "Realness Executive" category, "anyone can walk and be an executive, [whether you're] dressed up, dressed down, gender oblivious." The main idea behind his proposal is that everyone's interpretation is different and that there is no

fixed behavior that defines someone who is an executive for instance. Likewise, there is no fixed behavior of femininity or masculinity, for instance.

Nevertheless, instead of erasing or completely changing the Realness categories, I would suggest that it could be updated. Indeed, more categories could be added. In such a way, Realness categories will showcase a more open and diverse set of identities. Everyone could participate without having to follow strict criteria, and thus, Realness would end up becoming more welcoming to those who are non-binary, for instance.

However, I also argue that we must be careful not to confuse performance and identity. The world of Ballroom is closely linked today, and in general, much more to the performativity and the respect of the rules. The importance for many members relies on the production of a performance of quality. The point of the criteria is to allow members to be judged on their performances. Thus, the criteria serve as established guidelines to provide something that members will stick to in order to be efficiently judged when they perform the Realness categories.

In such a way, when the criteria used in the Realness categories are observed within the Ballroom scene, they are not part of an identifying system. The criteria must not be considered as compulsory criteria to which members have to apply if they want to register in a certain gender, class, racial or sexual identity. In such a way, within the Realness categories, one might not be considered as fully masculine because they didn't meet all the criteria that were asked, but outside of the categories, their masculinity or femininity is likely not to be questioned by the same criteria.

Nevertheless, we must acknowledge that cases vary and that Realness categories are complex. Each member uses Realness and Intersectional performance uniquely and in personal ways. Thus, differencing whether or not those criteria are used outside of their performative and protective role among members is quite complex. Therefore, the Ballroom community cannot be locked into this contradictory aspect of discrimination. It is probably safe to say that the representations and norms that Ballroom members use within Realness categories are only valid within the Ballroom scene as performances. Even so, the diversity of Realness categories shows that masculinity and femininity can be defined in different ways. Plus, the "Realness with a twist" category is a clear

example that shows that gender identities and expressions are malleable and not fixed. Members know that they are playing a role, and they can differentiate the *Jeu* from the *Je*.

Thus, it seems that members are aware of the different gender identities and the complexity of identities within the queer communities. The terms and criteria used are only valid in the performativity and at the time of the categories but are in no way anchored in their gender and community expression.

If some of the members use these criteria as fixed tools with which they define different identities and representations of gender, class, race and sex, then they become locked into the conformity and norms of the dominant society, forgoing a non-conformative expression, a potential result of internalized queerphobia and racism.

All in all, the Ballroom community uses balls as rehearsal environments for its members. Indeed, the Realness categories are examples of how *Intersectional performance* can be used and rehearsed to provide security and safety to its users. By hiding who they are and adopting the norms of the society through intersectional performance to move in spaces of exclusion, the Ballroom community has developed a strategy of resistance to the different forms of discrimination or exclusion that they encounter because of their gender, sex, class, sexuality, race and ethnicity.

However, intersectional performance can be used in many different ways. Ballroom members (un)consciously use intersectional performance to create and enforce their identities.

2.2 INTERSECTIONAL PERFORMANCE AND CATEGORIES

If Ballroom members use Realness categories as survival tools to be seen as what they are not, the other categories are used for self-fashioning, self-reclaiming and affirmation. Indeed, the Ballroom community has developed different categories for members to embrace their identities. In those categories, members will *embody* their unique identities. Embodiment is defined by Mark Johnson as rejecting the separation of the mind and the body. He argues that with the “body-mind [embodiment], meaning grows out of our organic transitions with our environment” (Johnson Mark 15). By that, Johnson means that we learn to move our bodies in relation to our experiences in the world. In addition, Foster argues that “all body articulation is mindful” (6). Both theories enforce the idea that the mind and the body are in conversation. Thus, the different categories of the balls allow members to effectively express their personhood through movement.

Drawing from our concept of intersectional performance, we can further argue that members will embrace their identity by performing on the stage of the ball events. In return, these performances allow the members to embrace their queerness, blackness, class and/or other characteristics. Members dive into their experiences, and their lives, to embody their identity through the means of (intersectional) performance.

In addition, members of the Ballroom community are affected by “vulnerability.” Vulnerability must be understood as an ontological condition (Butler). For instance, the vulnerability of the ballroom community is exacerbated by their specific context: social, political and environmental situations. The difficulties to find and access jobs, education and the experiences of violence, rejection or homelessness, for instance, illustrate the vulnerability of this community.

But, by recognizing their vulnerabilities, Ballroom members can overcome them. According to Jean-Luc Nancy, by interacting with the Other, the self is constructed.

The mode of existence and appropriation of a “self” 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. (41)

In other terms, to embrace their identity, ballroom members have to embrace and overcome their vulnerabilities on the main stage. They need not to see their differences as reasons for them to be ashamed but rather as reasons for them to be embraced and celebrated.

All in all, the categories of the ball events allow members to embrace who they are through the means of performance and embodiment. In order to support this argument, four examples will be pinpointed: *Voguing*, *Runway categories*, *Sex Siren/Body* and *Reading/Shading*.

Voguing

Vogue is a dance style that was created around the 1970s by Willi Ninja. The name of the dance is coined after the famous international fashion and lifestyles magazine *Vogue*. Indeed, the movement of the dancers is said to look like the poses of the models in the magazine. Vogue is a complex dance style, created by and for the ballroom community, that draws from a variety of diasporic dance practices (Jackson). There are three forms of voguing: the Old Way, the New Way and the Vogue Fem, also written as Vogue Femme.

Old Way Vogue emerged in the 1970s and “incorporates many of the dance and movement forms of the African diaspora [...], namely, break dancing, martial arts, capoeira. Old way also reflects some influence of disco music” (Bailey, *Butch Queens up in Pumps* 173). Old way Vogue is both a feminine and masculine dance style, that allows members to express their identity. Old way is also characterized by formations of lines and symmetry with graceful and fluid action. Egyptian hieroglyphs and fashion poses serve as inspirations for the old way voguing.

New Way Vogue is said to exemplify the ballroom community of recent times. The New Way Vogue also exhibits diasporic African dance styles. But contrary to Old Way, the New Way is linked with house music and the influence of hip-hop. New Way Vogue is also characterized by rigid movements and hand and wrist illusions, sometimes

looking like a modified version of mime. New way Vogue requires more flexibility and freedom of movement than Old Way Vogue, but members can still channel their femininity and/or masculinity to express their identity.

Lastly, Vogue Fem/Femme requires extreme fluidity. Vogue Fem is characterized by exaggerated feminine's movements influenced by ballet and jazz. Two styles of Vogue Fem can be identified: Dramatics and Soft. The first one puts the emphasis on speed, tricks and stunts while the second emphasizes graceful and easy flow movements.

Overall, Voguing has been characterized as a dance as the “site of intersection for the categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality” (Becquer 72). To push it further, Voguing allows the dancers to express their identity by performing with their bodies. This performance is an intersectional performance that allows dancers to play with the intersection of the categories of race, sex, class and so on, to present their unique identity and lived experiences. Obviously, this is done through the use of movement.

Indeed, voguing is a dance form that involves an engagement of the entire body in the performance. Voguing is thus composed of five elements that require the use of every body part:

1. Catwalk:

The catwalk requires the dancers to step one foot in front of the other while swaying their hips in a feminine way. Their hands and forearms move forward or back or up and down in the opposing directions of their feet. All of this must follow the rhythm. (See appendix 8)

2. Hands:

The hand element is the most complex of the five elements because it requires the dancers to tell a story with their hands. The hands can go fast or slow but should always have a meaning: boredom, flexibility, how pretty you are, or else. (See appendix 9)

3. Duckwalk:

Dancers kneel or squat down to kick their feet out like a duck while walking forward. (See appendix 10)

4. Spins and dips:

Spins and dips are very complex and hard to execute as well. The dancers will first spin around or twirl and drop to the floor. The dancers often end up in a split with one knee behind them and the other leg straight in front of them. (See appendix 11)

5. Floor performance:

Floor performances are often done after a spin and dip. While the members are on the floor, they will slide across the stage, and move their legs sensually or up and down. (See appendix 12)

Clearly, Voguing allows the dancers to use every part of their bodies. The five elements give ballroom members the possibility to express themselves through movement. Indeed, the five elements allow the members to perform and play with gender, race, class and so on.

In the ball, and through voguing, members can express themselves with freedom and not be restricted by social norms. A black male can move effeminately, pose like a model, and so on. Everyone is allowed to be however they see fit.

For instance, some of the voguing categories allow the dancers to channel their own identity and beliefs. In the old way category, members will emphasize, simulate and perform dramatic model poses in a masculine and/or feminine way. In the New way categories, members showcase their flexibility and sharpness with their bodies. And in the Vogue femme categories, members are expected to showcase effeminate gestures and dramatic poses.

These vogue categories are interlinked with the gender system of the ballroom community. Depending on how the members identify themselves, they will engage differently in the voguing categories. For instance, when a Butch queen participates in an Old way category, they are usually showcasing their masculine side. When Butch queens are performing in the Vogue femme categories or in the New way categories, they are often expected to showcase both aspects of masculinity and femininity in their performance. On the contrary, femme queens will often emphasize their femininity while voguing.

However, the common aspect of each category is the hand element. This element is often used in the same way, in each category, for members to directly express themselves: their femininity or masculinity, but more importantly to carry messages. Indeed, members often use their hands to highlight certain of their physical characteristics: face and hips; or they will pose with their hands to be seen in certain ways: serious, dangerous, fierce, elegant and so on. At certain balls, the hand element becomes a category of its own, and members are only judged by the stories and messages that they are able to tell with their hands.

Not only do members channel their gender identity, but they link it with their lived experiences and their “race.”

When a voguer is creating the dance of vogue, he or she is not only pulling from the knowledge of seeing voguing, but pulling from within. A black boy voguing is going to pull not only from his voguing peers, but from movement gestures, performativity, and repertoire his black mother, sisters, brothers, and father. The black boy voguing with pull and play with African American dances he was taught, and play with female and male roles, gestures, and movements. [Sic] (Peranda 45)

Clearly, Voguing is a dance style that allows members to visit the intersecting categories of race, class, sexuality, gender, and so on to develop their own and unique identity. Voguing thus allows members to embrace their queerness, blackness, and so on, in an intersecting way through intersectional performance.

But not only do members embrace their identity on stage, voguing also allows the members to embrace their identity in their everyday lives. Balls are used as safe places for members to develop their identity, to take pride in who they are. But thanks to the safe places and voguing, members learn to embrace who they are in and out of balls.

Whether you use it on the Ballroom floor or not, voguing is for everyone within the culture. You should feel you can use it to express yourself whenever you feel you want to do so. It should be in your back pocket- you never know what’s going to happen! You never know when a battle might pop up, or when you just need to relieve some energy, to feel like you’re that girl. (Jonavia Chase quoted by Tucker 78)

Ultimately, Voguing allows members to create and develop their self-identity. This identity is strengthened through dance and expression on the main stage of the ball events. Thus, through Voguing, members are able to embrace their identity in their everyday lives. Overall, Voguing is about self-knowledge and expression, and at the same time, self-worth and pride for members at an individual level and for the community as a whole.

Runway categories

Within the Runway categories, contestants are asked to walk on the runway as fashion models. However, they are not judged on how beautiful they look, but rather on how creative and confident they are. The Runways categories are means through which members can bring their own interpretation of gender and identity into play. For instance, on the runway, participants have the choice to walk either the All American Runway type or the European Runway type. The first one allows participants to adopt a very square gait, the arms along the body, like the male models who parade. While the second one allows members to adopt a more feminized walk, with more assertive hip movements and their legs crossing each other like Naomi Campbell, for example (see appendix 13).

Apart from the type of walking that they choose, members also express themselves through the choice of their clothes. For a long time, originality was not something common when it came to dressing. Indeed, the way a person dressed was certainly a matter of choice, but mostly it followed the codes, trends and mores of the time. However, little by little, subcultures appeared and broke this routine of “everyone dresses the same.” Thus, via the use of clothes, there is a transition from conformism to the assertion of oneself. Clothing becomes a means through which members express their identity: gender, ethnicity, class and so on and challenge dominant norms. In such a way, people who identify as "male" will tend to use feminine codes, while people who identify as "female" will use what has, until now, been considered masculine. It should also be remembered that a wide variety of gender expressions exist and that these are

not necessarily based on the desire to contradict the norms of the dominant society - i.e. to reverse the masculine and feminine codes - but rather on personal choices.

On top of gender, other elements come into play. Indeed, members also integrate their lived experiences, as well as their ethnicity or class by adopting looks that allow them to embrace those aspects of their identity. At the same time, the individual will have constructed their own identity rather than following the one assigned to them by society. For instance, instead of assuming a “thug” masculine look, Butch queens will choose a more effeminate and queer-looking aesthetic to break away from the typical and heteronormative idea of a Black male living in poor and urban areas. Some will thus display their femininity while others will put forward their masculinity. Some will play with their binarity by displaying a gender identity that is fluid and changing. In the pictures provided as appendix 14, a butch queen can be seen presenting a runway walk that is feminine, with their hands on their hips. Additionally, the person can be seen using *effect*: the earrings, the dress, the boots and the pink fan - which allow them, in this case, to enhance their femininity.

In addition, certain Runway categories have a specific theme that allows members to channel a specific genre of performance in order to build and reinforce their identity. For instance, during the Latex ball of 2018, one of the Runway categories was Battle of The Cape, in which some members channeled an Egyptian-looking style. The category demands that members use as *effect*, a cape. In the example provided as appendix 15, one butch queen presents a runway performance that crosses gender norms and expressions by proposing a gender-fluid performance.

Inside the runway categories, assuming one’s identity thus becomes an intersectional performance in which each person is free to define him or herself as he or she wishes: the idea being to create a personal identity that does not meet any expectations. Identity can thus be played, malleable and evolutionary and does not remain fixed.

Sex Siren/Body

Following in the same footsteps, Sex Siren/Body categories are another means through which members embrace who they are. Indeed, the contestants are asked to showcase their bodies, faces and walks. This category is often used by members to showcase their sexuality and sensuality. The aim is for members to take pride in their sexuality, as well as their bodies. The idea is that members should not be ashamed of how they look, but rather learn to embrace their physical appearance. Within the Sex Siren/Body categories, members enhance and highlight certain parts of their bodies. They are then praised by the judges and the public: the idea being that members will build their confidence by walking the category.

In theory, every body type is welcomed and praised during this category, but in practice, most participants are Butch masculine and muscular-looking or feminine-looking Femme queens. Appendix 16 and 17 both propose examples of the Sex/Siren body category. The Butch masculine participants are highlighting their physical appearance by wearing almost no clothes. The same can be said about the feminine-looking Femme queens who are wearing body paint to highlight their boobs and their physical body. Once again the members are free to present and defined themselves as they wish. Likewise, they are free to present their idea of what is sexy and sensual.

However, the predominance of hyper-masculine and muscular butch queens and hyper-feminine Femme queens in this category might lead to a misrepresentation of sexiness and sensuality. Indeed, the risk is that anything other than what is presented in those categories might not be classified as sexy or sensual by the members. For instance, someone who is more voluptuous, might not feel represented and might even come to believe that their body type is not attractive. Although it is hard to identify if it is actually the case, this potential issue is worth mentioning.

Nevertheless, the Sex Siren/Body category remains an important tool for members to embrace their identity through the use of movement, embodiment, clothing (or the lack thereof) and intersectional performance.

Reading/Shading

Last on our list is *Reading* and *Shading*. Reading and shading are not really categories of their own. They are a particular art style that can be used within different categories, but that are generally used at any given moment. The terms were created and used by the Ballroom community and usually refer to “the process of dissimulation that aims either to protect oneself from ridicule or to verbally or psychologically attack others in a haughty or derogatory manner” (Hawley 1202). The two terms are better explained in interviews with Dorian Corey, a former prominent member of the Ballroom scene, in the documentary *Paris is Burning*. She says:

[Shade is, I don't have to tell you you're ugly, because you know you're ugly, When someone insults you directly, that's called a "read." For example, if I were to tell you that your glasses are ugly. Point blank. That's a read. Reads can be long or short. "Shade" comes from reading. If I were to say in a terribly condescending voice, "Oh honey, I'm so glad you saved up to buy those glasses," that's blatant shade. I didn't insult the glasses, or you, directly. It's implied by my voice and the context of what I said. You know they're ugly. To "throw shade" simply means you've said something shady to someone].

Reading and shading can also be done in a non-verbal way. This non-verbal way is mostly used during the different categories. For instance, while voguing, some members can *throw shade* with their hand elements. In one interview, Willi Ninja explains how voguing motions actually have meanings. He says that one can use their hands to carry messages to shade the other contestant. For instance, the contestant will pretend to apply makeup on his/her face, then pretend to look in a mirror, and then pretend to shift the mirror to the other contestant in order to say: “my face is beat,⁸ but what about yours” (Ninja 1991).

Throwing shade and reading can also be done in a more subtle way. To shade or read someone is not only a way to denounce, criticize or shame someone, but it can also be used to distract someone during the categories. For instance, during certain categories, members will try to step in front of their contestant to steal the spotlight, or

⁸ The term *beat*, here, refers to a face on which make up has been applied, and as a result, the person's face looks stunning.

jump in front of each other,⁹ or even physically bump into one another and throw their cape (if they're wearing one) on their contestant.

Throwing shade doesn't always mean that the person throwing shade doesn't like their contestant or is being rude. According to Patrick Johnson, to throw shade is also to play and have fun with someone:

If a shade thrower wishes to acknowledge the presence of the third party, he or she might roll his or her eyes and neck while poking out his or her lips. People throw shade if they do not like a particular person or if that person has dissed them in the past. ... **In the playful mode, however, a person may throw shade at a person with whom he or she is a best friend.**
(178-179; my emphasis)

All in all, throwing shade is a particular and complex “insult” art form that can be used in many different ways and for many different reasons.

But most importantly, throwing shade is about constructing, embracing and challenging one's identity: Firstly, throwing shade can be used in categories to enforce one's identity, that is to say for someone to take pride in who they are and thus being able to shade the other contestant to appear as the best one. To throw shade means that you are aware of your strength and beauty and that you are self-confident. In addition, in the categories, contestants throw shade back and forth at one another. In such a way, this playful interaction allows everyone to build their confidence to become the best version of themselves in order to win the trophy or prize. Throwing shade is thus about self-knowledge and expression and self-pride and worth.

Secondly, throwing shade invites the thrower and receptor to see “insult” differently. Indeed, many ballroom members might hear derogatory terms about themselves outside of the balls. Reading and shading is thus a way for members to reappropriate those terms and insults to not be affected by them to a certain extent. Willi Ninja, who also appeared in *Paris Is Burning*, described *shade* in 1994 as a “nonverbal response to verbal or nonverbal abuse [...] If you said something nasty to me, I would

⁹ Mostly during the Vogue categories

just turn on you, and give you a look like: ‘Bitch please, you're not even worth my time, go on.’”

Lastly, throwing shade can be used to denounce and question the external world. Members can use shade to criticize the outside world. Indeed, members can shift the *mirror* so that those who are hostile to the community see themselves and realize the struggles that ballroom members are encountering. *Throwing shade* is saying to the world that you have nothing to be ashamed of, and at the same time, it invites the receptors to question if they, in return, have anything to be ashamed of.

All in all, these four examples show how the Ballroom community has created platforms and means of expression that allow both a claim and reappropriation of the members’ identity through the use of intersectional performance, art style and embodiment while questioning the dominant society and culture. The categories help members to build and develop their identities. Additionally, members build more livable lives for themselves by unapologetically being who they are.

The categories inside the balls events thus play two roles: one the one hand, Realness allows members to have access to strategies of *passing* while on the other hand, the other categories help members to embrace who they are in everyday life.

But one last dimension of Ballroom culture and of the intersectional performances needs to be addressed: intersectional performance as a tool to recreate family structures and relationships.

2.3 INTERSECTIONAL PERFORMANCE AND HOUSES

The Ballroom community has developed a particular community-fashioned system to respond to the different struggles they encounter. Indeed, houses are redefined and reconstructed homes for members that face exclusion and encounter queer phobia or racism in their daily lives. In order to understand why this system has emerged it is important to examine the discourse of the Black family and the exclusion or marginalization that queer people encounter in their biological family and in society at large.

Within the Black familial sphere, gender and sexual nonconformity positions Black gender and sexual dissidents along the fringes of the putative heteronormative family and community, thus denying Black LGBT people access to Black belonging. (Bailey, *Butch Queens* 80)

According to Marlon M. Bailey, families are seen as the primary form of community and belonging. But there has been a fetishization of heteropatriarchal family structures within biological families.

Black homes and the biological family are bound together and undergirded by an ideology that fetishizes a heteropatriarchal (male-dominated) nuclear family structure. And heteronormative gender and sexual relations are the means through which these ideals of Black family are constituted and reproduced. Thus, according to Black common sense, the home is the place of “appropriate” reproduction and the maintenance of a heteronormative social order. (Ibid)

Biological families are thus often seen as spaces of confinement for queer people because they experience a form of coercion to accept a “family deal” that requires them to hide or suppress their non-normative gender or sexual identities. But it is these special sexual and gender identities that keep Ballroom members from accessing different forms of belonging. In addition to this, being excluded from one’s biological home and family signifies also being excluded from accessing the benefit that families are supposed to provide: shelter, clothing, food and other resources. Noncompliance with the way families are constructed and the social dominant norms can result in queer

people living in unstable or dangerous conditions and to a certain extent - it can even lead to homelessness. Added to this, Ballroom members also face exclusion in their daily lives, outside of their biological homes and families.

It is thus important for queer people to redefine homes and families in order to have access to family structures to gain a sense of belonging. Consequently, the Ballroom community has developed Houses as a response to the exclusion that they might face in their biological families and in society at large because of their sexual and gender identities.

In addition, Houses regroup a diverse community of people who share common experiences: poverty, exclusion, queer phobia and racism, among many others. Hence, Houses are also constructed in response to those experiences.

Houses are thus family-like structures that provide support, kinship and protection to all the members in need. However, houses are not typical families. Indeed, a house is a social configuration that challenges the conventional notion of family. Ballroom members use intersectional performance to create alternative gender and sexual relationships within the house.

House parents

Houses are directed by house parents: house fathers and/or house mothers. Although it might seem at first glance that houses do not entirely break away from dominant family norms, it is in fact not entirely true. Indeed, Ballroom members find ways to appropriate and transform these dominant norms. For instance, members choose to be referred to as mother or father depending on the gender and sexual identities that they embody, represent or perform. Thus, house mothers are often Butch queens or Femme queens and house fathers are usually Butch queens or Butches. Butch queens can thus choose if they want to be addressed as mother or father. However, in the Ballroom scene, there are usually more mothers than fathers.

Mothers and fathers are usually successful individual competitors who have gathered status, prestige, recognition and knowledge within the Ballroom scene. House mothers and fathers take under their wings other individuals who will become their house children. Parenting within the Ballroom community and within houses is not directed by age. Parents can be younger than their “adopted” children. According to Bailey, in Ballroom culture, age is not about how long one has lived on earth but rather about how long one has been part of Ballroom culture. Members of the Ballroom community thus engage in parenting willfully instead of assuming titles or roles based on biological ties or age.

Both mothers and fathers take on different roles within the ballroom community.

House mothers

House mothers are the ones in charge of everything. They will usually walk at balls, organize events and delegate responsibilities. But in addition to their labored work, they also have a nurturing role. Every member can come up to them for advice and guidance. House mothers take on a mothering role. In an interview between Marlon M. Bailey and Trinity Prestige, the latter explained the role of a house mother:

MB: What does it mean to be a housemother?

TRINITY: Just being loving, caring, you know, just being able to listen, as well as have people confide in you.

MB: What do you offer that their biological mother doesn't offer?

TRINITY: Something they can't talk to their biological mother about, something they can talk to me about. (Bailey, *Butch Queens* 107)

Thus, house mothers engage in the labor of care by providing support, love, tenderness, guidance to all the members in need. Sometimes, House mothers become “real” mothers for those who have cut ties with their biological mothers and sometimes they become an addition: a second mother.

The Ballroom community has deconstructed what it means to be a mother. Indeed, the role of mothers is often carried by male bodies. Thus, the main idea behind mothering within the Ballroom community is that a mother is someone who nurtures and helps to guide. It is thus much more about nurturing than gender itself.

House fathers

House fathers play totally different roles than house mothers. Most of the time, House fathers are engaged within the “public sphere” rather than the “domestic sphere” of the house. According to Will Ford, fathers mostly perform representational labor, that is to say, fathers create an alternative representation of the stereotypical feminine Black gay men. In addition, House fathers are the ones in charge of taking the responsibilities of external affairs. For instance, they will be in charge of funding balls. However, on the side of Parental labor, House fathers are involved as well in the protection and nurturing of the House children. Once again, the role of a father goes beyond gender. A father is not ultimately a male-bodied person, but someone who carries the activities usually attributed to a father.

However, although house fathers and house mothers cross gender barriers they both have stereotypical roles: the mother “nurtures” and the father provides funding. Are roles therefore really deconstructed? If at first glance it seems that house mothers and house fathers reproduce dominant norms, in reality their role are much more complex. When looking at the way members perform their roles of father or mother, we can see that the lines between the two often cross and fade away.

How to be a house mother or a house father?

One question that can be raised is how ballroom members take on the role and identity of house mothers or fathers. What do they rely on?

Members of the ballroom scene rely on performance to take on those different roles and status. Indeed, my concept of intersectional performance can be applied to the

construction of the identities of house fathers and mothers. The intersectional performance within the houses is unique to each member and each house. Through the analysis of three case studies, I will show that the roles depend on the subjectivities of the person performing but that the goals remain similar.

Case study 1:

K-C Prestige (Father of the House of Prestige):

I want my children to stand for the exact same things I stand for, like being an overall good person, basically, put it that way. They should take care of business. I say, be me but be you. Or we'll say it like this, still be yourself, but try to act like me. (Quoted in *Butch Queens* 112)

Case study 2:

Trinity Prestige (Mother of the House of Prestige):

MB: What does it mean to be a housemother?

TRINITY: Just being loving, caring, you know, just being able to listen, as well as have people confide in you.

MB: What do you offer that their biological mother doesn't offer?

TRINITY: Something they can't talk to their biological mother about, somethings they can talk to me about. (Quoted in *Butch Queens* 107)

Case study 3:

Michael Robinson (Father of the House of Garçon, Mugler):

My parenting also has everything to do with what I always wanted my father to be. To some degree, that desire has probably allowed me to stay in these relationships with my kids so long. (...) So for me, that translates into seeing **who my mother was and wanting to be who my father was not**, which then translates over in my style of leadership, because parenting is leadership. (Quoted in *And the Category is* 111; my emphasis)

Those three case studies show that ballroom members take on identities that are unique and subjective, to perform what they consider the most efficient way to be a good father and/or a good mother. For instance, Butch queens use intersectional performance to carry the role of house mothers, by taking the role of the caring and loving mother, and

doing what is expected, by society at large, of a mother: provide support, organize balls and nurture the house children. Sometimes, a mother or a father can cross both parenting roles to produce an identity that crosses expectations of gender norms and behavior. But the performance of fathers' and mothers' roles do not stop there. House mothers and house fathers engage in co-parenting procedures (Bailey), copying the dominant family norms. Indeed, House fathers and house mothers are engaged in couples to maintain the house. However, the relationships between mothers and fathers are non-romantic and non-sexual (Bailey). Thus, co-parenting within the house structures is non-heteronormative. House fathers and house mothers recreate families-like structures that resemble biological families while still being very different.

Ballroom parents rely on the use of intersectional performance to take on the identity of father and /or mother in order to offer a space of care for children and themselves in the face of intersecting oppressions.

House siblings

Houses are mostly composed of house children. Each house child shares some common experiences. According to Ricky Tucker, there are four main points of entry into Ballroom culture and thus houses.

Firstly, members can join houses through gay adoption. Indeed, members who have been rejected by their guardians or biological families, because of their sexual and gender identities, often end up joining a house because they are in search of a space of belonging and support.

The second point of entry is through the Arts. Tucker argues that queer people are historically drawn to dance, costumes, singing and so on and that thus they are likely to join a house to find a place where they can enhance their art and their identity freely without facing marginalization or rejection. For instance, famous rapper Lil Nas X has entered ballroom through the Arts and is now a new and prominent member of the ballroom scene, although he doesn't belong to a house yet.

Thirdly, members join houses through means of word of mouth, or through what Tucker refers to as "your peers and/or the Piers." Members are introduced to Ballroom

culture by their friends or by the people they have met on the streets, and after attending a ball, they end up joining a house in order to be fully part of the community.

Lastly, some members come from the “Not-for-Profit sector.” Indeed, Tucker explains that some members originate from public health organisations, LGBTQ associations and black empowerment organisations. They then decide to join a house and the ballroom scene and community after or while gathering data and research.

The relationships between house children are not directed by age. Members choose how they refer to the other children, their siblings. Generally, members who have been in the house and the Ballroom community longer will be addressed as the older brother or sister and the other way around if they have been in the Ballroom community for a shorter period of time. Princes and Princesses are two other terms to refer to children with the most experiences and time in the house system. Those two titles and roles are a way as well to distribute housework to children. Indeed, House princes and princesses will assist House parents in daily tasks: maintaining the house, providing support and guidance to their siblings and helping with organizing ball events. Additionally, every child is expected to play a role in the house. All of them are expected to participate at balls, help their siblings and parents and overall maintain good relationships with one another.

Relationships between members of a house are based on friendships. “First of all, a house is a collection of like-minded individuals that share common interests, who for the most part can agree on different issues and ideas... or they can just agree to disagree” (Prada Escada quoted in *Butch Queens* 100). “A house is a clique of friends that got to know each other within the gay life” (Kali quoted in *Butch Queens* 99). As both quotes show, house children and parents’ relationships are built on the creation of bonds that are based on friendships, kinship and community. Siblings and parents thus participate in different activities to forge their relationships. For instance, they will participate in the same categories or as houses at ball events. They will also organise family gathering or training session. Ultimately, activities allow for the development and creation of a unified group and house.

Houses as homes

Thus, houses also represent homes for those who are part of them. House children will have access to support systems, friendships and places of belonging. Furthermore, houses represent safe environments for most members in contrast to their biological families. They will be able to express themselves, develop their identities and learn how to be proud of who they are. Houses also become for some a physical place to stay in order to avoid homelessness. And house children can rely on their parents and siblings and often help one another with different issues that are often time money-related.

A house parent has more duties than just being a regular parent. [...] A lot of people believe that being a housemother is easy, but they rely on you for things like travelling, getting prepared for balls, or they may even need a place to stay. (Goddess quoted in *Butch Queens* 120)

Furthermore, Houses allow every member to build relationships with a larger community. Indeed, Houses are interlinked into a complex web of relations. There are overlapping relationships within the Ballroom community. Some children have multiple mothers and/or fathers because they move from one house to another. Some children create their own houses and become themselves house fathers and/or mothers. Others expand their original houses and create other branches of the same house. Those branches are called house chapters. For instance, they are different chapters of the House of Ninja. Those chapters are located in different states and cities and sometimes countries. Overall, there are house chapter mothers and fathers, national mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers, Princesses and Princes, children and siblings, uncles and aunts. The ballroom community is thus engaged in overlapping relationships which help members of the Ballroom community to forge bonds together.

Altogether, House parents, siblings, children and relatives use intersectional performance to take on familial roles. Ballroom members end up performing the family in ways that reconstitute the home as a socially configured “house.” Thus, House members will engage in house works, that is to say, in house preservation. For instance,

older siblings will look after the younger siblings. Members will participate in ball events as family reunions and build relationships with one another to reinforce their socially recreated “homes” and “houses.”

Houses and community

In addition to taking on the roles of parents or children, Houses are also engaged in community preservation. Indeed, besides helping each individual at a personal level, Houses are also engaged in helping the community, as a whole, to face certain particular struggles. For instance, in the face of HIV/AIDS, the Ballroom community has been highly and disproportionately affected. Largely ignored and overlooked by national measures, Ballroom houses have decided to take affairs into their own hands.

Houses and HIV/AIDS

Ballroom houses have thus decided to carry the roles of prevention houses. House parents play the role of prevention workers. Indeed because of the close relationships that members have with one another, they will generally turn to their house parents and sometimes to their house siblings to discuss sexual and romantic affairs. Parents and oftentimes siblings thus take on the responsibility to provide information on HIV/AIDS. They will discuss the dangers that exist: *Stealth*, *Gift Giving* and so on. They will also remind members of the importance of engaging in safe-sex relationships, as well as the importance of knowing one’s status and getting tested. In addition, members can count on their parents and siblings to help them overcome their issues, if they ever were to get affected by HIV/AIDS. According to research on HIV/AIDS, many patients suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) that affects their mental health (Kelley). Therefore having houses to rely on is very helpful for ballroom members that have been affected by HIV/AIDS to overcome their fears, self-loathing and other feelings.

Ballroom houses have also decided to organize prevention balls in order to gain more visibility within the ballroom scene, to attract more people and to provide all

ballroom members with information regarding HIV/AIDS, regardless of their houses or if they belong to a house at all.¹⁰

The Latex Ball

The most famous and important prevention ball event in New York City is the Latex ball. According to Bailey, the Latex ball draws approximately around 2,500 and 3,000 audience members. The Latex balls are yearly social events. Its history is explained on the Latex ball's Facebook page and Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) website:

In the late 80s, the House and Ballroom community experienced the AIDS-related deaths of a large number of community members, as well as an alarming increase in new HIV infections. The Latex Project was founded in 1990 by members of the House and Ballroom community (including Avis Pendavis, Hector Extravaganza, Derrick Ebony, and many others). They came to GMHC and asked the agency to become more involved and to help raise awareness about prevention and provide support to the community members living with HIV and AIDS.¹¹

At Latex balls, all the main performance categories are transformed in order to integrate notions of healthy sexual practices and awareness. For instance, in the realness categories, members will have to take on roles that are linked with sexual awareness. Some of the flyers read:

Schoolboy realness - let's see if U were paying attention in Sex Ed. Brings us school boy realness with a safe sex production. Props a must and you will be graded on your project and knowledge.

Executive realness - U have been promoted to CEO of a condom company of your choice. U must have a prop and be prepared to sell your product to the board. (Bailey, *Butch Queens* 212)

Other categories are transformed as well to provide information. The runway categories - where members are asked to walk the runways as models by making fashion statements - are also creative ways for members to educate and do prevention. In the

¹⁰ Some ballroom members decide not to join houses, they are free agent or 007 members.

¹¹ <https://www.facebook.com/TheLatexBall/posts/latex-ball-frequently-asked-questions-faqwhat-is-the-latex-project-what-is-its-h/432304796882704/>

Informations on Latex balls are also present on GMHC website: <https://www.gmhc.org/?s=latex+ball>

picture provided as annex 18, one Butch queen walks the runway category carrying a scepter made of condoms and carrying the message “healing.

The transformation of the categories of the Ballroom scene encourages members to do research and at the same time helps them to learn about safe sex and healthy practices in a fun and creative way. In addition, some members might be reluctant about discussing their status or asking for help and thus those events allow them to have access to information and prevention. Overall, through the means of the Houses and the prevention balls, the ballroom community has been exposed to knowledge on safe-sex practices. Preventions for HIV/AIDS in the ballroom community is done without stigmatizing or singling out individuals.

The Ballroom community has thus developed a system of relationships that provide security, safety and support to all its members. Houses are complex family-like structures that redefine conventional and biological family structures. Members rely on the use of performance or rather intersectional performance to revisit traditional roles. Indeed, members take on roles - parents, siblings, children, uncles/aunts - regardless of their gender, age or biological ties to (re)create families and homes. Lastly, Members engage in activities related to the revisited roles that they have taken to provide and find love, care, security, safety, prevention and /or nurturing.

If the Ballroom community has succeeded in creating strategies of survival and affirmation: - Realness, Houses and Categories - their safety and well-being do not only depend on them. Another point of consideration is visibility or the lack thereof.

3. FROM THE UNDERGROUND TO THE MAIN STAGE: (IN)VISIBILITY

The power of visibility can never be underestimated

- Margaret Cho

In 1952, Ralph Ellison published a novel entitled *Invisible Man* in which he wrote:

I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. [...] it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard distorting glass. When they approach me, they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination - indeed, everything and anything except me. (3)

In this passage and in his book, Ellison talks about Black people, mostly men, in the United States, but his description of invisibility could also be applied to the issue of gender, class and sexuality. Whether you are queer, poor, black or a woman, the process of invisibilization remains the same: you become transparent, and when the observers see you, you become the object of their expectations. You become the construction of what the observer intends to perceive. In other words, the observer only looks at you through stereotypes, through “figments of their imagination” (Ellison 3).

The Ballroom community is challenged by invisibility in the outside world as members are oftentimes poor and queer people of color. Invisibility within the community is both a process used as protection and a process that is undergone. But the Ballroom community is aware of their invisibility and is engaged in a process of visibilization. Indeed, another part of their strategy to survive the outside world is to gain visibility. Visibility can be used by ballroom members to access mainstream platforms, improve their situation and condition, and gain recognition, representation

and protection. Gaining visibility is also a tool for members to deconstruct the distorted vision that the outside world has of them. In order to gain visibility and improve their lives, ballroom members are trying to get their stories told, their arts and performances recognized and they are trying to access mainstream culture. Mainstream has to be understood as the dominant trend in opinion, fashion or arts, and thus mainstream culture is “the culture that is held by or seems the most ‘normal’ to a large number of people that live in a society. It includes all popular culture and media culture, typically disseminated by mass media” (Guo, 194). Ballroom culture and its community have attracted mainstream attention and influenced mainstream culture during the 1990s, 2010s and 2020s.

3.1 DOES REPRESENTATION GO WITH INTEGRATION?

Ballroom culture and the Ballroom community made their screen breakthrough in 1990 when Jennie Levingston’s documentary film, titled *Paris is Burning*, was first released. Shot between 1986 and 1989, the documentary offers an insight into this “clandestine” culture of the queer Black and Latinx ball community of New York City. *Paris is Burning* is a mix of Ballroom footage, everyday-life materials shot at the piers and interviews. The film is considered as an invaluable documentary of this underground community and culture.

In 1990, an unknown NYU film student named Jenny Livingston released her 71-minute, low-budget documentary titled *Paris Is Burning*, and shone what has perhaps been the strongest spotlight to date on the House and Ball scene. (Monforte, 30)

Prior to being a filmmaker, Jennie Livingston was a photographer, whose early works dealt with racism, sexism and the media. But Levingston felt that photography was a too “silent” form of art expression (Levy). Determined to have more political impact, she decided to move to New York to study film at the New York University (NYU) Tisch School of the Arts in 1984.

After moving from Los Angeles to New York, Livingston was first exposed to Ballroom culture in 1985, when she observed a group performing at Washington Square Park in New York City. She was intrigued by their dancing and the slang they were using. After talking with the group, she learned that they were doing vogue, a particular dance style, and it soon became clear to her that there were deeper socio-political messages in voguing than it seemed to appear on the surface. Intrigued by her interlocutors, Livingston began to attend various balls, where she met Willi Ninja and got to learn more about Ballroom culture and voguing. The Ballroom scene began to challenge her (mainstream) conventional ideas about the meanings of gender, race and class. The closer she got to know the community, the more she realized how articulate and creative they could be. Camera in hand, she began to film her interlocutors, the Ballroom scene and started to conduct interviews with several ball participants.

From 1985 to 1987, Livingston gathered around 70 hours of footage. From that footage, she created a five-minute fund-raising trailer with editor Jonathan Oppenheim, which was made possible thanks to the selling of her car and other items (Levy). She received grants from the National Endowments for the Arts, The New York State Council on the Arts, The Paul Robeson Fund, and the Jerome Foundation. She also received the help of TV producer Madison Davis Lacy who contributed \$125,000 to the production. She then spent the next two years editing and cutting the film. In 1989, she did some follow-up production to do additional interviews and to tell additional stories. As a result, she needed additional funds in order to keep on editing the documentary. But in 1989, the BBC-2 show *Arena*'s executive producer of the time, Nigel Finch, contributed to the film. This additional fund helped Livingston to complete her project. Once the production was finished, she still needed to raise money to pay for the use of the songs and music played at the ball events she filmed. In total, the film is said to have cost around \$500,000.

All in all, the documentary took seven years to complete due to production costs and difficulties to find funding. *Paris is Burning* was edited down to 78 minutes from over 75 hours of footage. After the movie reached its final version, it was released on five different dates. The first screening was done at the Toronto International Film Festival on September 13, 1990. Following the first release, a second screening was

done on December 4 at Princeton Festival in 1990. Additionally, during the month of January 1991, screenings were done at the Sundance Film Festival. An additional screening of *Paris is Burning* was done on February 23 at the Berlin Film Festival (La Berlinale) in 1991. *Paris is Burning* was finally released in New York City on March 13, 1991. For five months the documentary film played to sell-out crowds at New York's Film Forum.

Thanks to its multiple screenings and success at the New York's Film Forum, *Paris is Burning* found a distributor. Indeed, the documentary film was later released by Miramax, a distribution company, on August 9, 1991, in multiple theaters. Miramax was said to have used "shrewd and aggressive marketing" (Levy) which succeeded in making *Paris is Burning* one of the most commercially successful documentaries that have ever been made. In total, the documentary film has gathered around \$4,000,000.

Paris is Burning explores the elaborated ball community of New York City. The documentary film alternates between ballroom footage and interviews. The spectator is presented to the Ballroom community and to the structures of balls, described as safe environments for competitions in which contestants face one another in what are called "categories" to win and snatch trophies and prizes. The documentary film also explores how the community is organized. Livingston presents the House structures. In addition, Performance is presented as a central component of the ballroom community. For instance, *Realness categories* are presented. *Realness* is described, in the film, as the ability to pass as a member of the group or sex that one is portraying. *Paris is Burning* specifically depicts the "banjo realness" category. In this category, mostly composed of gay men, contestants portray macho heterosexual archetypes such as soldiers or sailors. Members are judged on their ability to pass as straight. The film also documents the practice and origin of Voguing. *Paris is Burning* explores some of the issues that the Ballroom community faces in their everyday lives: AIDS, racism, poverty, homelessness, violence and queerphobia. Lastly, the film also discusses the lack of opportunities for Black and Latino queer people to access social standings of life.

Overall, the film is a multi-leveled exploration of this sub-culture. Indeed, Livingston shines a light on the Ballroom community and presents their way of living.

She also explores the structures of the ballroom scene, the struggles that members encounter and the practices in which they are engaged. *Paris is Burning* can be considered as a documentary film about survival. According to Livingston herself, the film is “about people who have a lot of prejudices against them and who have learned to survive with wit, dignity and energy.”

Although the film is about a politically charged subject, it has been well-received around the world by the film industry, the public and reviews. Indeed, the film received positive reviews from the mainstream and independent press. On *Rotten Tomatoes*, for instance, the film holds a score of 98%. The *New York Times* has written that *Paris is Burning* is “a beautiful piece of work - lively, intelligent and exploratory” (Rafferty). *The Black Film Review* has called the documentary film “a politically, astute, historically important document of our precarious times” (Parkerson). The film went on to win multiple trophies and became one of the most successful and awarded documentaries. In 1990, *Paris is Burning* received an International Documentary Association Award. The same year, the film received a Los Angeles Film Critics Association Award for Best Documentary. Additionally, it received the Audience Award for Best Documentary from the San Francisco International Lesbian & Gay Film Festival. In 1991, *Paris is Burning* won the Grand Jury Prize Documentary at the Sundance Film Festival. It also received the Teddy Award for Best documentary at Le Berlinale. The same year, the documentary film received four additional awards: the Boston Society of Film Critics Awards (BSFC) for Best Documentary; the Open Palm Award at Gotham Awards, the NYFCC Award for Best Documentary at the New York film Critics Circle Ceremony, and the Golden Space Needle Award for Best Documentary at the Seattle International Film Festival. In 1992, *Paris is Burning* received the awards for Outstanding Film at the GLAAD Media Awards and the NSFC award for Best Documentary at the National Society of Film Critics. Despite the success it had, the film was not nominated for the Academy Award, which led to speculations that the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences was homophobic and transphobic. As a result, the academy changed its rules about how documentaries are selected for nomination (Grimes). Nevertheless, the film has been a critical success as

the multiple awards it has received portray. More than 24 years later, in 2015, the movie received a Cinema Eye Honors Legacy award. And one year later, the film has been recognized for its success and groundbreaking material. Indeed, in 2016, the Library of Congress¹² selected the film for preservation in the United States National Film Registry¹³ because it was considered historically, culturally and aesthetically significant.

The film has indeed influenced mainstream and popular culture. In fact, the documentary film paved the way for many more documentaries to be released on the Ballroom community: *The Aggressives* (2005), *How do I look* (2006), *Kiki* (2016), and *Pier Kids* (2019). In addition, the film and the stories depicted inspired the famous TV show “Pose” which was released between 2018 and 2021. *Paris is Burning* also contributed to the emergence of Vogue in mainstream culture. On the other hand, Reading and Shading became part of everyday life, particularly in queer communities. The terms became popular thanks to the mainstreaming of gay culture and are tied to the popularity of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (Keller). The show, featuring renowned drag queen RuPaul, dedicates a segment to Reading and Shading. The segment which is very popular online starts with the following sentence: “In the great tradition of *Paris Is Burning*...the library is officially open.”¹⁴

In addition, the documentary film also gave rise to an interest by scholars and authors in the Ballroom community. Indeed, many authors have used the film as a tool to study the community. For instance, authors such as Judith Butler and Philip Harper have focussed on the use of performance. In her book, *Undoing Gender*, Butler dedicates the chapter “Gender is Burning” to the Ballroom community and offers an analysis of Realness. She described Realness as the ability to appropriate an authentic gender expression. Butler also uses her concept of *gender performance* to explain how

¹²The Library of Congress serves as the official research library of the United States Congress and as a national library of the United States.

¹³ Each year, the Library of Congress inducts 25 motion pictures into the National Film Registry, which are considered “culturally, historically or aesthetically” significant to the story of America. Films are selected by the National Film Preservation Board from nominations made both internally and from the general public, to preserve gems from the past 120+ years worth saving. (Hinckle)

¹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4TzLubuleYw&t=72s>

the contestants perform conventional gender roles while at the same time trying to challenge them. In 2013, Scholar Lucas Hilderbrand wrote *Paris is Burning, A Queer Film Classic*, which details the production, reception and influence of the film. More recently, in March 2022, Francesca Cicchilli analyzed *Paris is Burning* through the angle of performance in order to conclude if this community subverts or reinscribes dominant norms. Overall, the film has been read in many ways: some scholars have seen the practices used by the community as a way to dismantle dominant gender norms. Others have described the community as a “so-called Wonderland” (Egbatan) where hegemonic norms end up being reinscribed. Eventually, this raises one question: is the film enough to draw such conclusions? This question is even more relevant when looking at some of the controversies that surround the documentary.

Paris is Burning gave rise to many voices of discontent. Firstly, Livingston was accused of ransacking the ball culture. In an article for the *New York Times*, Pepper LaBeija, interviewed by Jesse Greens, expressed her feelings about the financial situation of the participants interviewed by Livingston.

When she did the interviews, she gave us a couple hundred dollars. But she told us that when the film came out we would be all right. There would be more coming. [...] But then the film came out and—nothing. They all got rich, and we got nothing.

These feelings were accentuated by the financial success of the movie, which has grossed almost four million dollars. This caused a lot of resentment within the Ballroom community. Indeed, the community thought that Livingston, a privileged white girl from NYU, had taken advantage of them by filming their intimacy for five years and that she was the one snatching all the glory and money for herself (Monforte). On the other hand, Livingston had expressed that documentaries are works of nonfiction and journalism, and that it has never been standard practice to pay their subjects. She argues that she paid the participants as a matter of respect at a time when this was not commonly done (Greens). However, in the end, Livingston distributed \$55,000 to the cast. According to Greens, while some were happy to be paid for a film they had understood to be an unpaid work, others felt they were not properly compensated and

planned to sue. But when their attorney saw they had all signed standard model releases generated by WNYC Television, they did not sue and they accepted payment.

Adding to the financial controversy of the movie, Livingston was also accused of appropriation. bell hooks¹⁵ argued that Livingston was a white upper-middle-class woman voyaging into the “heart of darkness,” in order to bring African-American exotica for white consumption. She also argues that Livingston was using the personal testimonies of the community as a way to provide a spectacular vision and a dramatic effect. Indeed, when discussing the movie, hook says:

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. (154–155)

On the other hand, certain Ballroom members also argued in the defense of Livingston and the movie. LaBeija, for instance, declared her approval of the broader project and its effects.

I love the movie, I watch it more than often, and I don't agree that it exploits us. [...] It brought me international fame. I do love that. Walking down the street, people stop me all the time. Which was one of my dreams doing the drags in the first place. (LaBeija, quoted in *Paris has Burned* by Greens)

Nevertheless, putting the reactions in contrast, one must be aware that the movie is directed, edited and produced by Livingston herself. Thus, the depiction within the movie is subjected to Livingston own's subjectivities. The Ballroom community and culture are depicted through the eyes and perception of Livingston. She is the focalizer

¹⁵ bell hooks (1952-2021) was a famous American author and social activist. bell hooks' name is not capitalised. This was a choice when she created the pen-name, in order to differentiate herself from her great-grandmother and to put more emphasis on her writing than her person.

and the one telling the story in the end. The concept of *Ventriloquie Provisoire*¹⁶ by Ashley Currier is an interesting concept that can be applied to the documentary film. *Ventriloquie Provisoire* is used to describe enlightening examples of *porte-parolat*¹⁷ in the absence or not of the people concerned. *Paris is Burning* is an undeniable example of *porte-parolat*. Indeed, the people concerned are not the ones directly expressing themselves. They are not the directors or editors of their own stories. Therefore, Livingston is the spokesperson of this community and the Ballroom community is thus the “victim” of *ventriloquie provisoire*. The issue is that through ventriloquy, the portrayal of the ballroom community might not be entirely reliable.

In addition, *Paris is Burning* can be considered a “Trap Door.” The concept of Trap Doors, coined by Reina Gosset, refers to the fact that minoritarian communities are often offered “doors” to visibility and recognition, that are actually “traps:” enforcing dominant norms or erasing certain issues. Marlon M. Bailey argues in the same sense, he says:

The Black and Latinx communities who created this cultural phenomenon have not gained the recognition they deserve. Systemic racism and white supremacy, homophobia, cissexism and transphobia continue to structure the conditions and experiences of Black and Latinx LGBTQ+ communities throughout the world, particularly in the US Ballroom community. (*Structures of Kinship*)

He further adds:

The producers and directors of the films, TV series and shows are, generally, not members of the communities they depict. While the community’s increased popularity and exposure have garnered much-needed professional opportunities for LGBTQ+ people of colour, particularly Black and Latinx queer people, this hypervisibility also obscures the racism, white supremacy, homophobia and transphobia that they face day to day in urban social geographies. (Ibid)

All in all, *Paris is Burning* has given birth to many unsettling questions. The film has been read in many ways: is it a cultural appropriation, a transformed spectacle for

¹⁶ Provisional Ventriloquism

¹⁷ The action of a Spokesperson

the pleasure of mainstream audiences, or an exploitation of the community? But more importantly, the film raises one quintessential question: is the portrayal of the community reliable and truthful?

Although *Paris is Burning* has told the story of this community and shone a light on this culture, the depiction is only one-sided: that of Livingston. The movie ends up backgrounding the real issues that the community experiences, as well as the strategies that they put in place to counter them. In other terms, the documentary film has somehow failed to show all the intricate and complex elements that compose this community. For instance, the movie does not explore the gender/sex system of the Ballroom community. The system is neither explained nor mentioned. In addition, The documentary presents *Realness categories* as the community's desire to belong in the outside world, while in reality it is much more than that. Plus, the film depicts only some aspects of the Houses system: competition teams and surrogate families. Yet, we have seen that Houses are also engaged in prevention and preservation of the culture and community. This complexity can also be applied to the other elements that are presented in the documentary film: voguing, reading, shading and so on. However, what should be highlighted is that the film has only succeeded in offering a brief introduction to this community and culture. In fact, the ballroom community and Ballroom culture are much more complex than they appear on the screen.

By watching the film the spectator can gather a first understanding of this community. Indeed, Livingston has been able to showcase some of the practices and structures of the Ballroom community. But one must be aware that the Ballroom community is much more complex than it appears in the film. Livingston has shown what she wanted to show. But the depiction is sometimes not entirely representative of the realities.

Nevertheless, *Paris is Burning* is the first entrance into mainstream culture for this community. But this entrance is both a success and a failure.

On the one hand, the film was a critical and commercial success. Plus, through the years, the film influenced mainstream culture: the birth of new movies and

documentaries, the popularization of voguing. But it did not only influence mainstream culture, it also gave rise to a great interest from the outside world in this community.

On the other hand, its increased popularity has also contributed to the birth of many controversies regarding Livingston and her documentary. From financial to appropriation and exploitation controversies, the film has definitely left its mark on the world.

Lastly, the Ballroom community has both benefited and suffered from this first entrance into mainstream culture. The community was able to gain more recognition and have access to more opportunities, more jobs and more money. But the increased exposure also intensifies the risks of appropriation or copying of culture.

People want to mimic vogue but they don't know the history or that people from marginalized groups are doing this because they are in need of space, not because it's a trend or a bit of fun, and that erases our experience. (Montero)

Additionally, some of the issues that the community encounters have been backgrounded. The Ballroom community was silenced in the telling of the story, and the observer only discovered some aspects of Ballroom made available by Livingston. The community thus suffered from *ventriloquie provisoire* and fell into a “trap door” that ends up rendering the community transparent. People see them and discover them but they do not look further than the surface. Ballroom members are rendered the “seen unseen.” In other words, *Paris is Burning* allowed ballroom members to gain visibility, but that visibility backgrounded the issues of queerphobia and racism among others.

Nonetheless, Livingston’s film is overall pretty good, and while it cannot fully answer the question of what Ballroom is, it does establish a framework for other scholars to pursue this analysis. Indeed, following in the footsteps of *Paris is Burning*, the TV series *Pose* renders visible an “up-to-now” silenced Ballroom community by giving it a voice not only in the story but, more importantly, in the telling of that story.

3.2 EXCLUSION, INCLUSION OR ILLUSION OF BELONGING?

Ballroom culture and the ballroom community went through a second wave of visibility in the 2010s. Those years saw the apparition of many ballroom-related productions. In 2014, Dominique Jackson released her autobiography entitled *The Transsexual From Tobago: Where I've Been, Where I Am, And Where I'm Going*. In her book, she retells her story from her childhood to her transition as a woman and her encounter with Ballroom culture. But more importantly, she draws the reader's attention to the way trans people are treated in the United States:

In dedication to the trans women that dared to be, paved the way for those today to walk the street as themselves and taught the trans-women they came in contact with to find strength, resilience and always be determined; I thank you and may you all rest in peace. (Jackson Dominique 5)

At the end of the book, she wrote a memorial for the many transgender people who lost their lives. The list starts in 1988 and goes up to 2013. In the list, she recalls every death that has been recorded, many of which were violently caused: murder, shot to death, stabbed to death, strangled, decapitation or beaten to death.

Although the book did not have a commercial success, it was the sign that ballroom members were starting to have their stories told but most importantly that they wanted to have agency in the ways their stories were told.

In 2018, Ballroom culture drew, for the second time, mainstream attention with the airing of the TV series *Pose*. Created and produced by Ryan Murphy, *Pose* became a worldwide phenomenon thanks to its presence in streaming services such as HBO, FX and Netflix. The show, which has 3 seasons, is “the first American series where much of the core cast is not only transgender, but played by trans actors” (Seitz).

The TV series *Pose* explores Ballroom culture in the 1980s. The spectators discover a “fictional world” set in the 1980s and 1990s that looks at the “juxtaposition of several segments of life and society in New York: The African-American and Latino

ball culture world, the downtown social and literary scene, and the rise of HIV” (Musbach). The series focalizes on the House of Abundance, led by Mother Elektra (played by Dominique Jackson) and the House of Evangelista, led by Mother Blanca (played by Michaela Jae Rodriguez). The series also follows Angel, Lil Papi, Damon, and Ricky, who are Blanca’s ballroom children, and Pray Tell (Played by Billy Porter), the master of ceremonies.

Most of the cast and roles are played by former and actual members of Ballroom culture: among which we can find Dominique Jackson, or Leiomý Maldonado for instance. The characters and story are also inspired by *Paris is Burning*. Livingston even served as a consulting producer on the show. Furthermore, creators and producers of the series all considered *Paris is Burning* "a text that helped inform not only the show, but also their identities when they first saw it” (Venable).

But where *Pose* differs from *Paris is Burning* is that it highlights and expands some of the subtler themes. The show aims to capture the diversity of Ballroom culture. It also puts forward some of the issues that were backgrounded in *Paris is Burning*.

Pose and Socio-Economic Situations

Pose highlights the socio-economic difficulties that Ballroom members encounter in their daily lives. For instance, *Pose* acknowledges and shows how prostitution and drug dealing are oftentimes the only sources of income for many members of the community. The show often features scenes where the main characters are engaged in sex work. In the show, while working, Angel encounters Stan, a white man working at the Trump Tower, with whom she develops a relationship until he decides to leave her because of the atmosphere and culture, which he realizes isn't for him. On the other hand, Elektra, at first, maintains a relationship with a sugar daddy,¹⁸ until he decides to leave her because she had a gender reassignment surgery. Then, she has no choice but to become a stripper and later a dominatrix. However, she ends up founding one of her clients dead, and scared of the repercussions and of being accused of a murder she did not commit, she hides the body in her closet. This is a clear reference to the body found

¹⁸ An older man who lavishes gifts and money on a young person in return for their company or sexual favors.

in the belonging of Dorian Corey (*Paris is Burning*) after her death. Later on, Elektra ends up developing a sex-call company while at the same time working with the Mafia by laundering money in exchange for protection.

However, the show also explores the danger of prostitution and sex work. Candy, one of the characters, is found dead in a motel. Once again, this is a direct reference to *Paris is Burning* and more precisely to Venus Xtravaganza. The show, however, dedicates a scene to the death of Candy as a direct response to the controversy surrounding *Paris is Burning* and how Livingston used Venus' "death as a spectacle" (hooks) and did not show the mourning and reaction of the members. In *Pose*, at Candy's funeral, Pray Tell announces that, in honor of Candy, they will now have the lip-synching category, naming it "Candy's Sweet Refrain." At the end of the episode, a posthumous Candy lip-syncs to the song "Never Knew Love Like This Before,"¹⁹ giving her goodbyes to the other members before being buried.

Pose and Finding Safe Space

Additionally, *Pose* presents Ballroom as a communal space for protection and competition. The show explores issues of exclusion. Angel and Damon were expelled from their biofamilies when coming out as trans (Angel) and as a gay man (Damon). Damon's story is presented in the first episode: he is a young boy who loves dancing, but has to conceal that passion from his father. 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).

Elektra's story is presented in season 3 episode 3: after coming back home from being out at a ball, her mom confronts her and she says: "I do not want a cross-dressing homosexual man in my home" to which Elektra responds: "I am not a crossdresser nor a man, I am a woman." The scene then goes into more violent interactions, when her mom tears her dress apart and forces her to look in the mirror. Elektra decides that she has had enough and decides to leave her mom and her house, becoming homeless.

¹⁹ Link to the scene as it appears on *Pose* : <https://youtu.be/tRuz6Qlaq44>

During the scene, she also delivers a strong speech in which she says: “you refuse to see me.” This can be related to Ellison’s quote: “people refuse to see me.” In such a way, the scene and *Pose* play a role of visibilization. Elektra shows her true self and refuses to remain hidden. She forces everyone to see her.²⁰

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 or social support. They end up finding refuge in the House system and in Ballroom culture. *Pose* highlights the role of the House system and how members end up creating strong bonds, friendships and intimate relationships. The show often features family gatherings at the members’ homes or at the ball where they compete with one another. *Pose* also offers heartwarming scenes showcasing the role of mother and how members protect one another. In one scene, interlinked with humor, Blanca offers Damon guidance regarding love and relationships and encourages him to practice safe sex.

Pose and Hostilities

The show also explores issues of identity, with a particular focus on the trans characters. For instance, Angel and Elektra voice their insecurities and their strangeness with their bodies. In the Pilot, Angel, when showing her body to Stan, says: “saving up to have my little friend [her penis] removed,” while Elektra exposes her need to have surgery to become a “complete woman.” Both of them express a feeling of shame for their body. It also shows how both of them are trying to express their womanhood and how they struggle to come to an end with their identity. At one point in the show, Angel and Candy end up going to a non-professional surgeon to have cement injections in order to enhance their hips and booty to look more feminine. *Pose* highlights the mental difficulties that a person can develop, as well as the extremes to which they are ready to go in order to take pride and become who they are or want to be.

Among the other issues presented in the show can be found racism and queer phobia. The characters often live experiences where they end up being discriminated

²⁰ Link to the scene as it appears on *Pose* : <https://youtu.be/mRTtjJsY3M0>

against. For instance, in season 1 episode 2, Blanca is refused entrance into a gay bar because she is trans and that she would be considered by most as doing cross-dressing. At the time (the 1980s), cross-dressing people were not allowed in bars as it was punishable by law. The series also shows micro-aggressions. In season 3 episode 5, Elektra is denied the right to buy a wedding dress for Angel, as the owner of the store argues that his dresses are only made for “real women.” The characters also encounter racism as the estate mogul Frederica is trying to evict Blanca from the nail salon she owns because she is a black transgender woman (season 2). Blanca fights back with the help of her friends and Ballroom family: they organize an ACT UP action, inflating a giant condom to wrap the house of Frederica Norman. Frederica responds by burning the nail salon down but she ends up being arrested for her crimes at the end of season 2.

The TV series also deals with HIV/AIDS. Indeed, many of the characters are diagnosed with HIV such as Ricky or Blanca and some of them end up dying from AIDS such as Pray Tell in season 3. Throughout the 3 seasons, the characters are involved in HIV prevention and they are trying to improve their conditions by lifting the stigma imposed by HIV. Most of the characters end up becoming active in ACT UP. For instance, in season 2, Blanca and her household participate in the “Stop the Church” protest. In season 3, ACT UP decides to protest by dumping the ashes of loved ones who have died from HIV/AIDS on the lawn of the mayor. The characters are also shown participating in fundraising and they do prevention during balls and within their private sphere, enforcing sex-safe practices. The show explores the difficulty, sadness and vulnerability of the members affected by HIV, and voices and renders visible HIV and its impact.

Pose and Ballroom

Pose also highlights the practices of ballroom members. First of all, the TV series portrays how balls are organized and how they function. *Pose* has succeeded in depicting the performative system of the balls: the audience is present, and the space is shown. The commentator, played by Pray Tell, is present. He is the one directing the balls. Then we have the different houses that compete with one another. The TV series

ends up often showcasing examples of balls and of the different categories. In the video montage entitled *POSE (FX) - Babylon*,²¹ the spectator can see and experience a fictional version of the balls. Although fictionalized, they are very close to the truth. The space is transformed into a T-formation and we have the participants in the middle of the room surrounded on both sides by the audience. The show has also succeeded in showcasing the different categories within the ball. For instance, the practice of voguing is presented with many of the characters voguing throughout the show and during the balls. The show also depicts the practice of the sex body categories. Additionally, the TV series also highlights the importance of fashion with many of the characters walking the runway by making fashion statements.

Pose also depicts, in a few scenes, the practice of mopping. Mopping is a technique used by Ballroom members to acquire clothing. As many are poor and cannot afford to buy clothes and materials for the balls, they end up stealing them. The opening scene of the series starts with the House of Abundance stealing clothes from a museum to go to a ball where they are later arrested.²² The scene references an old Ballroom legend and myth in which some members had presumably stolen costumes from a museum in America. However, the museum was so embarrassed that they refused to press charges for fear of publicity. The aforementioned information was confirmed by Ryan Murphy in an interview for *Variety*:

The first thing I did was meet with three of the survivors.²³ They're actually judges in every episode of 'Pose'...I just wanted to meet them to let them know I didn't want to take their story but make them a part of the show and pay them for their time and energies. The first thing they told me was the story of the museum heist that opens the pilot of 'Pose.' That's a true story.
(Bitran)

The show also features another scene, where Elektra and two of her daughters steal a bucket full of money from a man dressed as Santa on the street.²⁴ Elektra later

²¹ A video montage of certain scenes of the TV series *Pose* available at this link: <https://youtu.be/rgmMpowE6ZY>

²² Link to the scene: <https://youtu.be/u3KxWVX5cr8>

²³ The term survivors references ancient members of the cast of *Paris is Burning*.

²⁴ Link to the scene: <https://youtu.be/-YwHYPYlpEM>

uses that money to have her surgery. The show has depicted this practice in a humoristic way and doesn't blame or guilt the community for its practices.

Pose has also successfully depicted the use of reading. The show features many scenes where the characters end-up reading²⁵ one another. It also depicts how and to which extent can reading be used. In Season 2 episode 9, Elektra ends up reading a woman who attacks her and her friends for apparently speaking too loud at a restaurant. In reality, the woman was being transphobic, which she confirmed when she mentioned that she can recognize “a man pretending to be a woman” when she sees one and that they did not deserve to be there. Elektra then responds with a read, leaving the woman speechless. In another scene, Elektra also ends up reading the two mothers of *House of Ferocity*, she says: “House of ferocity, you two are about as fierce as my morning corn flakes [...] you think you're on the road to becoming legends, you two couldn't make it from here to the door without me pointing the way.” Lastly, Elektra once again uses her reading skills to respond to the man who refused to sell her a wedding dress because she and her friends were not “real women.” To whom she responds:

I can see from your sad little wedding band that you are married. But that doesn't mean that you had any real contact with the woman for quite some time. Even a loving wife would avoid her impotent husband if his testicles hung so low that they grew filthy from dragging along the dirty floor once he took off his tighty whities. And I doubt, no excuse me, I know that no other women have paid you any attention, because women aren't attracted to men who aren't tall enough to ride the Cyclone at Coney Island. If not for pity, your closest proximity to a vagina would have been at your birth. **So we can excuse the fact that you cannot see the royalty gracing your store. I have seen my share of real men. And I can assure you, I am not looking at one right now.** (My emphasis)

Reading in the TV series has been depicted as a tool and mechanism for defense and protection, as well as a response to queer phobic attacks.

²⁵ To throw shade: verbally or psychologically attack others in a haughty or derogatory manner.

Life gets better

Pose ends up offering a hopeful message to the Ballroom community. Indeed, at the end of season 3, most of the characters have achieved some of their life goals and they have evolved and gained what they always wanted. For instance, Blanca becomes a nurse. Elektra runs a successful business, Angel becomes a runway model, Damon goes on tour with Madonna after the success of her hit song “Vogue” and he ends up owning 3 dance studios. The show delivers the message that life gets better with time.

Additionally, the show highlights the importance of Ballroom. In the last episode of the TV series, Blanca is awarded Legendary status by Elektra. Then, accosted by another ball mother outside, Blanca is asked how it is possible to keep going without winning anything. Blanca responds that the reason to keep going is to support and lift up the children of a house. With this ending scene, *Pose* highlights that ballroom is necessary so that people can find a place and a refuge, and that they can be and feel uplifted, and that they can gain pride and confidence.

Pose is a multilayered TV series that shows a vulnerable community that resists stigmatization and marginalization thanks to the communal space, social support and safety that the houses and the ball competitions offer. The ball scene is depicted as a symbol of family, love, care, trust and loyalty. Plus, the TV series highlights the different practices that this community has, as well as the hostilities that this community encounters on a daily basis. *Pose* also redresses the wrong of *Paris is Burning*, by giving voice to members of the community as actors, scriptwriters, directors or producers. *Pose* also highlights some of the subtler themes present in *Paris is Burning*. But, the story is told from the perspective of the community. Hence, *Pose* confronts the spectator with a community that showcases the complexity in questions of ethnicity, gender, class and sexuality.

In the end, the Ballroom community ends up having agency in the way their stories and lives are told. Through this second wave of visibility, the community doesn't suffer from ventriloquism nor do they fall into a trap door. With *Pose*, the spectator has no choice but to see the community as they are. They are no longer transparent. Thus,

Pose aims at rendering this community visible by lifting the veil that was put on them. As such, the community refused to remain the “seen unseen.”

The visibility granted to the community didn’t stop on screen. The success of the show and the many accolades propelled the cast to the state of celebrities and influencers. Indeed, *Pose* encountered a commercial success thanks to its big audience. Most episodes received around 1 million viewers on FX television, without counting the number of views from Netflix and other streaming platforms. In terms of critical response, the TV series was met with positive reviews. On *Rotten Tomatoes*, season 1 received a score of 96%, while season 2 received 98% and season 3 received an overall score of 100%. Richard Lawson for *Vanity Fair* even described the series as “an engaging portrait of dark days met with merriment. Pain and perseverance are sewn together to create something humble yet fabulous—and, it should be shouted over all the show's loud and glorious clamor, very much long overdue.”

Additionally, the show and the cast received numerous award nominations. From 2018 to 2022, the show received nominations from the Golden Globes, Critics Choice Award, Primetime Emmy Awards and the GLAAD Media Awards for Best Television Drama Series and Best Actor and Actress in a Drama Series, among many others. In 2019, the TV series marked history as Billy Porter (Pray Tell) won the Primetime Emmy Awards for Outstanding Lead Actor in A Drama Series, becoming the first openly gay Black man to be nominated and win an Emmy in a leading category. In 2021, Michaela Jae Rodriguez (Blanca) became the first transgender woman to be nominated for an Emmy award and in 2022, Michaela Jae Rodriguez marked history by winning the Golden Globes Award for Best Actress in a Television Series Drama, becoming the first transgender person to win a Golden Globe in the history of the awards.

However, the nominations were surrounded by controversy as from 2018 to 2021, none of the transgender cast was nominated in the categories. Only Billy Porter was able to gain nominations for the show. The latter led to many speculations suggesting that the awards and mainstream society were trying to limit the visibility of trans people.

A win for gay men like Porter does not necessarily mean a win for trans women, especially those of color. Billy himself has said as much on many occasions in reference to his own win and multiple Emmy nominations for his work on *Pose*, and the contrasting lack of any nods for his Black and Latinx trans castmates. (Tucker 162)

What is important to note here, is that this gain in visibility only benefitted the cis members of the community. It is not until 2021, that a trans member of the cast would receive a nomination at the awards. However, when Michaela Jae Rodriguez won the Golden Globe in 2022, the show was in turmoil and was not televised, rendering her win invisible.

Nevertheless, *Pose* propelled Ballroom culture on television and made it accessible to a broader audience. Ballroom reached mainstream attention. Plus, *Pose* highlights how the ballroom community has been living and still live through issues that are still relevant today, such as transphobia or racism. The show has succeeded in boosting the visibility of the community on screen and away from the screen, offering new platforms and means of expression. For instance, in 2019, Dominique Jackson received the National Equality Award at the 23rd Annual HRC National Dinner. She took the stage to give her acceptance speech and talk about trans justice.

I am a human being just like each and every one of you. [...] I am a woman that was ostracized, I am a woman of Caribbean descent. I am a woman of transgender experience. I am a woman, but some of you don't see that. My brothers and sisters hurt. We are murdered. [...] Our foundation is human not sex. [...] You do not have the power to accept or tolerate me. I take that from you, you will respect me! My community dies every day, whether it is from HIV and AIDS or from transphobia or homophobia. I ask you to consider that this is a human being. We're all human beings. It's about inclusivity and I will never ask any of you for respect I will demand it.²⁶ (Jackson Dominique 05:21-07:19; my emphasis)

Through her powerful speech, Dominique Jackson reveals the harshness of life for queer people, more specifically trans people and invites the audience to recognize their struggles. She shines a light on the experience of trans people in the United States.

²⁶ Link to the speech: <https://youtu.be/DhjxDgdB24U>

Through *Pose*, the Ballroom community has been able to draw mainstream attention and gain a boost in visibility. This visibility helped the community to put the light on issues such as transphobia, poverty or racism. Through this second wave of visibility, the community was not only able to show the difficulties that they encounter, but they were able as well to highlight their practices and the importance of ballroom in their lives. However, this visibility did not erase the issues that the community encounters nor drastically improve their living conditions. Plus, it seems that the Ballroom community is still facing a form of invisibility as certain people are still turning a blind eye to the community. There is a kind of illusion of belonging. The community has surely gained visibility but not so much in inclusivity or respect. In other terms, there is still a long road to go for the community to fully be accepted in society, with all the benefits that it grants.

In the end, this second gain of visibility is ambiguous. It is once again a success and a “failure.” It has offered many opportunities, but it has also shown the limits in terms of trans representation, for instance. *Pose* has thus reflected the current conditions of Black and Latinx queer in the context of violence and increasing visibility in the United States.

Nevertheless, the show has redressed certain wrongs by paying homage to this community and by acknowledging their practices and their impact on mainstream culture, notably in terms of dance and fashion. But the fight is not over, and the show and its reception have also succeeded in showing why ballroom, visibility and representation are still relevant and needed as the Ballroom community is still suffering from appropriation, inequalities, queer phobia and racism. But in more recent years, a new wave of visibility for the community has started to take form, which leads us to wonder about the current and future state of Ballroom.

3.3 THE FUTURE OF BALLROOM

When it comes to the Ballroom community, representation still matters. Not only can representation on-screen help to represent the real world as it is, but the spectator can also use the examples and stories presented to them to inform their own perspectives. In this regard, Ballroom culture is still forging its place in the “Global queering.” The term, which was coined by Altman in a 1997 article “Global Gaze/ Global Gays,” refers to the fact that queerness is becoming more and more global, and that there is a proliferation of queer identities in diverse social, political and cultural settings, such as in advertising, political discourses, performance art, film or the internet. The growing representation of Ballroom culture helps with developing an accurate portrayal of the community as well as acknowledging their place and existence in society. Ballroom culture gained a new boost in visibility in the 2020s. This new wave of visibility, which is still growing, has helped with the representation of the Ballroom community on and out of the screen.

Online presence

Indeed, the Ballroom community has been growing its online presence. Balls have been accessible online, via Youtube, for years now, but it was not until COVID-19, that their online visibility grew. COVID-19 boosted most social networks during lockdowns. On TikTok, the community has been able to gain a large audience. For instance, the TikTok channel “Best of Vogue,” which has 1,9 million followers, often uploads videos of voguing performances taken directly from the balls. Their most viewed video has 159,9 million views and 9,2 million likes. The videos often show how voguing is performed during the balls and they also show how the audience and the ballroom community interact with one another during the performances. Taking directly from the community itself, those videos are entirely reliable and are an accurate representation of Ballroom. By enforcing their presence on social media platforms, the community is also enforcing their visibility in mainstream society.

Film and TV Industry presence

In the same process, the community has also been able to enforce its presence on many occasions. For instance, in 2022, Billy Porter and the Ballroom community participated at the BET²⁷ awards. They were offered a platform to pay homage to the ballroom community on stage. The performance, which lasts 2 minutes and 15 seconds, invites Ballroom legends to walk the runway and vogue. Billy Porter, who acts as the commentator, at one point says: “we’re here, we’re queer, get used to it.” This reflects that the Ballroom community, and the queer community, are set to make themselves a place in society and enforce their presence.

In 2023, Michaela Jae Rodriguez was the invited guest of Ryan Murphy at the 2023 Golden Globes. When Murphy took the stage to accept his Golden Globe, he praised the actress as an inspiration. Murphy also urged the Golden Globes audience to “give her the standing ovation she deserves for making history.” Thanks to his action, Murphy offered a beautiful moment of visibility for the actress, and through her, for the trans and ballroom community.

In 2020, a new television series about Ballroom was created. The reality competition series called *Legendary* was released on HBO Max. The show, which has 3 seasons, follows ballroom house members as they participate in nine balls to win a cash prize of \$100,000. The show features ballroom legend Leiomy Maldonado as a main judge. The TV series was praised by the GLAAD awards for featuring queer and trans artists from the New York Ballroom scene. In the end, the show offers a portrayal of the Ballroom community and of their practices, notably the performances of runway, realness and vogue. Once again, the community has been able to gain and maintain an online presence and gain recognition for their performances.

More recently, RuPaul’s *Drag Race*’s latest episode of Season 15, recreated a category from the Ballroom scene. During one of the mini-challenges of the show, contestants were asked to participate in the category: Vogue. Each contestant then goes on to vogue and RuPaul states that among the contestants some are “stars and

²⁷ An American award show that was established in 2001 by the Black Entertainment Television network to celebrate black entertainers and other minorities in music, film, sports and philanthropy.

statements“ but only one is a “legend.” A member of the pit crew then brings out a trophy and RuPaul announces the winner of the “Grand Prize.” In this episode, RuPaul pays homage to the Ballroom community by recreating a fictional ball category and using the slang and terms of the community. Hence, RuPaul aims at making ballroom visible within the queer community and to a broader audience.

The ballroom community was also able to gain recognition in other fields and domains, such as dance and music.

Music and Beyoncé

In 2022, Beyoncé released her seventh studio album called *Renaissance*. *Renaissance* is an album highly influenced by Ballroom culture. Indeed, the album uses House music, a genre created and mostly used by the ballroom community. In her songs, Beyoncé uses terms and slang that are directly borrowed from the Ballroom and queer community. On *Alien Superstar*, she uses the word “category” as a reference to the ballroom categories, she says: “category: sexy bitch, I’m the bar.” On the outro of the song *Heated*, Beyoncé uses a lot of the terms present in Ballroom culture. For instance, she uses the terms: “Ten across the board,” “Give me face” (as in the category face) and “Eat it,” which refers to the fact that you are doing good and being excellent in something. On *Pure/Honey*, Beyoncé samples a staple music of the ballroom scene that was created from the sampling of a scene from the movie *Trading Place*, which contained racially insensitive imagery. The original sample is a reappropriation and transformation of the racial prejudice that the movie originally portrayed, shifting the narrative and empowering the community. Additionally, Beyoncé invites Kevin Aviance from the House of Aviance and Kevin Jz Prodigy from the House of Prodigy on the song. They use the term “cunt” which was reappropriated by the ballroom community to define someone who is attractively and beautifully feminine. Additionally, in her songs, Beyoncé also recreates the commentator’s musicality during the vogue category at the balls. In *Heated*, for instance, she sings “yadda, yadda, yah, yadda, yadda, yah, yah, yadda, yadda, yadda, bom, bom, ka, ka,” the same way that commentators do during

voguing performances.²⁸ But her most striking reference to Ballroom culture is in her song *Break my Soul (The Queens Remix)*. The song features Madonna and a passage from Madonna's *Vogue*. But before looking into *Break my soul*, an analysis of Madonna's *Vogue* and its impact is necessary.

Vogue, the song by Madonna, was first released in 1990 and became a global phenomenon. It reached the number 1 position on Billboard Hot 100 and stayed there for four consecutive weeks, becoming one of Madonna's most successful singles. The song is based on the voguing performed in the ballroom scene. However, Madonna ended up being accused of cultural appropriation and exploitation.

The performer's stage has always displayed a sense of cultural carnivalesque, having race, ethnicity and gender as a stable creative axis around which her persona revolves. Her history with urban sub/cultures is constantly under debate wherein appropriation and borrowing are the notions most contested within Madonna's readership. (Chatzipapatheodoridis)

With regards to her song, *Vogue*, Madonna's impact is ambiguous. She seems to have benefited and profited from Ballroom members while giving them opportunities and appreciation.

Not only did Madonna draw from the scene to produce the song and the video of "Vogue," but, notably, she hired prominent ballroom figures, such as Jose and Luis Xtravaganza, to choreograph and assist her in her 1990 Blond Ambition World Tour as evidenced in the Truth or Dare documentary. (Keshishian)

But yet, it seems as well that *Vogue*, the dance, ended up losing its queer side and thus the ballroom community ended up losing from this representation:

[She brought vogue in the limelight, at least outside the U.S., but critics envisioned Madonna's oeuvre as the embodiment of commercialization and cultural exploitation. Arguably, through her engagement with sub/cultural practices and scenes, Madonna came to epitomize the Jamesonian logic of late capitalism while her position in relation to those scenes was always fixed as one of uncreative plagiarism.] (Chatzipapatheodoridis)

²⁸ Example of the commentator's musicality: https://youtu.be/Jhhd_tEaJEQ

Because the artist has “contributed into making the culture of vogue widely known to an ever-increasing global and intergenerational audience,” (Chatzipapathodoridis) she stripped voguing off of its cultural markers. Basically, she only showed the performative aspect of vogue while not acknowledging that vogue was first created as a response to the hostilities that the Ballroom community encountered in their daily lives. In other words, vogue was stripped of its cultural significance. Madonna became the face of voguing and was reaping the benefits of the success. Additionally, the world started to vogue while the Ballroom performers were backgrounded and not acknowledged by the broader audience for having created the dance. But is Madonna the one to blame? Madonna’s vogue remains a complicated case. But nevertheless, Madonna boosted the visibility of vogue and of the Ballroom community to a certain extent in the 1990s.

Back in 2022, *Break my Soul* can be read as a response to the controversies surrounding the song *Vogue* and the watering down of voguing. Beyoncé and Madonna’s collaboration on *Break my soul* redresses the wrongs of the past and helps to finally acknowledge and make the broader audience know that vogue comes from Ballroom. In the song, the singers pay an ode to the Ballroom community by citing the names of certain Houses:

House of Xtravaganza
House of Revlon, House of LaBeija
House of Amazon, the House of Aviance
House of Balmain (Go with the flow), the House of Ninja
The House of Lanvin, House of Telfar
House of Ladosha, House of Mugler
The House of Balenciaga, the House of Mizrahi-i-i-i-i (Beyonce, Break my Soul)

Although the song does not have a music video, it has been picked up by fans who produced fan-made videos that offer clips of the Houses voguing while *Break my Soul* is playing.²⁹ Additionally, Beyoncé’s album reached number 1 on the Billboard 200, and she ended up winning 3 Grammy Awards at the 2023 Grammy for her Album *Renaissance*. During one of her acceptance speeches, she took the stage to thank the

²⁹ Link to the fan-made video: <https://youtu.be/HoBIPj8I0d0>

queer community for having created the genre.³⁰ Beyoncé's case is another example of visibility for the Ballroom community who ends up, through Beyoncé and her music, being recognized for their cultural impact.

About the third wave

If the first two waves of visibility encountered mixed success, this still-growing third wave of visibility is constantly bringing the community into the light. That it is by being mentioned, alluded to, or by directly having their voices heard, the community is trying to make itself visible and truly public. According to queer theorist Cherry Smith, by “making public” queer identities, it would allow queer visibilities to “inform and transform the cultural, social, political and historical contexts we inhabit” (38). Additionally, it would also allow for self-empowerment and self-esteem. The ultimate goal is to shift and deconstruct the “acceptable and normal” citizen or in the words of Butler the “regulatory ideal” (1). The regulatory ideal refers to the fact that bodies can become “qualified for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility,” (Butler 2) that is to say that a certain form of identity is constructed as natural, real and legitimate. This process has:

crystalized into traditions and moral values, and have taken the shape of regulating and standardizing rules and laws - some evolve through time and thus loosen the net of regulating social and moral standards - which play a fundamental role in the way that we live our not so intimate lives today. (Croisy 148)

Queer visibility is thus a way to portray alternative identities and to legitimize their existence. The constant battle for visibility, and change, is even more needed today, as the lives, rights and security of queer people are threatened.

Indeed, in June 2022, the US Supreme Court overruled *Roe v. Jackson Women's Health organization* because abortion was not “deeply rooted in the Nation's history or tradition.” This decision leaves it up to each state to enact its own abortion law. *Roe v. Wade* not only affects women but every person who is able to get pregnant

³⁰ Link to her speech: <https://youtu.be/DXnnucnZyek>

and give birth, that is to say non-binary people and trans men. *Roe v. Wade* has become one of the most politically significant Supreme Court decisions, dividing the United States between those who call themselves "pro-choice" and "pro-life" (anti-abortion). This division and the law enforce inequalities and violence for trans and non-binary people, specifically for ballroom members, for whom it might become harder and more dangerous to get an abortion. Because not only are they pregnant but they also have a gender identity and sometimes other factors such as race or class, that come into play, making it harder for them to reach for medical help. Visibility in that concern can thus help at shifting the stigma and ultimately "normalizing" non-binary and trans identities.

More recently, Anti-LGBTQ+ Bills have been rapidly escalating and becoming laws. For instance, Mississippi and Tennessee both banned gender-affirming care for trans minors. Tennessee also made it illegal to perform drag in any public space. However, their definition of drag is ambiguous. The act defines drag performances as a "performance in which one or more performers exhibit a gender identity that is different from the performer's gender assigned at birth." In other words, the bill affects not only drag queens and kings but every trans person, and anyone gender-nonconforming. Similar bills are trying to be passed in other States in the United States and are rapidly drawing mass attention. These laws are not only threatening trans and non-binary people's lives but they are also erasing them from public life and are trying to render them invisible. The laws are also maintaining disproportionate standards of living for trans people who experience poverty at different levels and it enables discrimination in terms of health care and self-identification.

What's next?

Those two examples highlight why today it is still important for the queer community and the ballroom community to make themselves public and visible. There has to be a queering of the screen, a queering of mainstream culture and a queering of public life in order to present alternative and queer spaces and identities. This third wave of visibility has to keep growing, not only for queer people in general but for

ballroom members who are even more disproportionately affected. I argue that the movement can grow in three main ways:

Firstly, the Ballroom community can adopt a commercialization technique. Basically, I propose here that the ballroom community tries to commercialize its culture by creating new platforms. For instance, they could try and find ways to publicize their balls by broadcasting them on television or on streaming platforms. They could also create media and TV reality show, such as *Legendary*, to keep bringing and attracting broader audiences. However, this technique can encounter many limits. First, it can lead to a commodification of Ballroom culture, making members visible “as consumer subjects (and objects) but not as social subjects” (Hennessy 721). It can also lead to a transmogrification of the culture. Transmogrification has been defined as a “strange or grotesque transformation: transformation that is characterized by distortion, exaggeration, extravagance, and, as the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* puts it, ‘unnatural combinations’” (Sullivan 553). In other terms, commercialization could lead to a transformation of the culture in order to make it more attractive to mainstream audiences by creating exaggerated or extravagant examples of balls, making them unreliable or unreal. Thirdly, it could lead to misrepresentation or a backgrounding of certain issues. But, the Ballroom community could also manage to commercialize its culture while not altering it to fit mainstream standards.

Secondly, The Ballroom community could also use shrewd and aggressive marketing techniques. Indeed, members could use the already acquired platforms to keep on producing sociocultural events to enforce their visibility. In other words, they can keep on disclosing their culture and struggle through the media and entertainment industry as they have been doing so far, the goal being to “[un]become] others” (Sullivan). Through unbecoming others, the many productions will “[explode] in a volatile multiplicity that nullifies ‘normality.’” This continuous and increasing representation of queer identities might lead to a cultural visibility that creates a “viable and legitimate concern” (Hennessy 721). However, the risk can be that those actions end up becoming infra-political, located beyond the visible spectrum of politics. As a result,

the initiatives could not directly or quickly influence public policy or weigh heavily on the dominant paradigm of political homosexuality” (Marche) [My translation].³¹

The third way that I propose is to improve the members’ visibility by focusing on social media visibility. By developing their online visibility on social platforms members can end up attracting more attention by appearing on more social media feeds. Social media feeds can improve engagement and through photos, infographics, and GIFs, they will gain more likes and shares and could spread information better. Social media platforms are also widely used and can help in building community and growing awareness. However, once again the risks are that it might lead to a transmogrification or a commodification of the culture, rendering the community transparent.

The three ways that I proposed here can be as much successes than failures for the community. However, they could also very well combine and use the three techniques to enforce their visibility in a more successful way. Thus they could deconstruct and reconstruct the imaginaries that people have. They could offer alternatives and new representation that will eventually help in improving their conditions.

Nowadays, Ballroom culture finds itself in a complex and ambiguous condition. Ballroom culture is constantly shifting in and out of the underground and the mainstream. Eventually, Ballroom offers a looking glass that allows ballroom members and Black and Latinx LGBTQIA+ people to see themselves (in and out of the screen) and offers to a limited audience the less glamorous existence of discrimination and stigmatization. The visibility will also keep on triggering positive responses of self-assertion and empowerment. Plus, it also highlights and informs the world that transitional and alternative spaces exist. Thus, Ballroom positions itself as an alternative space that offers the public and its members safety by granting everyone opportunities that are denied to them by society at large. Ballroom today ends up making itself known as necessary in the current state of things. Even in a fairy-tale and fantasy world where

³¹ “Les initiatives ne sauraient directement ou rapidement influencer les politiques publiques ou peser lourdement sur le paradigme dominant de l’homosexualité politique.” - Original quote.

discrimination and stigmatization were not problems for queer people, Ballroom would still exist and thrive, simply because it offers freedom of expression through arts, dance, music and fashion. But since the world is not as welcoming, Ballroom definitely has its place in the world that we live in.

The Ballroom community has been engaged in an intersectional performance of visibility. In other words, the community has been trying to gain visibility by performing their plural identities through various means. Indeed, the community has been trying since the 1990s to bring awareness to their living conditions and gain recognition for their practices. The first wave of visibility led to a shift from anonymity and invisibility to transparency, thanks to the likes of *Paris is Burning* or Madonna's *Vogue*. However, the living conditions of the community did not evolve or change as much as they expected. The second wave of visibility that started in the 2010s led to a better representation of the community, who were able to gain platforms to discuss their living conditions and shine a light on their struggles. But once again, the success of their visibility was still limited and they encountered stigmatization and certain forms of exclusion. Even so, racism, transphobia and queer phobia are still recurrent patterns in the lives of Ballroom members. It is thus why the community is surfing on a third wave of visibility by attracting mainstream attention in as many fields as they can. Still in construction, this third wave can lead in many directions and can be as much a success as a failure. 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" (Hidalgo-Ciudad).

Nevertheless, the community has been trying to gain visibility as part of its strategy to survive in a hostile world. The goal being to "normalize" their identities and create a safer and more accepting world. However, this process is still an ongoing battle, one that might never be fully successful, but one that needs to be fought nonetheless. Nowadays, Ballroom finds itself at the crossroads between an underground and mainstream culture: it is an underground culture that has reached mainstream culture or

should I say attention and knowledge. Ballroom also stands at the crossroads between invisibility, transparency and visibility: it is a culture about minorities that have gained visibility but who are still transparent or even invisible to a certain extent. It is thus why making themselves visible and public is still important today.

CONCLUSION

*Ballroom life is not about what you could be in real life,
but how you transcend what you couldn't be in real life.*

-Kiddy Smile

This dissertation has aimed at shedding light on the Ballroom community of New York. Ballroom members, who are mostly Black and Latinx working-class people, evolve in socio-economic environments that are marked by racism and queerphobia. Using the concept of intersectionality has helped to shed a light on how members are affected by racism and queer phobia in combined and intertwined ways, and has allowed for a better understanding of how these factors lead to further inequalities and hostilities for members of this community: intersectional marginalization, poverty, exclusion and violence. As a result, members develop complicated relationships with the spaces, both private and public, in which they live and evolve. This context led to what seems an important question: how do members forge better lives for themselves in what is and seems to remain somehow a hostile world?

The first answer lies in the gender system of the Ballroom community. Indeed, Ballroom members use a unique gender system that offers more categories of identification than the outside world. By using categories such as *Butch queens* or *Butches*, members create sites of identification that go beyond dominant binary systems: male/female and heterosexuality/homosexuality. Indeed, members are free to define themselves as they want and categories of sex, gender and sexuality are not fixed but malleable. However, the system itself is ambiguous and is caught between norms and counter-norms: no separate categories for feminine lesbians, gender-fluid people or non-

binary people. The system is thus as much a liberating tool as a confining one. Still, because the gender system allows for a freer expression of identity than the one imposed by society, it can also lead to further exclusion from the outside world. But what is most important is that this system offers a unique perspective on how dominant norms of sex, gender and sexuality can be deconstructed and transformed to expand the freedoms of all despite and by virtue of their differences.

Moreover, far from accepting and being content with exclusion and violence, members create and use strategies that allow them to be themselves, be freer and build better lives in New York and in the United States. Among these strategies are the creation of queer spaces.

Ballroom members transform heteronormative spaces into alternative queer spaces where each member has an important place. Indeed, Ballroom spaces require a Transformation that allows for a better organization of the space and for all those in attendance to occupy strategic positions. Each position depends on the role that one will play during the event. There are 5 roles: the DJ(s)/Music, the Judge(s), the Commentator(s), the Audience and the Participants. Each of the roles has their importance and complements each other: the audience interacts with the participants, the commentator(s), the judges and the DJ(s) and vice versa. Such a system ensures the inclusion and active participation of everyone. Consequently, members build trust, confidence and a sense of belonging by assisting and participating at balls. This system has become crystallized and ritualized and allows the preservation of Ballroom culture.

Additionally, within these alternative queer spaces, performative categories will take place. These categories are the basis of the balls and they structure the events. The categories are based on the gender system used by the members. Each category is announced on flyers before the event and requires the use of either drag, dance, fashion or makeup, among other things. Within these categories, everyone has a role to play. Obviously, the participants are the ones who will perform, while the judges will decide who wins. The commentator(s) will govern and direct the categories, and while the DJ(s) animate, the audience observes, challenges or affirms the decisions made by the

judges and encourages the participants. Overall, these categories allow for a broad range of racial, sexual and gender subjectivities to be developed, represented and expressed.

These spaces and the practices that are developed in them have raised an important question: How do members establish good living conditions when they are outside of these spaces?

It is then that the subversive and transformative powers of the categories become clear. Indeed, the categories play essential roles outside the spaces in which they were created. Two roles can thus be identified: passing and reclaiming.

Passing

Firstly, Realness categories are categories in which members perform societal roles such as teacher or executive. The aim is to adopt a new identity, one that corresponds and responds to dominant and conventional roles and norms. In order to do so, members use intersectional performance.

Intersectional performance is a concept that I develop to better understand how members (re)interpret their sexual, class, gender and ethnic identities in combined and intertwined ways. Intersectional performance thus refers to the ability to take on or revise an identity. In other words, intersectional performance is a performance that allows one to act, talk and walk in ways that consolidate or challenge the idea of being for instance a black heterosexual man or a black heterosexual woman. Intersectional performance can thus be used to hide one's identity, copy someone else's identity or create our own identity.

By using intersectional performance, Ballroom members put on a disguise that allows them to hide and suppress their queer identities in the outside world. The ultimate goal for members is to be able to pass as a straight cis person in order to move into exclusionary spaces for Black and Latinx queer people. Realness is rehearsed within ball spaces and performed in the outside world. Realness thus served as a survival tool for this community in order for them to resist the different forms of discrimination that they encounter in their daily lives.

Reclaiming

Secondly, categories are also used for members to gain pride in who they are and reclaim and embrace their identities. Members once again use intersectional performance to present their bodies and their identities in categories that allow them to express themselves. Intersectional performance here is used by members to build, embrace and solidify their identity on the main stage and in their everyday life. For instance, through the runway categories, members act as fashion models to present themselves. In the vogue category, members use voguing to create, (re)claim and develop their identity, pride and self-esteem. These categories allow members to express their queerness, blackness and other characteristic. Members have also developed Reading and Shading, an insult art form that allows them to question themselves and others and ultimately build their confidence. By practicing their identity within the created spaces members learn to unapologetically be themselves outside of the spaces. All in all, the different categories allow both a claim and reappropriation of the members' identities that allow room for self-assertion and pride.

In addition to the spaces and the categories, members have also created a family-like system. The system emerged as a response to the rejection that most members face from their families and society at large. Thus, the Ballroom community is divided into Houses. Houses act as alternative families for those who have been rejected, who face exclusion or/and who are in need of understanding and belonging. Houses mirror biological families: family name and same structure. However, houses are not conventional families, members subvert biological families by developing and taking on roles based on friendship rather than biological ties or age. Members thus choose which role they decide to play. Ballroom members end up revisiting traditional, conventional and biological roles - parents, siblings, and relatives - by using intersectional performance to engage in various relationships in order to provide love and care. For instance, house mothers will adopt and welcome people within their house and provide them with guidance, advice on relationships and help them on certain issues.

Intersectional performance thus allows members to redefine what family is and to

take on roles that allows them to consolidate or challenge the idea of what is a mother or a father for instance.

House members are also at times prevention workers. By developing Latex Balls, members provide all those in attendance guidelines on how to have safe sex and they offer prevention on HIV/AIDS without stigmatizing or excluding anyone.

Ultimately, the Ballroom community has redefined and recreated families and homes to provide security, safety and support to all the members in their everyday life, regardless of their background, age or biological ties.

Added to the strategies already mentioned, Ballroom members have also been trying to gain visibility in order to make the outside world more welcoming to the queer Black and Latinx community that composes their culture. Through three big waves - the 1990s, 2010s and 2020s - the community has been able to gain a certain visibility which had allowed them a few victories along the way:

To begin with, Ballroom members have gained more opportunities throughout the years: they have access to more job opportunities either as dancers, models, or music producers. In addition, they have also gained new means and platforms of expression, both online and offline.

Secondly, the visibility has granted to Ballroom members a sense of self-assertion and self-pride as they were finally represented on screen. While the many shows which were produced throughout the three big waves accentuated their presence in mainstream culture, it also led to the legitimization and recognition of Ballroom members' existence within mainstream society.

Additionally, because Ballroom members attracted mainstream attention, it also allowed for a mainstream and political concern about their conditions. Using their newfound visibility, members have used their platform to voice their struggles and shine a light on queer Black and Latinx people.

Lastly, members are also recognized and praised for their cultural impact: house music, fashion, voguing and so on. Thanks to the likes of Beyonce, the Recording Academy, TV show, or even famous members of the Ballroom scene, Ballroom culture is little by little becoming a major force in mainstream culture and society.

However, Ballroom members are still experiencing racism, queer phobia and other forms of discrimination and exclusion. The fight for visibility, and thus change and improvement, is still ongoing, as the current situation regarding drag queens in the United States attests. Ballroom members are thus still trying to maintain and improve their visibility in order to influence mainstream American society to become more and more inclusive.

All in all, Ballroom culture is a culture engaged in preserving the life of its members, queer Black and Latinx communities, by creating safe alternative spaces, developing tools and strategies for survival and self-pride and by trying to gain visibility.

Nowadays, Ballroom culture still remains an important alternative space for all those who are stigmatized, marginalized and oppressed. However, this dissertation has also addressed the limitation of Ballroom culture, specifically in terms of including new kinds of gender and sexual subjectivities. Ballroom as a community is very complex and conflicted: it is fluid and inclusive in some ways while exclusionary in others. Additionally, this dissertation has also highlighted how Ballroom consistently expands itself while simultaneously reifying within itself some of the exclusionary and oppressive structures that brought the community into existence in the first place. But as Robin D.G. Kelley reminds us “culture is never static” (9). Ballroom culture is constantly evolving and becoming more and more engaged in the effort of creating innovative ways to include all LGBTQIA+ lives and challenge limiting structures. For instance, British Ballroom offers a category reserved for non-binary people. So, unlike its American counterpart, the British Ballroom offers balls that are, at first glance, more open and inclusive. But research on British Ballroom culture is almost non-existent. The sources are mainly produced by the press and only give access to summary information, which deserves thorough reflection. It is thus why future research could explore the link between the British and American Ballroom cultures, and underline the differences and similarities between the two geographical areas. Thus, it will highlight how Ballroom crossed the American continent and the Atlantic Ocean, to settle in England and how it

developed on the English territory. By looking at the practices of this community and how members of British Ballroom culture have adopted and adapted American Ballroom culture, we could have a better understanding of the power that there is in Ballroom culture.

While research on Ballroom culture still need to be carried out globally, our dissertation has highlighted the role of Ballroom culture in the life of New York-based members. Indeed, Ballroom culture offers a unique perspective on how dominant notions and norms in terms of gender, sex, sexuality, race and community can be and could be disrupted to allow members to develop greater freedom while acquiring the necessary tools and spaces for them to build better lives for themselves.

Last but not least, this dissertation is a tribute to Ballroom members who are constantly fighting for inclusion and trying to make the world a better place for themselves and for queer people around the world, whether Black and Latinx or not.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1:

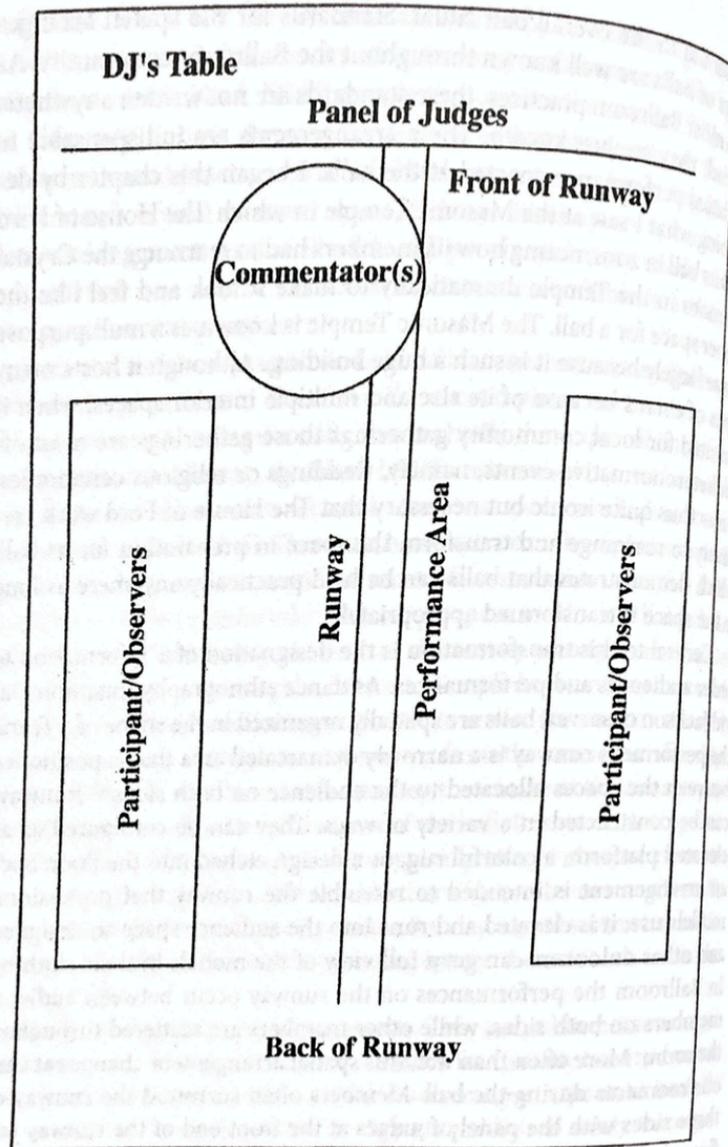
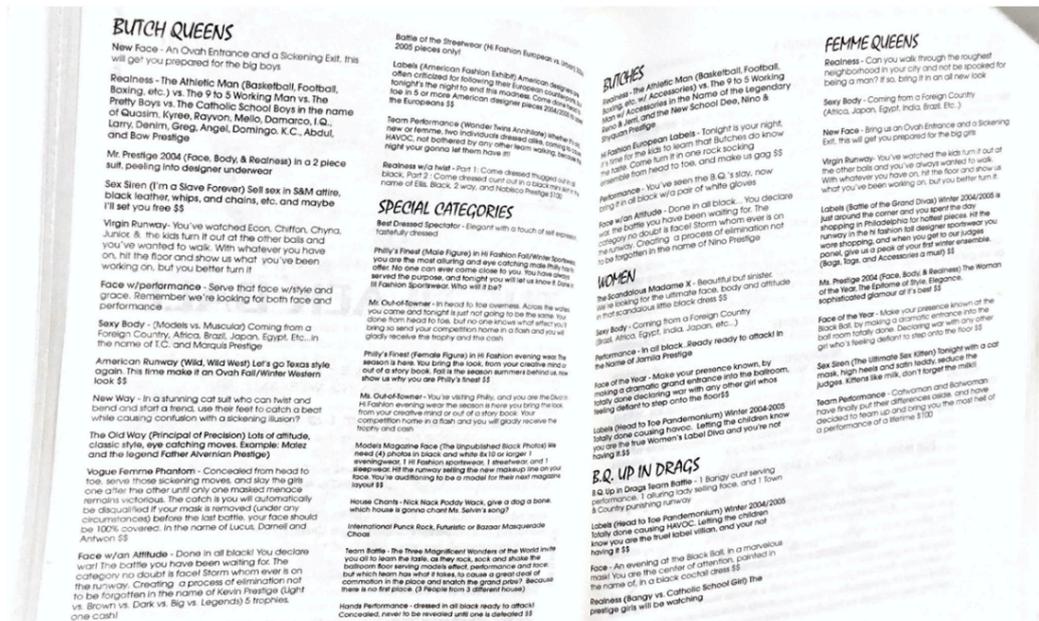


Illustration by Marlon M. Bailey
Butch Queens Up in Pumps
p.148.

APPENDIX 2:



Flyer for “in The Heat of the Night II : The Black Ball” by the Legendary House of Prestige 2004.

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ABSTRACT:

The lived experiences of Ballroom members, who are mostly Black and Latinx queer people, have long been overlooked in queer history. Most studies have focussed on the experiences of white gay men. The aim of this study is to fill this gap by drawing attention to this “silenced” community, and more specifically to the Ballroom community of New York, from the 1970s to the present day. Evolving in environments marked by queer phobia, racism and resentment, members have difficult relationships with the spaces in which they move and live. It is thus relevant to analyse how members forge more livable lives for themselves in New York and in the United States. In what seems to remain somehow a hostile world, members have been using marginal strategies of survival: the creation of queer spaces, and the use of intersectional performance to (re)create families, to perform normativity and forge new identities. Moreover, from the 1990s onwards, Ballroom members have been striving for visibility and recognition in mainstream society. This study is a gradual observation of the several aspects that shape Ballroom member's cultural practices.

Keywords: Ballroom; Black; Drag; Femininity; Gender; Intersectionality; Latinxs; Masculinity; New York; Performance; Queer; Racism, Sex; Sexuality; Trans-identity; United States; Visibility.

RÉSUMÉ:

Les expériences vécues des membres de la culture Ballroom, qui sont pour la plupart des personnes queers de couleur, ont longtemps été négligées dans l’histoire queer. La plupart des études se sont concentrées sur les expériences d'hommes gays blancs. L'objectif de cette étude est de combler cette lacune en attirant l'attention sur cette communauté « réduite au silence, » et plus particulièrement sur la communauté Ballroom de New York, des années 1970 à nos jours. Évoluant dans des environnements marqués par la phobie queer, le racisme et l’animosité, les membres entretiennent des relations difficiles avec les espaces dans lesquels ils se déplacent et vivent. Il est donc pertinent d'analyser comment les membres se forment une meilleure vie à New York et aux États-Unis. Dans ce qui semble un monde hostile, les membres utilisent des stratégies de survie marginales : la création d'espaces queers, la performance intersectionnelle pour (re)créer des familles, interpréter la normativité et forger de nouvelles identités. De plus, depuis les années 1990, les membres de la Ballroom s'efforcent d’être visibles et reconnus dans la société *mainstream*. Cette étude se veut progressive, explorant les différents aspects qui façonnent les pratiques culturelles des membres.

Mots-clés: Ballroom; Drag; États-Unis; Féminité; Genre; Intersectionnalité; Latinxs; Masculinité; New York; Noir.e.s; Performance; Queer; Racisme; Sexe; Sexualité; Trans-identité; Visibilité.