

PERFORMANCE IN *POSE*: BALLROOM COMMUNITY AS RESISTANCE AND PROTEST.

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Premiering in 2018 on FX, *POSE* (2018–present) is a worldwide acclaimed drama series created by Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk, and Steven Canals comprised of two seasons. The series begins with the introduction of character Blanca Evangelista (M. J. Rodríguez), a member of the New York ballroom community. After being diagnosed as HIV-positive, Blanca decides to leave a prominent house in this subculture (the House of Abundance) to start her own: The House of Evangelista. She is joined by Damon (Ryan Jamaal Swain), a young boy who is kicked out of his parents' home after coming out as gay. *POSE* follows the story of these two main characters in both the ballroom community and the outside world. Within the ballroom subculture, a safe space and an alternative world for LGBTQ people, these houses are like teams and also, as per the series, chosen families. There the participants organize balls, which Blanca herself defines as “a gathering of people who are not welcome to gather anywhere else, a celebration of a life that the rest of the world does not deem worthy of celebration” (*POSE* 2018, “Pilot”). These balls follow specific themes that dictate the dress codes and performance styles required of participants.

Following Marlon M. Bailey's work, although drag performances have been essential to ballroom subculture, new categories have emerged within this scene that include more expansive gender and sexuality diversity that better represents the community (2011, 375). Ballroom emerged as a countercultural practice that defied the gendering of clothes. Though drag is obviously involved in these performances, there is a distinction between drag and other sorts of performances like those of femme queens, carried out by trans women (ibid). This article explores performance as a means of resistance and protest for the communities belonging to ballroom subculture. Furthermore, this paper aims at illustrating and discussing how performance in ballroom subculture helped members of this community to embody their identities and develop strategies of survival and resistance against sexist, racist, and transphobic social discourses.

BALLROOM AND TRANS REPRESENTATION

POSE is clearly influenced by Jennie Livingston's documentary *Paris Is Burning* (1990). Indeed, scholars have analyzed the show as an alternative narrative inspired by the events, aesthetics, and community explored in Livingston's documentary. In their view, *POSE* offers an "answer to both the violence and injustices represented in the film and to the gaps in representation *Paris Is Burning* itself re-produced" (Koch-Rein, Yekani, and Jasper Verlinden 2020, 1). One of the main features of ballroom is the competitions between members of different houses. In these contests, there are various categories that participants, who prepare in advance, can compete in and win prizes. Balls involve voguing, modelling, the use of homemade outfits, and performances based on categories which vary according to criteria informed by stereotypes, gender roles, and social classes.



Figure 1 Angel Abundance (Indya Moore) walking the "Bring It Like Royalty" category (Pilot, ep. 1, season 1).

Ballroom subculture and its community constitute a series of performative acts based on the stereotypes inherent in the binary distinctions of gender, sex, and sexuality. However, the performances that take place within this community also imply and build a system of support promoting prevention against HIV/AIDS—the infectious spread of which was at its height in the 1980s. The community can likewise be interpreted as a chosen family embodying an alternative form to the traditional one. *POSE* and *Paris Is Burning* are two examples that illustrate the significant impact that ballroom subculture and trans representation have recently had on popular culture in the United States. Livingston's documentary served as a turning point for ballroom

subculture and its community by giving its members mainstream visibility for the first time, thus drawing the attention of academic scholars to its subjects' environment and corresponding peculiarities. The most prominent scholar on ballroom subculture is the already quoted Marlon M. Bailey, whose works on the identity system in ballroom subculture and the importance of performance are essential for understanding community formation in *POSE*. The values of ballroom subculture in the education and support of LGBTQ youth are fundamental in this community. The gender and sexual performativity of ballroom subculture emerges and functions amid the gaps between hegemony and transformation, thus creating new forms of self-representation and social relation (Muñoz in Bailey 2011, 383). Hence, the transformative power of these performances is made obvious as community members gain agency in the formation of their identities, reach towards authentic expressions of their selves, and further improve their quality of life as members of the LGBTQ community.

In foundational texts of Queer Studies like Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1999), gender performativity was understood as inherent to trans embodiment. However, there have been accusations that these performances reinforce binary distinctions (Prosser 2013, 32). It has been argued that the performativity located at the core of trans reality only accounts for a representation based on the binary structure of heteronormativity. Yet, ballroom performativity has also been regarded as a false expression of the self—effectively overlapping with drag performances—rather than a manifestation of one's own identity and experience. Since identity is always intermeshed with its normative conceptions, these performances might be more accurate than what is considered "real". Additionally, the balls' competitive categories account for a wider gender/sexual identity system that extends the possibility of identities beyond performance.¹

PERFORMANCE AND EDUCATION IN BALLROOM

Ballroom subculture, the core of *POSE*'s narrative, can be understood as a "flamboyant, semi-public ritual performance" (Bailey 2013b, 630). According to Bailey, ballroom subculture is an example of a performative response to the United States' unwillingness to take measures against the spread of HIV/AIDS infection among minorities (most members in ballroom communities are Black and Latinx). Thus, performance as a form of activism and a counter-discourse to raise awareness

¹ Marlon M. Bailey's outline of the six subjectivities within the system can be found in *Performance as Invention: Ballroom Culture and the Politics of HIV/AIDS in Detroit* (2013).

on the HIV/AIDS crisis becomes central to the balls, as do other issues like the creation of “an alternative world” where “queer genders and sexualities, and kinship coalesce” (ibid). Ballroom subculture fundamentally functions as a safe space for its members, allowing them to create survival and support strategies for LGBTQ subjects.

According to Bailey, “the gender and sexual identity system, the kinship structure, and the performances at the ball” (2013b, 631) are the three aspects within this subculture that serve as strategies to prevent HIV/AIDS, since “the organic practices and strategies of prevention that emerge from within so-called at-risk communities have been woefully neglected” (ibid). These preventive strategies not only refer to safe sex and the use of protection but also to practices of intravention which Bailey defines as “prevention activities that are conducted and sustained through practices and processes” (ibid) within communities. Examples of such practices in *POSE* include Blanca’s efforts to educate her protected “children” and raise their awareness of HIV/AIDS. By organizing prevention balls, the community intervenes in all the three aspects mentioned above by creating a socially configured community in which its members can share their experiences and help others grow to accept their identities and learn how to survive. HIV/AIDS prevention takes place within the houses, but also at the prevention balls aimed at educating community members on healthy sexual practices and promoting sexual responsibility (Arnold and Bailey 2017, 304). Thus, the series shows that prevention balls constitute another competitive performance among other categories, but with a distinct emphasis on sexual education and promoting healthy sexual practices, like using condoms. These balls incorporate sex awareness and encourage safe practices by displaying knowledge on HIV/AIDS in showcases of safe sex practice paraphernalia allowing these practices, such as the distribution of condoms, to be disseminated and inscribed throughout the audience (ibid).

These practices illustrate that “queer members of the Ballroom scene are communities of support rather than simply communities of risk” (Friedman et al. 2004, 251) because of performers’ agency. The ballroom community encourages vulnerable individuals to act independently and make their own choices by providing a system of support and education on queer matters. Ballroom subculture is often approached from the perspective of the methodology of performance, emphasizing community activism and awareness in HIV/AIDS prevention. Therefore, the central function of performance for the ballroom subculture and its members is obvious. In Román’s words, “cultural performance is, indeed, an act of intervention into the cultural politics of race, sexuality, and AIDS” (in Bailey 2013b, 633). Blanca Evangelista tries to educate Damon on the dangers of having unprotected sex. Blanca encourages her house members to get tested for HIV/AIDS and transforms her flat into a site of refuge for all her children. Furthermore, she actively engages in the fight for trans rights, as well as in the denunciation of Black trans women’s oppression and marginalization both outside and within the LGBTQ community of the 1980s.

Performance also serves other purposes. For example, there is a moment in the show when a large part of the community in *POSE* follows Blanca and reenacts one of the famous performative acts by the activist group ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), a political organization founded in 1987 as a response to the lack of government measures to battle the HIV/AIDS crisis. Moreover, in the first episode of the second season, they also participate in a die-in at Saint Patrick's Church in New York City to protest for increased sexual education. Both instances are examples of performance implemented outside of the ballroom sphere, enacted by ballroom members noncompetitively and aimed at protesting their situation. Performance here is working as a form of activism that has consequences not only for those performing but also those present during the performance. These protests bring issues into the public sphere which seem to only affect vulnerable communities. The protests' performative elements serve the fight for awareness and education on queer matters by intervening in the outside world's status quo. In other words, these vulnerable communities demonstrate the agency they have acquired through public performances that aim at further changes in mainstream society.

The process of building a community in which people care, intervene, teach, and provide a system of support for its members is not an imitation or re-idealization of the traditional family structure. It is, rather, a way to construct an alternative, yet familiar, safe space for individuals often rejected by their own biological families. Thus, this use of kinship terms in the context of ballroom subculture serves not only as a strategy for survival but also a counter-discourse against the heteropatriarchal norm of the dominant social conventions regarding gender and sexuality. What Blanca does when forming the House of Evangelista is build a familial structure that is socially configured and serves as a source of support cultivated by mutual bonds and shared participation in the ballroom environment. As a House Mother, Blanca provides guidance and education to her children. She does so by helping them grow personally, emotionally, and professionally. Her children are her responsibility, and she also tries to create family traditions such as Christmas, where she lets her children ask for one gift. This maternal effort on Blanca's part also brings love and affection back to her when everyone in the House of Evangelista buys her a heart charm necklace. "It's a heart 'cause that's what you are to us" (*POSE* 2018, "Giving and Receiving") says Ricky (Dyllón Burnside) to Blanca.

Despite their shared sense of community and the resulting structure of support and kinship, ballroom members experience violence and oppression in their daily lives and thus must search for survival strategies (Bailey 2011, 366). This vulnerability is the reason why passing becomes an important part of the community and of queer people's lives. Though performance is used by the ballroom community to parody stereotypes, it also unmarks members as "gender and sexual non-conforming subjects" (ibid) in the public sphere. Through performance they try to pass in the

mainstream world, thus avoiding discrimination and violence. Passing becomes an advantage because it renders members invisible and unmarked (Bailey 2011, 380). Nevertheless, the use of performance in ballroom subculture serves as a counter-discourse that critiques, satirizes, and revises the cultural structures and stereotypes at the core of gender, sexuality, and family in American society. Judith Butler argues that drag in *Paris Is Burning* serves a subversive function by reflecting impersonations through which heterosexual ideals are performed and naturalized undermining their power through exposure (Butler 2011, 176). These performances are also present in *POSE*. For example, hyper-feminized images are produced and required by competition in balls.



Figure 2 Blanca Evangelista in a challenge for reigning Femme Queen (“Access”, ep. 2, season 1).

The ballroom subculture proves that performances can be of use and value to the lives of those who appear meaningless to the mainstream public eye. Performances based on the inclusive gender system of ballroom subculture are essential when the performative identities inherent in the subculture are extended beyond ballroom events into “practices of self-identification and self-fashioning in members’ lives in the outside world” (Bailey 2011, 376). Moreover, the use of parody in these performances can also be deemed a coping mechanism: one of the many survival strategies developed by the community.

Butler states in her earlier work that drag performances constitute a parody of the norms they aim to overturn (Butler 2010, 187), and it is arguable that performances in



ballroom culture reflect the possibilities of reinterpreting gender and sexual roles as well as creating alternative forms of kinship in an often dangerous, homophobic, transphobic, and sexist environment. Other scholars have asserted that “ballroom members are obsessed with White femininity and illusions of material wealth” (Bailey 2011, 383). However, it is worth highlighting how the community achieves an alternative existence that echoes White privilege during the balls, but from within their marginality. Performers reproduce categories of high fashion or executive realness. At the same time, these vestiges of White privilege also constitute a performance precisely because of the performers’ vulnerability and desire to represent themselves holding such privilege. In the end, ballroom subculture is clearly built upon two central pillars: houses, which resemble families, and balls, which showcase performances. Moreover, performance remains the shared device between the houses and the balls. These performances can be understood as, first, the individual act of each member to embody their identities within and outside this world and, second, as a collective protest to their situation.

RESISTANCE AND AGENCY IN BALLROOM

Themes at the core of *POSE* are acceptability, the struggle to fit into a predominately heteronormative culture, surviving the HIV/AIDS crisis, and the inaccessibility of the American Dream to LGBTQ people. Such fundamental elements are also a shared factor for every character’s story. Performances are based on a scheme of gender, sexuality, class, and race, as the performances are gendered, sexualized, classed, and racialized. This community and its subculture embody resistance and denounce their social situation and isolation from US mainstream public discourse, as well as in late twentieth-century expressions of popular culture. The community promotes resistance by educating its members on queer matters that were only accessible through other queer people such as effective prevention against HIV/AIDS during prevention balls. Another strategy of survival, which also constitutes an act of resistance for these vulnerable individuals, is the acquisition of agency. The agency and education they acquire from their community are used against the heteronormative constructs of society regarding sex and gender norms among other issues, such as the lack of proper sex education and not having access to social equality. They gain this agency through their performances within the ballroom subculture context. Moreover, the kinship effort carried out in the houses also helps them to obtain agency self-awareness and identity expression. The ballroom community has a lot to offer, from a new classification of gender identities to new ways of coping with the marginalization and



violence that its members suffer. Furthermore, *POSE* is an example of how popular culture makes these issues more present in the public sphere.

Paris Is Burning and *POSE* demonstrate how performance constitutes an act of public resistance and protest through the stimulation of dialogue and the audience's interpellation. Ballroom performances intervene in the lives of those who belong to this community by providing an escape from their oppressive and marginalized situations in the outside world. Additionally, such performances can also be understood as parodying of the standards of femininity and masculinity inherent in 1980s America. Performances do not reinforce the heterosexual stereotypes of gender identity; rather they present a parodical reproduction of them. Members of the ballroom community gain agency and freedom to express themselves by understanding and developing their own identities within the safe space that the balls and the houses constitute. Moreover, Blanca's House of Evangelista takes up the parental work that, for example, Damon's parents were unwilling, or unable, to provide him. Thus, houses are also seen as alternative and functional family structures. The ballroom subculture and the community presented in *POSE* promote education and resistance in a context where vulnerable individuals gather to share their knowledge and identities to develop survival strategies to confront mainstream society's discourse.



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