

AND THE CATEGORIES ARE: SEXUAL “REALNESS”, INDIVIDUALISM, AND THE
PARADOX OF CATEGORIES IN BALL CULTURE

by

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ABSTRACT

GABRIELLE GREY. AND THE CATEGORIES ARE: SEXUAL “REALNESS”,
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(Under the direction of DR. GREGORY MIXON)

Ball culture has been a Black/Latinx gay subculture overlooked by historians. Ball culture served as a safe space for young gay Black/Latinx men and trans-people to express themselves. The competition categories held an equally significant role in ball culture as the balls did. If not for the categories, the balls would not bring the moment where participants present their individualism amongst their peers.

Although other social sciences such as gender studies and sexuality studies have explored ball culture, the focus was not on the categories. The categories became an afterthought and were compared to beauty pageants. Ball culture categories were much more than simple competition categories. Many categories had the purpose to teach “realness” and challenged homophobia and transphobia, racism, and poverty ball culture participants experienced outside the balls.

This thesis specifically examines ball culture competition categories during its golden age, 1981-1993. A discussion on homo/transphobia, racism, and poverty in New York City during ball culture’s golden age lays out the groundwork on why specific categories were created and sustained themselves over time. Ball culture competition categories were separated into two themes: queerness/realness categories and race-based categories. This thesis seeks to establish why ball culture competition categories were created, evolved, and maintained as important mechanisms for Black and Latinx gay men to define themselves and their identities as individuals with self-worth.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to myself for never giving up, even when I thought I could no longer continue.

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1: “I SAW THINGS I NEVER SAW BEFORE”: UNDERSTANDING BALL CULTURE	1
1.1 INTRODUCTION	1
1.2 THEMES	5
1.3 HISTORIOGRAPHY	6
1.4 DEFINITIONS	13
1.5 BIOGRAPHIES	27
1.6 CONCLUSION	32
CHAPTER 2: “THE STRANGEST AND GAUDIEST OF ALL HARLEM SPECTACLES”: BALL CULTURE’S HISTORY	33
2.1 INTRODUCTION	33
2.2 TIMELINE	34
2.3 CONCLUSION	42
CHAPTER 3: “WHEN YOU’RE GAY, YOU MONITOR EVERYTHING YOU DO”: HOW HOMOPHOBIA IN AMERICAN INSTITUTIONS AFFECTED BALL CULTURE MEMBERS DURING THE TWENTIETH CENTURY	44
3.1 INTRODUCTION	44
3.2 THE THREATS TO THE LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY	45
3.3 CONCLUSION	66
CHAPTER 4: “A BALL IS THE VERY WORD. WHATEVER YOU WANT TO BE, YOU BE”: HOW QUEER AND REALNESS THEMED COMPETITION CATEGORIES HELPED SHAPE INDIVIDUALISM AND IDENTITY IN BALL CULTURE	68
4.1 INTRODUCTION	68
4.2 QUEERNESS	68
4.3 REALNESS	76
4.4 CONCLUSION	90

CHAPTER 5: “WE HAVE HAD EVERYTHING TAKEN AWAY FROM US AND YET WE HAVE ALL LEARNED HOW TO SURVIVE”: HOW PARODY AND IDENTITY RACE-BASED COMPETITION CATEGORIES DURING BALL CULTURE’S GOLDEN AGE DIFFERED FROM THE RACISM AND POVERTY PARTICIPANTS EXPERIENCED 91

5.1 INTRODUCTION	91
5.2 RESIDENTIAL SEGREGATION AND BLACK/LATINX NEIGHBORHOODS IN NEW YORK CITY	94
5.3 STEREOTYPES, DRUG USE, AND POVERTY DURING THE 1980S IN NEW YORK CITY	103
5.4 BALL CULTURE RACIAL CATEGORIES	111
5.5 CONCLUSION	120
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION	121
REFERENCES	124

CHAPTER 1: “I SAW THINGS I NEVER SAW BEFORE”: UNDERSTANDING BALL CULTURE

Introduction

On May 10, 1989, a ‘Love Ball’ was held in New York City to raise funds to meet the AIDS crisis. The ‘Love Ball’ was not a typical charity event; it was a ball held by members of a LGBTQ+ subculture known as “ball culture”. Notable sponsors and A-list celebrities attended, making this specific charity ball a highly publicized event in New York City. The ‘Love Ball’ was ball culture’s first mainstream exposure. People outside the subculture who attended the ‘Love Ball’ had no idea what was to come. “It was kind of confusing... I saw things I never saw before,” David Byrne of the “Talking Heads” rock group confessed when interviewed about his experience. He judged a competition category in the charity event. The interviewer, Woody Hochswender, had a different interpretation: “Voguers employ fluttery hand movements, gymnastic contortions, and freeze-frame poses. They also chew gum. They do not look like Vogue models.” Even though the ball completed its task in raising \$400,000 for direct AIDS care and preventive education, the first highly publicized ball also left people feeling differently about ball culture. While Hochswender was unimpressed, William Ivey Long, a costume designer, was amazed. Byrne a rock musician was confused, while Anna Wintour, the editor in chief of Vogue Magazine who knew high fashion and modeling, was excited.¹

The confusion, amazement, excitement and even the unimpressed emotions of the people who witnessed ball culture competition balls for the first time was common. Jennie Livingston, the director of the documentary that highlighted this subculture titled “Paris is Burning”, also felt jumbled emotions when she visited a ball for the first time in 1985. The documentary “Paris is

¹ Woody Hochswender, "Vogueing Against AIDS: A Quest for 'Overness': How to Vogue: Strike a Pose, Wave Your Hands and Twist Your Body," *New York Times*, May 12, 1989.

Burning”, was a major source for the structure of this thesis. The visuals from the documentary brought great descriptions for the people interviewed, the categories highlighted, and the living conditions participants experienced. All categories defined and analyzed in this thesis were featured in “Paris is Burning.” The legendary queens interviewed in the documentary have short biographies in this thesis to show how influential they were during ball culture’s golden age.²

Jennie Livingston, the director, was in Washington Square Park in New York City and happened upon some men striking poses and saying statements such as “butch queen in drag!” She asked them what they were doing and if she could photograph them posing and performing. These men said yes and explained that they were voguing. In 1985, voguing was not mainstream, so Livingston did not know what it was. When she questioned the men about voguing, they told her that if she really wanted to see voguing she should go to a ball. That same day she attended the ball and engaged with ball culture members. She said this encounter was what sparked her ideas for the documentary. The documentary, filmed in 1986 and 1989, and released in 1991, received overwhelmingly positive reviews from mainstream and independent media, earning over four million dollars in the box office. The film won thirteen awards, mostly for best documentary. Ball culture members and the LGBTQ+ community recommended “Paris is Burning” when someone outside the community wanted to learn about ball culture. The documentary became the epitome in understanding ball culture.³

While some ball members believed the documentary brought their lives to light for the American mainstream, others were unhappy with the outcome because they believed that Livingston made a profit from their lives while they continued to live in poverty. The film’s

² Jennie Livingston, *Paris is Burning* Directed by Jennie Livingston (New York: Off White Productions, 1991) video; Dena Seidel, “An Interview with Jennie Livingston,” *Films for the Feminist Classroom*, Volume 1. Number 1. (2009): 1-16.

³ Jesse Green, “Paris Has Burned,” *New York Times*, April 18, 1993; Seidel, “An Interview with Jennie Livingston,”

producers decided to split \$55,000 among 13 participants within the film. Members such as Dorian Corey and Willi Ninja understood that participating in the documentary was unpaid work about their life within ball culture and were happy with their payment of around \$4,230. Other members felt that the payment was too meager and obtained an attorney to sue for a share of the film's profits. Paris Dupree had planned to sue for \$40 million. Conversely, they had signed a release and were unable to sue.⁴

This thesis examines how ball culture's golden age (1981-1993) competition categories served as an outlet that participants used to express their individuality. Participants used these categories during a time when their sexuality and race were considered a threat to the mainstream heteronormative American society. Competition category themes held importance for ball culture members. Themes ranged from gender to sexuality to race to 1980s American social class. These themes elevated ball culture competition categories, helping younger ball culture participants understand their identity. As marginalized members of an already marginalized community, queer Black and Latinx drag queens created a world in which fashion, dance, and beauty offered a way to survive. Competing in and attending the balls allowed self-expression that became a political act of escapism. In New York City in the 1980s, Black and Latinx communities lived in poverty while the white communities were either financially comfortable or extremely wealthy. The competition categories helped relieve the stresses of poverty for competitors, by acting as if they were wealthy. Doing this did not erase their blackness; instead these categories enhanced a moment in their struggling lives to feel fabulous while their peers cheered them on.⁵

⁴ For more information on how ball participants felt after "Paris is Burning" see: Green, "Paris Has Burned,"; Seidel, "An Interview with Jennie Livingston,".

⁵ Courtney Delong, "BLACK DRAG QUEENS INVENTED CAMP: THE POLITICAL AND AESTHETIC EFFECTS OF BLACK DRAG CULTURE," *crfashionbook.com*, June 10, 2020.

The discussion of themes, historiography, and definitions that surround ball culture will occur in this chapter. The analysis will alleviate the confusion in understanding the difference between drag queens and ball culture. However, a simple one sentence definition ignores the adjustments members of the subculture made in shaping ball culture during the 1980s. Ball culture in the 1980s and 1990s continued into the 21st century as a community event that allowed LGBTQ+ people of color to accept and love who they were.

Paris Dupree expanded ball culture competition categories in 1981, starting ball culture's golden age. The golden age ended in 1993 when both Angie Xtravaganza and Dorian Corey, two iconic queens, passed away from AIDS complications. The short biographies feature legendary queens from the documentary "Paris is Burning". Presenting mini biographies will aid in understanding the pioneers and innovators in ball culture during the 1980s and 1990s. The goal for the thesis is to define ball culture, comprehend its history, and chronicle the competition category themes that allowed ball culture participants a moment to express their individuality. The significance of this study is to highlight how ball culture competition categories allowed competitors to reject 1980s gender norms and the notion that racial minorities in America could not succeed financially as white Americans did.⁶

This thesis focuses on the Harlem ball scene during the 1980s and 1990s and is different from other arguments posed by scholars. Ball culture expanded from New York City to fifteen major United States cities such as Los Angeles, Oakland, Detroit, Atlanta, Charlotte, Miami, Philadelphia, Louisville, and Indianapolis. Most ball culture discussions surveyed the entire subculture, while this thesis examines ball culture's competitive categories and its importance to

⁶ My interpretation for the "golden age" of ball culture comes from: Tim Lawrence, "'Listen, and You Will Hear all the Houses that Walked There Before': A History of Drag Balls, Houses and the Culture of Voguing," in *Voguing and the Gay Ballroom Scene of New York City, 1989-92*, Photographs by Chantal Regnault, (New York City, NY: Soul Jazz, 2011); Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

a community who could not express their true selves in the public view. These categories will be analyzed as contradictions, compared to ball culture participants daily lives outside the ball. The term “contradiction” should not be understood as negative. Despite some categories being contradictory to the participants reality, these same categories were essential in teaching and aiding young gay people of color in comprehending themselves and the world around them.⁷

Themes

This thesis will analyze several themes relating how ball culture’s competitive categories also held significance for ball participants both as ball culture contestants and during their daily life on New York City’s depressed streets. Queerness, femininity, race, identity, gender, masculinity, wealth inequality, American sexual hypocrisy, adaptability, and family are the key themes for this thesis. Themes such as queerness and identity were important to ball culture because they highlighted the idea that it does not matter who you are, if you are you.⁸

Ball culture members were mostly young queer people of color. Many were runaways or had been kicked out of their familial home because they were homosexuals. Estranged from their original family, many believed that moving to New York City was a way to start a new life. For these impressionable youth, seeing the excitement was mesmerizing when invited to a ball for the first time. Nevertheless, older ball culture participants never hid the realities of racism and homophobia that defined their lives outside the balls from the younger members experiencing New York City for the first time. Despite the challenges, ball culture contested the forces that sought to erase gay men of color’s identity. Ball culture participants did not become nihilistic. Instead they lived optimistically while recognizing American hypocrisy. The individuals featured

⁷ Tara Susman, “The Vogue of Life: Fashion Culture, Identity, and the Dance of Survival in the Gay Balls,” *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory* vol. 9, article 15 (April 15, 2000): 118.

⁸ Michelle Lhoq, “20 Tracks That Define the Sound of Ballroom, New York’s Fiercest Queer Subculture,” *Vulture*, July 24, 2018.

in this thesis were gay, gender nonconforming, and transgender POC (person of color) youth experiencing social rejection during the height of the AIDS crisis in the late 1980s.⁹

Historiography

Ball culture as a subject of scholarly exploration has recently become a focus of intellectual inquiry. Race and queerness were two themes that structured the historiography of ball culture, including this thesis. Whether the scholarly work centered around gender and sexuality, AIDS, safe spaces, gay kinship, or identity; themes of race and queerness underlined the work examining ball culture. However, there has been no discussion on ball culture's competition categories and its relation to race and queerness. Of course, it is impossible to write about ball culture without highlighting its competition categories. Yet, scholarly work on how these competition categories compared to the participants' lives outside of the balls has been absent. This thesis will fill in the absence of the discussion on competition categories by exploring ball culture and how the competition categories were opposite from participant's lives outside the ball, creating a fantasy versus reality enigma. This paradox was seen in categories such as "Upcoming Pretty Girl", "High Fashion Model Parisian", and "Women's Vogue". Black/Latinx gay men fantasied about fame and fortune while performing even though their race and sexuality put them at risk of having a violent and pessimistic life.

Scholars researching in Gender Studies, performance studies, medical research, anthropology, psychology, and philology have explored ball culture. Historical scholarship on ball culture and Black gay life, however, is absent. This is because Black queer historical scholarship began in the 1970s and has only recently received more attention by potential

⁹ Kyle Telander, Sybil G. Hosek, Diana Lemos, Gihane Jeremie-Brink, "Ballroom itself can either make you or break you' - Black GBT Youths' psychosocial development in the House Ball Community," *Glob Public Health* 12, no.11 (March 2017):1391–1403; Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

scholars researching in universities. It is important to note that many ball culture participants lived hidden precarious lives in urban spaces outside the safe space of the balls and were unable to document their experiences. As a result, few primary sources exist allowing a full examination of the participants' lives outside the balls, impacting the understanding of their daily thoughts and experiences. This historical study will rely heavily on primary sources such as interviews, statistics, photographs, songs, newspaper articles, and flyers. Relying on primary sources will answer how ball culture competition categories served as a moment where participants could pretend that their fantasies were realities.

General LGBTQ+ history has been vastly documented, compared to the small quantity of historical documentation in ball culture. For this thesis, looking at the LGBTQ+ history in the 20th century allows for an understanding of the recent events that led to ball culture's emergence in the second half of the twentieth century. Jonathan Katz, a historian of human sexuality, wrote *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the USA*, and contributed to the LGBTQ+ historiography, which became a very influential and foundational work in LGBTQ+ history. However, a ball culture narrative was nonexistent. This work was published in 1978, only a few years after ball culture's creation, so it is understandable why the subculture was not added. Historian Jim Downs argued that the 1970s was not just a decade of free love rationalized as the reasoning behind HIV spread. He argued that the 1970s started the Gay Liberation Movement that became a major turning point in how gay people defined culture, community, and their place in historical popular culture. Downs' argument critically applies to ball culture because the first House ball was hosted in 1972, after splitting away from racially discriminatory drag balls controlled by white judges. Immediately, the balls became a place for Black and Hispanic gay men to be together and compete fairly. LGBTQ+ activist Colin Clews, claimed that by the 1990s,

the LGBTQ+ community collectively achieved a “very real sense of place in the world,” despite the continuing hostility from governmental and religious discrimination. This point was also true for ball culture participants, because they were still a part of the LGBTQ+ community. The LGBTQ+ community and the white gay historical streams were not a part of ball culture because ball culture focused on serving as a safe space for gay men of color.¹⁰

New York City has always been a popular city for LGBTQ+ community members. The city was a popular place to live because it had an open free-expression culture. Although LGBTQ+ members accepted differing sexualities, it did not mean that racial discrimination was absent within the community. Gay men of color had to work particularly hard for acceptance, even within their own sexuality-based community. Fifty years after the Stonewall Riots that happened for several days during the summer months of 1969, gender studies scholars and historians agree that the Stonewall Riots changed the LGBTQ+ community forever. Historians Martin Duberman, David Carter, and Nicholas Edsall all argued that the New York City Stonewall Riots were the turning point initiating the Gay Liberation Movement that occurred in the 1970s. Although the Stonewall Riots were the turning point, many scholars wondered what happened in the LGBTQ+ community before that important moment. Historian George Chauncey looked at gay men in New York City during the first half of the twentieth century and argued that “the construction of male homosexual identities can be understood only in the context of the broader social organization and representation of gender”. Those relations among men were construed in gendered terms. Policing gay men was part of a more general boundary setting in the gender order during the 1920s through the 1960s. Chauncey’s argument on “gay

¹⁰ Jonathan Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the USA* (New York City: Avon Books, 1978); Jim Downs, *Stand by Me: The forgotten History of Gay Liberation* (New York City: Basic Books, 2016), 4-5; Colin Clews, *Gay in the 80s: From Fighting for Our Rights to Fighting for Our Lives* (London, United Kingdom: Troubador Publishing, 2017), 1-3.

New York” examined drag balls before the 1960s, a time when drag balls were racially integrated although the Black/Latinx participants did not win trophies. Growing Black and Latinx dissatisfaction with rarely winning in the competitions resulted in the creation of ball culture. The Stonewall Riots became the reminder for participants in ball culture to always embrace their identity.¹¹

The AIDS epidemic began in the 1980s. Ball culture felt AIDS’ devastating effects as many young members died from its ravages. Medical scholar Emily Arnold and Gender Studies scholar Marlon Bailey argued that gay kinship provided Black American queer youth support for same-sex desire and identity while also teaching same-sex safety during a time when AIDS/HIV killed many participants. Support came in multiple forms for HIV prevention in ball culture, especially through the balls (Love Ball) and Houses (The House of Latex). Houses in ball culture served as an alternative family that provided a safe space for young gay men of color. An article written by medical researchers, studied how ball culture kinship sparked HIV/AIDS prevention for ball culture members. This thesis relies heavily on ball culture’s support of identity, so it is important to weave in the AIDS discussion into this thesis to examine what AIDS was and how AIDS affected ball culture.¹²

¹¹ David Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots that Sparked the Gay Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004); Martin Duberman, *Stonewall: The Definitive Story of the LGBT Rights Uprising that Changed America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993); Nicholas Edsall, *Toward Stonewall: Homosexuality and Society in the Modern Western World* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2003); George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (NY: Hachette Book Group, 2008), 8; Eric Garber, “A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem.” In *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, edited by Martha Vicinus, George Chauncey Jr., and Martin Duberman, (New York: Penguin Group, 1990), 318– 31.

¹² Emily A. Arnold and Marlon M. Bailey, “Constructing Home and Family: How the Ballroom Community Supports African American GLBTQ Youth in the Face of HIV/AIDS,” *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, 1: (2009): 171-88; Gregory Phillips, James Peterson, Diane Binson, Julia Hidalgo, and Manya Magnus, "House/Ball Culture and Adolescent African-American Transgender Persons and Men Who Have Sex With Men: A Synthesis of the Literature," *AIDS Care*, 23 (4): (2011): 515-20.

During ball culture's golden age, most of its members were Black gay men. In New York City in the 1980s, Black males under the age of twenty experienced a higher possibility of death via gang violence than any other race or gender. At the same time, homosexuals experienced an increase in homophobic violence because of the AIDS epidemic. The Black gay men in ball culture, had to deal with the reality that their lives were in constant danger because of their race and sexuality. Anthropologist William Hawkeswood analyzed both gay and Black male identity in Harlem during the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 1990s. He argued that these men negotiated their societal status through "codeswitching" (a process of switching externally between being a gay man and a straight man for fear of prejudicial judgement). Ball culture competition categories challenged mainstream ideal masculinity standards. Ball culture embraced its own set of masculine identifiers—"Banjee Boy Realness". Ball Culture went further by expanding the masculinity categories during the 1980s intending to create a more inclusive space where masculinity would be defined so that everyone could be represented. This inclusion and representation allowed members who presented a more masculine personae to find their identity within the balls.¹³

Marlon Bailey, a Women and Gender Studies scholar, wrote in *Butch Queens in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit* that he personally participated in ball culture during the early 2000s. He authored several articles and a book about ball culture. His collective argument was that ball culture since the 1980s had evolved into various helpful forms for the participants. Balls were a safe space away from anti-gay discrimination and was used as a cultural labor (performance) outlet for participants to enhance the quality of their lives. Bailey also argued that ball culture served as a kinship that helped bring understanding about HIV/AIDS

¹³ William G. Hawkeswood, *One of the Children: Gay Black Men in Harlem*. Vol. 2. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), Editor's Note XI-XVI.

prevention to younger participants. This thesis looks deeper into the idea that Bailey presented by focusing only on competition categories being the outlet instead of solely focusing on the balls. During a ball, a participant played the part as a competitor and an audience member. Nevertheless, a participant only expressed their individuality while competing in a category. As an audience member, the participant celebrated the other ball contestant peers.¹⁴

In ball culture there were Houses that served as families for those within the subculture who needed a familial structure in their daily lives. Anthropologist Kath Weston does not explore the LGBTQ+ community's history like Katz and Down. Instead, she argued that kinship or "the gay family" as an institution does not exist. Family has always been a contested concept within the LGBTQ+ community because some people wanted a sexual relationship, not a familial one. Its supporters drew heavily on love, friendship, and biology defining family for individuals with similar sexualities like the Houses in ball culture. This idea that "the gay family" was not an institution, is important for this thesis for understanding identity and family within and outside ball culture. Outside ball culture, many participants were homeless young gay Black/Latinx men rejected by their biological families for being homosexual. In ball culture, the elder members became the person the younger participants could look up to and learn from.¹⁵

In ball culture, each House operated differently. Latinx Houses created kinship structures and values found in Latinx culture and changed them to fit their sexual lifestyle. Education Scholars Gerardo Wence-Munoz, Laura Tejada, Elaine Koffman, and Shedah Tavakoli suggested Chicago's late twentieth century and early twenty-first century Latinx drag queens

¹⁴ Marlon M. Bailey, "Endangering Space: Ballroom Culture and the spatial practice of possibility in Detroit," *Journal of Feminist Geography*, 4 (2011): 489-507; Marlon Bailey, *Triangulations: Lesbian/Gay/Queer Theate: Butch Queens in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan, 2013), 8-15.

¹⁵ Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), Preface XI-XIX.

were part of the transgenerational transmission of Latinx kinship values. Latinx kinship values stressed family, a direct challenge to the scholar who claimed that gay people of color had no families. Family transcended gender identity. Latinx kinship structures required that the younger generation financially support their elders, while also providing care and support for siblings. Latinx gay men had to uphold these traditions. These expectations shaped the Latina drag queens represented in the scholars' study. Since this study examines Latinx drag queens in Chicago during the late twentieth century, it can be assumed that Latinx ball culture members used Latinx kinship in similar ways. The most famous Latinx Houses in ball culture, the House of Xtravaganza, took these Latina family values and changed them to fit their lifestyle. The young gay men House Xtravaganza nurtured and bestowed care lived within the boundaries of Latina transgenerational culture. This included the expectations from the House mother that her "children" would win ball trophies and live safely. Since many participants in ball culture were estranged from their biological families because of their sexuality, House culture served as the basis for young queer runaways to find their new families.¹⁶

One historical study that examined drag balls was George Chauncey's monograph, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*. This monograph explored gay culture in New York City from 1890 to 1940. Most scholarship that specifically explored ball culture was outside the scholarly analyzed historical context. This thesis adds historical scholarship based on competition category themes (sexuality, race, wealth inequality), presented within the argument. Historizing the themes will allow for a better

¹⁶ Geraldo Wence-Munoz, Laura Tejada, Elaine Koffman, and Shede Tavakoli, "I'm a Good Girl, I'm a Good Brother': The Family Dynamics of Latina/o Drag Queens" ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, (Northeastern Illinois University, 2016); Marcia Carteret, "Cultural Values of Latina Patients and Families," *dimensionsofculture.com*, March 15, 2011.

historical understanding on how the categories served as a moment when a participant's fantasy became reality.

Race and queerness themes structured not only ball culture's historiography, but this thesis as well. The lack of scholarly discussion on ball culture's competition categories, the comparison between category themes to the participants' lives outside of the balls, and how categories became a moment where participants could express themselves will be filled in this thesis. During the 1980s, the LGBTQ+ community and racial minorities in New York City, struggled with daily pessimistic experiences. Ball culture participants were racial minorities part of the LGBTQ+ community. Unfortunately, the racial community and the LGBTQ+ community ball culture members belonged in, rejected them because of their sexuality and race. In 1981, understanding that they were excluded from both communities, participants created a vast array of categories to include anyone who wanted to be a part of the balls. Studying ball culture competition categories will bring the context needed to see just how far participants would go to include everyone in the balls. In addition to inclusion, ball culture competition categories created a moment for competitors to bask in the spotlight amongst their peers. During this "moment in the spotlight," competitors rejected 1980s gender norms and the notion that racial minorities in America could not succeed financially as white Americans did. Examining ball culture competition categories fills the void on how participants stayed optimistic during a time when American society did not accept them for who they were.

Definitions

Most key terms refer to queer men of color, and terms that do not refer to queer men of color will be stated as such in this section. Any time the word 'ball/s' appears, it specifically means ball culture competition balls, not drag balls. Gender, Houses, Realness, Identity, and

Categories are some key terms defined in this section. This section also breaks down the four-part gender system used in ball culture (femme queen, butch queen, butch, and women). Small terms are defined in parentheses beside the term. Common terms in the LGBTQ+ community defined in this section are not exclusive to ball culture nor queer men of color and will be referred to as a common term. It is also important to note that ball culture members were and have always been a part of the LGBTQ+ community because they were gay. The LGBTQ+ community was never exclusive to white gay men. However, not everyone in the LGBTQ+ community was a part of ball culture because they did not participate in the balls. Anytime a reference to the LGBTQ+ community occurs, it is written as a separate entity from ball culture, unless commented otherwise. This section's goal is to define terms and explore ball culture's complexity to give a better understanding.

What were Balls and Competition Categories?

Balls were exciting social competitions for gay men of color participating in ball culture. Participants walked (competed) in themed categories for trophies, prizes, and popularity amongst their peers. Competition categories organized the balls. These categories had themes participants would recreate, and whoever performed the best in a specific category won a trophy. After ball culture's creation in 1972 until 1981, competition categories played a minor role in the balls. In 1981, categories expanded so that participants could perform as more than just models. In the 1980s competition categories separated out into more specific categories. Doing this allowed participants of all backgrounds to feel included, the opposite of the exclusiveness found in 1980 United States society. In the United States, a person's race, sex, and sexuality meant a lot in their

everyday lives. If a person did not fit the exclusive role in American society (straight white male), then they had a harder time being accepted in their societal life.¹⁷

It is important to note that the balls post-1980s were no longer annual as the pre-1980s balls were. Balls in the 1980s occurred regularly within a year's time because a specific House sponsored each ball (this continued after the 1980s). The host House determined the competition categories, making consistency in the categories impossible over time. In this context, ball culture categories will be examined and organized around four main themes: race, queerness, wealth inequality, and identity. These themes were not broad categories used in ball culture, they were used instead to organize this thesis for a better structure and flow. Race was key to defining the LBGTQ+ racialized subculture that emerged in the 1970s. Ball culture broke off from the LBGTQ+ mainstream in 1971. Ball culture participants did this to contest the drag ball restrictions created within white gay culture. For example, Black participants whitened their faces so the white judges could perceive them as beautiful. The remaining three broad themes: queerness, wealth inequality, and identity were categorized consistently in ball culture during the last thirty years of the twentieth century. The categories listed below, featured in ball culture during the 1980s, and the categories continued to evolve into the twenty-first century. Ball culture broadly defined queerness in themed categories. These categories were: "Butch Queen (BQ) Realness", "Femme Queen (FQ) Realness", "Realness with a Twist", "Luscious Body", "Butch Queen First Time in Drag at a Ball", "Women's Vogue", and "First Time in Drag". Wealth inequality was categorized as: "High Fashion Winter Sportswear", "Town and Country", "Executive Realness", "Military Theme", "Labels", "High Fashion Model Parisian", and "High

¹⁷ Tim Lawrence, "An interview with Kevin Omni," in "Listen, and You Will Hear all the Houses that Walked There Before': A History of Drag Balls, Houses and the Culture of Voguing," in *Voguing and the Gay Ballroom Scene of New York City, 1989-92*, Photographs by Chantal Regnault, (Soul Jazz, 2011); Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

Fashion Evening Wear”. Ball culture categorized identity utilizing 1980s markers: “Upcoming Pretty Girl”, “Schoolboy/Schoolgirl Realness”, “Banji Girl/Banji Boy Realness”, “Body”, “Face”, and “Sex Siren/Sexy Body”. Ball culture’s post-2010 era had similar categories as ball culture’s golden era. Of course, the times changed, and new generational members entered ball culture. These members created new rules and categories that caused some wealth inequality categories like “Dynasty” and “Town and Country” to fade out.¹⁸

Defining Gender, Sex, Sexuality, Transgender, Transexual, and Ball Culture’s Four-part Gender System

Before explaining ball culture’s gender categories and terms, it is important to note that these definitions do not necessarily describe a participant’s sexuality. Ball culture members believed that sexuality was not bound by mainstream society’s traditional norms. Ball culture stood by the philosophy that sex, gender, and sexuality were three separate entities. Sex was a term defined by mainstream culture at every person’s birth. Sex assignment was based on the sexual reproductive organs (female, male, other/intersex) a person had. Gender, along with the gender categories in ball culture, had two specific categories: gender identity and gender expression. Gender identity was a label everyone used to identify how a person felt about their own gender. Gender identity labels were separated into three categories. Female (woman), male (man), and other (gender/s). Gender expression was the outward physical gender label (feminine, masculine, other) expressed by mainstream observers. Sexuality was the personal sexual feelings, thoughts, attractions, and behaviors towards others. In all, it is important to note that no matter what gender category a person chose, the person’s sexuality could be different than how mainstream society viewed their sexuality. For example, a male-to-female trans-person sexually

¹⁸ Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

attracted to males would consider themselves heterosexual instead of homosexual, since they were a female internally although they were born as male.¹⁹

Transgenders or trans-people were individuals who identified with a gender different than the one assigned at birth by doctors. Femme queens and trans-people were similar when applied to ball culture since femme queens and trans-people always dressed as their opposite assigned sex. Trans-people did not need to be a ball culture participant to be trans. Femme queen was a category for members participating in ball culture to categorize gender and ball competitive categories. Femme queens considered themselves trans, but trans-people rarely thought themselves femme queens, especially since trans-people included both male to female and female to male transitions.²⁰

Transsexual was a term for individuals who had Gender Reassignment Surgery (GRS) to change the sexual organs they were born with, to a different gender. Participants in ball culture often considered GRS as they learned who they were as an individual. Regularly, the terms transsexual and trans-people were used interchangeably, which is incorrect. Trans-people still have the sexual organs they were born with while transsexuals do not. However, a trans-person could become a transsexual after having GRS. This thesis uses transsexual and trans-people as different terms, not umbrellaed together as one, because the two terms are not the same. Trans-people and transsexual definitions are important, because some participants in ball culture identified themselves in these two gender categories.²¹

¹⁹ “The Difference Between Gender, Sex, and Sexuality,” Reach Out Australia, accessed July 2, 2020, <https://au.reachout.com/articles/the-difference-between-gender-sex-and-sexuality>; “Sexuality Explained,” Better Health Channel, accessed June 22, 2020, <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/HealthyLiving/Sexuality-explained>.

²⁰ Marla Berg-Weger, *Social Work and Social Welfare: An Invitation* (London: Routledge, 2016), 229; Jonathan. D. Jackson, “The Social World of Voguing,” *Journal of the Anthropological Study of Human Movement* 12, no.2 (2002): 27; Bailey, *Butch Queens in Pumps*, 33-34.

²¹ Cydney Adams, “The Gender Identity Terms You Need to Know,” *CBS News*, March 24, 2017; Jackson, “The Social World of Voguing,” 27; Bailey, *Butch Queens in Pumps*, 33-34.

Ball culture had a fluid four-part gender system: butch queen, femme queen, butch, and women. The four-part gender system organized and categorized gender and ball competitive categories for participants. It is unknown when and who created the four-part gender system for ball culture, but this system continues into the present. There were also additional gender definitions that were not in the four-part system but are defined in this thesis. These terms were transgender, transsexual, and the male sex. Gender encompassed a wide range of issues important to gay people starting in the 1980s as Black and Latinx gay men sought to stretch masculinity and femininity boundaries. Participants also wanted to create an individualized identity both within the ball culture competition system and in their daily lives on New York City streets. Sex had several distinctive characteristics such as biological sex, sex based on social structure, and gender identity. This thesis uses gender identity to define each gender featured because each term identified how a person felt within ball culture about their own gender.²²

Butch queens (BQ) was a gender featured in the four-part gender system. Butch queens were men who dressed like women only for the balls. Outside the balls, butch queens dressed and behaved similarly to normal urban mainstream American men. The butch queen identity category was more commonly known as drag queens. The most popular identifiers amongst ball culture participants was the butch queen gender category. This popularity occurred because many participants wanted to dress similarly to women, but only wanted to do so during ball culture competition balls. To participate as a butch queen in the balls, members had to dress like a woman with exaggerated features. Dressing with exaggerated features meant that their hair, makeup, chest, hips, and bottom was femininely exaggerated. When a butch queen walked

²² My interpretation of defining the word “gender” comes from: *Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gender>, s.v. “Gender.”; Jackson, “The Social World of Voguing,”²⁷; Bailey, *Butch Queens in Pumps*, 33-34.

(competed) in a themed category, they were not trying to look like an authentic female as femme queens were. Instead, exaggerated female features allowed butch queen participants to express themselves, creating another avenue for individualism.²³

Femme queens (FQ) – the second most popular identity category in ball culture – were male to female transgender people who dressed as a woman, even outside the balls. Femme queens fixed their features to look like an authentic female regardless of race. These queens perfected concealing their male features to impress the ball judges to win a trophy in the category they were competing. Femme queens had to be perfect with their concealment since they also dressed as a woman outside of the balls. The American public would not scrutinize them for dressing outside of their assigned gender in public, if the public had no idea that there was a femme queen amongst them. It would be a generalization to say that all trans-people lived with this objective in mind, so this idea within this thesis will only relate to femme queens.²⁴

The last two gender categories for the four-part gender system were butch and women. Butches were female to male transgenders who dressed like men in and outside the balls. Women rarely participated in balls, only participating if their gay male friend attended and participated as well. Since there were female participants in the balls at times, there needed to be an identity category for them as well. The women's gender were gay and straight women who dressed feminine or masculine to compete in balls. The butch and women's gender categories for ball culture were not as common as butch queen and femme queen, since those categories centered around ball culture participants: gay men and male to female trans-people.²⁵

²³ Jackson, "The Social World of Voguing," 27; Bailey, *Butch Queens in Pumps*, 33-34.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Julianne Shepherd, "A Bitch I Have to Know," *Spin.com*, May 6, 2013; Jackson, "The Social World of Voguing," 27; Bailey, *Butch Queens in Pumps*, 33-34.

During a ball competition, “men” as a gender category described gay men who did not dress as a woman. These participants competed solely in categories that required contestants to compete in men’s attire. It was unknown if participants who labeled themselves as a man, cross-dressed. There were no examples of participants walking in “men’s” gendered competition categories, to then walk in the butch queen gendered competition categories later in the same ball, have been found.²⁶

Each gender existed within ball culture and had its own competition categories. For example, femme queens could only walk in femme queen categories, and butch queens could only walk (compete) in butch queen categories. This gender boundary was not created as an exclusion method. Instead, the boundaries created by the older participants allowed the gendered competition categories to stay consistent, so that femme queens and butch queen participated in their gendered categories. It is important to note that this boundary applied only to the gender themed categories. Most wealth inequality and race themed categories were not bound to the four-part gender system so anyone regardless of gender could compete. In the mid-1980s, there were hundreds of categories, so many that the balls often lasted until three or four in the morning. Participants had to run home in drag to beat the sunrise in hopes that the mainstream anti-gay populace would not notice. There was a category for everything, and anybody could win. The idea that any participant could win was a goal held by many Black and Latinx gay men. Racial discrimination against Black and Latinx gay men usually excluded them from winning drag balls between 1900-1960. Having the expanded categories allowed a non-discriminatory

²⁶ My interpretation of the term “men” comes from: Livingston, *Paris is Burning*; Jackson, “The Social World of Voguing,” 27; Bailey, *Butch Queens in Pumps*, 33-34.

space filled with people who could not be themselves once the balls were over and it was time to go back into the outside world.²⁷

Ball Culture's Philosophy and Defining Realness

Ball culture philosophy focused primarily on individualism, expression, and identity throughout its golden age. Individualism was the result of a person learning and discovering their interests, without following the interests of the mainstream societal structure. During the latter half of ball culture's golden age (1989-1993), photographer Chantal Regnault captured participants expressing their individualism. In one photograph, featured below, there were three participants posing for the camera each dressed in various exotic costumes. Another photograph, featured below, showed a participant using lampshade bones for high fashion hat wear. Competition categories allowed ball culture participants to embrace who they were.²⁸

Realness was an idea and practice that ball culture members used from the 1980s to the present. Realness identified a participant who looked "straight" or a mainstream normative male or female. Members attempted to resemble either a real woman or a straight man. Participants used realness for two reasons. First, the competition categories were extremely competitive, and members had to look "the part" or else they would be called out by other participants, judges, and/or the audience. The second reason was for safety. While realness became a ball category, it was more; a methodology for convincing the public that the contestant successfully presented an identity that masked their birth identity. Ball participants were not trying to fool the judges or the spectators but instead competed to perfect "realness" as a public performance without the fatal mainstream hazing's that threatened gay men on New York City streets. Realness was a form of

²⁷ Bailey, "Endangering Space," 492-93.

²⁸ Chantal Regnault, *Voguing and the Gay Ballroom Scene of New York City, 1989-92* (New York City, NY: Soul Jazz, 2011); Andy Thomas, "Voguing and the House Ballroom Scene of New York City 1989-92," *The Quietus*, February 15, 2012.

gender passing. After the balls were over, participants had to leave the safe space of the balls and enter the hostile outside world. Realness allowed participants to walk freely without the “untrained eye” noticing that they were a trans-person or a gay man.²⁹

Defining Ball Culture Houses

Ball culture had another safe space away from the balls known as Houses. “A House is like a gay street gang, they fight by competing and winning at a ball,” Dorian Corey, a legendary queen within ball culture explained in 1986. “This is like a new meaning of family. Hippies had families, and nobody asked any questions about their families. So, these are our families.” Most Houses were a combination of a social family and a dance troupe to walk (compete) in balls. A House consisted of a ‘mother’, a ‘father’, and ‘children’, all participated in the balls. The children considered each other as ‘brothers’ or ‘sisters’ depending on whether an individual identified themselves as a male or female. New members joined as young as fifteen and no older than twenty-five. Invitations to join a House usually came after the participant had snatched (won) a trophy, or in Venus Xtravaganza’s case, the father and founder of the House of Xtravaganza, Hector Valle, took a liking to her, so she automatically joined the House without having to ‘snatch’ a trophy.³⁰

The House mother usually behaved as if they were the “true mother” of their children, even though they were not. Marlon Bailey, a gender studies scholar, has explained House parenting as follows: “House parents recruit, socialize, and prepare their protégés to compete successfully in performative identity and performance categories.” Angie Xtravaganza, legendary queen and the 1986 “mother of the year”, explained what it was like to be a House mother, “When there is a ball, I am always doing something for everybody in my house. I do that

²⁹ Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

³⁰ Jackson, "The Social World of Voguing," 27; Livingston, *Paris is Burning*; Bailey, “Endangering Space,” 492.

one's hair, the other one's makeup. You know, choose their shoes, their accessories ... and always offer advice on what I know." Bailey, a ball culture member in the early 2000s, defined House mothers as coaches. Angie Xtravaganza, an actual House mother, described the House mother differently: as not only a coach but a true mother to young gay boys who did not have anyone to look up to. House mothers gave guidance on life that their children's biological mother and father were supposed to provide but did not.³¹

Houses that won many ball trophies were well respected and legendary. The House of Xtravaganza, House of LaBeija, House of Aviance, House of Prestige, House of Saint Laurent, House of Princess, House of Pendavis, and House of Infiniti, each earned public notoriety both locally and nationally. Some Houses were named after queens whose reputations earned them the "legendary" title during ball culture's early days. The House of Ninja for example was created in 1982 and named after Willi Ninja, a legendary ball queen, while other Houses were named after famous luxury fashion houses and designers popular in mainstream culture.³²

House members usually adopted their House name as their own surname in real life. House creators fashioned the surname, and new members could adopt the name if they wanted. That was the case for legendary queen Pepper LaBeija. Pepper LaBeija was not the House of LaBeija's founder. By the late 1970s, Pepper LaBeija had become a legendary drag queen, and by 1982 the mother of House LaBeija. LaBeija said memorably in "Paris is Burning," "I'm not the founder, Crystal (LaBeija) was the founder. I just rule it now." Some Houses formed because the founding members were friends from a similar place. For example, the House of Christian's first members all attended Catholic schools in New York City. During the 1980s, new Houses popped up in large cities throughout the United States, and members recruited anywhere they

³¹ Bailey, "Endangering Space," 493; Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

³² Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

traveled. Recruiting happened to expand the membership in numbers at a time when AIDS tore through the LGBTQ+ community. Today, there are 8,000 ball culture members in differing Houses, showing that the AIDS epidemic did not decimate the subculture that became ball culture.³³

What is Voguing?

Voguing was a ball culture dance style inspired by Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphs and the models that appeared in the trendy fashion magazine, Vogue. Music, attitude, and arrogance were key characteristics of voguing, especially while competing in a ball. Ball culture participants who walked in the voguing competition categories usually competed at the same time as others and whoever performed the best snatched (won) the trophy. Participants used femininity to their advantage to win a trophy. While performing, they pretended to apply makeup, style their hair, and put on clothing as they danced in a staccato fashion. Voguing in ball culture often involved throwing shade (insulting) at the other contestants to impress the judges and audience.³⁴

In 1981, Paris Dupree vogued for the first time at a ball, creating the false narrative that she created voguing. David DePino, an influential disc jockey (DJ) for ball culture and the voguing community, believed that Dupree invented voguing and claimed he saw the first instance of it himself at a ball in 1981. He remembered how during a ball competition; Dupree walked (competed) in a category with a Vogue magazine in her hand. As she walked, insults were heard from the audience. In retaliation, she opened the magazine to a page where a model posed and stopped in that pose right on beat. Then, she flipped to another page with a different model and switched to that pose, again right on beat. DePino then described how another queen

³³ Bailey, "Endangering Space," 493; Livingston, *Paris is Burning*; Jackson, "The Social World of Voguing," 27.

³⁴ Lawrence, "A History of Drag Balls,"; Livingston, *Paris is Burning*; Jackson, "The Social World of Voguing," 26.

approached Dupree and did a pose, to which Dupree responded with another pose. “This was all shade (insults) – they were trying to make prettier poses than each other –” DePino explained.³⁵

Dupree did not create voguing. Instead, she pioneered the dance style by popularizing the staccato movements that voguing became known for. At the ball, when the house dance music started by the disc jockey, Dupree began her walk (dance). When she hit a pose, she did so on beat, stopping for the audience to see. Doing these movements showed the audience her ball attitude and arrogance, attributes praised in voguing. Voguing quickly caught on amongst the other participants during 1981. Kevin Omni, the House of Omni founder and father, debunked the theory that Dupree invented voguing, but he was not sure who the voguing founders were:

Maybe they [Jail Queens] didn’t have a name for it, but that’s what they were doing, or so it’s said... I know Paris was an early pioneer of voguing. But I believe that vogue existed in some other form through other people as well. I also think that a lot of voguing poses come from African art and Egyptian hieroglyphics.³⁶

Voguing originated with the “Jail Queens” (gay Black and Latinx inmates) imprisoned in New York City’s prison facility on Rikers Island in the 1970s. Throughout the 1970s ball culture participants imported voguing from Rikers Island to Harlem balls.³⁷

Three styles or formats defined voguing: The Old Way (pre-1990), the New Way (post-1990), and the Vogue Fem (c. 1995). The Old Way was static with balletic poses transitioning from one to another. The New Way incorporated the Old Way with athleticism added. Willi Ninja mastered the New Way in the early 1990s making it the first popularized voguing version within the American mainstream. Vogue Fem, after 1995, included ultra-feminine choreography

³⁵ Lawrence, “An interview with David DePino,” in “A History of Drag Balls,”.

³⁶ Lawrence, “An interview with Kevin Omni,”.

³⁷ Lori Ortiz, *Disco Dance* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood Publishing Company, 2011), 105; Lawrence, “A History of Drag Balls,”.

involving intricate posturing, hair whips, and death drops dramatically falling backward for a pose on the ground. Death drops were also an exciting way to end the dance.³⁸

Mopping, Drag Queens, and Female Impersonators

Mopping, another extensively used ball culture term during the 1980s, literally meant, stealing. Ball culturalist, Freddie Pendavis' comments in "Paris is Burning" provided the literal definition that he mopped at "Roy Rogers" fast food restaurant. Pendavis fed himself by stealing "Roy Rogers" patron orders. He then begged Roy Rogers not to change the way their lines worked after the interview aired because then he would not be able to steal the food anymore. Pendavis also made a point noting gay men did not mop for fun. Needing to feed and dress themselves with no money resulted in members mopping. Older ball culture members, usually in their 20s, resorted to mopping because their economic situation and living space in the New York City's depressed neighborhoods prohibited them from surviving in capitalist America.³⁹

"Drag Queen" and "female impersonator" had similar definitions during the first half of the twentieth century. The two terms were quite different and defined with no racialized distinction. A drag queen, in its simplest definition, was a gay man dressed as a woman with exaggerated features. Famous drag queen RuPaul tweeted, "I do not impersonate females! How many women do you know who wear seven-inch heels, four-foot wigs, and skintight dresses?" (@RuPaulsDragRace, June 3, 2013). A female impersonator was an actor who dressed as a woman, regardless of their sexuality in movies, plays, and television shows.⁴⁰

³⁸ Mark Lindores, "A Brief History of Voguing," *Mixmag.net*, October 10, 2018; Lawrence, "A History of Drag Balls,"; Livingston, *Paris is Burning*; Jackson, "The Social World of Voguing," 26.

³⁹ Livingston, *Paris is Burning*; Les Fabian Brathwaite, "The Ultimate 'Paris is Burning' Viewing Guide," *Out.com* February 1, 2017.

⁴⁰ Stephen L. Mann, "Drag Queens' Use of Language and the Performance of Blurred Gendered and Racial Identities," *Journal of Homosexuality* 58:6-7 (July 8, 2011): 793-94; Dana Berkowitz and Linda Liska Belgrave, "'She Works Hard for the Money': Drag Queens and the Management of Their Contradictory Status of Celebrity and Marginality," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 39(2) (2010): 163-64; RuPaul's Drag Race

These terms create a base for understanding ball culture's complexity. Remembering these key terms are important to comprehend why ball culture participants' experiences of homo/transphobia were incorporated into the competition categories during ball culture's golden age of the 1980s and why ball culture had racial and wealth-based categories while also highlighting New York City's history of racism.

Along with terms, biographies on ball culture's pioneers and innovators during ball culture's golden age will create a better understanding of what ball culture was. These short biographies serve three purposes: where these legendary queens came from, what they did for ball culture during their lives, and how/when they died. Without these ball culture queens the New York City circuit would not be as popular in today's mainstream American culture.

Biographies

The short biographies within this section will provide an understanding of 1980s and 1990s ball culture pioneers and innovators. Crystal LaBeija (d. 1982) (credited founder of ball culture and the House of LaBeija) would have a biography in this section. Unfortunately, the only information known about her comes from other legendary ball culture members. Other than the fact that she was a well-known drag queen and that she created ball culture (discussed later in the chapter) there is no information on her. The biographies listed follow no particular order because each individual is equally important to this thesis.

Pepper LaBeija (November 5, 1948 – May 14, 2003) was a drag queen known as “the last remaining queen of the Harlem drag balls” at the time of her passing. This title declared that an era in ball culture, the 1980s and 1990s Harlem drag balls, had ended. She was born in the Bronx, New York City and died in Manhattan, spending her entire life in New York City. In

(@RuPaulsDragRace), “Quoted Tweet,” Twitter Post, June 3, 2013, <https://twitter.com/rupaulsdragrace/status/341638123953995776?lang=en>.

1982, she became the House mother for the House of LaBeija and remained in the position for over 20 years. Although she often dressed as a man, she preferred feminine pronouns (she/her). She was known as “the last remaining queen of the Harlem drag balls” because many queens and/or participants died during the AIDS epidemic (1981-1997).⁴¹

Dorian Corey (c. 1937 – August 29, 1993) was a transwoman who had a clothing business using the moniker, “Corey Design”. She was also a drag queen that appeared in “Paris is Burning”. Born in Buffalo, New York, she moved to New York City in the 1950s to study art at Parson School of Design. Known as a legendary ball culture queen Corey in 1972 founded the House of Corey. She won over fifty grand prizes at competition balls in her lifetime. She was known for her many famous quotes recorded in “Paris is Burning”, and for having a mummy in her closet found after her death. She passed away at age 56 due to AIDS complications.⁴²

Willi Ninja (April 12, 1961 – September 2, 2006) was an American dancer, choreographer, and one of the most legendary queens in ball culture. He was born in New Hyde Park, New York with a mixed-race ancestry. He had a Black mother and claimed Irish, Cherokee, and Asian ancestry within his family. Ninja taught himself how to dance as a child, and although he did not create voguing, he was known as the “King of Vogue” or the “Godfather of Vogue”. Even though Ninja had never been a member of a House nor had he won three grand prizes (top prize in competition), he created the House of Ninja (HoN) in 1982, with Sandy Apollonia Ninja, another ball culture member who had once been a part of the House of LaBeija. Being previously part of a House and winning three grand prizes were the general requirements to start a House. During the 1980s, HoN gained a reputation of being multiracial (including

⁴¹ Simon Doonan, “Pater is Burning! Rad Dads in Drag,” *Observer*, June 16, 2003.

⁴² “Dorian Corey is Dead, A Drag Film Star, 56,” *Obituaries NYTimes.com*, August 31, 1993; Michael Cunningham, “Slap of Love,” *Open City*, 1995; Jeannie Russell Kasindorf, [“The Drag Queen Had a Mummy In Her Closet.”](#) *New York Magazine*, Vol. 27 no. 18., May 2, 1994, 55.

white gay men) at a time when most Houses were Black apart from the Latinx House of Xtravaganza. After “Paris is Burning” released in 1991, he gained notoriety outside of ball culture, and was featured in music videos such as “Deep in Vogue” by Malcolm McLaren (1989), “Alright” by Janet Jackson (1990), and “I Can’t Get No Sleep” by Masters At Work featuring India (1993). He choreographed music videos, gave Naomi Campbell and Paris Hilton pointers on how to walk the runway, and appeared on “America’s Next Top Model” and “Jimmy Kimmel Live!” In 2006, he succumbed to AIDS-related heart failure at the age of 45.⁴³

Another voguing innovator, Paris Dupree (c. 1950 – August 2011) was a butch/drag queen primarily known for featuring and hosting the ball in “Paris is Burning”. She founded the legendary House of Dupree in 1978 and served as the House’s mother. It is unknown when she stopped serving as the House of Dupree mother. She held her first “Paris is Burning” ball in 1981. Kevin Omni remembered Dupree’s first hosted ball as, “the first time the categories were really there.” As explained in the definition section, there was a belief that she invented voguing. Although she did not invent voguing, Dupree was a pioneer. In 1981, she also expanded ball culture’s competition categories so that the balls could be more inclusive. Dupree passed in 2011 in New York City. The cause of death was unknown.⁴⁴

Angie Xtravaganza (October 17, 1964 – March 31, 1993) was a transwoman, a founding member of the House of Xtravaganza, and House mother (1982-93). She was born in New York

⁴³ Lola Ogunnaike, “Willi Ninja, 45, Self-Created Star Who Made Voguing Into an Art, Dies,” *NYTimes.com*, September 6, 2006; Andrew Ross, Tricia Rose, *Microphone Friends: Youth Music & Youth Culture* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994), 163–75; Tricia Romano, “Eulogies of Fabulousness,” *The Village Voice*, September 5, 2006; Lawrence, “A History of Drag Balls,”; Anna Herrera, “Willi Ninja: Voguing Butch Queen,” *OutHistory.org*, November 20, 2018; Malcolm McLaren, “Deep in Vogue” (song), track #3 on *Waltz Darling*, Epic, 1989; Masters At Work “I Can’t Ger No Sleep (ft. India)” (song), 1993; Janet Jackson, “Alright” (song), track #2 on *Rhythm Nation 1814*, A&M, 1990.

⁴⁴ Viktor Kerney, “Legendary Paris Dupree Has Passed On,” *Bilerico Report on LGBTQ Nation*, August 26, 2011; Angela Helm, “Gay History is Black History: These 10 Icons Prove It,” *TheRoot*, June 29, 2019; Lawrence, “A History of Drag Balls,”.

City, and died at age 28 from AIDS-related liver disease. Danny Xtravaganza (July 14, 1961 – January 1996) was another House of Xtravaganza founding member and recorded the popular song “Love the Life You Live” (1990), to remember his friends who had died of AIDS.

Unfortunately, he also passed away from AIDS-related complications in 1996 at age 34.⁴⁵

Venus Xtravaganza (May 22, 1965 – December 21, 1988) was a trans woman who gained attention after appearing in “Paris is Burning” in 1986. Xtravaganza was born Thomas Pellegati in Jersey City, New Jersey. She began cross-dressing and performing publicly at age 14 in 1978-1979. Venus Xtravaganza moved to New York City hoping not to embarrass her family when they learned about her performances and cross-dressing. In 1983, she started competing in balls and worked as a sex worker putting her life in danger when she met potential customers who did not know her sexuality. In December 1988, detectives found Xtravaganza strangled and stuffed under a mattress at the Duchess Hotel in New York City; her murder remains unsolved. She was only 23.⁴⁶

Octavia St. Laurent (March 16, 1964 – May 17, 2009) was a trans woman and AIDS educator featured in “Paris is Burning”, born in Brooklyn, New York. She started walking in balls in 1982. “I want a normal, happy life... whether it is being married and adopting children or being famous and rich,” Octavia St. Laurent was quoted, lying in her bed, smoking a cigarette. She worked hard pursuing her dreams of being an actress, but only had one small role in “The Saint of Fort Washington” where she played a sex worker. She booked a few modeling jobs,

⁴⁵ Cunningham, “Slap of Love,”; Green, “Paris Has Burned,”; Danny Xtravaganza “Love the Life You Live” (song), 1990; Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

⁴⁶ Rebecca Schiller, “Venus Xtravaganza’s Nephew on Her Legacy: ‘She Never Envisioned Herself Becoming a Transgender Martyr’,” *Billboard*, June 25, 2018; Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

although it is unknown which modeling agency, if any, she modeled for. She passed away from cancer at age 45.⁴⁷

Although the lives of these legendary queens did not exceed sixty-one years of age, they lived to the fullest even when their reality brought nothing but darkness, homelessness, disease, and violence. Each queen touched ball culture in their own way, making themselves and ball culture's golden age (1981-1993), memorable. Researching ball culture brought repeated topics such as definitions, voguing, and the legendary queens interviewed in "Paris is Burning." LaBeija, Xtravaganza, Corey, St. Laurent, and Dupree were influential ball figures who elevated ball culture to the eccentric and breathtaking event recorded in "Paris is Burning." If it was not for these brilliant queens, ball culture's New York City circuit would not exist within mainstream American culture, as it does today.⁴⁸

Conclusion

The examination of ball culture's themes, historiography, definitions, and short biographies are important when understanding how competition categories served as an outlet for participants to display their race and queerness. Scholarly discussion on ball culture's competition categories and its relation to race and queerness; and competition categories compared to the participants' lives outside of the balls, have been absent. Highlighting key terms and philosophies used during ball culture's golden age help separate ball culture from the LGBTQ+ community. Gender, Houses, Realness, Identity, and Categories were key terms defined and explored to give a better understanding of ball culture's complexity. Short biographies on ball culture's pioneers and innovators and how each queen touched ball culture in

⁴⁷ Petter Wallenburg, "Octavia St. Laurent's Last Interview" *dazeddigital.com*, November 20, 2014; Livingston, *Paris is Burning*; *Saint of Fort Washington*, Directed by Tim Hunter (Burbank, CA: Warner Bros., 1993).

⁴⁸ Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

their own way brings a better understanding on who made ball culture's golden age, memorable. Without these ball culture queens the New York City circuit would not be as popular in today's mainstream American culture. This thesis fills the discussion on competition categories by exploring ball culture and how the competition categories were opposite from participant's lives outside the ball, creating a fantasy versus reality enigma.

CHAPTER 2: “THE STRANGEST AND GAUDIEST OF ALL HARLEM SPECTACLES”: BALL CULTURE’S HISTORY

Introduction

Ball culture has a complex history. Originally, Black drag queens participated in integrated balls hosted and judged by white drag queens. Evidence shows that since the 1930s, Black drag queens were upset with the “conspiracy” that the balls were easier for white drag queens to win because the host and judges were white. The Stonewall Riots inspired the LGBTQ+ community to fight for social justice. The riots became a flashpoint in history for Black/Latinx trans-people and homosexuals who organized and led the riots. Two years after the Stonewall Riots, Black drag queens continued to face racial discrimination from their white peers. In response, to the racism Black/Latinx drag queens decided to create their own space for people of color. After ball culture’s creation in 1971, the subculture slowly evolved into becoming more inclusive for Black/Latinx LGBTQ+ members. In 1981, the competition categories expanded, allowing anyone who wanted to participate in the ball the opportunity to do so. This historical timeline covers the early 20th century racially integrated balls, the racial divide between Black and white drag queens that led to the creation of ball culture, the Stonewall Riots impact on ball culture’s creation, and the evolution to expanded competition categories in 1981.

Timeline

The Early Days of Drag Balls

Drag balls were not a new phenomenon at the beginning of the twentieth century. Drag balls originated in Europe in the mid-seventeenth century. The earliest recorded drag balls came from the Portuguese Inquisition papers that documented large, organized parties in Lisbon, Portugal (“Gaia Lisboa” or gay Lisbon) called “escarramao.” Documenting drag balls has been

difficult and rare. As a result, the “escarramao” may or may not have been the first drag ball. By the end of the seventeenth century in London, England, a completely developed white gay subculture emerged that served as the foundation for the gay subculture in the United States.⁴⁹

In the United States before the 1880s, drag balls were simple events where men dressed as women and women dressed as men and danced through the night. The balls consisted of heterosexuals and undisclosed homosexuals. By the 1880s, more exclusive balls for homosexuals began to appear. The sex-swapping costumes continued, but when the music played, the couples who danced together were the same sex. Balls in the 1920s changed into a heavily populated and competitive event. These balls became large scale socials in the homosexual world, so much so that heterosexuals and homosexuals looked forward to the ball.⁵⁰

Drag Balls during the Harlem Renaissance

The Harlem Renaissance (1920-1935) transformed the drag balls. Several Harlem Renaissance leaders such as, Claude McKay, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, and Wallace Thurman, were openly gay or identified with a differing sexuality. The Renaissance, an intellectual, cultural, and artistic movement, brought a flurry of Black cultural creativity focused on Black American life. These influences distinctly shaped the Black LGBTQ+ culture in Harlem, demonstrating that race, gender, sex, and sexual dissimilarities intersected.⁵¹

As drag balls became more popular throughout the 1920s and because of American segregation, the Black LGBTQ+ community began to host balls in Harlem, New York. During

⁴⁹ Linda Rapp, “Portugal” *gbtq: An Encyclopedia of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Culture*, May 10, 2010, 1-5.

⁵⁰ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (NY: Hachette Book Group, 2008), 291-99.

⁵¹ Sexual identity means that no matter the gender category a person chooses, their sexuality could be completely different than how mainstream society viewed sexuality (see page 16 and 17 for more detail). Tsione Wolde-Michael, “A People’s Journey: A Brief History of Voguing,” *Smithsonian: National Museum of African American History and Culture*, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/brief-history-voguing>.

the Harlem Renaissance, white New Yorkers were fascinated by the cultural and intellectual explosion and attended the balls hosted by the Black community. As the number of white spectators grew, so did the white participants, integrating the balls. In his essay “Spectacles of Colors,” Langston Hughes described his experience at a drag ball during the Harlem Renaissance:

Strangest and gaudiest of all Harlem spectacles in the '20s, and still the strangest and gaudiest, is the annual Hamilton Club Lodge Ball at Rockland Palace Casino. I once attended as a guest of A'Lelia Walker. It is the ball where men dress as women and women dress as men. During the height of the New Negro era and the tourist invasion of Harlem, it was fashionable for the intelligentsia and social leaders of both Harlem and the downtown area to occupy boxes at this ball and look down from above at the queerly assorted throng on the dancing floor, males in flowing gowns and feathered headdresses and females in tuxedos and box-back suits.⁵²

Langston Hughes' experience was fascinating for two reasons. First, he did not specify the race of the competitors or the spectators in a time when the United States separated itself socially by race. The presumption was that he was referring to Black competitors and spectators, but integrated balls existed in New York City during the Harlem Renaissance. He attended the Harlem ball with A'Lelia Walker, a Black female socialite during the 1920s and Madame C.J. Walker's daughter. A'Lelia Walker was an art patron, the host of extravagant parties, and someone who was heavily involved with the literary and music greats of the Harlem Renaissance such as Langston Hughes. Although it is unknown if she was a lesbian or bisexual, she did have her parties at her two homes that created a safe space for queer people, regardless of race. These safe spaces were used for queer people to express their sexuality at a time when there were few social options available for free sexual expression. Second, Hughes' mentioned female cross dressers in their “tuxedos and box-back suits”. Drag balls in the early twentieth century were not

⁵² Langston Hughes, *Autobiography: The Big Sea*, Volume 13 (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 208.

exclusive to white males. Although New York City had integrated balls during the Harlem Renaissance, it did not mean that racism within the balls did not exist. Racism played a part in the balls because white participants ignored the participants of color, and Black efforts to please the judges. White participants usually won the trophies, offending the participants of color. Despite integrated early twentieth century balls, it is unclear whether there were any single race balls held in New York City.⁵³

Racial Rifts at the Balls

During the first half of the twentieth century, Black queens attended integrated drag balls. Bonnie Clark, a Black participant who won a grand prize in 1931 and 1932, told the Harlem press in 1933 that, “there is a conspiracy afoot,” and that “they [the competitions] are always arranged for the white girls to win. They never had no Negro judges.” Clark’s assumption of a conspiracy became the reason Black queens created ball culture two generations later. White gay culture dominated the balls and controlled who won. The expectation was that Black queens had to whiten their faces for the white judges’ consideration to win a trophy. “It was our goal to look like white women,” Pepper LaBeija, a legendary queen, recalled in a 1986 interview explaining how the balls were for her in the 1960s: “They used to tell me, ‘You have negroid features.’ ... That’s how it was back then.”⁵⁴

The white drag queens, who served as judges and participants, created a toxic environment for the Black drag queens. Black contestants were forced to make choices they did not want, suggesting that they mask their identity. Judges insulted Black participants by noting their ‘negroid features’ compounding the disparity by demanding that Black contestants present

⁵³ Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 208; Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 291-99; Hugu Ryan, “Remembering A’lelia Walker, Who Made a Ritzy Space for Harlem’s Queer Black Artists,” *NPR.org*, September 22, 2015.

⁵⁴ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 263; Michael Cunningham, “Slap of Love,” *Open City*, 1995; Jennie Livingston, *Paris is Burning* Directed by Jennie Livingston (New York: Off White Productions, 1991) video.

themselves as white women. These conflicting standards, Blacks judged as racially unfair, especially when white drag queens did not dress to emulate well-known beautiful Black women such as Lena Horne. Although it is unknown how Black queens whitened their skin. LaBeija claimed that she responded to the prejudices by saying that it was all right, her eyes were white. Dorian Corey, another legendary Black queen, remembered when she was younger, everyone wanted to look like Betty Grable, Marilyn Monroe, or Audrey Hepburn. There was no ambiguity in the examples of how ball culture participants used these Classical Hollywood Era actresses as costume templates when competing in a ball. The participants simply wanted to emulate beautiful women, and 1960s mainstream American culture considered those white actresses as beautiful.⁵⁵

In the 1968 documentary “The Queen”, Crystal LaBeija, a Black drag queen, accused the host of rigging the ball for a white queen and even disputed the judges and organizers. While arguing, she told the other queens: “I didn’t say she’s not beautiful, but she wasn’t looking beautiful *tonight*. She doesn’t equal me – look at her makeup; it’s terrible!” Not only did LaBeija call out the winner, a white contestant named Rachel Harlow, for not looking as pretty, she also told the other competing queens openly that Harlow did not *equal* her, meaning Harlow’s outfit, make up, and overall drag set was not up to par with LaBeija’s, so LaBeija did not understand why Harlow won over her. LaBeija’s accusation bared similarities to the “conspiracy” Clark complained of during the 1930s.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Cunningham, “Slap of Love,”; Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

⁵⁶ Frank Simon, *The Queen*, 1968; Tim Lawrence, “Listen, and You Will Hear all the Houses that Walked There Before’: A History of Drag Balls, Houses and the Culture of Voguing,” in *Voguing and the Gay Ballroom Scene of New York City, 1989-92*, Photographs by Chantal Regnault, (New York City, NY: Soul Jazz, 2011); Jeffrey J. Iovannone, “Crystal LaBeija: Legendary House Mother,” *Medium.com*, June 29, 2018.

Crystal LaBeija and another drag queen named Lottie decided to host their own ball for Black queens in 1972. The ball was entitled, “Crystal & Lottie LaBeija presents the first annual House of LaBeija Ball at Up the Downstairs Case on West 115th Street & 5th Avenue in Harlem, NY”. She was credited for starting ball culture, a subculture that differed from drag balls. The balls quickly moved from New York City to major cities all over the United States. Michael Cunningham, a journalist, saw the creation of Houses as a public relations gimmick that pushed Crystal LaBeija to legendary status within ball culture, during the 1970s. The House culture caught on amongst ball participants throughout the 1970s, and by 1981 when the competition categories expanded, a House hosted every ball.⁵⁷

Stonewall Riots

The Stonewall Riots were a turning point in LGBTQ+ history that led to the gay liberation movement in the 1970s. The Stonewall Riots occurred between June 28th - July 3rd, 1969, at a time when New York City, and other cities across the United States, criminalized homosexuality. The riots took place at the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village, a neighborhood with a multi-racial gay population in Manhattan, New York City. The Inn was popular amongst the gay Black/Latinx community; however, the Stonewall Riots are remembered as a white gay demonstration. The media coverage’s erasure of Black and Latinx trans-people who organized the protests – which turned into riots – created this common misconception that the leaders were white gay men. Black and Latinx LGBTQ+ activists such as Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera,

⁵⁷ Cunningham, “Slap of Love,”; Livingston, *Paris is Burning*; Iovannone, “Crystal LaBeija,”; Courtney Delong, “BLACK DRAG QUEENS INVENTED CAMP: THE POLITICAL AND AESTHETIC EFFECTS OF BLACK DRAG CULTURE,” *crfashionbook.com*, June 10, 2020.

lead the Stonewall Riots against the continuous systemic abuse the LGBTQ+ community faced at the hands of New York's law enforcement.⁵⁸

The riots involved two parties, the Stonewall Inn patrons (of various races) and the New York Police Department (NYPD). The Stonewall Inn was a well-known gathering space for the LGBTQ+ community. On June 28th, 1969, the NYPD raided the Stonewall Inn, a regular occurrence for the LGBTQ+ community in the 1960s. The raid did not go as planned for the NYPD. Stonewall Inn patrons refused to give officers their identification. Individuals who dressed as women, refused to go with a female officer to a restroom to identify their sex because they felt the search would breach their privacy. The officers arrested most of the Stonewall Inn patrons, but the patrol wagons had not arrived. So, the patrons under arrest had to wait outside for the transportation that would carry them to the police station, while the few patrons who were released from police custody watched. By the time the first wagon arrived, a large crowd had formed, but the crowd stayed silent and watched. When the people arrested refused to enter the wagons, violence ensued on both sides. The once quiet crowd became hostile when an officer forcefully restrained a trans-person. The police tried to restrain the crowd by pushing them back but ended up provoking the bystanders.⁵⁹

The riot's second night involved violence from both sides as well, but the LGBTQ+ community also demanded: "Legalize and support the gay community." This demand was directed at two separate groups. The word "support" was directed to average Americans. To

⁵⁸ Martin Duberman, *Stonewall: The Definitive Story of the LGBT Rights Uprising that Changed America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 183; David Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots that Sparked the Gay Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004), 15, 141-42, 151-52; Lucian K. Truscott IV, "The night they busted Stonewall: I was there when gay power came to Sheridan Square," *salon.com*, June 28, 2017; Gina Bellafante, "Who Owns Gay Street?" *The New York Times*, September 27, 2019.

⁵⁹ Don Teal, *The Gay Militants* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1971), 4, 17; Dudley Clendinen and Adam Nagourney, *Out For Good: The Struggle to Build a Gay Rights Movement in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 31; Duberman, *Stonewall*, 183; Carter, *Stonewall*, 15, 141-42, 151-52; Truscott IV, "The night they busted Stonewall,"; Bellafante, "Who Owns Gay Street?"

legalize homosexuality, the LGBTQ+ community needed the support from the heteronormative public. “Legalize” was directed toward politicians because they decided on the legalization of homosexuality. The second night’s message and violence brought a change within the LGBTQ+ community that queer people could fight for their rights and bring about social change.⁶⁰

When queer people of color fought against the police’s abuse during the Stonewall Riots it, “changed self-perceptions within the subculture: from feeling guilty and apologetic to feelings of self-acceptance and pride.” Before the Stonewall Riots, the LGBTQ+ community hid their sexuality from the public, feeling guilty and apologetic for being gay or trans. After the Stonewall Riot, many in the LGBTQ+ community openly expressed their sexuality, having pride in who they were as a person. Johnson’s desire to express herself stemmed from the systemic oppression she faced as a queer trans Black person. Johnson’s fight did not end with gay liberation, but also with Black and gender-queer liberation during the 1970s.⁶¹

This shift from a passive (hiding sexuality) to aggressive (publicly expressing sexuality) philosophy on fighting for civil rights within the LGBTQ+ community, matched Black drag queens who refused to allow sexual and racial discrimination not only from mainstream America, but from white LGBTQ+ members. Ball culture was created two years after the Stonewall Riots. Its creation allowed Black drag queens to express themselves without any racial constrictions. In ball culture’s early years, there were sexual constrictions for those who wanted to participate in certain categories. These constrictions influenced Paris Dupree to expand competition categories, thus creating ball culture’s golden age.

Ball Culture’s Evolution from its Creation to its Golden Age

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Delong, “BLACK DRAG QUEENS INVENTED CAMP,”; Carsten Balzer, “The Great Drag Queen Hype: Thoughts on Cultural Globalisation and Autochthony,” *Paideuma* 51 (2005): 114.

During the 1970s, participants replicated their physical looks and style to the classic Hollywood movie stars such as Elizabeth Taylor, Rita Hayworth, and Lauren Bacall because these women were known as traditionally beautiful “sex symbols”. Again, there was no ambiguity in how ball culture participants used the actresses as templates when competing in a ball. It mattered not that the actresses were from differing decades, because their outward beauty was considered as a single entity of classically beautiful American women. Due to America’s beauty standards from 1900 through the 1970s, white women were traditionally beautiful and the blueprint for others who were not white.⁶²

Competition categories in the 1970s were drag: queer men of color dressed as women in exaggerated ways. The category “Butch Mod Face” was the only category before 1981 where participants could dress as men. Winners were determined on how much they looked like the male models of the 1970s. Kevin Omni, founder of the House of Omni, described the “Butch Mod Face” category as: “you had to be butch, real masculine, not a punk or a sissy (flamboyant person), and you had to be a model with model’s looks, and you also had to have a nice-looking face.”⁶³

In the early 1980s, as the Houses flourished with members, so did the balls, inspiring each House to host its own ball. As more Houses hosted balls in the 1980s, a once yearly occasion became a monthly affair. Dupree hosted her first House ball for the House of Dupree in 1981. This ball was credited with being the first ball to list the types of categories participants would be competing, thus making Dupree the inventor of the competition categories. Kevin Omni recalled the category expansion as follows:

In the early 1980s, we separated the categories out, so there was a category called butch realness and another called models effect, and another called face. Then we created all

⁶² Cunningham, “Slap of Love,”; Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

⁶³ Lawrence, “A History of Drag Balls,”.

these other categories, like executive, town and country, ethnic, and they continued to develop through the eighties.⁶⁴

Omni outlined the evolution of categories in the 1980s. First, categories separated for gender purposes. As categories developed in the early 1980s, it ended the days of the old drag balls where men could only dress and compete as women and embraced the idea of more masculine alternative categories. Feminine categories did remain during the 1980s to today and evolved just as all the categories did as time went on. For example, the Women's Vogue category expectation changed yearly to mirror the female models featured in Vogue Magazine. American mainstream fashion changed constantly, so the judges did not want to see a contestant in "outdated" clothing.⁶⁵

The evolution of inclusion in ball culture happened because members understood how it felt to be excluded. The 1981 competition category expansion filled the void in ball culture, making the balls completely inclusive. Of course, in each category there were rules participants had to abide by, but the number of categories in the balls allowed participants to select ones they felt most comfortable in. Although this meant countless categories per ball, members were pleased with the idea that anyone and everyone could participate.

Conclusion

Drag balls had been a part of the American culture since the turn of the twentieth century. Unfortunately, racial discrimination also defined American culture. Racial discrimination existed within the LGBTQ+ community and hindered Black drag queens from winning drag balls hosted by white drag queens. From as early as the 1930s, Black drag queens, winners and losers alike, complained about the "conspiracy" that competitions were easier for white drag queens to win.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Lawrence, "A History of Drag Balls,"; Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

Crystal LaBeija refused to accept that white drag queens who did not look or perform well won over Black drag queens. Separating from the drag balls in the early 1970s, the Black queens created an intricate ball culture because they no longer wanted to accept the racial discrimination from the white gays who ran the drag balls. Black queens believed they at least deserved a chance at winning the drag balls. That was why the creation of ball culture was rooted in defiance.

From the early 1970s when ball culture formed in New York City, the balls evolved from the conformity forced upon them by white drag queens and judges (whitening skin/emulating white women) to free expression and enlightenment, understanding realness. This evolution occurred because Black drag queens left the white controlled drag competitions and created a safe space for themselves where they were their peers accepted their sexuality and race. From the 1920s until 1971, white judges unfairly awarded white drag queens in the competitions while ignoring the work Black drag queens put in to try and win a trophy. After this split, Black drag queens no longer had to conform to the rules the white judges created for them, they could create the rules themselves. Since the 1981 competition category expansion, ball culture focused on inclusion. Participants did not want any reason for a member to be excluded from the competition and made sure everyone had a fair chance of winning, even if that meant creating countless categories. Since 1981, this idea continues, and ball culture participants pride themselves in how inclusive they are.

CHAPTER 3: “WHEN YOU’RE GAY, YOU MONITOR EVERYTHING YOU DO”: HOW HOMOPHOBIA IN AMERICAN INSTITUTIONS AFFECTED BALL CULTURE MEMBERS DURING THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Introduction

At the beginning of “Paris is Burning,” a gay Black man stands with his friends and tells the camera a memory he had with his father. “I remember my dad say, ‘You have three strikes against you in this world. Every Black man has two - that they're just Black and they're male. But you're Black and you're male and you're gay. You're gonna have a hard fucking time.’ Then he said, ‘If you're gonna do this, you're gonna have to be stronger than you ever imagined.’”

Throughout the twentieth century, gay men of color had to deal with different threats that mainstream society placed against them. Whether the threat was law, Christianity, or medicine, LGBTQ+ members, regardless of race, had to stay hidden. They did this to prevent experiencing physical or verbal harassment by the public. This caused many homosexuals to keep their sexuality hidden. Mainstream America did not allow homosexuals to be themselves in public as heterosexuals could. However, when ball culture emerged during the 1970s, its main goal was to allow the participants to express their individuality and accept their identity.⁶⁶

The chapter first defines the threats to the LGBTQ+ community in the United States since the colonial era. The most devastating threat was homo/transphobia and homophobia sub-terms. Defining the terms first will bring an understanding on what these terms were, why the terms existed, and how these terms and sub-terms brought pain among the LGBTQ+ community. Homo/transphobia and its sub-terms highlighted the threats the LGBTQ+ community experienced. This chapter highlights antigay hostility in New York politics and Christianity, as

⁶⁶ Jennie Livingston, *Paris is Burning*, Directed by Jennie Livingston (New York: Off White Productions, 1991) video.

well as the heightened homophobia during the 1980s brought on by AIDS. The examination seeks to establish the negative scope of homo/transphobia in American daily life during ball culture's golden age. The discussion on why ball culture had queer and realness themed categories will be last. This chapter's structure from the threats to the LGBTQ+ community to ball culture competition categories will highlight participants' experiences with homo/transphobia. It will also help explain why ball culture participants created competition categories that contrasted against the homo/transphobia members faced in public.

The Threats to the LGBTQ+ Community

The biggest threat to the LGBTQ+ community was homophobia and transphobia. This "fear" of a person who had a sexual orientation different from the social norm led the public to be prejudice and violent against the LGBTQ+ community. The Black community saw homosexuality as a white phenomenon. Meanwhile, white gays expressed racism towards their Black counterparts. This forced Black gay men to choose between their sexual and racial identity. Ball culture created a safe space for Black and Latinx gay men where they could be accepted for being a person of color and a homosexual. In ball culture, there were no repercussions for being one's self.

Historically, politics, religion, and medical practices have threatened the LGBTQ+ community. Politically in New York state, the LGBTQ+ community struggled to legitimize their sexuality using the legal system. The LGBTQ+ community has also been threatened by religion, its doctrine, and beliefs. At the end of the twentieth century, churches that accepted the LGBTQ+ community did exist, but since this chapter examines conservative Christian threats to the LGBTQ+ community, "gay churches" are not examined.

Homophobia

Homophobia was the irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against homosexuality (same-sex relationships) or homosexuals (gay people). Homophobia was not a new idea that arose during the second half of the twentieth century. Political, religious, and medical antigay leaders used homophobia against the LGBTQ+ community throughout the twentieth century. In the 1950s, U.S. senator Joseph McCarthy used homosexual accusations to damage someone's reputation. Anita Bryant, a popular Christian singer, organized "Save Our Children" in 1977, to oppose legislation prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation. People such as McCarthy and Bryant used homophobia to their advantage to push their own agendas. Heterosexism – the discrimination or prejudice against non-heterosexual people based on the belief that heterosexuality was the only normal and natural expression of sexuality – ruled the American mainstream throughout the twentieth century. Heterosexism influenced social life everywhere causing the LGBTQ+ community to face homophobia in both urban and rural lifestyles. Pepper LaBeija described the gay experience in a heteronormative society:

When you're a man and a woman, you can do anything. You can... you can almost have sex on the streets if you want to. The most somebody's gonna say is, "Hey, get a hump for me, " you know. But when you're gay, you monitor everything you do. You monitor how you look, how you dress, how you talk, how you act. "Do they see me? What do they think of me?"⁶⁷

In the United States, homophobia had two forms: mass homophobia and individualized homophobia. Mass homophobia occurred when institutions such as newspaper companies, politics, religious traditions, and educational institutions individually and collectively employed their institutional resources against the LGBTQ+ community.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

⁶⁸ My interpretation of defining the word "homophobia" comes from: *Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/homophobia>, s.v. "Homophobia."; My interpretation of defining the word "heterosexism" comes from: *Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/heterosexism>, s.v. "Heterosexism"; My interpretation for creating the term "mass homophobia" comes from: Douglas Greenwood, "Why do We Forgive Homophobia in Music," *NME.com*, June 28, 2018; James Flinn, "Homophobia, LGBTQ Hate Speech, and Social Media," *Medium.com*, September 6, 2019;

Individualized homophobia was person-to-person antigay interactions. Individualized homophobia had three forms: direct homophobia, passive homophobia, and “internalized” homophobia. Heterosexuals publicly and privately expressed homophobia, both directly and passively. A direct individual attack on a homosexual defined direct homophobia. Individuals who used direct homophobia did so physically, verbally, and mentally. The relationship between the antigay attacker and the LBGTQ+ victim ranged from personal to random. In “Paris is Burning,” Pepper LaBeija retold an experience where her mother was directly homophobic:

I had on white hot pants, a chiffon blouse, and a ponytail, and my father was waiting for the light in his car and he saw me, he recognized me. And he went straight to my house before I could get there and told my mother, "Your son is a woman." She didn't press it then, but, like, maybe a few months later when she noticed that I had breasts, everything started coming together. She really was devastated. "How could you have breasts bigger than mine? 'You're growing nails. You're becoming a woman right before my very eyes! I can't hold my head up. I'm embarrassed!"⁶⁹

Individuals who expressed direct homophobia did so knowing they were hurting (physically or mentally) homosexuals simply because of their sexuality. Unfortunately, Pepper LaBeija had more than just one experience with direct homophobia with her mother:

And when I had women's clothes stashed in my closet and she found them she would destroy them. She burnt up a mink coat. I was, oh, devastated. She smelled the perfume in it that I liked to wear, which was Jungle Gardenia at the time. And she said, "This ain't no girl's coat. This is your coat." She took it downstairs in the backyard of the building and burnt it. And I stood there and cried like a baby. As long as I have a mustache and all that, it's cute for me. She don't want me to be in no girl's clothes. She can't take it.⁷⁰

LaBeija’s mother expressed direct homophobia knowing that it would hurt LaBeija mentally.

Experiences such as Pepper LaBeija experienced happened in many households where a person

Graeme Reid, “Homophobia as a Political Strategy,” *Human Rights Watch*, June 29, 2015; K. A. Cuordileone, “Politics in an Age of Anxiety’: Cold War Political Culture and the Crisis in American Masculinity, 1949–1960” *The Journal of American History* 87 (2) (2000): 515–45; “Miami Demonstrations,” *United Press International*, 1977.

⁶⁹ Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

(usually the child) was homosexual or a trans-person. Even though the “loved one” was hurt by their words or actions, the homophobic person continued their attack because of their commitment to heterosexism.⁷¹

Spoken word and antigay language casually defined passive homophobia. This same antigay language popularized in mass media transformed individualized homophobia into mass homophobia. In the twentieth century, movies, television shows, newspapers, and music in the United States used passive homophobia. *The New York Times*, during the 1980s AIDS epidemic, limited its coverage of LGBTQ+ issues. *The New York Times* also refused to use the word “gay” in its articles, instead “homosexual” was substituted as a more clinical term. From the 1970s to the present, LGBTQ+ characters were on television shows for two reasons. First, minority (race, sexuality, or religious) representation on television defined the show as more progressive. Second, gay characters exposed the audience to the homophobia LGBTQ+ people experienced in mainstream society. A script that matched the two reasons, made many Americans aware of passive homophobia. After exposing homophobia, the LGBTQ+ character arc ended by dying in a tragic way.⁷²

Internalized homophobia was when a homosexual kept their sexuality a secret from friends, family, and society. Heterosexism’s antigay language and actions were central to

⁷¹ My interpretation of defining the word “internalized homophobia” comes from: Greenwood, “Why do We Forgive,”; Flinn, “Homophobia, LGBTQ Hate Speech,”; Reid, “Homophobia as a Political Strategy,”; My interpretation of creating the term “direct homophobia” comes from: “Handling Homophobic Reaction and Harassment,” *Region of Peel: Working for You*, <https://www.peelregion.ca/health/sexuality/relations/sex-harass.htm>, Accessed June 17, 2020; “Stigma and Discrimination,” *CDC.gov*, <https://www.cdc.gov/msmhealth/stigma-and-discrimination.htm>, Accessed July 20, 2020.

⁷² My interpretation for creating the term “passive homophobia” comes from: “Homophobic Behavior,” *VIC.org*, <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/programs/bullystoppers/Pages/advicehomophobia.aspx>, Accessed July 25, 2020; Greenwood, “Why do We Forgive Homophobia in Music,”; Flinn, “Homophobia, LGBTQ Hate Speech, and Social Media,”; R. Laermer, “The Televised Gay: How We’re Pictured on the Tube,” *The Advocate*, February 5, 1985; T.J. Thompson, “From the Closet to the Beach: A Photographer’s View of Gay Life on Fire Island From 1975 to 1983,” *Visual Communication Quarterly*. 25(2018): 3; Caroline Framke, “Queer women have been killed on television for decades. Now The 100’s fans are fighting back,” *Vox*, March 25, 2016; Heather Alexandra, “Let Queer Characters Be Happy,” *Kotaku*, June 26, 2018.

defining internalized homophobia. Internalized homophobia was both passive and direct. In the 1980s on New York City streets, Hector Crespo, an openly gay Latino man and “son” to House Xtravaganza’s “mother” Angie Xtravaganza, was sexually molested/assaulted by an internalized homophobic passerby. According to Crespo, someone first, hand slapped his butt immediately followed by whispered sexual pleasures in his ear. Crespo described the huge man who publicly assaulted him on Christopher Street as “a truck-driver type” wearing tight jeans and poly-blend tank top. Crespo noted, that sex acts were common on Christopher Street, including men like the one who had assaulted him. The internalized homophobe would solicit young Latinx and Black male sex workers into their cars and vanish into the Holland Tunnel. Crespo’s assailant pushed him and had money in his hand narrating an anticipated twenty minutes of pleasure that they might have. Crespo, wanting no part of the tryst pulled away. Upset with Crespo’s denial, the internalized homophobic homosexual shouted, “Fucking faggot, get away from me! You little slimeball!” Crespo hurried off before the situation turned violent. This example shows how internalized homophobia could hurt and confuse a person who was socially out as homosexual. The confusion came from the quick switch from sexual to verbal abuse of the internalized homophobe.⁷³

Homophobia threatened the daily lives of homosexuals. In the United States, mass homophobia steered how the average American viewed homosexuals. Physically and mentally, homosexuals experienced hatred shown towards them because of their sexuality. Homosexuals could experience homophobia from friends, family, and strangers. This hatred against someone’s

⁷³ My interpretation for creating the term “internalized homophobia” comes from: Richard M. Ryan and William S. Ryan, “Homophobic? Maybe You’re Gay,” *The New York Times*, April 27, 2012; “Internalized Homophobia,” *Revel & Riot*, <https://www.revelandriot.com/resources/internalized-homophobia/>, Accessed June 30, 2020; Michael Cunningham, “Slap of Love,” *Open City*, 1995.

sexuality did not stop at homophobia. Trans-people also had to experience something similar called transphobia.

Transphobia

Transphobia was the irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against transgender people. As defined in chapter one, transgenders or trans-people were individuals who identified with a gender different than the one assigned at birth by doctors. Transphobia included a wide variety of manifestations such as harassment, violence (sexual and physical), and misgendering (whether intentional or accidental by the general society). Just as mainstream political, religious, and medical practitioners were homophobic in the 1980s, they too struggled with transphobia. Thomas Spijkerboer, immigration law professor, confirmed this assertion arguing, “Transgender people subjected to violence, in a range of cultural contexts, frequently report that transphobic violence is expressed in homophobic terms.” Correlations between homophobia and transphobia existed for two reasons. The first being the transphobic person associated a trans-person’s gender identity with homosexuality. The second reason was a trans-person may have had a sexual orientation that was not heterosexual. For example, male-to-female trans-person attracted to females technically made the trans-person homosexual.⁷⁴

Anti-trans violence was physical and sexual. Trans-people have always experienced an increased risk of violence compared to non-transgendered individuals because it was less socially accepted to be a trans-person than to be a homosexual. Trans-people encountered transphobia violence the moment their physical transformation would be publicly evident. Transphobic

⁷⁴ My interpretation of defining the word “transphobia” comes from: *Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/transphobia>, s.v. “Transphobia.”; Genny Beemyn, *The Lives of Transgender People* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 91; Rebecca L. Stotzer, “Violence against transgender people: A review of United States data,” *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 14 (3) (2009): 170–79; Thomas Spijkerboer, *Fleeing Homophobia: Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Asylum* (London, UK: Routledge, 2013), 122.

abusers ran the gamut from intimate family, friends, partners, and neighbors to the more public encounters with co-workers, strangers, and the police. A 1999 survey conducted in New York City asked eighty-three male-to-female trans-people and eleven female-to-male trans-people about any reported violence against them because of their gender identity. Thirty-three percent of the respondents experienced transphobic violence.⁷⁵

Transphobia also defined filming “Paris is Burning.” Ball circuit legendary femme queen, Venus Xtravaganza, experienced transphobia personally. She stated how, “Some of them say that we're sick, we're crazy. And some of them think that we are the most gorgeous, special things on Earth.” A 1980s sex worker during the AIDS crisis, Venus Xtravaganza sought to quit sex work similar to many other ball culture participants. Yet daily survival needs such as paying household bills, food, and ball culture activities prevented her from quitting. “Paris is Burning” chronicled how transphobia plagued Venus Xtravaganza. Venus’ House “mother,” Angie Xtravaganza warned Venus to carefully screen any customers, but never believed Venus was so discerning. Transphobia threatened Venus when a male customer realized Venus was physically male. The customer screamed, “Oh my god you are a man! I am going to kill you!” Fearing for her life, she jumped from a window to escape.⁷⁶

For trans-people, possible violent altercations increased as opposed to homosexuals. Heterosexuals who did not understand the difference between gender and sexuality saw trans-people who posed as the opposite gender to what they were biologically as a threat. In ball culture, the transphobic threat was all too real, and the violence that came from transphobia

⁷⁵ Stotzer, "Violence against transgender people," 172-73; Beemyn, *The Lives of Transgender People*, 91; Y. Gavriel Ansara and Peter Hegarty, "Cisgenderism in psychology: pathologising and misgendering children from 1999 to 2008," *Psychology & Sexuality*. 3 (2) (2011): 137–60; C. K. McGowan, *Transgender needs assessment, December 1999* (New York, NY: The HIV Prevention Planning Unit of the New York City Department of Health, 1999).

⁷⁶ Tempe Nakiska, “The Legacy of Venus Xtravaganza” *dazeddigital.com*, November 20, 2013; Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

effected ball culture members, including Venus Xtravaganza. Laws against homo/transsexuals threatened the LGBTQ+ community for years. Only within the last forty years has the LGBTQ+ community and ball culture received rights and social justice backed by the law.

Gay Men of Color and Sexuality

This section will analyze gay men of color and how their race and sexuality obstructed acceptance from the communities they belonged. Rejection from both the Black and LGBTQ+ community helped create not only ball culture but the House structure that filled the void of not being in a community. As a “double minority” gay men of color experienced racism and homophobia. For Black people, the Black community served as a space for coping with racism and building a positive self-identity. Similarly, the gay community served as a support space for homosexuals dealing with their sexuality by providing supportive social and psychological networks for individuals in the community. An example of a supportive social and psychological network would be a group of people with similar racial/sexual experiences spending time together, creating a friendly relationship.⁷⁷

Sociologists in the late 1970s and early 1980s defined gay identity as beginning in a state of sexual confusion and ending with the individual having increased tolerance, acceptance, and comfort in their homosexual identity. Black identity began when the Black individual became racially self-aware, usually beginning in infancy. LGBTQ+ racism and Black homophobia were the most significant contributors against positive self-identity amongst Black gay men. The Black community refused to accept the Black gay because the person was gay. The gay community refused to accept the Black gay because the person was Black. The impact the black community and the gay community had on the Black gay identity was based on the positive and

⁷⁷ Larry D. Icard, “Black Gay Men and Conflicting Social Identities,” *Journal of Social Work & Human Sexuality* 4:1-2, (1986): 83-84.

negative philosophies on self-value, and the behavior an individual observed that came from those closest to them in each community. These experiences affected how Black gay men identified themselves.⁷⁸

Although the gay community was a minority group, it did not align itself with racial minority groups. Politically, the white gay community made limited efforts in working collaboratively with gay racial minorities; the Stonewall Riots are an example. Racism was a potent force in the gay community that affected the interactions between white gays and gay minority groups. The racism that Black gays received from the gay community evolved from attitudes based on sexual racism, gender stereotypes becoming linked to racial stereotypes. An example of this was when a white gay told Pepper LaBeija she had “negroid features”. From the 1930s to the 1970s, this negative image limited Black gays from obtaining the positive “self-love” the gay community had for its white members. This timeline matches when white gay people used their whiteness to restrict Black drag queens from winning in white balls. In gay social gathering spaces signs such as, “No Blacks, Fems, or Faggots,” expressed what white gays considered unacceptable. For many gay Black men, the gay community was a foreign world that reflected the values and customs of the larger white society since the beginning of American history.⁷⁹

The Black community ostracized homosexuality and the gay community. This happened because the Black community saw homosexuality as a white phenomenon or as something created by white people. Publicly gay Black men such as Bayard Rustin, Little Richard, and

⁷⁸ Icard, “Black Gay Men,” 83-84, 86; Vivienne Cass, “Homosexual Identity Formation: A Theoretical Model,” *Journal of Homosexuality* vol.4 (1979): 219-36; Eli Coleman, “Developmental Stages of the Coming-out Process,” *Homosexuality: Social, Psychological, and Biological Issues*, ed. W. Paul, J. Weinrich, J. Gonsiorek, and M. Hotvedt (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publishing, 1982).

⁷⁹ Michael Cunningham, “Slap of Love,” *Open City*, 1995; Icard, “Black Gay Men,” 86, 88-90; LaShonda Mims, “Drastic Dykes: The New South and Lesbian Life,” *Journal of Women’s History*, 31, no. 4 (2019): 111-12.

RuPaul did not change the Black community's view that homosexuality was a white phenomenon. Civil Rights leader, community activist, and pastor, John R. Porter, observed in 1979 that: "When an occasional adult or young Black homosexual popped up, Blacks assumed he learned to be a sissy hanging around white guys." For many within the Black community, the gay community represented white society. The Black church was another factor that influenced the community's revulsion against homosexuality. Homosexuality was believed to be a sin that rebelled against the will and love of God to have a perverse sexual nature and will. In 1982, sociologist Julius Johnson noted this dilemma in a small study of gay Black men. Johnson labeled those who identified with the Black community as Black gays. While Black men who identified with the gay community were labeled as gay Blacks.⁸⁰

As a "double minority" Black gay men experienced racism from the LGBTQ+ community and homophobia from the Black community. Understanding Black and gay identity formation, Black gay men had to make an extremely difficult choice: identify with the Black community or with the gay community. It is unknown if there was an option to choose both, but usually identification was termed as "gay Black men" or "Black gay men". In "Paris is Burning", when participants mentioned themselves, they used the term "Black queen". No Latinx participants used their race when defining themselves, only their sexuality.⁸¹

For homosexuals, laws pertained to all and did not distinguish by race. Black, white, and Latinx homosexuals in New York City dealt with sodomy laws that hindered how they operated in society. Homosexuals had to learn when and where they could openly express their

⁸⁰ John R. Porter, *Dating Habits of Young Black Americans: And Almost Everybody Else's Too* (New York, NY: Kendall Hunt Publishing Company, 1979), 26; Icard, "Black Gay Men," 86-88; T. Bearne, "Young, Gifted, Black and Gay: Dr. Julius Johnson," *Advocate* (July 8, 1982): 25-57.

⁸¹ Icard, "Black Gay Men," 88.

homosexuality. By the 1970s, the LGBTQ+ community no longer wanted to hide, and the Gay Liberation Movement forced change, bringing social justice to the LGBTQ+ community.

New York and its Laws Against Homosexuality

The LGBTQ+ community thrived in New York City before the twentieth century, especially since average New Yorkers tolerated homosexuality, if the gay communities stayed hidden. In politics, however, the LGBTQ+ communities, including ball culture, were constant targets. In the nineteenth century, “homosexual sodomy” was not the driving force behind the implementation of sodomy laws. Sodomy laws were intended to achieve two purposes: protect “public morals and decency” and to protect women, “weak men”, and children against sexual assault. In the twentieth century, sodomy changed from sexual assault to “homosexual sex”. The changed definition of sodomy forced the LGBTQ+ community to stay sexually hidden in New York or faced the consequences for breaking the law.⁸²

New York City bathhouses were well-known homosexual spaces that the police raided during the twentieth century. On February 21, 1903, the New York City Police Department raided the Ariston Hotel Baths, a gay bathhouse. Police arrested twenty-six men, twelve went to trial on sodomy charges, and seven were found guilty with sentences ranging from four to twenty years in prison. On January 5, 1919, police raided the Everard Baths with encouragement from the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice arresting the manager and nine customers charging them with lewd behavior since no one was caught performing a homosexual act. In 1920, the police again raided the Everard Baths charging fifteen patrons, the resulting court cases

⁸² Nicholas C. Edsall, *Towards Stonewall* (Charlottesville, VA: Virginia University Press, 2003), 127–52; George Painter, “The Sensibilities of Our Forefathers: The History of Sodomy Laws in the United States: New York,” *Sodomy Laws*, https://www.glapn.org/sodomylaws/sensibilities/new_york.htm#fn31, Accessed August 15, 2020.

were unknown. Three years later New York City sought to address homosexual prostitution by prohibiting loitering for sexual acts.⁸³

Police raids on “fairy resorts” or safe dance spaces for gay men, continued to increase in the twentieth century to counter New York City’s growing homosexual population. In retaliation, the LGBTQ+ community and their allies created a safer space, such as A’Leila Walker opening her houses as a safe space. Police eventually raided these spaces as well. In 1927, the New York State Assembly created “The Padlock Bill” by editing the public-obscurity code to include homosexuality on stage. After “The Padlock Bill” became law in 1927, police began censoring theatrical stages and clubs. In 1939, in preparation for the World’s Fair, the city closed many well-known gay bars. The 1939-1940 World’s Fair was held at the Flushing Meadows-Corona Park in the borough of Queens, New York City. It is unknown if there were altercations between police and homosexuals during the World’s Fair. The LGBTQ+ community also lived in Queens in the Jackson Heights neighborhood, about 2.2 miles away from the Flushing Meadows-Corona Park. In 1940, the New York Supreme Court ruled that the New York State Liquor Authority could legally close any bar that served “sex variants” (homosexuals) because of the growing visibility of gay and lesbian patrons in bars and restaurants. On April 21, 1966, LGBTQ+ activists staged a “Sip-In” at a Greenwich Village gay bar named “Julius” protesting the hostile treatment they received from police. In 1967, New York repealed the ruling that forbade bars from serving homosexuals.⁸⁴

⁸³ Painter, “The Sensibilities of Our Forefathers,”; DAP #41,914, March 4, 1903; *Laws of New York 1923*, 960, ch. 642, enacted May 22, 1923; George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (NY: Hachette Book Group, 2008), 134, 173, 216-17; “When and why did public bathhouses become popular? Do they still exist?” *New York Historical Society Museum and Library*, video.

⁸⁴ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 33-35, 356; Liam Stack, “New York’s LGBTQ+ Story Began Well Before Stonewall,” *The New York Times*, June 19, 2017; Google Maps, “Queens, New York City.” <https://www.google.com/maps/dir/Jackson+Heights,+Queens,+NY/Flushing+Meadows+Corona+Park,+Corona+Av e.,+Queens,+NY+11354/@40.7488952,-73.8794202,14z/data=!3m1!4b1!4m14!4m13!1m5!1m1!1s0x89c25fa191b4692b:0xe573e64fb17e324a!2m2!1d->

In 1966, New York had the first transsexualism case in the United States, *Mtr. Of Anonymous v. Weiner*. The case involved a New York City transsexual who had undergone sex reassignment surgery and sought to change their birth certificate's name and sex. The New York City Health Department contested these changes and won because the city's health code only permitted birth certificate changes due to official errors. *Mtr. Of Hartin v. Dir. Of Bur. Of Recs.*, (1973) and *Anonymous v. Mellon* (1977) affirmed the 1966 decision. The 1964 Civil Rights Act transformed LGBTQ+ status nationally with the inclusion of the word "sex," which comprehensively protected gay citizens from employment discrimination. Although the LGBTQ+ community has seen progress in protection against discrimination, as of July 2020, twenty-five states and five U.S. territories do not have explicit prohibitions against discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity in state law.⁸⁵

By the 1970s, gay activists forced New York state and New York City to have a new attitude toward sexuality, permitting social justice for the LGBTQ+ community. On February 16, 1971, the New York State Assembly examined the introduction of the "Sexual Orientation Non-Discrimination Act" (SONDA), the act did not pass Assembly, the reason is unknown. In 1974, the Village of Alfred, a community of about one thousand, passed the first New York gay rights ordinance, prohibiting any discrimination based on sexual orientation. Three years later, the State

[73.8830701!2d40.7556818!1m5!1m1!1s0x89c2607fc22166fb:0x133d2c68e8326ce1!2m2!1d-73.8407448!2d40.739998!3e2](https://www.lawpipe.com/New-York/Anonymous_v_Weiner.html#:~:text=of%20Anonymous%20v.,for%20a%20new%20birth%20certificate,), Accessed August 3, 2020.

⁸⁵ Painter, "The Sensibilities of Our Forefathers,"; *Laws of New York 1950*, 1271, 525, enacted April 11, 1950; *Mtr. of Anonymous v. Weiner*, 50 Misc. 2d 380, 270 N.Y.S.2d 319 (1966), https://www.lawpipe.com/New-York/Anonymous_v_Weiner.html#:~:text=of%20Anonymous%20v.,for%20a%20new%20birth%20certificate, Accessed August 24, 2020; 75 *Mtr. of Hartin v. Dir. Of Bur. Of Recs.*, Misc. 2d 229, 347 NYS 2d 515 - NY: Supreme Court, 1973; 91 *Anonymous v. Mellon*, Misc. 2d 375, 398 NYS 2d 99 - NY: Supreme Court, 1977; *An act to enforce the constitutional right to vote, to confer jurisdiction upon the district courts of the United States of America to provide injunctive relief against discrimination in public accommodations, to authorize the Attorney General to institute suits to protect constitutional rights in public facilities and public education, to extend the Commission on Civil Rights, to prevent discrimination in federally assisted programs, to establish a Commission on Equal Employment Opportunity, and for other purposes*, Public Law 88-352, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 78 (1964); "Nondiscrimination Laws," *MAP: Movement Advancement Project*, https://www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps/non_discrimination_laws Accessed July 7, 2020.

Supreme Court ruled in favor of Renee Richards, a transgender woman, petitioning to play in the U. S. Open tennis competition.⁸⁶

While New York’s laws slowly reduced discrimination against LGBTQ+ rights, the years 1960 to 1990 also were noted as the “Fourth Great Awakening” in the Christian community. This awakening initiated a conservative Christian religious revival. Protestant denominations such as Southern Baptist, and other evangelical and fundamentalist denominations expanded its membership. At the same time, “mainline” Protestant denominations such as the United Methodist Church and the Presbyterian Church declined in membership. A large following allowed conservative Evangelical and Fundamentalist Christians to influence politics during the 1980s in the United States, making the LGBTQ+ community’s effort toward social equality difficult once again.⁸⁷

Homosexuality, the Fourth Great Awakening, and the Black Church

The growth in membership within conservative Evangelical and Fundamentalist denominations proved a serious threat to both the LGBTQ+ community and ball culture, especially when conservative Christians attained elective office at the local, state, and national level. This section will examine the “Fourth Great Awakening”, a Christian awakening or revival that took place in the United States post-World War II until the 1990s. The threats conservative Christianity brought to the LGBTQ+ community such as influencing a homophobic doctrine to mainstream America, will also be examined. The reason for doing this is to show how the

⁸⁶ Lee Bantle, “The Emerging Field of Equal Rights for Gay and Lesbian Employees,” *Bantle and Levy LLP*, <https://www.civilrightsfirm.com/emerging-field-glb-rights/>. Accessed August 23, 2020; New York State of Opportunity, “Downtown Revitalization Initiative: Application,” 19, https://www.ny.gov/sites/ny.gov/files/atoms/files/Alfred_DRITHREE.pdf, Accessed August 17, 2020; 93 *Richards v. United States Tennis Association*, Misc. 2d 713; 400 N.Y.S.2d 267 (8/16/1977); Nell Amdur, “Renee Richards Ruled Eligible for U.S. Open,” *New York Times*, August 17, 1977.

⁸⁷ William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakening, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607-1977* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978), 186.

“Fourth Great Awakening” made conservatism popular, turning many heterosexual people away from liberal ideas such as LGBTQ+ rights. Conservative Christian denominations such as Evangelical and Fundamentalist directly impacted ball culture and the LGBTQ+ community. Religion was only mentioned once in “Paris is Burning”, but conservative Christian doctrine still threatened ball culture members who were also a part of the LGBTQ+ community.⁸⁸

Historian William McLoughlin believed that Americans lost faith in liberalism during the Cold War, (1947-1991), when communism’s growth throughout the world occurred as America took its place as the leading nation of the Western world. Conservative Christian denominations such as Roman Catholicism, Fundamentalism, and Evangelism, taught its members that homosexuality was sinful. The comparison of sexual immorality to sin appeared in several verses in the Bible. The three conservative Christian denominations pointed to Leviticus 18: 22. The verse related homosexuality to sin, “Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.” Many American Evangelical and Fundamentalist Christians interpreted this biblical verse describing homosexual acts to mean that God created the heterosexual family as the bedrock of civilization. Homosexuality contradicted this belief. American Evangelical and Fundamentalist Christians declared that same-sex relationships violated God’s will. Specifically, single sex relationships were unnatural and unacceptable in a Christian society.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakening, and Reforms*, 183, 186.

⁸⁹ Leviticus 18:22 NRSV; “Lifeway Research Study,” *The Christian Post*, June 6, 2008; “A Biblical Perspective on Same-Sex “Marriage” and Civil Unions,” *The Association of Politically Active Christians*, January 2008; Ken Campbell, *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 85, 172, 223, 242-43.

⁸⁹ Ralph R. Smith, Russel R. Windes, *Progay/Antigay: The Rhetorical War Over Sexuality*, (New York: SAGE Publications, 2000), 29; Dallin H. Oaks, “Same-Gender Attraction,” *Liahona*, March 1996, 14; Television interview with Elder Dallin H. Oaks, December 3, 1986; answer “love the sinner, not the sin” not telecast; excerpts printed in “Apostle Reaffirms Church’s Position on Homosexuality,” *Church News*, February 14, 1987, 10-12; Katia Dunn, “What If God Were Gay?” *Portland Mercury*, March 10, 2005.

Fundamentalist anti-gay activists used television and radio to claim that homosexuality caused the world's social problems such as disease and terrorism. The 1980s AIDS epidemic reflected this focus with controversial slogans such as: "God hates Gays", "Fags die, God laughs", and "Fear God not Fags." These slogans were common at antigay protests held by conservative Christian organizations. Some conservative Christians even argued that AIDS was God's vengeance against the LGBTQ+ community for violating God's will.⁹⁰

The "Fourth Great Awakening" peaked during the Ronald Reagan presidency (1980-1988) when conservative values were more visible because they were incorporated within American politics nationally. The AIDS crisis coincided with the national merger of Fundamentalism and conservative political power as conservative politicians ignored the beginning of the AIDS crisis 1981-1985.⁹¹

Most ball culture members were Black. In the Black community, the Black church traditionally informed, influenced, and guided Black Americans. Bishop Kwabena Rainey Cheeks, of Inner Light Ministries in Washington D.C., explained that the Black church, "is a stabilizing force and a place to connect not just to God but to community, as well." During ball culture's golden age, Black churches demonstrated leadership by promoting awareness and mobilization around issues affecting Black communities at the time such as drug use, homelessness, and gang violence. While researching the "Black church" there was no specific denominations and liberal/conservative ideologies, the "Black church" was simply the "Black church". Yet, Black churches were not monolithic. It is unknown if ball culture members were religious, however it would be detrimental to ignore how the homophobic doctrine taught in the Black church hindered Black gays in accepting their identity. This section analyzes the Black

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

church, its rejection of homosexuality, and how Black gays dealt with their sexuality within the church.⁹²

The *Global Public Health Journal* revealed three prominent themes that explained the relationship between Black gays, the Black church, and Black church doctrines encapsulated within the slogans: “love the sinner, hate the sin”, “don’t ask, don’t tell”, “your body is a temple”. “Love the sinner, hate the sin” addressed separating homosexual behavior from homosexual identity by loving the homosexual as a child of God, but defining homosexual intercourse as a sin against God. “Don’t ask, don’t tell” defined sex and sexuality as a private behavior and should not be a public discussion. “Your body is a temple” interconnected spiritual and physical health. Sexual immoralities were physical acts blocking an individual’s relationship with God. To the Black church, homosexual physical activities were sinful and prevented a person’s spiritual access to God after death.⁹³

Keith Boykin, a Black gay commentator, believed, “The church might be the most homophobic and most homotolerant of any institution in the Black community.” The Black church’s conservative doctrine regarding one’s sexuality created a homophobic environment and forced Black gays to stay sexually hidden. Although the Black church rejected and condemned homosexuality, the presence of gays and lesbians in Black churches were common. Black gay people feared the Black church and the Black community would shun them if their sexuality became public. This fear forced many gay people to keep their sexuality a secret, even during the AIDS epidemic, continuing the circle of sexual silence. Sharon J. Lettman-Hicks, an executive

⁹² “Religion and Coming Out Issues for African Americans,” *The Human Rights Campaign*, <https://www.hrc.org/resources/religion-and-coming-out-issues-for-african-americans>, Accessed November 5, 2020.

⁹³ Patrick Wilson, Natalie Wittlin, Miguel Munoz-Laboy, and Richard Parker, “Ideologies of Black Churches in New York City and the Public Health Crisis of HIV among Black Men who have sex with Men,” *Global Public Health Journal*, 2011.

director of the National Black Justice Coalition, an LGBT advocacy group said, “They would rather suppress their identity than denounce their church. I’ve seen people refuse to divorce themselves from their church despite the ignorance that spews from the pulpit. ... It’s their way of repenting. They victimize themselves through self-oppression.” Suppressing their identity hindered Black gays from understanding themselves and their sexuality. For some Black gays, self-oppression allowed them to repent their sexual “sins” taught to them by the Black church’s doctrine.⁹⁴

Some Black gays believed in the self-identification of “spiritual not religious.” RuPaul described his relationship to religion and spirituality:

Do I give spiritual advice? All the time. Everything I say is spiritual advice. It’s not like I’m a guru or anything, but it is the only game in town. It is the only game I can ever really have. As drag queens, we have taken the position of being... people who remind the culture to not take itself so seriously. What it says on your driver’s license isn’t really who you are - you are something much greater than that. A lot of the queens coming on the show are just beginning to realize that. They know it on an unconscious level, that they wanted to transcend the labels and boxes that society would have them be in, so they turn to drag because it’s a natural thing. It’s what we are all doing... God masquerading in drag.⁹⁵

RuPaul suggested that spirituality was the only option as a person. To RuPaul, religion marginalized those who “do not take itself so seriously.” A person was greater than what society labeled them as and this ideal was replicated in ball culture. Ball culture built itself on acceptance and community, allowing participants to recognize and accept their own identity. Houses became closed environments and an intimate community, holding space for those otherwise marginalized by the heteronormative American society.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ “Blacks, Gays And The Church: A Complex Relationship,” *NPR*, May 22, 2012, <https://www.npr.org/2012/05/22/153282066/Blacks-gays-and-the-church-a-complex-relationship>, Accessed November 7, 2020.

⁹⁵ Rev Paul Brandeis Raushenbush, “RuPaul’s Divine Mystical Wisdom,” *Huffington Post*, January 28, 2013.

⁹⁶ Raushenbush, “RePaul’s Divine,”; Joss Rae Willsbrough, "CATEGORY IS: RELIGIOUS “REALNESS” A Consideration of Disparate Subjectivity via “RuPauline Drag” and the House of LaBeija" Theses - ALL. (Syracuse University, 2019), 1.

Although there was no indication that New York City ball culture members during the golden age were religious, the Black church's homophobic doctrine hindered many Black gays from understanding their own identity. Having to hide their sexuality to be an active member within the church – and Black community – confused many Black homosexuals on what acceptance and community was. The Black church's homophobic doctrine did not directly influence ball culture's creation. Ball culture, however, did become the solution to solve participants racial and sexual identity not addressed by white gays, religion, and heteronormative popular culture. During ball culture's golden age to today, the balls became a haven for young Black/Latinx gay and trans-people. Marlon Bailey, a Detroit ball culture member, wrote, "this community offers an enduring social sanctuary for those who have been rejected by and marginalized within their families of origin, religious institutions, and society at large. For most, the Ballroom scene becomes a necessary refuge and a space in which to share and acquire skills that help black and latino/a LGBT individuals survive." While some Black gays suppressed their identity, ball culture members embraced their sexuality and identity during ball performances.⁹⁷

The belief that homosexuality was unnatural trickled down from religious institutions into mainstream American society. During the 1980s AIDS epidemic, gay men were mostly affected by the disease, causing society to see gay men in a negative way. This translated into higher numbers in homo/transphobic violence. Ball culture members dealt with HIV/AIDS and homophobia simultaneously, bringing violence and death into their community.

Homophobia and the AIDS Epidemic

⁹⁷ Marlon Bailey, *Butch Queen Up In Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 6-7.

AIDS, an auto-immunodeficiency disease transmitted by blood, affected anyone regardless of their sexuality, gender, race, religion, or nationality. High-risk groups for AIDS were homosexuals, drug addicts, and hemophiliacs. This placed every single ball culture member into the high-risk group. As ball culture had to deal with members contracting AIDS, homophobic violence increased as a response to the epidemic, causing some members to fear how they appeared in public.

In 1981, the AIDS epidemic began as an unknown untreatable disease. Within the epidemic's first six months, one hundred and twenty-one people afflicted with AIDS died in cities such as New York City, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. Each had been young healthy gay men, races unknown. AIDS was a disease that the Center for Disease Control (CDC) knew nothing about. The CDC did not know exactly what the AIDS virus was but continued to learn information as more gay men became afflicted. American mainstream media's constant AIDS coverage forced the CDC to convey incomplete information to the public. This caused confusion and led to discrimination by the mainstream population in the United States against openly gay men. Before the CDC named the disease as AIDS, terms such as "gay disease" arose because young gay men were the primary AIDS victims but were not the only group fatally victimized by the disease.⁹⁸

Since AIDS was attributed to homosexuals, homophobia rose during the AIDS epidemic, as did increased homophobic violence. This violence included everyone from the LGBTQ+ community regardless of race. In 1985, 28% of New York City's homophobic incidents taunted their victims with comments about AIDS. The New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project testified in 1986 that in the first nine months there were 351 homophobic attacks,

⁹⁸ "Timeline of HIV and AIDS" *HIV.gov*; "Thirty Years of HIV/AIDS: Snapshots of an Epidemic" *amfAR.org*; CNN, "The Fight Against AIDS" *The Eighties*, 2016.

including 17 homicides. Twice the number of incidents reported in 1985's first nine months which were 167 homophobic attacks. This rise in violence against homosexuals in the 1980s were not exclusively in New York City. Journalist William R. Greer explained just how expansive homophobic violence against the LGBTQ+ community was in 1986:

Surveys indicate that homosexuals are more often the victims of violent crimes than the general public. Surveys in cities from Richmond to Minneapolis to Des Moines, and in states from Maine to Alaska, found that 15 to 20 percent of homosexuals interviewed said they had been beaten in incidents related to their sexual orientation.⁹⁹

This rise in violent crimes against the LGBTQ+ community, was extremely frightening to ball culture members. Ball participants in the 1980s heavily focused on realness as a category idea. Realness was a response to rising antigay violence. Participants believed that if they looked real enough (gender-wise) to the average person, they would be safe from homophobic violence.¹⁰⁰

In 1991, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reported that thirty-five percent of over one thousand physicians agreed that “homosexuality is a threat to many of our institutions,”. Sixty-eight percent of the physicians felt ethically bound to treat AIDS patients. When a person infected with HIV/AIDS went to their medical physician, there was a possibility that the physician had homophobic attitudes. Seventeen percent of the over one thousand questioned felt they were not ethically bound to treat AIDS patients. AIDS early stigma as the “gay disease”, created the stereotype that only homosexuals were susceptible to the disease. Anyone else who had AIDS, meant the person sexually interacted with a homo/bisexual mate. The automatic assumption created an unwillingness amongst doctors to treat a patient because of

⁹⁹ William R. Greer, “Violence Against Homosexuals Rising, Groups Seeking Wider Protection,” *New York Times*, November 23, 1986.

¹⁰⁰ My interpretation of defining the word “homophobia” comes from: *Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/homophobia>, s.v. “Homophobia.”; Greer, “Violence Against Homosexuals Rising.”; For more information on the discrimination people faced during the AIDS crisis: CNN, “The Fight Against AIDS”; Ronald Bayer and Gerald M. Oppenheimer. *AIDS Doctors: Voices from the Epidemic: An Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Ryan White and Ann Marie Cunningham, *Ryan White: My Own Story* (New York: New American Library), 1992.

their sexuality. The belief that a doctor, a person who aided the sick, was not ethically bound to treat a patient based on their sexuality, allowed other United States social institutions such as religion and education to likewise discriminate.¹⁰¹

Unfortunately, to some heterosexuals, the stigma that homosexuality was unnatural continued. Homophobic attacks rose during the AIDS epidemic (1981-1997) threatening the lives of homosexuals not infected with AIDS. In the end, ball culture felt the wrath that AIDS epidemic brought onto the community, killing many legendary queens and up-and-coming participants.

Conclusion

The LGBTQ+ community's biggest threat during the twentieth century was homophobia and transphobia. The Black community saw homosexuality to be a white phenomenon. Black gay men had to choose between their sexuality and racial identity. These threats hindered ball culture members because they were gay and Black. Outside the balls, members could not be themselves because of the general public's anti-gay thoughts and behaviors against homosexuality. Instead, ball culture participants practiced individuality inside the balls. That was why ball culture competition categories held such importance for participants. Ball culture provided Black/Latinx gay men an opportunity to exercise their individuality in a safe protected space free from the various threats daily life imposed on them.

Politics and religion throughout the twentieth century served as mainstream heteronormative societal threats that attempted to control the daily lives of all within the LGBTQ+ community. Politically in New York state, the LGBTQ+ community struggled for the

¹⁰¹ Abby L. Wilkerson, *Diagnosis: Difference: The Moral Authority of Medicine* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1998), 49; "Survey Reveals Doctors Uneasy about Treating Gays," *Windy City Times*, December 12, 1991.

legalization of their sexuality. Religiously, the “Fourth Great Awakening” threatened the LGBTQ+ community with its conservative anti-gay teachings and practices. The Black church’s homophobic tradition forced Black gays to hide their sexuality or face repercussions, confusing Black gays’ identity. During the AIDS epidemic (1981-1997), homophobic attacks rose, and some doctors refused to treat AIDS patients. All these versions of homo/transphobia threatened the livelihoods of those in the LGBTQ+ community regardless of race.

CHAPTER 4: “A BALL IS THE VERY WORD. WHATEVER YOU WANT TO BE, YOU BE”: HOW QUEER AND REALNESS THEMED COMPETITION CATEGORIES HELPED SHAPE INDIVIDUALISM AND IDENTITY IN BALL CULTURE

Introduction

This chapter establishes how ball culture participants experienced homo/transphobia and incorporated those experiences into the competition categories during ball culture’s golden age, 1981-1993. Ball culture categories reflected these experiences. All information known about ball culture competition categories in this thesis came directly from ball culture members’ interpretation. Their interpretation of the categories and ball culture in general, brings an understanding on how hard participants tried to include everyone in the balls. Individual expressions of queerness (“BQ Runway”) or sexually blending in a heterosexual normative world (“Banjee Realness”), aided participants in understanding their queerness. The categories described in this chapter emerged and evolved during ball culture’s golden age, 1981-1993.¹⁰²

Queerness

What is Queerness?

Queerness was the characteristic of having a sexual or gender identity that did not correspond to established ideas of sexuality and gender, especially heterosexual norms. Participants within the ball culture competition system wanted to create an individual identity both within the balls and daily lives on New York City streets. Ball culture members believed that sexuality was not bound by mainstream society’s traditional norms. Ball culture stood by the notion that sex, gender, and sexuality were three separate ideas. Sex was a term used for the

¹⁰² Jennie Livingston, *Paris is Burning* Directed by Jennie Livingston (New York: Off White Productions, 1991) video.

sexual reproductive organs (female, male, other/intersex) of a person. Gender could be split into two ideas: gender identity and gender expression. Finally, sexuality was the personal sexual feelings, thoughts, attractions, and behaviors towards others.

Ball culture had a fluid four-part gender system: butch queen, femme queen, butch, and women. The four-part gender system structured and characterized gender and ball competitive categories for participants. Butch queens (BQ) were men who dressed like women only for the balls. Femme queens (FQ) were male to female transgender people who dressed as women, even outside the balls. Butches were female to male transgenders who dressed like men in and outside the balls. Women were heterosexual females who rarely participated in balls, only participating if their gay male friend attended and participated.¹⁰³

Ball Culture Queerness and Categories

During ball culture's golden age, 1981-1993, and onto the present, BQs and FQs had their own specific categories. Participants who fit within the specific gender category could compete amongst other participants who also identified in that gender category. Unlike BQ and FQ based categories, there was a lack of evidence on specific Butch and Women gender based categories (excluding realness themed categories) during ball culture's golden age. It is important to note that Butch and heterosexual women could participate in gender fluid categories. For example, the "Men's/Women's Evening Wear" category was solely judged on the participant's mainstream American upper-class stylized evening outfit. All four genders within ball culture's gender system, participated in sexually fluid categories like the one described above, because the judges looked at what the participants were wearing, not the participant's

¹⁰³ Jackson, "The Social World of Voguing," 27; Bailey, *Butch Queens in Pumps*, 33-34; Julianne Shepherd, "A Bitch I Have to Know," *Spin.com*, May 6, 2013.

masculine or feminine facial features. The judges for these categories were usually experienced “legendary” ball culture queens. The only time the qualifications changed for judges was when a “special guest” (celebrity/public figure) attended bringing attention to the balls. One example was the 1989 charitable “Love Ball” for AIDS prevention where rock star David Byrne, who was not associated with ball culture, was a judge. During ball culture’s golden age, gender fluid competition categories were a form of realness based solely on attire.¹⁰⁴

In performance scholarship, the discussion on ball culture competition categories does not go in depth as this thesis does. Nevertheless, the ball culture discussion itself has occurred within performance scholarship, focusing on live performance. Harris Kornstein, a current PhD candidate at New York University, explained that ball culture performances were, “stylized representations [that]... highlighted the constructed, contested, and contradictory natures of social categories more broadly.” One such “social category” that constructed, contested, and contradicted ball culture was gender. Gender themed competition categories allowed contestants to use stylized representations such as voguing, to defy mainstream society’s gender definition. Other scholars such as bell hooks and Judith Butler believed that performances within categories during balls created a complex relationship between racialized and class “drag” (explained in chapter three) and gender/realness “drag”.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ For more information on Butch Realness and Woman Realness competition categories, see: Traditional ball categories and gender guidelines written by: Stephaun Elite Wallace Blahnik, “Ball Categories,” *House of Luna*, 2017, <https://www.houseofluna.org/ball-categories>, Accessed August 13, 2020; Livingston, *Paris is Burning*; Woody Hochswender, "Vogueing Against AIDS: A Quest for 'Overness': How to Vogue: Strike a Pose, Wave Your Hands and Twist Your Body," *New York Times*, May 12, 1989.

¹⁰⁵ Harris Kornstein, “Drag Performance on Screen,” in *The International Encyclopedia of Gender, Media, and Communication*, eds. K. Moss, I. Bachmann, V. Cardo, S. Moorti, and M. Scarelli, March 3, 2020; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, 1990), 136-138; bell hooks, *Black looks: Race and representation*, (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 145-156.

This section will only focus on a few BQ and FQ categories. It is unknown just how many BQ and FQ categories there have been during ball culture's history. There were many more examples than the categories discussed, however, the eight queerness themed categories explain how these categories allowed participants to actively practice individualism while also expressing their own identity. During ball culture's golden age, participants used queerness themed categories so that fairness ruled the balls. A person who identified with the BQ gender category and a person who identified with the FQ gender category appeared as two completely different genders. BQs were gay men who dressed as a woman for the ball but did not have a feminine physique. FQs were male to female trans-people that did have a feminine physique. Judging between the two differing genders in a category that made feminine prettiness the primary focus would not be fair for the BQs. Similarly, a "drag queen" themed category would not work for FQs whose goal was to look like a real woman, not an over exaggerated woman as BQs presented themselves.¹⁰⁶

BQ categories included: "BQ Vogue/Vogue Fem", "BQ Runway", "Butch Queen up in Pumps", and "BQ in Drag Female Figure". Voguing was a highly stylized dance featured within ball culture that heavily featured BQs. Before the 1990s, participants vogueed in the Old Way. The Old Way was static with balletic poses transitioning from one to another. The Old Way had characterizations such as the formation of lines, symmetry, and precision in the execution of formations with fluid-like action. Egyptian hieroglyphs and fashion poses found in Vogue Magazine inspired the Old Way. Historically, the Old Way was a duel between two rivals, and

¹⁰⁶ Jackson, "The Social World of Voguing," 27; Bailey, *Butch Queens in Pumps*, 33-34; Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

traditionally one rival had to pin or trap the other making them motionless while the pinner (the person who trapped the opponent) continued voguing to win.¹⁰⁷

In 1990, the New Way dominated the performances in ball culture, and required much more athleticism and flexibility than the Old Way. The New Way was more rigid than the Old Way and involved clicks (limb contortions at the joints) and arm control (hand and wrist illusions) similarly to miming (a performance art that acts through body motions without speech). Vogue Fem is the current ball culture voguing. Elements of Vogue Fem derived from the original Old Way style that participants from the 1960s until 1990 performed.¹⁰⁸

Since 1981, the “BQ Vogue Fem” category allowed BQs to express their most feminine side. As contestants performed in the “BQ Vogue Fem” category, they added a twist to the femme queen dancing technique. BQ participants also performed using the five elements of voguer: hand placements, floor performance, catwalk, duckwalk, and spins followed by dips. Hand placements were part of a performer’s effort to tell a story. Floor performance defined a contestant’s sensuality. The objective was to use their body to attract the audience and judges’ attention twisting and rolling their body. The catwalk was an exaggerated fashion model walk. A participant would overdramatically walk in a feminine form where the legs crossed over the other as the hips thrust from side to side while the arms moved forward opposite of the legs. The duckwalk, literally imitating a duck’s walking that involved squatting on the heels and kicking the feet out while moving forward on beat. The showiest component of Vogue Fem were

¹⁰⁷ Mark Lindores, “A Brief History of Voguing,” *Mixmag.net*, October 10, 2018; Tim Lawrence, “Listen, and You Will Hear all the Houses that Walked There Before’: A History of Drag Balls, Houses and the Culture of Voguing,” in *Voguing and the Gay Ballroom Scene of New York City, 1989-92*, Photographs by Chantal Regnault, (New York City, NY: Soul Jazz, 2011); Livingston, *Paris is Burning*; Jackson, “The Social World of Voguing,” 26; Marcos Becquer and Jose Gatti, “Elements of Vogue” *Third Text* 5:(16–17) (September 1, 1991): 65–81; Oxygen Media, *The 5 Elements of Vogue with Leiomyl Maldonado - In Progress* | *Oxygen*, June 2, 2016.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

spins and dips. The spins and dips occurred when the participant turned on beat and dropped to the floor, this movement included death drops.¹⁰⁹

“BQ Runway”, “BQ in drag Female Figure”, and “Butch Queen up in Pumps” had similarities because the focus was appearance, unlike “BQ Vogue/Vogue Fem” where the category tested the competitors’ ability to vogue. “BQ Runway” judged the participants ability to catwalk. In contrast “BQ Runway” required judges to evaluate the outfit worn while catwalking. Participants could not wear street or casual outfits, they had to look like a model walking the runway. Sometimes, judges would request the participants wear a specific style or color. Nevertheless, this did not hinder the participants individuality because the contestant could still choose what they wanted to wear within the rules the judges created.¹¹⁰

“BQ in drag Female Figure” was a category where the participant presented themselves as a famous female figure who also sang and danced for the judges and audience. Lip synching a song by a famous female figure such as Dolly Parton, Madonna, Whitney Houston, the participants represented was the usual way BQs performed in this category. The famous female figure did not have to be a singer/musician, they could also be a historical figure such as Marie Antionette or film star, Marilyn Monroe. Nevertheless, presenting as a famous female singer was the most popular form for this category.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ True T. Staff, “The Ballroom Glossary: A List of Terms You Should Know,” *truotpgh: Celebrating Queer People of Color through Creative Art, Entertainment, Resource Sharing, and Activism*, February 28, 2019, <https://www.truotpgh.com/news/the-ballroom-glossary-a-list-of-terms-you-should-know>, Accessed August 10, 2020; Contributors, “The Ballroom Scene: A New Black Art,” *Black Youth Project*, October 21, 2009, <http://Blackyouthproject.com/ballroom-scene-a-new-Black-art/>, Accessed October 27, 2017; Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

For “Butch Queen up in Pumps,” judges looked for three qualities while the participant walked: the catwalk, the labels, and the six inch (or more) heels the participant wore and performed. Judging the catwalk quality for Butch Queen up in Pumps was exactly like the “BQ Runway” category. The labels’ quality meant that the judges focused on how many trendy fashion labels the participant wore as they walked and the label’s authenticity. To judge the labels, participants would go to the judges table, and the judges would pull out the garments label/tag and examine it. Judging the heels really meant how well the participant wore and walked in the high heels, correlating with the catwalk judging. This category did not change over time. In the label portion, the judges wanted to see change as new designers gained a reputation in mainstream America, and older designers fell out of stylistic favor.¹¹²

Femme Queen (FQ) Realness included: “FQ Runway”, “FQ Female Figure Performer”, “Female Figure”, and “FQ Performance”. “FQ Runway” and “FQ Female Figure Performer” had the same judging criteria as “BQ Runway” and “BQ in drag Female Figure”, except that the participants in the FQ version were more feminine. Judges for the “FQ Runway” and “FQ Female Figure Performer” looked for feminine qualities along with grace as the contestant walked. For the “FQ Runway” category, participants emulated high fashion models. This did not mean participants looked like Iman, Christie Brinkley, or Naomi Campbell. Instead, participants would study the way these models walked and the swagger the models presented as they walked. Ball culture icon Stephaun Elite Wallace Blahnik described the “Runway” category as:

Any female figures should walk straight up and down, incorporating poses, but leaving the “antics” out as much as possible (think European runway shows). The same applies for male figures, except that it is generally acceptable for them to give extra “antics” or shade or stunts. Effects and garments should “hold up” during [the] category and not fall off or fall apart.¹¹³

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Blahnik, “Ball Categories,”.

Judges and participants alike wanted the walk, outfit, persona (attitude), and physique to match high fashion models. Judges, who were usually older and legendary ball culture members, and participants observed these models by reading fashion magazines and watching New York/Paris/Milan fashion week videos. Judges considered high fashion model qualities as the participant walked to determine the category winner.¹¹⁴

“FQ Female Figure Performer” emulated famous female performers and performed for the judges and audience, usually lip-synching a song by the famous female figure the participants represented (Dolly Parton, Madonna, Whitney Houston) just like the BQs did in a parallel category. Similar to the “BQ in drag Female Figure”, the famous female figure (regardless of race) did not have to be a singer/musician, yet female singers were the most popular because participants wanted to lip sync a female singer’s song. “FQ Female Figure Performer” contestants did not dress in drag as their BQ counterparts did because FQs were male to female trans-people, there was no need to dress in drag.¹¹⁵

The “Female Figure” category was available for cis-gendered (person whose gender identity was the same as their sex assigned at birth) women, transwomen, and drag queens. Though, the category “Sex Siren/Sex Body” (described in the realness section of this thesis) included all genders. The “Female Figure” category, nevertheless, was only for transwomen. Stephaun Elite Wallace Blahnik described the “Female Figure” category as:

Think “strippers” or the hottest... feminine strip tease. Generally, the more skin revealed the better. This is not an exotic dance or “go-go” category. Feminine presentation is expected, in look and movement.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Blahnik, “Ball Categories,”; Contributors, “The Ballroom Scene,”; Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

This category was all about sex appeal for FQs. Wallace-Blahnik specified how the “Female Figure” category was not an erotic dance. Participants did move their body; although choreography did not apply to this category as it did for voguing categories. Judges based their scores on how the participant used their feminine bodies to present sex appeal. The “FQ Performance” category was the FQ version of the “BQ Vogue/Vogue Fem” category described previously. Only femme and transwomen could participate in this category because BQs had their own similar category where judges gave differing considerations based on the BQs body type. Voguing in the “FQ Performance” category mimicked the “BQ Vogue/Vogue Fem” category with the five voguing elements: hand performance, floor performance, catwalk, duckwalk, and spins/dips. On the other hand, the “FQ Performance” category, judges also scored participants’ feminine presentation.¹¹⁷

Realness

What is Realness?

For many ball culture participants realness was a way of life. Realness allowed them to morph into who they were on the inside, confirming their personal identity. Appearing as “straight” or a mainstream normative male or female defined realness. Ball culture members practiced realness from the 1980s to the present. The various threats to the LGBTQ+ community, forced ball culture participants to use realness as a way of life outside the balls. If the participant deceived a person with an “untrained eye”, the inability to identify someone’s sexuality based on appearance, then they could blend in with the public without enduring direct homophobia. Realness also served as a theme within ball culture competition categories. In the balls, realness

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

consisted of an energetic presentation of one's self-transformation into whichever themed category they participated. The participants attempted to perfect the thematic act of realness, but contestants were not trying to fool the judges and spectators.¹¹⁸

Realness, in its contemporary, has strayed away from ball culture's original meaning. Television shows that staged competing drag queens such as *RuPaul's Drag Race*, realness became an alteration of fantasy, not sexual realness. Today's realness no longer holds the same significance as realness in ball culture's golden age. This happened for two reasons. First, twenty-first century mainstream American society merged ball culture and drag queen as the same in gay culture. In doing this, twenty-first century drag queen culture appropriated ball culture's terms, phrases, and actions. Performing drag queens did not present themselves as real women. They wore dramatic makeup, overly padded hips and breasts, and assorted colors, lengths, and style wigs. Second, twenty-first century contemporary performance art had revitalized realness through urban music, fashion, and art. Rap and hip-hop artists, choreographers, and designers have taken realness and creatively made it match their own styles.¹¹⁹

"To Be Real" in Ball Culture Competitive Categories

In the 1980s, the New York City ball culture circuit's older participants were legendary queens such as Pepper LaBeija and Angie Xtravaganza. They usually held the "mother" or "father" title within the House system, so the younger participants looked up to their elders and listened to what they taught. The growing "direct homo/transphobia" in New York City during

¹¹⁸ Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

¹¹⁹ Owen G. Parry, "Fictional Realness: Towards a colloquial performance practice," *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, 20:5, (2015): 109; Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

the 1980s AIDS epidemic, pushed ball culture's more senior participants to teach the younger generation how to perfect realness. In "Paris is Burning", Dorian Corey described social world dangers, and the importance of executing realness correctly:

When they're undetectable, when they can walk out of that ballroom, into the sunlight and onto the subway, and get home and still have all their clothes and no blood running off their bodies, those are the Femme Realness Queens.¹²⁰

The elder participants taught realness by adding realness themed competition categories to the balls during the 1981 category expansion. During ball culture's golden age, 1981-1993, there were a few examples of realness themed competition categories, which were: "Upcoming Pretty Girl", "Schoolboy/Schoolgirl Realness", "Banjee Girl/Banjee Boy Realness", "Body", "Face", and "Sex Siren/Sexy Body". These six categories were not the only realness themed categories in ball culture. The categories listed above will be examined throughout this section to show how realness within ball culture competitions allowed individuality amongst competitors during the golden age when heterosexism threatened anyone who did not fit within the mainstream normative expression of one's sexuality.¹²¹

Before exploring the realness-themed competition categories, it is imperative to understand how important realness was within the competition. Realness was particularly important to the competitors. Participants insured that their outward appearance was identical to mainstream American heterosexism. Being mainstream was vital to participants because they wanted to blend in. Ball culture members believed that if they looked like everyone else in public, then they could walk the streets with no one noticing their sexuality. "Paris is Burning" provided an example. The judges were told that a competitor wore a woman's evening coat while

¹²⁰ Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

¹²¹ Lawrence, "A History of Drag Balls,"; Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

competing in the “Men’s Evening Wear” category. This sparked a screaming match during the competition between the competitor who claimed that he was wearing a men’s evening coat and the informant that came from a rival House. Knowing that this small detail would have him disqualified, the competitor showed the judges his coat, proving that it was a men’s coat repeatedly yelling, “The buttons are on the right side!” This spectacle left the audience throwing shade at each other, and saying that the situation itself was shady, all while laughing hysterically. This example shows that although the competition was all fun, these competitors were serious about realness. Although competitors were not trying to convince the audience that realness was a serious category, these competitors still wanted to make sure the details were right. Participants understood that outside of the balls, they could not make the mistake of wearing a woman’s evening coat when they were publicly “posing” as a heterosexual man, or vice versa. Mainstream society forced these participants to dress appropriately so that no one publicly could determine they were gay.¹²²

“Upcoming Pretty Girl” was a ball culture competition category during its golden age to the present era. The term “upcoming” in ball culture meant that a participant had competed in a ball before and had won at least one category. The term “pretty girl” meant exactly what it said – a conventional pretty girl. Femme queens (FQ) dominated the “Upcoming Pretty Girl” category because they better represented the idea of a pretty girl. It is unknown if any butch queens (BQ) participated in this category. The most important aspect of the “Upcoming Pretty Girl” category was the participant’s face. The judges based the score not only on the participant’s physical body, but how feminine their face looked. Looking like a white woman was not the object this category attempted to achieve; presenting literal facial beauty and mainstream style clothing was

¹²² Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

what participants and judges looked for. As the judges watched the participants walk, they had to objectively ask themselves, “Does this person look like a mainstream pretty woman walking down the street in New York City?” The answer to that question determined the scores, from one to ten, ten being the best. Then the judges awarded the winner a trophy. Ball culture judging had similarities to how beauty pageants were judged. After the participant finished “walking,” judges would rate them one through ten on how well they matched the competition category’s theme. Whoever had the highest score was declared the winner. The “Upcoming Pretty Girl” category had one rule: look like a 1980s mainstream American stylish pretty girl. During ball culture’s golden age (1981-1993), a “stylish pretty girl” had no race; it was about how they presented themselves. The participants could wear any outfit and style their hair or wear their makeup how they wanted, but only if they looked like a conventionally pretty and stylish girl found in fashion magazine (not high fashion) to match the category. Allowing the participants to express themselves in their looks, if they fit the themed category of “Upcoming Pretty Girl,” created individualism amongst participants.¹²³

The documentary “Paris is Burning” featured “Upcoming Pretty Girl 1986”. During this segment, two participants appear to walk for the category. One participant wore an outfit inspired by the 1986 New York City women’s fashion. They wore mainstream feminine attire such as a black see-through mesh tank top, a black leather skintight miniskirt, with gold jewelry and a matching gold headwrap. Their opponent wore a silky black top with a long yellow skirt and silver jewelry. While the two participants gave poses to show they were a “pretty girl”, the audience interacted by crowding around the two participants cheering and waving; so much so

¹²³ Ibid.

that the master of ceremonies (MC) asked the audience to back up and give the two participants “some air”.¹²⁴

“Schoolboy/Schoolgirl Realness” was a ball culture competition category created during the 1981 expansion period and continued into recent years. To participate, the competitor dressed as if they were a schoolboy or schoolgirl, usually in high school or college. The category’s realness aspect centered on passing as a mainstream normative heterosexual male or female, so that participants understood how to act and look in school. During the “Schoolboy/Schoolgirl Realness” category in “Paris is Burning,” Junior LaBeija, the master of ceremonies (MC), shouted to the audience, “Going to school. School. Elementary, high school, college. Not here [the ball] School. Looking like a girl going to school [high school/college]. Do [sic] she look like a girl going to school?” The amount of realness a competitor presented was a positive indicator of their aptness for the category. Depending on the host House, this category’s title changed to “BQ Schoolboy/FQ Schoolgirl Realness”, separating the BQs and FQs into distinct categories for better organization. These categories were present in “Paris is Burning” where contestants competed as either a schoolboy or a schoolgirl, based on what gender the competitor identified as. As they walked in this category, participants also resisted poverty by wearing popular Ivy League universities clothing such as Princeton and Harvard sweatshirts while carrying thick textbooks.¹²⁵

Black and Latinx gay men attempted to appear ordinary but “fabulous” as conformists to Western styling, clothing, and behavior. However, ball culture participants did not box their creativity only mainstream Western styling, and the competition categories mirrored this fact.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Blahnik, “Ball Categories,”; Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

The “Banjee Realness” competition category, for example, was an exception to the ordinary but “fabulous” styling where participants used “inner-city” stereotyping while competing that reflected 1980s poverty. Food Stamps was not a stereotype. It was reality, and reality was exactly what participants attempted to convey when performing “Banjee Realness”. In this category, Black and Latinx gay men dressed similarly to average New York City heterosexual Black male. Contestants mimicked the average New York City heterosexual Black male by standing, walking, and talking just as the ones that participants saw outside the balls. Contestants never used violence to mimic what they saw outside in the “Banjee Realness” category. The mimicry in the “Banjee Realness” category was like how contestants mimicked female beauty. Participants preferred to speak and used gestures to match whoever they were mimicking in the “Banjee Realness” category, making it easier to turn the mimicry into a performance.¹²⁶

“Banjee Realness” played on Black inner-city stereotypes. This category had been a part of ball culture since the 1981 category expansion. The description of Banjee differed from Banjee Boy or Banjee Girl. The term Banjee Boy was a gay man who presented himself as the stereotypical masculine Black man by wearing Black urban fashion such as popularized streetwear and spoke in a deeper tone to mask his homosexuality. The rarely used term Banjee Girl described a female – or in ball culture’s case, male-to-female transgender – who wore feminine streetwear and had physical female attributes to be more attractive to heterosexual males. Streetwear was a style of casual clothing worn by teenagers and young adults living in the city. In “Paris is Burning”, Junior LaBeija described the “Banjee Realness” category in a variety of ways:

¹²⁶ Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

Banji, looking like the boy that probably robbed you a few minutes before you came to Paris's Ball. Shake the dice and steal the rice! Right here. Come on, baby. Yes, Daddy, I got my food stamps and card waiting. All right. Dust coat, bay soap, Roloids, you got it. Sweetheart with the cigarette, you're giving me a Banji girl effect. This is Banji. You know, the girls that be on the corner talking about "young man." One that can hang out with the rough and the tough... Brenda Xtravaganza, looking like a Banji girl. Banji. Banji girl realness. You know, one that could take her little baby brother to school.¹²⁷

The statement also described impoverished Black/Latinx New Yorkers throughout the 1980s by depicting gambling games “shake the dice and steal the rice,” and stereotypes “looking like the boy that probably robbed you.” Tim’ m T. West, a gay Black man, described his experience as a “Banjee Boy” outside of the balls:

Banjee. That was the identity I was given back in the summer of 1991, when I, half out/half in approached... the Christopher Street piers. I was new to the life, so I had no reference for what people were talking about, but I soon gathered that "banjee" meant that I wasn't a "queen." Whatever the terms of identification, all I knew was that there was one thing that brought both the banjees and the queens (and whatever lies between) to the pier: we were men who loved men. An anxious 19-year-old, I wore my banjee realness designation like a badge of honor... a queen schooled me on how my masculinity was something that carried great weight, not only in the gay world, but the straight world as well.¹²⁸

To West, masculinity meant heterosexuality, and presenting heterosexuality in public held great psychological weight. Psychologist Joseph Pleck argued that a hierarchy of masculinity exists as a dichotomy of homosexual and heterosexual males: “Our society uses the male heterosexual-homosexual dichotomy as a central symbol for all the rankings of masculinity, for the division on any grounds between males who are “real men” and have power, and males who are not [real mean/homosexuals].” The male heterosexual-homosexual dichotomy Pleck described the social structure where heterosexual men had more “power” in society compared to homosexual men. It is unknown if ball culture used other stereotypical Black urban male categories. There is also no

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Tim’ m T. West, “Deconstruction Banjee Realness,” *Brave Soul Collective*, May 25, 2006, www.bravesoulcollective.org, Accessed November 17, 2017.

evidence that ball culture participants believed pimping and being in a gang, urban Black male stereotypes, was glamorous. During ball culture's golden age, 1981-1993, "Banjee Realness" helped participants blend with the heterosexual Black community in New York City. Participants wanted to blend in because their sexuality was considered forbidden by the Black community. Blending into the heterosexual Black community did not protect gay Black men from anti-Black police abuse and brutality because participants were still Black, they were just posing as heterosexual and hiding their homosexuality.¹²⁹

Celebrating the human body was another way ball culture presented realness. The "Face" category has been part of ball culture since the 1980s and focused only on the participant's face. In this category, participants showed evidence of femineity such as their perfect, clean, soft, and smooth face to the judges and audience. Participants with facial hair would receive deductions in their score because facial hair was masculine and not feminine. The True T. Staff, contributors who defined ball culture categories, described "Face" as:

One of the most critiqued ballroom categories because it is not a category you can learn. You have to be born with face or you have to go under the knife to achieve the 5 elements. Competitors compete by displaying their beauty to the judges who vote based on these elements: Teeth, Skins, Eyes, Nose, and Bone Structure. Fem Queen face is one of the most highly competitive and lucrative ballroom categories. to date.¹³⁰

FQs dominated the "Face" category because of the requirements. Soft and smooth were key words for an FQ's face. Stephaun Elite Wallace Blahnik of the Legendary House of Blahnik, titled the "Face" category as Femme Queen (FQ) Face. There were similarities between his

¹²⁹ Guy Trebay, "Legends of the Ball: Paris Is Still Burning," *The Village Voice*, January 12–18, 2000; Parry, "Fictional Realness," 108; Livingston, *Paris is Burning*; Joseph Pleck, "Understanding patriarchy and men's power," *National Organization for Men Against Sexism (NOMAS)*, August 19, 2012.

¹³⁰ Staff, "The Ballroom Glossary,".

description of the category and the True T. Staff's description. Wallace-Blahnik described the "Face" category as:

This person should be a transgender female (MTF). This category is designed to allow the participant to sell their face, like they are on a photo shoot set for a major fashion magazine. The point is to highlight their face, their best features, in the way they move down the runway, use their hands, and angle their face. The elements of face are: eyes, teeth, skin (tone/complexion), structure, and nose. Consider whether you would likely see this person [of color] grace the cover of major fashion magazines.¹³¹

Touching the face helped determine the softness and smoothness especially around the chin, where facial hair could grow, in the "Face" category. Junior LaBeija, the master of ceremonies at the "Paris is Burning" ball, encouraged the femme queen participants as they walked in the "Face" category. "Are they soft? Looking from head to toe, would you know? Is this realness or not? Let it be motherfucking hot. Miss Octavia, you don't feel this realness?" This quote perfectly represented the assessment the Black and Latinx judges had during the "Face category". The judges wanted realness, and whichever participant's face looked and felt the most like a real woman's, regardless of race, would win.¹³²

The realness themed "Body" competitive category focused only on the participant's body. The category was created during the 1981 category expansion period and continued in contemporary ball culture. In this category, participants walked the floor showing off their male or female body, since this was the category's objective. Judges wanted to measure the participant's (femme queens) waist and bust and critique their curves and hips to the ideal body type. The measurements wanted by the judges were 36-24-36 inches. 36 inches for both the bust and hips and 24 inches for the waist. Judges wanted to see defined muscles and stereotypical

¹³¹ Blahnik, "Ball Categories,".

¹³² Blahnik, "Ball Categories,"; Contributors, "The Ballroom Scene,"; Staff, "The Ballroom Glossary,"; Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

maleness on the men. Judges did not critic the participant's skin color in the "Body" category, only their body shape. During ball culture's golden age, and onto recent times, a conventionally beautiful body had no race. What mattered was the body's shape, tone, and muscles. It is unknown if gay Black and Latinx men hoped for a "raceless" society, but they did hope for a society that was not judgmental.¹³³

"Body" category contestants usually wore revealing outfits, although some male to female transgenders walked the floor completely naked. "Luscious Body" was an alternative title for this realness themed category and was featured in the documentary "Paris is Burning". The "Sex Siren/Sexy Body" category was like the "Body" Category. This category focused on the participants body and sex appeal to the audience and judges. While the participant walked the floor during this category, they presented sex appeal by wearing sexy underwear such as thongs, briefs, or bikinis. This allowed participants to express their individuality with their physical body, since all human's physical bodies are naturally individualistic because no two bodies were the same.¹³⁴

Real World Realness

Ball culture participants wanted to be real and accomplished in differing ways. Ball culture used realness as a shield against mainstream societal heterosexism. Outside the balls, participants who were openly gay suffered homophobia. Ball culture accepted openly gay men and these men felt unity amongst their peers during the balls. The balls were created out of defiance against racial discrimination Black and Latinx participants experienced at white balls.

¹³³ Contributors, "The Ballroom Scene,"; Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

The 1981 category expansion solidified ball culture's inclusiveness philosophy. Pepper LaBeija described the balls as:

A ball is the very word. Whatever you want to be, you be. So, at a ball, you have a chance to display your elegance, your seductiveness, your beauty, your wit, your charm, your knowledge. You can become anything and do anything right here, right now, and it won't be questioned. I came, I saw, I conquered. That's a ball.¹³⁵

This philosophy has carried ball culture to the present. The quote, "Whatever you want to be, you be," meant that members could attend balls and be who they wanted to be. Exclusiveness did not exist in ball culture because participants understood how discrimination felt because of their race and sexuality, they did not want to discriminate against other people by saying they could not be a part of ball culture. Pepper LaBeija stated, "and it won't be questioned," meant exactly that: in ball culture, the only people who judged were the Judges. Other participants were not going to harass someone simply because of the way they looked. This was the reason ball culture from the 1980s on, became inclusive.

Although ball culture became inclusive during the 1980s, it did not mean the outside world also became inclusive. Dorian Corey, a legendary ball culture queen, explained realness as:

They [ball culture members] give the society that they live in what they want to see, and they won't be questioned. Rather than having to go through prejudices about your life and your lifestyle, you can walk around comfortably, blending in with everybody else. You've erased all the mistakes, all the flaws, all the giveaways, to make your illusion perfect.¹³⁶

Portraying a heterosexual in public was the 'illusion' members were trying to perfect. This was what Dorian Corey explained. "The mistakes, the flaws, the giveaways" was homosexuality, which was not accepted in mainstream American society. During ball culture's golden age

¹³⁵ Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

mainstream America believed that homosexuality was unnatural and a flaw. Despite the LGBTQ+ community appearing in mainstream society in the 1970s, the 1980s AIDS epidemic pushed many homosexuals back into the shadows preventing any public expressions of their sexuality. The growing “direct homo/transphobia” in New York City during the AIDS epidemic pushed ball culture participants to perfect realness in public. Members feared the violence they could face if their sexuality was outed publicly.¹³⁷

Femme queens (FQ) practiced realness daily and if someone exposed them as a trans-person, they could face hate and violence from the public. Femme queens were male-to-female transgender or transsexual. Transgenders or trans-people were individuals who identified with a gender different than the one assigned at birth. Transsexual was a term for individuals who had Gender Reassignment Surgery (GRS) to change the sexual organs they were born with to a different gender. Since the 1980s, transsexual ball culture participants felt freer with their gender and realness after having GRS. One femme queen featured in the documentary “Paris is Burning”, named Brooke Xtravaganza, accomplished her dream that many femme queens had: to undergo GRS and become full-fledged women. In the documentary, she told viewers how she recently had the “sex change surgery”. She wanted to show it to the world by walking on the beach in a woman’s bathing suit. Carmen Xtravaganza, a transwoman, accompanied Brooke. Carmen wore a bathing suit as well but wore shorts to “cover” herself. Both Brooke and Carmen had feminine physiques and feminine facial features. Brooke and Carmen Xtravaganza were able to blend in with the public without anyone noticing anything different about them.¹³⁸

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ “TransGriot Ten Questions Interview-Carmen Xtravaganza” *TransGriot.com*, August 19, 2013; Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

Octavia St. Laurent, another FQ in “Paris is Burning” also embodied feminine realness similar to the Xtravaganzas. St. Laurent dreamed of becoming a model. She traveled to her modeling auditions with the documentary film crew following closely behind. The filmmakers documented St. Laurent’s auditions. St. Laurent blended perfectly with over one thousand cisgender women. No one knew St. Laurent was a trans-person.¹³⁹

Venus Xtravaganza also embodied realness. St. Laurent and Xtravaganza envisioned the day they could undergo GRS to be transformed into full-fledged women. They understood though that their dreams may not come to fruition because GRS was expensive. Pepper LaBeija, on the other hand, did not agree with her peers about getting their sex changed. “I would never have a sex change... women don’t live the fabulous life. They get beat up, robbed, and raped.” The fact that some BQ participants acknowledged that a cisgender woman’s life was in no way fabulous was important. Several FQs in “Paris is Burning” did fantasize about being a female, however, they believed that they were born a female in a male’s body. With that belief, it was understandable why trans-people continued their transition regardless of the consequences.¹⁴⁰

BQs used realness differently than FQs. Outside of the balls, BQs walked the streets dressed as a man. BQs did not have to worry about looking like a “real” man because that was the gender they were born. What BQs did have to worry about when they stepped out into heterosexual society was how they behaved, spoke, moved, dressed, and replicated heterosexual masculinity. BQs could be themselves in ball culture without fear because no one questioned their sexuality. Political, religious, and medical threats forced some BQs to hide their sexuality

¹³⁹ Petter Wallenburg, “Octavia St. Laurent’s Last Interview” *dazeddigital.com*, November 20, 2014; Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

¹⁴⁰ Angela Helm, “Gay History is Black History: These 10 Icons Prove It,” *TheRoot* June 29, 2019; Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

from their family, coworkers, preachers, and even doctors. Homophobia made life much more difficult for BQs, so they used realness to their advantage by “posing” as Black/Latinx heterosexual men. BQs did this so no one recognized that they were homosexual, making their lives safer in a world filled with threats against them.¹⁴¹

Conclusion

The mainstream heteronormative societal threats to the LGBTQ+ community made it difficult for homosexuals to express themselves and their individuality. Those threats reached ball culture members, pressuring them to stay sexually hidden. Yet, the balls served as a safe space for members to express their individuality. Black drag queens were not the only LGBTQ+ members that felt shunned because of their race. The white LGBTQ+ members added to the challenges facing Black and Latinx gay men with racist attitudes that made it difficult for any homosexual or trans-person of color to feel accepted. Ball culture members craved acceptance, so they created a safe space, the balls, where people not only felt accepted but were encouraged to express themselves and their individuality while finding and understanding their identity. Since the 1981 category expansion period to contemporary ball culture, queerness and realness themed competition categories allowed for individual expression. No one wanted to walk the floor looking the same as another competitor. Participants wanted to express their creativity amongst their peers and the balls were the perfect place to do this.

¹⁴¹ Ryan, “Homophobic? Maybe You’re Gay,”; “Handling Homophobic Reaction,” *Region of Peel*; Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

CHAPTER 5: “WE HAVE HAD EVERYTHING TAKEN AWAY FROM US AND YET WE HAVE ALL LEARNED HOW TO SURVIVE”: HOW PARODY AND IDENTITY RACE-BASED COMPETITION CATEGORIES DURING BALL CULTURE’S GOLDEN AGE DIFFERED FROM THE RACISM AND POVERTY PARTICIPANTS EXPERIENCED

Introduction

Just imagine if I had the dollars! Poh, it would be too much for the world. If I had the riches that I had the fame, trust me, all of you all in here would be rich for points. 'Cause I'm very generous, you know. I can't... I wouldn't enjoy having a whole lot of money, like being a millionaire and hoarding it, you know? I'd share it with all my loved ones, you know. I'd want them to have it, too. We'd all have to go. I'd want to charter a plane and we'd all fly to Paris.¹⁴²

Pepper LaBeija did not know how it felt to be wealthy, yet she imagined it. She knew she would be generous with her wealth and share her fortune amongst her loved ones. Impoverished, LaBeija already knew what she would do if she had “the dollars”. LaBeija was poor, Black, and gay, and being a minority in both race and sexuality during the 1980s led to an exceedingly difficult life. Although ball culture members knew this, they refused to accept it and used the balls and the competition categories as an outlet to express themselves. Participants could be wealthy and fabulous during the balls, and contestants felt relief and joy away from their lives outside the balls while performing in race-based competition categories.¹⁴³

This chapter does not erase ball culture members’ sexuality, but instead highlights the members’ race and social class and how this not only affected their lives, but also affected ball culture and its creation of race-based competition categories. During the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1968, New York City dealt with white resistance to racial equality, especially when it came to desegregating neighborhoods and schools. Since many ball culture golden age members were children during the Civil Rights Movement, this chapter will analyze examples of

¹⁴² Jennie Livingston, *Paris is Burning* Directed by Jennie Livingston (New York: Off White Productions, 1991) video.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

demonstrations for and against desegregating schools and neighborhoods. Twentieth century racism and discrimination and residential segregation defined New York City neighborhoods. Harlem, the Bronx, and Bedford Stuyvesant were three neighborhoods that ball culture members lived during ball culture's golden age. The examination of the three neighborhoods will bring a better understanding on the racial tension in these majority Black and Latinx neighborhoods.

This chapter also discusses how New York City dealt with bankruptcy in the 1970s, causing a social collapse within the Black and Latinx communities because of the lack of city funds. This caused many golden age participants to experience growing up in a poverty-stricken environment. As they grew up in impoverished households, ball culture members also watched the luxurious life of wealthy white Americans on television. Not only were there television shows based around wealthy white Americans, but television commercials never showed the impoverished life ball culture members lived – only white Americans who lived in a single-family-household with a lawn in a safe neighborhood. Everything ball culture members saw from the 1960s to the twenty-first century television and other media presented the “American Dream” dressed up as wealthy white Americans. Understanding economic differences between white New Yorkers and Black/Latinx New Yorkers will help with the explanation on why Black and Latinx members created categories such as “CEO Realness” and “Military Realness”, occupations dominated by heterosexual white Americans.

The generalized term “white New Yorkers” will be used when explaining racist instances from the 1960s to the 1990s. Unfortunately, naming specific actors who publicly expressed racist statements to the Black/Latinx community is impossible. This is because, when interviewed by reporters, the person who made the racist statement did not give their name. There are examples within this chapter where a person who made a racist statement is named. Nevertheless, when the

term “white New Yorkers” is used, the discussion is centered on the racism publicly expressed by specific white New Yorkers recorded by media. These statements and actions were not reflective of all white New Yorkers, and if there is an example where a white New Yorker is specifically not racist and their name is unknown, it will be stated as such. The term “wealthy white New Yorkers” is utilized as a separate entity from the generic “white New Yorkers”, where the analysis only looks at the social status of the white New Yorker and not their views on race.

Anytime the term “media” or “mainstream media” is used in this chapter, it is referring to newspaper articles and video recorded interviews broadcasted on television, that reflected and shaped the American mainstream. This chapter will also examine the impact of other media forms such as television, movies, music, and art. These media forms depicted the “fabulous life” as the “white” life. White actors dominated 1980s television shows such as *Dynasty* and *Dallas*. Television commercials and newspaper/magazine advertisements used white people as models/actors and rarely depicted the Black/Latinx American lifestyle. Lacking positive representation in various American media forms, ball culture members created “parody race-based categories,” mimicking rich white Americans. Ball culture categories did not erase gay, Black, and Latinx identity whereby media images did not recognize blackness and Latinx culture as American. The parody race-based categories allowed members to dress and present themselves as fabulous and wealthy even though that was not their reality. Unfortunately, because the consistent depiction of wealth being “white”, ball culture members used the depictions as inspiration for the parody race-based categories.

Residential Segregation and Black/Latinx Neighborhoods in New York City

There were two periods in the twentieth century where the general white population in New York City openly expressed disdain for Black/Latinx New Yorkers. These periods were the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1968 and the 1980s. For the Civil Rights Movement, the years 1954 through 1968 were chosen for a specific reason. In 1954, the Supreme Court case *Brown vs. Board of Education*, deemed segregation unconstitutional. Twentieth century New York City neighborhoods were segregated, de facto segregation, not legally enforced segregation. In New York City, this court case ignited the Black and Latinx community's fight to end segregation in schools and residential areas. In 1968, several riots occurred in New York City after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., a Black preacher and civil rights activist. In the same year, many white Americans believed Richard Nixon's "southern strategy" and elected him to the presidency. These two events in 1968 ended the Civil Rights Movement.¹⁴⁴

White Resistance to Desegregation in New York City Residential Areas

White New York City journalists, homeowners, renters, the upper-class, the working-class, police commissioners, union leaders, criminal court judges, and mayors enjoyed the economic advantages racial residential segregation brought. Many resisted changes when the Black population demanded desegregation in neighborhoods and schools in the early 1960s. The reason for this section is to show white resistance to racial equality in New York City. New York City took pride in its racial diversity, yet it was one of the most racially segregated cities in the United States. Ball culture members lived in Black and Latinx neighborhoods such as Harlem, Bedford Stuyvesant, and the South Bronx, and rarely visited white neighborhoods. It is important

¹⁴⁴ Dr. W. Marvin Dulaney, "The Day the Civil Rights Movement Ended," *The Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza*, April 4, 2018.

to first note instances of white resistance before explaining the 1980s white violence against Black men. Describing the Jim Crow North and how white New Yorkers reacted to the push for racial equality will give a better understanding on why parody and identity race-based categories existed during ball culture's golden age.¹⁴⁵

In 1947, a white only residential neighborhood, Stuyvesant Town, opened in Manhattan, New York City. Although Stuyvesant Town was racially segregated, the money used to construct the community came from New York state taxpayers because the project was to bring modern housing to New Yorkers. Racial restrictions made it impossible for Black New Yorkers to live in the neighborhood, even though their taxes helped pay for the construction. Upset by the developer's discrimination, some Black New Yorkers decided to sue the developer in the court case, *Dorsey v. Stuyvesant Town Corporation*, 1949. The New York Supreme Court protected segregation and sided with the unnamed Stuyvesant Town developers claim that the development was private and therefore entitled to segregate the community as it saw fit. The New York Supreme Court was decisive in its segregation decision, ignoring the fact that New York state taxpayers paid for Stuyvesant Town's construction and not from the developers' private funds.¹⁴⁶

During the 1960s, New York City's racism problem came to national attention. Reports by the newspapers and televised news on white New Yorkers protesting desegregation forced the United States to recognize that the legitimization of anti-Black racism, did in fact exist in the

¹⁴⁵ Bruce Bartlett, *Wrong on Race: The Democratic Party's Buried Past* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008), 24; Elizabeth Schmermund, *Reading and Interpreting the Works of Harper Lee* (Berkeley Heights, NJ: Enslow Publishing, 2016), 27; Ingrid Gould Ellen, Jessica Yager, and Maxwell Austensen, "Chapter 2 – Housing: The Paradox of Inclusion and Segregation in the Nation's Melting Pot," in *Racial Inequality in New York City, 1965-2015 and Beyond*, edited by Benjamin P. Bowser and Chelli Devadutt, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019), 9; Brian Purnell and Jeanne Theoharis, "How New York City became the capital of the Jim Crow North," *The Washington Post*, August 23, 2017.

¹⁴⁶ *Dorsey v. Stuyvesant Town Corp.*, 299 N.Y. 512, 87 N.E.2d 541 (N.Y. 1949); Prunell and Theoharis, "How New York City,".

North. Whether it meant desegregation in schools or in neighborhoods, many white citizens resisted desegregation. Malcolm X, a Black civil rights activist in the 1950s and 1960s, observed:

Ultraliberal New York had more integration problems than Mississippi. The North's liberals have been for so long pointing accusing fingers at the South and getting away with it that they have fits when they are exposed as the world's worst hypocrites.¹⁴⁷

There were many examples that substantiated Malcolm X's claim. During the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1968, whites in New York City did not want integration, and they protested anytime desegregation arose. White New Yorkers were content in their neighborhoods and schools and were not willing to change that, regardless of the "melting pot" or "all races living in harmony" persona New Yorkers showed the world.¹⁴⁸

Black/Latinx New Yorkers wanted integrated schools and neighborhoods, while White New Yorkers did not. Specifics on who protested are unknown, yet these protests effected all New Yorkers. Black/Latinx people in New York City attempted to convince city government to desegregate schools when the United States Supreme Court ruled that the concept "separate but equal" was unconstitutional in *Brown vs. Board of Education*, 1954. From the 1950s to the 1960s, they organized, held meetings and rallies, but the city government did nothing to desegregate neighborhoods and schools.¹⁴⁹

On January 31, 1964, the *New York Times* editorial board wrote a scathing review on New York City civil rights demonstrations. The editors wrote that Black and Puerto Rican boycotters were "hellbent", "reckless", "stubborn", "close minded", and "can do no good". The

¹⁴⁷ Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcom X* (New York: Ballentine Books, 2015), 276.

¹⁴⁸ Prunell and Theoharis, "How New York City,".

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

editorial board believed, “The [Black/Latinx] children should be in school getting the best education they can to cope with a world in which they are bound to be at a regrettable disadvantage anyway.” The editorial did not deter the Black/Latinx community from demanding desegregation in New York City neighborhoods and schools and protests continued. On February 3, 1964, frustrated with the lack of results, over 460,000 students and teachers stayed out of school to protest the absence of a comprehensive desegregation plan for New York City schools, making it the largest United States civil rights demonstration.¹⁵⁰

On March 3, 1964, more than 10,000 white mothers marched in Brooklyn, New York City to protest “school pairing” another term for desegregating schools. White protesters shouted, “we’ve got troubles of our own; so why not keep us close to home; please, oh, please leave us alone; stop zoning, zoning, zoning.” One person at the protest noted, “this is the biggest demonstration that’s ever been held at City Hall.” The city listened to the white parents’ demands and stopped attempting desegregation in 1964. The media coverage differed from the protest held by Black and Latinx parents in January and February. Not only was there more media coverage, but the tone differed too. Interviewed white protesters were described as civilized Americans using their first amendment right. While words such as “hellbent” and “close-minded” defined Black/Latinx protesters. The imagery demonstrated that the races were portrayed differently in American mainstream media.¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ The New York Times Editorial Board, “A Boycott Solves Nothing,” *The New York Times*, January 31, 1964; Adam Sanchez, “The Largest Civil Rights Protest You’ve Never Heard Of: Teaching the 1964 New York City School Boycott,” *rethinking schools*, vol. 32, no. 2, (Winter 2019-20); Prunell and Theoharis, “How New York City,”.

¹⁵¹ Fred Powledge, “OPPOSE SHIFTING OF PUPILS: Demonstrators March at City Hall Against Board of Education’s Integration Plan: More than 10,000 March in Protest on School Pairing MARCHING THROUGH PROTESTS PAIRING,” *New York Times*, March 13, 1964.

Unfortunately, anti-blackness amongst white New Yorkers at every social level was the reality for Black residents. The fight for racial desegregation in New York City residential areas and schools brought protests and resistance from white New Yorkers. Members were not blind to the fact that racism existed and that they were targeted not only because they were gay, but because they were Black. In “Paris is Burning,” Pepper LaBeija described how it felt to be Black not only in New York City but in America:

And when it come to the minorities, especially black, we as a people, for the past 400 years, is the greatest example of behavior modification in the history of civilization. We have had everything taken away from us and yet we have all learned how to survive.¹⁵²

Ball culture participants had to learn how to survive because their race and sexuality differed from the normalized heterosexual white American that had been in place since the colonial era. Pepper LaBeija’s quote did not just apply to ball culture participants, but all Black Americans. Black Americans were constantly reminded that their lives were not like white Americans, so their lives did not matter. This problem about whose life mattered based on race, sexuality, and economic class, continues in the present.¹⁵³

Predominant Black and Latinx Neighborhoods in New York City: Harlem, Bedford-Stuyvesant, and the South Bronx

Many Black/Latinx ball culture participants were homeless or lived impoverished areas in New York City neighborhoods such as Harlem, Bedford-Stuyvesant, and the South Bronx. The statistics on how many ball culture participants lived in these neighborhoods is unknown. In “Paris is Burning,” these neighborhoods were mentioned along with location markers such as

¹⁵² Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

¹⁵³ Prunell and Theoharis, “How New York City,”.

certain piers and streets participants spent time together. These three neighborhoods are the focus as a result.

Every generation, New York City experienced shifts in who lived in each neighborhood. During the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, majority Black neighborhoods in New York City lived in middle class to poverty to gentrification social shifts. A majority of the twentieth century – from the Great Depression (1929-1936) until the mid-1990s – Black New York City neighborhoods were impoverished, heavily patrolled by the NYPD, and when residents asked for help, the city government ignored them.¹⁵⁴

During World War II, shipbuilding jobs drew Black Harlem residents to Brooklyn neighborhoods such as Fort Greene and Bedford-Stuyvesant, increasing the Black population. In 1961, Alfred Clark, a *New York Times* reporter referred Bedford-Stuyvesant as “Brooklyn’s little Harlem.” High unemployment and continued de facto residential segregation brought racial unrest in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Those factors along with Black residents’ belief that the NYPD was oppressive and racially biased, led to urban riots in 1967 and 1968.¹⁵⁵

Harlem functioned as the primary neighborhood for New York City’s Black population from the 1920s to the 1960s and continues to be the heart of the city’s Black cultural heritage. In

¹⁵⁴ Andy A. Beveridge, “Harlem’s Shifting Population,” *Gotham Gazette: The Place for New York Policy and Politics*, September 2, 2008; Robert A.M. Stern, David Fishman, and Jacob Tilove, *New York 2000: Architecture and Urbanism Between the Bicentennial and the Millennium* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 2006), 1016; Alphonso Pinkney, and Roger Woock, *Poverty and Politics in Harlem* (New Haven, Conn.: College & University Press Services, Inc., 1970), 33; Georgios Pan. Piperopoulos, “Review,” *Contemporary Sociology* 1, no. 4 (1972): 338-40.

¹⁵⁵ Alfred E. Clark, “GANG WARS UPSET AREA IN BROOKLYN; Bedford – Stuyvesant Tense Following Two Slayings,” *The New York Times*, May 2, 1961; Andrew Darien, “Police Fraternity and the Politics of Race and Class in New York City, 1941-1960,” *Regional Labor Review*, (Spring 2000): 29-37; Suzanne Spellen (aka Montrose Morris), “Walkabout: Saving Bedford Stuyvesant, Part 3,” *Brownstoner*, May 24, 2011.

1910, the Black population in Harlem was at ten percent. The Black population increased to thirty-three percent in 1920 and skyrocketed to seventy percent by 1930.¹⁵⁶

Between the 1950s to the 1980s, Harlem's Black population declined, affected by suburbanization, public-housing construction, crime, drugs, and disinvestment in the private housing stock. Only increasingly poor Black residents stayed in Harlem, and many lived in public-housing projects such as Esplanade Gardens and Polo Grounds Towers and subsidized housing. At the end of the 1970s, the New York City government revoked the titles from 70% of the private rental units in Harlem. Needing funding, in 1985, New York City auctioned off Harlem properties to the public at below market value.¹⁵⁷

Since the early twentieth century integrated balls, Harlem served as the place to host balls. In 1936, *The New York Amsterdam News* reported a "masquerade" (drag) ball that attracted 5,000 mixed gender and race participants and observers. The reporter described queens in beautiful dresses squabbling with each other. After ball culture's creation, Harlem continued to serve as the primary location to host the balls. "Paris is Burning" was filmed in Harlem at the Imperial Lodge of Elks. During ball culture's golden age, drag queens, gay men, and trans

¹⁵⁶ John Mollenkopf, "The Evolution of New York City's Black Neighborhoods," *Metropolitics*, May 9, 2017, Accessed August 20, 2020, <https://metropolitiques.eu/The-Evolution-of-New-York-City-s-Black-Neighborhoods>; Michael Oreskes, "Census Traces Radical Shifts in New York City's Population," *The New York Times*, September 20, 1982; John R. Logan, Weiwei Zhang, and Miao Chunyu, "Emergent Ghettos: Black Neighborhoods in New York and Chicago, 1880-1940," *AJS; American journal of sociology*, 120(4), (January 2015): 1055-94. <https://doi.org/10.1086/680680>; Themis Chronopoulos, "African Americans, Gentrification, and Neoliberal Urbanization: the Case of Fort Greene, Brooklyn," *Journal of African American Studies*, vol.20 (September 2016): 294-322, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12111-016-9332-6>; Hilary Botein, "From Redlining to Subprime Lending: How Neighborhood Narratives Mask Financial Distress in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn," *Housing Policy Debate*, vol. 23, no. 4, (2013): 718.

¹⁵⁷ Mollenkopf, "The Evolution of New York,"; Daniel Knapp and Kenneth Polk, "Scouting the War on Poverty: Social Reform in the Kennedy Administration," *Social Forces*, Volume 52, Issue 3, (March 1974): 428-29.

women of color from several notable Houses competed at the Imperial Lodge of Elks, including those from the House of LaBeija, the House of Xtravaganza, and the House of Ninja.¹⁵⁸

In 1930, 57.1% of the Bronx population was Jewish, but white flight occurred in the 1950s. The South Bronx went from being two-thirds non-Hispanic white in 1950 to being two-thirds Black and Puerto Rican in 1960. Urban decay was a term used to describe when a previously functioning part of a city deteriorated, causing the community despair and decrepitude. In the 1960s, the South Bronx began to experience urban decay, with the construction of the Cross Bronx Expressway that cut through South Bronx, displacing thousands of residents, and local businesses. South Bronx decline continued as property value decreased and racial tensions amongst residents grew. The South Bronx attracted street gangs and drug dealers. In the 1970s, an arson epidemic affected the South Bronx. By 1977, dozens of buildings and sometimes whole blocks burned. By the 1970s, the South Bronx became the neighborhood with the highest murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, and arson crimes in America. In total 40% of the South Bronx was burned or abandoned between 1970 and 1980. During the late 1970s, “the Bronx is Burning” was a common phrase applied to the fires in the South Bronx. Although the title “Paris is Burning” was similar to “the Bronx is Burning,” Paris Dupree who hosted the ball created the title to mean that the competition would be “hot” or exciting.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ Ulysses, “Remember: The Legendary Imperial Lodge of Elks,” *Harlem + Bespoke*, January 12, 2015; Livingston, *Paris is Burning*; George Chauncey, “The Harlem Drag Ball Scene,” *Columbia News*, May 29, 2019; Karyl J. Truesdale, “Striking a Pose: A History of House Balls,” *Council of Fashion Designers of America*, August 3, 2018; Stephan Roberston, “Perry Brown: A Lodge member’s life in Harlem,” *Digital Harlem Blog*, July 15, 2010; “Drag Balls at Imperial Lodge of Elks,” *NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project*, <https://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/imperial-lodge-of-elks/>, Accessed February 17, 2020; “Gracious Me! Dear, 'Twas to-Oo Divine: Things were Leaping at Hamilton Lodge’s Ball, and the “Chicks” were Ogling,” *The New York Amsterdam News (1922-1938)*, March 7, 1936. <https://librarylink.uncc.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.librarylink.uncc.edu/docview/226150233?accountid=14605>.

¹⁵⁹ Jesse Green, “Paris Has Burned,” *New York Times*, April 18, 1993; Seymour J. Perlin, “Historical Survey: Remembrance of Synagogues Past: The Lost Civilization of the Jewish South Bronx,” *bronxsynagogues.org*, Accessed September 7, 2020, http://www.bronxsynagogues.org/ic/bronxsyn/about_the_author.html?id=kxxALAvy; Denton Tarver, “The New Bronx: A Quick History of the Iconic Borough,” *Cooperator: New York*, April 2007;

During the 1980s, Harlem, Bedford-Stuyvesant, and the South Bronx were impoverished New York City neighborhoods where ball culture participants lived. Harlem and the South Bronx suffered from the 1960s to the early 1980s when New York City began to face bankruptcy. During ball culture's golden age, it seemed that New York City would fall apart. Unfortunately for ball culture members, they lived right in the middle of the urban decay that ravaged the neighborhoods.

Stereotypes, Drug Use, and Poverty during the 1980s in New York City

During the 1980s, many white New Yorkers blamed the city's many problems on the Black/Latinx communities. Blaming the city's problems on the Black/Latinx communities created stereotypes, or a generalized belief about a group of people. Drug use and poverty affected ball culture members. For some members, the balls became an outlet so that they were not so dependent on drug use. The balls were also an outlet away from the poverty they experienced outside the balls. Participants' perceptions of their status as human beings in life were instrumental in forming the race-based ball culture competition categories.¹⁶⁰

Stereotypes of Black People in New York City during the 1980s

In the 1980s, stereotypes perpetuating Black men and women as the lowest class in society were created and portrayed by the media. Black men were depicted as drug dealers, crack

Robert Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York* (New York: Knopf, 1974), 893-94; Matthew Purdy, "Left to Die, the South Bronx Rises from Decades of Decay," *The New York Times*, November 13, 1994; Joe Flood, "Why the Bronx Burned," *New York Post*, May 16, 2010; Jim Rooney, *Organizing the South Bronx*, (New York: SUNY Press, 1994), 57-58; Terry Wynn, "South Bronx Rises Out of the Ashes," *NBC News*, January 17, 2005; Manny Fernandez, "In the Bronx, Blight Gave Way to Renewal," *The New York Times*, October 5, 2007; Bob Henderson, "A Night on Patrol with the NYPD," *Newsweek*, June 6, 2015; "Ridgewood to Maspeth," *All-City New York*, February 21, 2008.

¹⁶⁰ William J. Drummond, "About Face: From Alliance to Alienation. Blacks and the News Media," *The American Enterprise*, v1 n4 (Jul-Aug 1990): 22-29.

victims, poor, homeless, and muggers. Black women were welfare queens or angry, loud, aggressive, demanding, and uncivilized.¹⁶¹

Black American stereotypes portrayed in the media further stigmatized how mainstream American society viewed Blacks. For example, after a white mob beat, shot, and killed a sixteen-year-old named Yusuf Hawkins in 1989, Black New Yorkers protested that the white mob should be charged and held accountable for the murder. In 1990, during one protest, white New Yorkers sneered and mocked the Black protestors. “You’re all a bunch of crack heads,” shouted one white onlooker featured in the *New York Times*.¹⁶²

Jesse Jackson, a Black civil rights activist, minister, and politician, argued that Blacks were portrayed as “less intelligent” in the media compared to how whites were portrayed. The news media used pervasive stereotypes to make Black people seem immoral. Black Americans were more likely to appear as perpetrators in drug and violent crime stories on local network news. According to Lawrence Grossman, former president of CBS News and PBS, the media also “disproportionately show African Americans under arrest, living in slums, on welfare, and in need of help from the [white] community.” These portrayals did not accurately represent all Black Americans, because Black Americans were not a monolith. Nevertheless, Grossman, described the racialized attitudes of mainstream American culture.¹⁶³

In the 1980s, ball culture members hid their sexuality when out in public using sexual realness. They could not, however, hide their race. The media and the white community did not separate the Black community based on sexuality, meaning that they saw all Black people as a

¹⁶¹ Drummond, “About Face,”.

¹⁶² John Kifner, “Bensonhurst Aftermath; After 2nd Bensonhurst Verdict, A March Amid Cries for Calm,” *The New York Times*, May 20, 1990.

¹⁶³ “Jackson Assails Press On Portrayal of Blacks,” *The New York Times*, September 19, 1985; Lawrence Grossman, “From bad to worse: Black images on “White” news,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, Jul/Aug 2001.

monolithic stereotypical entity. It did not matter if a Black person was heterosexual or homosexual, they were Black, and to the media and the white community, their blackness was dangerous. Ball culture members knew this and had to live with the double anxiety of being gay and Black. Members that were Black also had to learn how to survive the racist environment they were born into. Their sexuality did not separate them from the racism Black people experienced.¹⁶⁴

The stereotype that all Black men were drug dealers or drug users was false. In the 1980s, all races, genders, and ages in America used drugs. Drugs also effected the LGBTQ+ community and ball culture. For many in the LGBTQ+ community, drugs became an outlet to ease the pain from experiencing homophobia. Some ball culture participants used drugs. Conversely, many believed that the balls were the drug they needed to feel happy. In the next section, there will be an analysis on the tensions between drugs and ball culture in the 1980s.

Surviving the Drug Epidemic of the 1980s

In New York City during the 1980s and 1990s, drugs, and particularly crack-cocaine, ravaged the Black and Latinx communities. Drugs also impacted white New Yorkers, but not to the same extent. Crack was a smokable form of cocaine a powdered nervous system stimulant that was cheap, easy to produce, and highly profitable for drug dealers. Crack became a media driven drug on November 17, 1985. The *New York Times* reported it as “a new form of the drug [cocaine] called ‘crack’, or rock-like pieces of prepared ‘freebase’ or concentrated cocaine.”¹⁶⁵

According to Dr. Bruce Johnson, director of the Institute for Special Populations Research at the Nation Development and Research Institutes [NDRI] in the 1990s and John

¹⁶⁴ Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

¹⁶⁵ Donna Boundy, "PROGRAM FOR COCAINE-ABUSE UNDER WAY," *New York Times*, Nov 17, 1985.

Muffler, there were three “drug epidemics” in New York City from 1965-1990: the heroin injection era (1965-1973), the cocaine and freebase era (1975-1984), and the crack era (1985-1990). General drug usage by all New Yorkers rose in 1985, reached a peak in 1988, then declined. To demonstrate the horrific impact crack had in New York City, in 1972 the monthly death rate was 72 a month. In 1988, the peak, there were 101 drug deaths per month.¹⁶⁶

Substance abuse negatively affected ball culture’s golden age, 1981-1993. Ball culture’s House system embraced values that challenged drug culture. Familial relationships helped House members win trophies at ball competitions. Some House mothers and fathers gave their children drugs while other Houses kicked members out for doing drugs. For some members, the balls became the “drug”. Miss Slim Jim, a New York City ball culture member, first learned about the balls from an acquaintance:

At 18-years-old, I was on drugs, heroine. I was shooting up with some dope heads on the roof, and one of them told me about the balls. He took me to one on Harlem, and for one night I forgot how fucked up my life has been. I saw men in wigs, dresses, and heavy makeup. They were dancing how I do in my bathroom mirror. I ain’t even want the drugs anymore. I wanted to be a part of the ball.¹⁶⁷

The daily life struggles such as racism, poverty, and homophobia affected ball culture members, and some dealt with the pain differently than others. Miss Slim Jim’s daily struggles turned them to drugs, but when introduced to the balls, they forgot life’s horrors by putting their time and energy into the balls. Many participants focused their time and energy into the balls. They occupied themselves creating hand-made outfits or practicing their voguing moves for the

¹⁶⁶ Before doctors were aware of the drug, some crack-related deaths may have been diagnosed as non-drug related; Hope Corman and H. Naci Mocan, “A Time-Series Analysis of Crime and Drug Use in New York City,” *NBER Working Paper Series: Working Paper 5463*, (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1996), 7; Bruce D. Johnson and John P. Muffler, “Sociocultural aspects of drug abuse in the 1990s,” in: J.H. Lowison, P. Ruiz, R.B. Milliman, J.G. Langrod, *Substance abuse: A comprehensive textbook*. 3. (Baltimore: Williams & Wilkins, 1997), 107-17.

¹⁶⁷ Arkee Escalera, “The Ballroom Revolution,” *Esquire Magazine*, May 31, 2018.

upcoming ball. For some in ball culture, there was no time in their day to do drugs, nor did they want to participate in using drugs. Dorian Corey described how the balls made her feel:

The people cheering you on, the winning. It's like a physical high, you know? It's a good high. It's an addictive high, like all highs, in the long run, turn out to be. But it's a high that won't hurt you. If everybody went to balls and did less drugs, it'd be a fun world, wouldn't it?¹⁶⁸

This ideal shared by some was optimistic in a time when the Black and Latinx community faced daily hardships. Michell'e Michaels, a present-day ball culture member agreed with Dorian's description:

Oh my god. Have you ever done drugs? It is exactly like that. It's a high that is unexplainable. For however long a category lasts, from the entrance, I kind of get this nerve... but as soon as I get onstage, it all goes away. It also happens so quick, that I'm like 'Oh my god, it's over? I want more.'¹⁶⁹

Ball culture filled the void for members who needed an outlet away from their reality. As Dorian Corey described, ball culture's cheering and wining as a "physical high" causing them to turn away from drug culture.¹⁷⁰

Although the balls turned participants away from using drugs, participants still had to deal with economic instability. Along with the rest of the Black and Latinx communities, ball culture members suffered from poverty and wanted to live a better life. In the balls, members were able to take a moment in the spotlight and perform while their peers cheered them on. The next section describes the poverty ball culture members experienced during its golden age.

Poverty in New York City, 1969-1990s

¹⁶⁸ Livingston, *Paris is Burning*

¹⁶⁹ Sarah Feldberg, "Glory and Glitter: Ballroom Culture turns Vogue into an Olympic Sport," *A Beautiful Perspective*, March 23, 2018.

¹⁷⁰ Kyle Telander et al. "Ballroom itself can either make you or break you' - Black GBT Youths' psychosocial development in the House Ball Community," *Global Public Health*, vol. 12,11 (2017): 1391-1403.

The Black and Latinx community from 1969 to the 1990s was negatively impacted by poverty. Ball culture participants hated living in poverty. They embraced ball culture hoping to escape poverty's clutches for one glorious moment. That moment of fantasy allowed them to live affluently. Poverty statistics do not provide information about sexuality. There are race based statistics that include Black and Latinx communities in New York City.

For example, in 1969, 14.5% of residents in New York City lived below the poverty line, a rate comparable to the nation's 13.7%. In the 1970s, however, disorder, crime, and drug use combined to elevate New York City's poverty. Early in the 1970s a recession and a middle-class exodus to the suburbs eroded the City's tax revenue. By 1975 New York City's municipal government faced a serious fiscal crisis when New York City ran out of money. Unable to borrow, the city faced bankruptcy. President Gerald R. Ford refused to grant the city a bailout, angering New Yorkers. In the summer of 1977, New York City faced a blackout that lasted twenty-five hours. During the blackout, Black and Latinx neighborhoods fell victim to property damage and looting, and over three thousand New Yorkers, mainly Black and Latinx were arrested. After the blackout, many believed that New York City was in permanent decline and passed civil redemption. By 1979, one in five city residents, or 20.2%, lived in poverty. Unfortunately, there is no information on the percentage of gay residents of color living in poverty.¹⁷¹

¹⁷¹ Mark K. Levitan and Susan S. Wieler, "Poverty in New York City, 1969-99: The Influence of Demographic Change, Income Growth, and Income Inequality," *newyorkfed.org*, <https://www.newyorkfed.org/medialibrary/media/research/epr/08v14n1/0807levi.pdf>, Accessed October 5, 2020; Kevin Bake, "'Welcome to Fear City' – the inside story of New York's civil war, 40 years on," *The Guardian*, May 18, 2015; Edward M. Gramlich, "The New York City Fiscal Crisis: What Happened and What is to be Done?" *American Economic Review*, 66 2, (1976): 415-29; David Frum, *How We Got Here: The '70s* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 14-15.

In 1981, Mayor Ed Koch balanced New York City's budget, ending the city's fiscal crisis. Nevertheless, poverty rates for Blacks in the city remained high, over twenty-one percent of New Yorkers. The crack epidemic divided the city into areas ruled by drug lords and gangs, causing murder rates to soar as they fought for territory. Instead of focusing on the crack epidemic, Koch prioritized quality of life issues such as homelessness. He gave police broader powers in dealing with homelessness, prompting harsh criticism from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). In 1989, David Dinkins, a politician, lawyer, and author became the first Black American elected as New York City's mayor. He pledged racial healing when he entered office, referring to New York City's diverse racial demographic as a "gorgeous mosaic". During Dinkins' four-year term, a thirty-year uptrend in crime ended and the crime rate began to drop. For New Yorkers, the twelve percent drop in crime was not enough, creating a perception that crime continued to be out of control.¹⁷²

These events coincided with ball culture's golden age and participants poverty. Unfortunately, there is no information on how many members lived in poverty. However, the visuals in "Paris is Burning," suggested that any ball culture participant that did not live impoverished was rare. Members helped each other through the tough times that many New Yorkers had to face from the 1970s until the 2000s. Dorian Corey explained that ball culture changed from creating outfits and wearing big costumes, feathers, and beads, to designer labels. It is unknown how much money participants spent dressing up for the balls. "Now it's all about designers. And it's not about what you create, it's about what you can acquire." Dorian clarified:

¹⁷² Tamar Lewin, "Business and the Law; AIDS and Job Discrimination," *The New York Times*, April 15, 1986; Sam Roberts, "The 1989 Elections: The New York Vote; Almost Lost at the Wire," *The New York Times*, November 9, 1989.

If you have on a [designer] label, it means that you've got wealth. Well it doesn't, really, 'cause any shoplifter can get a label. You can't come down the runway in something for \$14.99 or \$49.99 and say, "Well, I'm lovely," and expect to win.¹⁷³

Corey did not specify whether she believed this was a positive or a negative change. Ball culture participants fantasized about wealthy white America while experiencing poverty. The wealthy white American fantasy plagued all poverty victims because the media – newspapers and advertisements/commercials – along with television shows and movies made the “American Dream” rich and white. Pepper LaBeija explained in “Paris is Burning” how it felt to see the American wealth fantasy:

I'd always see the way that rich people lived and I'd feel it more, you know. It would slap me in the face. I'd say, "I have to have that." Because I never felt comfortable being poor. I just don't. Or even middle-class doesn't suit me. Seeing the riches, seeing the way people on *Dynasty* lived, these huge houses. And I would think, "these people have 42 rooms in their house!" "Oh, my God, what kind of a house is that?" And we've got three. So why is it that they can have it and I didn't? I always felt cheated. I always felt cheated out of things like that.¹⁷⁴

Ball culture participants did not live like *Dynasty* characters. They lived with their family, biological or House, in one-bedroom apartments, purchased clothing from the thrift stores and sometimes could not even afford food. Nevertheless, participants still dreamed about being wealthy. In “Paris is Burning”, Octavia St. Laurent described her ideal profession and an affluent life:

I think if I could just be on TV or film or anything, I'd do that instead of the money. Of course, I do want the money because I want the luxury that goes with it. But... I want to be wealthy. If not wealthy, content, comfortable, you know? I want to be somebody. I mean, I am somebody. I just want to be a rich somebody.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

The balls and competition categories became a moment the participant could “live the fantasy”. Pepper LaBeija described the balls as, “You know, a ball is like our world. A ball, to us, is as close to reality as we're gonna get to all of that fame and fortune and stardom and spotlights.” This sobering realistic view explained how ball culture members viewed fame and how they could achieve it.¹⁷⁶

In the 1980s, ball culture participants used the term mopping, which meant stealing. Many competitors in the ball scene mopped their clothes so that they could have the most expensive items when competing. Mopping clothes would not necessarily mean that they would steal the entire article of clothing. Instead, they stole the tag off an expensive piece of clothing and sewed onto a thrifted dress item. This was all done to pull off the idea that the thrifted clothes were from an expensive brand. Doing this did not always fool the other competitors, spectators, and judges. One competitor, who was a soldier in the United States military, claimed that it was easy to tell when someone had mopped. He emphasized the impossibility of someone buying high-priced items while living in poverty. Willi Ninja claimed at the end of “Paris is Burning,” that he did not mop a pair of earrings he had purchased in Japan yelling, “I have the receipts!” Ball culture members did not just steal so that they could feature the stolen items on the ball culture competition runway, they mopped to survive, such as steal food.¹⁷⁷

Poverty forced ball culture participants to live to survive outside of the balls. They stole to eat and obtain clothing for the balls, and sometimes were homeless. Some participants did have low paying jobs like grocery store clerk, while others risked their lives doing sex work to obtain more money. Participants did not want to suffer in poverty and wanted to live a luxurious

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Livingston, *Paris is Burning*; Les Fabian Brathwaite, “The Ultimate ‘Paris is Burning’ Viewing Guide,” *Out.com* February 1, 2017.

life. Categories such as “Dynasty” existed so participants who lived in poverty could pose as a *Dynasty* character during the balls.¹⁷⁸

Ball Culture Racial Categories

Ball culture created racial competition categories during its golden age because of the environment participants lived in outside the ball. During the golden age, participants lived in impoverished unsafe neighborhoods such as Harlem, Bedford-Stuyvesant, and the South Bronx. Participants lived in a world with constant propaganda that the “fabulous life” was the “white life”. The analysis on racial ball culture competition categories will be split into two groupings: parody race-based categories (parody categories) and identity race-based categories (identity categories). Ball culture’s creation in 1971 brought the idea that racism could not stop someone from celebrating who they were. This section will examine race-based competition categories and ball culture participants’ rejection that Black people could not live the fabulous life because of their race.

Parody Race-Based Categories: Dynasty and High Fashion Evening Wear

The parody race-based categories were a theme for ball culture categories that centered on creating the “American Dream” elite whites lived, or mainstream media projected as the American ideal life. Unfortunately, ball culture members never lived in the economic wealth white Americans on the Upper East Side of Manhattan experienced. Pepper LaBeija described how important parody race-based categories were to the younger ball culture generation:

Those balls are more or less like our fantasy of being a superstar. You know, like the Oscars, or whatever, or being on a runway as a model. You know, a lot of those kids that

¹⁷⁸ Michael Cunningham, “Slap of Love,” *Open City*, 1995.

are in the balls, they don't have two of nothing. Some of them don't even eat. They come to balls starving.¹⁷⁹

Instead, during these themed categories, participants would live out the fantasy they only saw in media and never experienced. Unfortunately, it is unknown if the balls would have food to feed starving participants. The balls, the cheering, and winning gave participants a “high” that they wanted to experience again. Pepper LaBeija explained how important the balls were for participants, “They'll go out, they'll steal something, get dressed up and come to a ball for that one night and live the fantasy.” Stealing for the balls was common amongst participants. It is unknown what would happen to participants if they were caught and there is no evidence of the NYPD arresting a ball participant for mopping. In “Paris is Burning,” Freddie Pendavis explained, “Now, faggots will do a stunt [steal] and, I mean, you will never catch up with it until years later. And then, I mean, you'll be like, ‘Oh, shit! This faggot pulled this stunt on me!’” This quote gives the assumption that ball culture members were good at stealing and did not fear the repercussions if caught.¹⁸⁰

Television culture was extremely important to participants mimicry in the parody race-based competition categories. During the 1980s, television culture not only affected Black and Latinx gay men, but it also affected heterosexual mainstream Americans. John Fiske, a scholar in cultural studies, defined television culture as, “a crucial part of the social dynamics by which the social structure maintains itself in a constant process of production and reproduction: meanings, popular pleasures, and their circulation are therefore part and parcel of the social structure.” For ball culture participants, the reality – dress, makeup, speech, gestures – in television shows were what attracted them. In shows such as *Dynasty* and *All My Children* the characters were realistic,

¹⁷⁹ Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

but ball culture members could not see themselves within the characters. In *Dynasty* and *All My Children*, the characters were wealthy or financially stable, and during the 1980s ball culture members lived in poverty. Ball culture competition categories that involved television, were used as a moment to emulate the rich.¹⁸¹

The “Dynasty” category was based on the popular American prime time television soap opera. *Dynasty* aired on the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) from January 12, 1981, to May 11, 1989. The show revolved around the Carringtons, a wealthy white family residing in Denver, Colorado. By 1985, *Dynasty* was the number one show in America; so, it was understandable why the “Dynasty” category was featured in “Paris is Burning”, which filmed in 1986. Actress Joan Collins said in 2018, “Every single person on *Dynasty* was good-looking. You wanted to see rich, good-looking people fighting with each other.” Nolan Miller’s popular costumes created a “trend for thick shoulder pads during a decade (1980s) of power dressing.” *Dynasty* showed fantasy-America: rich white people scheming against each other and looking glamorous doing it. That vision translated into ball culture’s “Dynasty” category.¹⁸²

Most Black people in New York City in the 1980s never experienced the wealth of upper-middle class America. Black people were accustomed to how white upper-class Americans lived shown on television. Pepper LaBeija described how she didn’t see herself in commercials and ads, only the fabulous white American lifestyle:

¹⁸¹ Nasrullah Mambrol, “John Fiske and Television Culture,” *Literary Theory and Criticism at Literariness.org*, July 17, 2018.

¹⁸² Joe Klein, “The Real Star of *Dynasty*,” *New York Magazine*, September 2, 1985, 32-39; Christopher Bagley, “Joan Collins Is Back, and Thorny as Ever,” *W Magazine*, December 11, 2018; “TV Listings for May 15, 1985,” *TV Tango*, Accessed October 4, 2020, <http://www.tvtango.com/listings?filters%5Bdate%5D%5Bmonth%5D=5&filters%5Bdate%5D%5Bday%5D=15&filters%5Bdate%5D%5Byear%5D=1985&commit.x=13&commit.y=6>; Eric Wilson, “Nolan Miller, Design of *Dynasty* Power Looks, Is Dead at 79,” *The New York Times*, June 8, 2012; Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

When they showing you a commercial from Honey Graham to Crest... or Pine-Sol, everybody's in their own home. The little kids for Fisher-Price Toys - they're not in no concrete playground. They're riding around the lawn. The pool is in the back. This is white America.¹⁸³

Many Black Americans felt left out or underrepresented in the stereotypical American societal image. LaBeija claimed that Black Americans were not the only nationality that felt left out, saying:

This is white America. Any other nationality that is not of the white set knows this and accepts this till the day they die. That is everybody's dream and ambition as a minority - to live and look as well as a white person is pictured as being in America.¹⁸⁴

For the white working-class, there was no need for them to feel like they were left out of the “American Dream” in television. Since the beginning of television culture during the 1950s, there had been shows that depicted the white working-class in a sympathetic manner. From the late 1970s to the early 1980s, white working-class representation fell in television. By 1987, shows such as *Married... with Children* and *Roseanne* once again brought positive representation of the white working-class. From 1955 to 1986, only six percent of characters on American prime-time television shows were Black.¹⁸⁵

In *Dynasty*, the character Dominique Deveraux (played by Diahann Carroll) was one of the first Black character in television history to openly manipulate white people. Deveraux was a very wealthy woman having a 2019 estimated \$500-\$600 million net worth. Carroll was the only Black actress with a continuing role on a nighttime serial show at the time (1981-1989) and the character she played, Deveraux, was the first prominently-featured Black character on a prime

¹⁸³ Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ryan Girdusky, “What TV Can Teach Us About The White Working Class,” *the American Conservative*, December 2, 2020; S. Robert Lichter, “Prime-Time Prejudice: TV’s Images of Blacks and Hispanics,” *Public Opinion*, 10 (July/August 1987): 13-16.

time soap opera. In a 1984 interview with People Magazine, she was asked about these feats, and Carroll responded with, “I certainly wasn’t researching the number of blacks on TV, but how could you fail to see they’re not there?” Unfortunately, the character was only in the show for three years (1984-1987) and was written out of the series by the end of the seventh season (1987). It is unknown how ball culture members felt about the character Dominique Deveraux because she was never mentioned in the “Paris is Burning,” interviews.¹⁸⁶

The epitome of parody race-based categories was the “Dynasty” category and its focus on white wealth. The white characters’ lifestyle in *Dynasty* depicted the white American fantasy that ball culture members envisioned. Dorian Corey explained this as:

With the current children [younger participants in ball culture], the children that are young [under 18], they’ve gone to television, you know? I’ve been through several balls and they’ve actually had categories – *Dynasty*. You know, want you to look like Alexis or Krystle. And I guess that’s just a statement of the times.¹⁸⁷

Dorian Corey was correct in her assumption that the “Dynasty” category was just a statement of the times. The category no longer exists in today’s ball culture competitions because *Dynasty* the TV show aired in the 1980s. American culture since then has evolved, causing the show to no longer depict the current white wealthy American lifestyle.

The “High Fashion Evening Wear” category was a competition category during ball culture’s golden age. For this category, participants had to portray themselves as a heterosexual man or woman dressed in high fashion evening wear. It is unknown if the labels on the clothes mattered to the judges in this category. This simple category was a favorite amongst participants,

¹⁸⁶ Scot Haller, “Diahann Carroll Dresses Up *Dynasty*,” *People Magazine*, May 14, 1984; “The Wealthiest Black Television Characters of All Time,” *The Root*, October 17, 2019; Carson Cook, “A content analysis of LGBT representation on broadcast and streaming television,” *Honors Theses*, May 2018.

¹⁸⁷ Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

and there were constant arguments on what the contestants wore as they walked the category.

One scene in “Paris is Burning”, when a FQ participant did not walk with a woman’s purse, the MC called them out saying:

Come on, now. It is a known fact that a woman do carry an evening bag at dinnertime. There 's no getting around that! You see it on Channel Seven between *All My Children* and *Jeopardy!*, *Another World*, *Dallas* and the whole bit. An evening bag is a must! You have to carry something! No lady is sure at night.¹⁸⁸

It is interesting that the MC gave examples of women in television for high fashion evening wear. *All My Children*, *Another World*, and *Dallas* were popular soap operas (serial television shows that dealt with domestic situations) that aired during the 1980s. *Dallas*, for example, was known for its portrayal of wealth, sex, intrigue, conflict, and power struggles. These television themes were played by white people, creating the illusion that only white people experienced wealth and “drama” in their lives. This imitation was like the Betty Grable and Elizabeth Taylor fixation before television shows became a primary mode of entertainment for the average American.¹⁸⁹

For ball culture members, parody race-based competition categories were used as an outlet to portray the high-class glamour shown on television shows. In the 1980s, American television culture centered around wealthy white Americans. Black representation in television during the 1980s was small and gay Black representation did not exist. Performing in categories such as “Dynasty” and “High Fashion Evening Wear” allowed a moment for participants to look like a wealthy character shown on television. Parody race-based categories was based around an unobtainable fantasy. Identity race-based categories served a different purpose and helped

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ David Jacobs, “TV VIEW; When the Rich and the Powerful were Riding High,” *The New York Times*, April 15, 1990.

participants understand that they could be who they wanted to be and obtain a job that society said they could not get.

Identity Race-Based Categories: CEO Realness and Military Realness

The identity race-based categories was a term used in ball culture to describe occupational themed competition categories that centered around identity, realness, and blackness. Ball culture separated Black drag queens from the white drag balls. With their own subculture, ball culture members could embrace their blackness while performing in competition categories. Identity within these race-based categories created the confidence to portray the wealth the participants did not have. Enforcing realness in these categories, made it so that participants dressed as the category rules dictated. Blackness was not as easy to identify as identity and realness. In the outside world, white Americans, mainly white men, dominated many occupations seen in the racial identity categories. When participants competed in these categories, they were rejecting the mainstream stigma that only white wealthy educated Americans could work in such occupations as Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of a company.

“CEO Realness” was a category during ball culture’s golden age where participants dressed in suits and carried briefcases. Ball culture used this category so that participants could show not only their peers but themselves that if the heterosexual dominated world gave them the opportunity to become a CEO that they could do it. Dorian Corey explained the purpose of the “CEO Realness” category and its importance to ball culture members in “Paris is Burning”:

In real life, you can't get a job as an executive unless you have the educational background and the opportunity. Now, the fact that you are not an executive is merely because of the social standing of life. That is just the pure thing. Black people have a hard time getting anywhere. And those that do are usually straight. In a ballroom, you can be anything you want. You're not really an executive, but you're looking like an executive. And therefore, you're showing the straight world that I can be an executive. If I had the opportunity, I

could be one, because I can look like one. And that is, like, a fulfillment. Your peers, your friends are telling you, "Ph, you'd make a wonderful executive." ¹⁹⁰

It is unknown what the educational level of ball culture participants were. The assumption would be high school or lower because the "Schoolboy/Schoolgirl Realness" category emphasized what it would be like in college. Interesting enough, there was no indication that participants dressed as female CEOs. There was no indication that femme queens participated in this category either. This could be because in the 1980s, for example, there were only three female CEOs – Katharine Graham, Washington Post Company; Linda Wachner, Warnaco Group Incorporated; Marion O. Sandler, Golden West Financial Corporation – with Linda Wachner becoming CEO in 1986. ¹⁹¹

"Military Realness" was a ball culture competition category where participants dressed as United States military members. It is unknown which part of the military such as the Navy and Air Force were used in ball culture. In the 1980s, military ads were usually on military equipment such as planes and guns. If there was an ad with a person, it was almost always white and male. "Military Realness" appeared for only a few seconds in "Paris is Burning", but there was a quote by an unnamed military serviceman and ball culture participant who explained "Military Realness" exactly:

The military scene is a basic scene. It doesn't call for a bunch of flamboyant turkey boas and bugle beads, rhinestones. It's a basic category. The more natural you are, the more credit your outfit is given. ¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ Livingston, *Paris is Burning*.

¹⁹¹ Julia Carpenter, "Women in the Fortune 500: 64 CEOs in half a century," *CNN Money*, August 7, 2017; "Historical List of Women CEOs of the Fortune Lists: 1972-2019," *Catalyst: Workplaces that work for Women*, May 16, 2019, Accessed September 30, 2020, https://www.catalyst.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Catalyst_Women_Fortune_CEOs_1972-2019_Historical_List_5.16.2019.pdf; Livingston, "Paris is Burning,".

¹⁹² Livingston, "Paris is Burning,".

Just as all the other realness themed categories, replicating the image of a uniformed United States military member, was key to winning the category. In “Paris is Burning,” participants shown competing in the “Military Realness” category wore military uniforms, saluted, and moved in a staccato fashion similarly to servicemen. No participant shown in “Paris is Burning,” wore military gear while performing. There were former military servicemen who competed and judged this category, but it is unknown how they viewed ball culture. It was not specified if all ball culture members who competed in this category were also in the military.¹⁹³

Both the “CEO Realness” and the “Military Realness” categories allowed participants to realize that they – a Black/Latinx homosexual or trans-person – could be a CEO or a military member. “CEO Realness” replicated economic power and leadership that was displayed by a company CEO. “Military Realness” replicated a serviceman’s poise and did not focus on the “person with power” imagery. The more natural a participant looked compared to the category, the more credit they received in personifying realness.

During ball culture’s golden age many Black/Latinx were homeless or lived impoverished in New York City neighborhoods. They lived with their family, biological or House, in one-bedroom apartments and sometimes could not afford food or new clothing. Stealing clothing to go the balls were common and it is unknown if food was provided at the balls. These identity race-based categories allowed participants to realize that they were not much different from wealthy white America.

Conclusion

¹⁹³ “Military, War and Army Recruiting Ads of the 1980s,” *Vintage Ad Browser*, Accessed October 15, 2020, <http://www.vintageadbrowser.com/military-ads-1980s>; Livingston, “Paris is Burning.”

Race-based competition categories existed during ball culture's golden age, 1981-1993, because of the racism and economic instability that participants experienced in their everyday lives in New York City. During the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1968, many older members who participated during ball culture golden age were children. These members saw the riots and protests that occurred because the Black/Latinx community wanted residential and school integration in New York City. In the 1970s, when golden age ball culture participants were children, teenagers, and young adults, they watched as New York City faced bankruptcy and their neighborhoods declined into chaos. In 1981, participants continued to witness and experience racism and poverty in New York City. Ball culture members understood what it felt being a person of color; and for some who were Black men, they understood the troubles they faced in society because of their gender and skin color. In New York City and the United States in general, to racists, it did not matter what a person's sexuality was, only their skin color.

Ball culture's golden age also had parody race-based categories because members faced New York City's economic instability. The mainstream media, television shows, and movies presented the "American Dream" as a wealthy white American reality. Ball culture members saw the difference between their own poverty, and the fabulous lives white Americans lived on television and movies. Instead of living in despair because of their reality, participants created parody race-based categories to spend a moment in the spotlight amongst their friends.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Conclusion

Discovering ball culture was a complete accident. On Pinterest, a social media website, I came across photographs of Black drag queens from the 1980s. Interested, I found a blog about Black drag queens and it brought me to the documentary “Paris is Burning.” After watching the documentary, it became clear how important ball culture was for queer Black/Latinx people during the 1980s. Knowing nothing about ball culture other than what was in “Paris is Burning,” I began researching scholarly articles and monographs. Through research, it became clear that ball culture was not a well-researched topic and all information found was a basic outline on the subculture. Scholarship on the competition categories was absent. “Paris is Burning” gave the understanding that without the intricate categories, the balls would not have been as exciting and fulfilling to participants. This thesis tells the story of marginalized people who found solace performing in certain categories at the balls. Doing this not only brings historical scholarship to ball culture, but it also specifically targets competition categories which had not been solely discussed in scholarly work.

Since ball culture’s creation in 1971, the balls held a deep importance to queer Black/Latinx people as a safe space. Although the balls were important, in the 1970s, the categories were an afterthought. Only a few categories existed where participants performed as Vegas Showgirls or popular 1970s models. Before 1981, the categories had no structure, were exclusive, and did not encourage individuality amongst participants. After 1981, when Paris Dupree expanded ball culture competition categories, the categories became the most important part of the balls. The categories structured the balls, brought inclusion so anyone could compete, and allowed participants to understand themselves and express their individuality. In ball culture,

competition categories helped participants understand that in a world where they had to stay hidden to stay safe, they could always be themselves at the balls.

In New York City, during ball culture's golden age, 1981-1993, several factors threatened queer Black/Latinx people such as homophobia, racism, AIDS, and poverty. Inside the balls, participants did not have to worry about their struggles in life. Black and Latinx gay men and trans-people gravitated to ball culture because they were not accepted by the gay community for being a person of color, and the Black/Latinx community for being gay or a trans-person. The competition categories brought a moment of relief for members who wanted to fantasize being something they were not. That is why ball culture competition categories are so important to examine.

Competition category themes such as queerness, femininity, race, identity, gender, masculinity, wealth inequality, American sexual hypocrisy, adaptability, and family allowed participants to express themselves in a variety of ways during ball competitions. Ball culture participants wanted inclusion and refused to create anything that could create an exclusive environment. The four-part gender system (BQ, FQ, butch, woman) structured ball culture and its gender competitive categories. Participants chose a gender category based on how they felt about themselves gender-wise, so the gender system structure did not hamper their individuality.

This thesis brings an important view on how a marginalized group created categories to reject how mainstream American society viewed them. The purpose of this study was to create a scholarly historical analysis on ball culture and its competition categories during its golden age. Historians have ignored ball culture and its history, and this thesis fills that void. Sexuality studies, articles, and monographs, combined with a historical analysis on racial culture in New York City during the 1980s, created context for this thesis and proved that ball culture and its

competition categories fit within the framework of LGBTQ+ and Black/Latinx history.

Researching ball culture brought a clear message that ball culture competition categories did not exist to erase participants race and sexuality. Instead, the categories posed as several entities, making ball culture a complex subculture.

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