

The Invisible Ballroom:
An “Unbothered” Exploration of Race, Gender, and Power

Morgan A Belveal
University of Pennsylvania
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Meeting the Ballroom

Before the opening credits roll on the iconic Ballroom film *Paris is Burning* (1990), we follow a young Black man through the streets of New York City in 1987. He remembers his father telling him about his three strikes in this world: he is Black, he is a male, and he is gay. He walks through the crowded New York streets in his letterman’s jacket with a friend’s arm hung over his shoulder. He pauses by a door marked only by the 6’5” tall woman dressed from head to toe in gorgeous voluminous gold. The doors open, swallow up the legendary “Queen all up in drags” and she sashays in to the room unbothered. The doors seal shut and closes out the world. The voice of the commentator clears the floor, the queen’s knees bend at right angles and she begins to walk. In a display of power, poise, and prestige she vogues.

In the early 1920’s, Queer culture was pushed underground. At the same time, the compounding marginalization of LGBTQ African- and Latino/a Americans was making identity exploration in relation to gender and power all but impossible. In response, the community in Harlem came together in support of seeking selves. This community supported the exploration of gender identity and stripped power from gender in a way that both mocked and celebrated the general culture.

Composed of two primary components, the Ballroom Scene was the hub of the intersectional lives lived by Queer African- and Latino/a Americans. The first component, the houses, was created to provide support to a population that had been literally and figuratively beaten into the ground. Lead by a house mother and house father, these houses existed to support the children (amateur performers). The second component of the Scene, the Balls, are opportunities not only to explore identity but to play with power and spatiality. While the

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Ballroom Scene has evolved since its birth in Harlem in the 1920s, it has stayed true to these two pillars.

The nature of gender identity exploration often begins in youth – a period with its own set of complexities. The population that most engages in the Ballroom Scene is one riddled with oppression, marginalization, and misunderstanding. As a result, the Ballroom Scene fills a unique void in the lives of young Queer African- Latino/a American youth.

Through its tumultuous and rich history, the Ballroom Scene has evolved to one that is expanding physically and digitally around the world. As it becomes more and more known in the mainstream, it opens the doors to criticisms in the functions of the Ballroom Scene. Even through its criticisms, the Scene remains true to its principles of supporting Queer African- and Latino/a Americans in their exploration of race, gender, and power.

Behind the Ballroom

LGBTQ African American and Latino/a youth have a history of being misunderstood, ostracized, evicted and attacked for the overt exploration of their gender. In response, the community came together to create a new space. This space would support, accept, and judge the fluid presentation of gender in the moment. This space would exist at the intersection of mainstream culture, African American culture, Latino/a culture, and LGBTQ culture. This space was born in Harlem in the 1920s and is known as the Ballroom Scene (Rowan 2013).

Rowan (2013) explains why the Black and Latino/a MSM (men who have sex with men) population is the population that created and cultivated the Ballroom Scene. For Rowan the formula is a history of Black inter-community support, an intergenerational shunning of queer people of color, and a saga of code switching and cultural innovation within the population. This sub-culture has a history of highlighting behaviors that contrast the dominant culture. For

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example, the culture acknowledges the disproportionate role of masculinity in the general society and in response creates the space that features a feminine driven Ballroom (Rowan 2013). The development of the Ballroom Scene in response to their positionality in society was a statement of unity and expression for Queer African- and Latino/a Americans.

One of the two fundamental components of the Ballroom Scene, the houses, act as a network of social support and a free setting to adventure into exploring personal identity (Arnold & Bailey 2009). Arnold and Bailey (2009) explain that the houses afford a space that promotes what they describe as a “fictitious existence”. This fictitious existence is a performance of the children’s life reimagined in a way that would not face discrimination, rejection and marginalization from the general society. Goldsby (1993) explains that the house, traditionally figurative but often a literal house, serves two fundamental purposes. First, it is the role of the house to provide protection from the violence that the children (the term given to amateur performers in the Ballroom Scene) will face for being a sexual outcast in their community. Second, the houses exist to groom children to become legends (the term given to performers with an impressive number of victories in various categories in the Scene). Without the support of a house, LGBT African- and Latino/a Americans feel particularly vulnerable to race, gender and sexual violence. This is the result of the compounding nature of their marginalization. Bailey (2013) explains that Black LGBTQ people are simultaneously marginalized within gay spaces and excluded from heteronormative spaces. Further, the children of the Scene experience general spatial marginalization in the form of structural prohibition, denied access, and interspace oppression.

The Ballroom Scene is best known for opening the doors to explore the meaning of gender and gender norms that are traditionally dictated by white western society. Often criticized

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for not completely obliterating the traditional definitions of gender in the mainstream culture, the Ballroom Scene uses a fluid and liberating lexicon to describe gender that creates a space for non-heteronormative self-exploration which proves to be attractive to young African American and Latino/a youth.

Motivated not only by a feeling of being ostracized but also a frustration with the modern definition of western beauty, the Ballroom Scene is known for simultaneously mocking and glorifying the culturally promoted form beauty and media. “On the deepest level of meaning, Voguing is about the adaptation of mass media conceptions of beauty as predominantly White, visually-focused, and commodified. In contrast to this, beauty in Voguing is culturally diverse, socio-politically contested, deeply felt and embodied. On the most immediate level of meaning in the moment of performance at rituals, Voguing’s transformation of beauty is about social conflict and the expression of power among peers.” (Jackson 2002, pg. 38)

Motivations behind actions are often covert. However, for the children that enter the Ballroom Scene, there are a number of clearly overt motivators. Not only are they facing generational levels of compounding marginalization but they are living in a space that does not allow them the freedom to explore their identity. This is especially true of any attempt to explore a gender identity that lies outside of the system of traditional gender norms. Finally, the weight of constant violence and vulnerability in combination with a lacking support system leads the children to come seek out a community (Rowan 2013). For the queer African- and Latino/a American youth of the major cities of the world, that community is the Ballroom.

In the Ballroom

“When they Vogue, community members tell at least two overlapping stories. One story involves claiming power from the powerful by disrupting dominant views. The other story

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involves the formation of a personal aesthetic in competition with peers according to evolving community standards.” (Jackson 2002, pg. 38)

While fluid in its nature, the gender-sex system of the Ballroom Scene described by Arnold and Bailey (2009) is still defined by six categories: Butch Queens (gay man), Fem Queens (transgender woman), Butch Queen up in Drags (gay man wearing women’s clothes), Butches (transgender man), Men (straight man), and woman (straight woman). Within each of the gender-sex categories, performers compete for the titles awarded on realness (passability). Within these 6 categories lies a plethora of competition categories for performers to compete within. For the most part, these categories are relevant only for performance. However, they do hold weight in the development of the hierarchy. More masculine categories traditionally produce Fathers and more feminine categories produce Mothers. In their performances within each of these categories, performers will be judged. In each walk (the term given to the procession back and forth down the runway), the judges will rank the performers based on their ability to serve realness on the floor. The performer serving the most realness will win the title for the ball and often a substantially sized trophy. It is the accumulation of a series of these trophies that turns a child into a legend. Legendary performers are the current leaders of the scene and those that used to hold the legendary title but are no longer performing are referred to as icons (Jackson 2002). In the scene what a performer has accomplished is more important than the longevity of their career. There is no age at which a child becomes a legend or a legend becomes an icon. As a result, the Ballroom Scene mocks the role of age in power and situates power with prestige and acclaim.

The most commonly known judged performance of the modern Ballroom Scene is the Vogue, shaped after the poses of the models on the cover of fashion magazines in the 19th and

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20th century. It is paired and mixed with the other 5 ritual traditions of the scene (face, body, realness, labels, and runway) to create the lengthy list of competition categories of the ballroom. This performance is a symbolic and exaggerated representation of the performer's interaction with their space. On the runway, the voguer will navigate the space towards and away from the judges completely "unbothered" by the noise of the flamboyant ball. The competition of Voguing is more than just the acrobatic and yoga based danced. To one performer in the film *KiKi* (2017) "Voguing is not just a dance, it's an art, it's an outlet". The performance that takes place on the runway, often simply described as Voguing, is a real-time physical commentary on the spatiality of the performance as it is situated within the constructed space of the Ballroom which is often situated out of the sight of society at large. The Voguer is performing a series of motions that range on a spectrum from simple to complex in order to emphasize the power driven relations with the people in the room. The observers, the least privileged population in the room are positioned on the floor of the space. They shift the figurative and literal space of the room to interact with the performers. The voguers are situated on a runway reminiscent of the format walked by the fashion elites of the world. The runway is often elevated a foot off of the ground to emphasize the voguers as a focal point of the room. In the space of a ball, the judges panel is composed of at least six legends of the Scene and is always literally and figuratively the focus point of the room. It is the role of the performer to situate themselves in the space in relation to the reactive audience and the highlighted judges panel. They do this by physically moving towards and away from the judges in exploration and respect of the power dynamics in the room. In further exploration of the power in the room, the voguers will move "unbothered" pass the crowd of interacting spectators to demonstrate their literal and figurative role of power above the spectators in the moment.

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Power plays a commanding role in the Ballroom scene and navigating the power structure serves several specific purposes. The community of voguers are often outcasts from their families and have no home to live in. For this reason, the navigation of power in the Ballroom becomes a courting process of a new family. Children are recruited from the runway when they walk in a category. Voguers must walk a precise line between insecurity and disrespect of the judges. By the end of their walk, the room ought to both want to recruit the child and see the potential in them to become a legend. If a current legend sees the potential in the often vulnerable child, then they will invite them to be a member of their house (Jackson 2002).

The house, the second major component of the Ballroom Scene, is defined by the collection of children all under one Mother and one Father that provides kinship and training to become a legend. For young people, these houses often act as replacements for the physical houses in which they were/are discriminated against, bullied, abused, and attacked for their exploration of the identity. Because these actions are so common for Black and Latino/a queer youth, many of them are driven to find a replacement house in the Ballroom Scene. Rowan (2013) explains that it is the role of the house within the Scene to promote an environment that cultivates the expression of a series of selves each performing improvised roles in the context of their moment.

Since its birth in Harlem in the 1920's the Ballroom Scene has expanded and evolved over time. Balzer (2005) discusses the geographic expansion of the Scene around the world. New York was the first epicenter of the Ballroom Scene, but it was not the only international city with the variables required to support the Scene. Rio de Janeiro and Berlin both acted as hubs for marginalized populations within their country. Trans communities would flock to these cities and

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as a result they would come together to form culturally rich subcultures as the young African American and Latino/a populations did in New York City (and eventually every major city in the United States).

In addition to geographic expansion, the Scene has experienced cultural expansion. For better or for worse, one of the most iconic moments in the Ballroom Scene was the release of Madonna's 1990s music video for her song titled *Vogue*. This moment is not only iconic but it is also one of the fundamental rhetorical pins in the conversation about the cultural expansion of the Ballroom Scene. On a surface level, Goldsby (1993) describes her action as exploiting on the Ballroom Scene's inability to claim *Voguing* as its own as the scene lacked power in the mainstream. An inability rooted in generations of poverty and racial and queer oppression and marginalization that the pop-star herself would never experience. However, Chatzipapathodoridis (2017) makes the point that Madonna's cultural exploitation must be considered within the context of her influence on the Scene. This tension around the moment explains the conflict between making the decision to place the Scene on cultural lock down for the sake of preservation and supporting the borrowing of culture as Madonna did for the sake of expansion and main stream acceptance.

Almost as iconic as Madonna's *vogue* video is the rise to fame of the world famous drag queen – RuPaul. Balzar (2002) explained that the legendary voguers of the Scene in the 1970's paved the way for celebrity queens to bridge the culture from the underground to mainstream adjacent. The most famous and successful of these queens is RuPaul who rose to fame through the Ballroom Scene and eventually made the leap to mainstream television shows on MTV and VH1. This moment also created conflict, though a different kind of conflict. RuPaul, unlike Madonna, did experience the unique intersectionality that birthed the Ballroom Scene. RuPaul

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was a poor queer Black child. However, Balzer's interview with Dierdre explains one element of the tension. "The day RuPaul came out, it went from 20 to 1,000, 'cause every faggot thought I can be a star too. It was really crazy. I hated her for that." (Balzar 2002, pg. 117). The other rhetorical pin in this conversation is exposed by Dierdre's response to the rise of RuPaul. The very nature of the Ballroom Scene is contrarian to the mainstream. Therefore, the belief in the acceptance of the Ballroom Scene into the mainstream expects that the children of the Scene are seeking outside acceptance. Instead, they are seeking acceptance among their peers and the opportunity to explore gender identity outside of the heteronormative mainstream. Dierdre also explains discontent with the flock of 'faggots' thinking that they can be a star. The mainstream adoption of Voguing separated the dance from the expression and culture. The power commentary embedded in the fluidity of Voguing is not something that can be expressed by a mainstream audience. The fear of the cultural expansion and the simultaneous stripping down of the expression to a physical motion sparked controversy.

Youth and the Ballroom

The unique power dynamic of youth in society often positions them in a place of heightened marginalization and reduced agency in changing their circumstances. For Queer African- and Latino/a American youth, these circumstances are compounded within the marginalization associated with their gender and their race. Further, youth is characterized by a series of identity explorations. For Queer African- and Latino/a American youth, their possibilities to explore identity are stunted. This historical set of circumstances has meant that youth have played a crucial role in the development of the Ballroom Scene.

The youth that are entering the Ballroom Scene are often extremely vulnerable as they are often living without support systems and without money. In some situations, this can lead to the

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exploitation of children by older Voguers (Arnold & Bailey 2009). Further, the population that is engaged in the Ballroom Scene often engages in higher levels of risk (drug dealing, survival sex, etc.) (Phillips et. al 2011). Bailey (2013) explains that between 20-40% of homeless youth identify as LGBT. In urban spaces, such as Detroit, the majority of these LGBT homeless youth are Black. In discussion with the Ruth Ellis Center, a homeless center for LGBT youth in Detroit, Bailey discovers that almost all of the LGBT youth that access the center are a part of the Ballroom Scene. While exploitative behaviors do exist intergenerationally within the Ballroom Scene, the Scene overall understands the significance of the youth in the culture and therefore embrace them and support their futures both as Legends in the Scene and as healthy and supported youth.

The language of the Ballroom Scene is extremely unique, especially in the way that it is used to discuss age, power, and gender. With relation to age, mainstream words (such as children, mother, and father) are used to describe performers. However, instead of this being a commentary on the static age of the performer, this language is used as a commentary on their place on their trajectory in the Ballroom Scene. A child is an amateur performer, often without any or with very few titles to their name. Expanding on the commentary of the Ballroom Scene on the Mainstream society, the age of the Mothers and Fathers of a house do not dictate their status. Instead, their positionality is rooted in their prestige. The formation of the hierarchy as rooted in power but titled in age acts as both a mockery and a glorification of Western ideals.

Historically, children joined houses as young as 15-years-old and were legends by the time they were in their early 20's (Jackson 2002). However, in recent years the role of the Ballroom Scene in the lives of youth is evolving yet again. In a manner similar to the generations before them that created the niche Ballroom Scene within the unique intersectionality of their

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lives, current young voguers have created the KiKi ball Scene. This subset of the Ballroom Scene is created and cultivated by the youngest people on the Scene and supports their intersectionality in the same way that the Ballroom Scene addressed and supported the intersectionality of the generations before them.

The documentary *KiKi* (2017) works to capture the unique formation of the KiKi Ball Scene within the larger Ballroom Scene. The *KiKi* is focused on using the principles of the Ballroom Scene (expression, power, and unity) to address the risks that African- and Latino/a American youth face today. Primarily the *KiKi* focuses on homelessness and HIV prevention and treatment. ChiChi, one of the house mothers (also a teenager himself), explains the layering effect of his marginalization. He is marginalized for being a young man, for being Black, for being queer, and for presenting masculine or feminine. The documentary also describes the spatiality of the Voguers of the KiKi Scene. Another Voguer visits his home town and in conversation with the documentarian about Voguing on the street in his small home town he says “it would be very weird... (their reaction) wouldn’t be cute.” For Chi Chi, he completely changed his identity. His past identity is dead. His comment speaks to the Scene’s existence in a physical space.

While the gender lines of the Ballroom Scene at large seem to be somewhat rigid, the KiKi Scene depicted in the documentary affords for much more fluidity. At a later point in the documentary, Chi Chi is seen talking to his children about their realness. He tells them “you walk realness, it don’t matter which realness it is... it’s you, you’re real” (*Kiki* 2017). This message would not have been as well received within the traditionally gender motivated confines of the performance of realness in the Ballroom Scene.

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The most moving and authentic-feeling moments of the documentary come when the performers in the KiKi Scene are expressing concern for one another's health and well-being. The most prominent example of this is the constant discussion of HIV prevention. When a House is Voguing on the peer, one member casually offers condoms to the group. When they are having a house meeting, people are openly discussing their HIV status, and when they are Voguing, the commentator (the person responsible for keeping the event alive and on-track) reminds everyone that there is free HIV testing upstairs. There is a poignant moment in the film when a sexual health worker explains that two out of every three people in the room will be living with HIV by the time they are 40. This moment formally comments on the informal commentary running through the film: we are at risk and we care about each other (Kiki 2017).

One Voguer in the KiKi Scene explains the risks at a memorial on the pier for a fellow child. They state "Our community is on very intimate terms with death. That comes from complications with HIV, it comes from police brutality, it comes from all sorts of health issues, it comes from suicide, it comes from hate crimes, it comes from a lot of things." The level of Precarity that accompanies the futures of these Voguers is often overwhelming. Not only does precarity relate to their likelihood of living, but precarity surrounds their chances to succeed. When discussing the precarity that surrounds his health, ChiChi describes an uncharacteristic feeling of being surprised when his HIV test result came back negative. The chances are so heavily stacked against him that every time he expects a positive result. Symba, a Voguing peer, describes his frustration with receiving a positive result when he simply says "Shit, I became a statistic." (KiKi 2017). Symba's frustration is not in the fact that he will live with HIV forever as he, like ChiChi, expected that outcome. Instead, his anger is in the fact that he became a number. Second to HIV as a seemingly inevitable fear, is violence. The youth are often the target of

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police brutality. So much so that Gia, when describing their relationship with the police, explains that the most homophobic police patrol the Village (a historically gay region of New York City). Further, the police understand the structure of the Ballroom Scene and have been known to profile based on the number of previous arrests from each house (Kiki 2017). This intimate relationship to death and violence and the burning desire to explore identity at a young age is the reason the KiKi Scene was born as a subset of the Ballroom Scene.

Critique of Ballroom Culture

The culture of the Ballroom Scene is not without flaw. One of the most repeated words in a Ball is “realness” which refers to a performer’s passability. If they were walking down the street, would they be “clocked” (recognized as presenting a gender different than their biologic sex)? This promotion of the idea of realness demonstrates the Scene’s aesthetic attachment to becoming a reformed cultural ideal through self-representation as opposed to a completely reimagined ideal of gender (Goldsby 1993).

Further, the notion of “realness” is rooted in the physicality of a person’s gender. Bailey (2011) discusses the ways that realness is rooted in genitals and dictates the category of performance. Butches (a Ballroom Scene category for trans women) will be required to perform as a Woman (a Ballroom Scene given to straight biological woman) after receiving sex reassignment surgery. In the categories of Thug and Schoolboi realness, one of the highest forms of compliment is “you give me dick down boy”. This phrase comments on the masculinity of the competitor with a direct connection to the size of his penis (Bailey 2011).

The house structure is also one that is modeled off of a family reminiscent of the gendered American nuclear family. A house will always have one mother and one father. Each of these roles is pigeon-holed into the traditional gender-based responsibilities often associated

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with the position. The Mother of the house is responsible for the emotional support of the children and the Father of the house is responsible for the structure and discipline of the children. Where this model diverges from the traditional trajectory however is in the occupation of these roles. The responsibilities of these roles is attached to a traditionally gendered title but the person fulfilling these roles achieves the title not by their gender but by their prestige (Jackson 2002). This is another way the Ballroom Scene is simultaneously mocking and glorifying western beauty.

While the Scene is often structured in a way that supports rigid definitions of gender, it is the flexible nature of these definitions that promotes the contrarian nature of the Scene. Further, and most importantly, it is the malleability of the physical performance of gender in support of identity exploration that makes the Ballroom Scene divergent.

Conclusion

The camera for KiKi (2017) pans across a group of vibrant and flamboyant youth communicating with a series of precise, calculated and interactive hand and full body motions. They communicate with each other and the space. They share the space in an elegant way reminiscent of martial arts. The top half of their body seems to move separately from their bottom half. Their arms twirl and their legs flip. The sun is high above the pier and the group of queer Black and latino/a youth are not hiding. Peers slowly gather and the group begins to play off of one another “The Word is KiKi!” Symba screams to a beat and a series of rhythmic noises follow to a beat as Symba introduces the legendary ChiChi who vogues within the group. The KiKi on the pier supports each other and loves each other. Each and every person in the Scene contributes. Civilians pass by glance for just a second and move on. The KiKi Scene on the pier today is “unbothered”.

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For generations, the Ballroom Scene has been created by LGBTQ African- and Latino/a Americans as an underground space to explore race, gender, and power. This space acts to present, accept and judge the fictitious existences of hyper marginalized populations in a way that supports their exploration and their becoming a legend. Since its start in Harlem in the 1920's, the Scene has evolved to one that is expanding into mainstream cultures in metropolis areas around the world. Crucially, it is evolving to accept the Ballroom subset KiKi Scene. The current rendering of the youngest subset of the Ballroom Scene is dedicated to the positionality of young people today with respect to their gender, race, power, and heightened levels of risk. As Gia Maria Love says in *KiKi* (2017) “people dress me up as something else and now I have to deconstruct all of that to get to what I actually am.” The Ballroom Scene continues to be a space of deconstruction and reconstruction of identity, space, power and relation for Queer African- and Latino/a Americans and marginalized queer people around the world.

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