

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

ORDINARY QUEENS: THE BALL, THE STREETS, AND THE BEYOND OF SURVIVAL

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To be sensual, I think, is to respect and rejoice in the force of life, of life itself, and to be present in all that one does, from the effort of loving to the breaking of bread.

-James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

Happiness is not a state. For if it were, someone might have it and yet be asleep for his whole life,
living the life of a plant.

-Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*

Welcome to the good life
Where niggas who sell D
Won't even get pulled over in they new V
The good life, let's go on a living spree
Shit, they say the best things in life are free
The good life, it feel like Atlanta
It feel like L.A., it feel like Miami
It feel like N.Y., summertime Chi, ahh
Now throw yo' hands up in the sky

-Kanye West "Good Life"

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Abstract

This dissertation is an ethnography of the ballroom scene, an underground, predominantly black, queer performance community, in Chicago and New York. It explores how people strive to imagine and secure existence beyond mere survival within an ordinary haunted by anti-black and anti-queer violences; and it tracks the practices for living that emerge out of performances and presentations that experiment with and against normative US practices and values. I consider how these practices elaborate an alternative narrative arc and structure to the American dream. Where it is widely assumed that the idea of living well is necessarily tied to stability—that the good life is inextricably linked to economic, social, and political upward mobility and/or maintenance—I argue that this community pushes the boundaries of what survival and flourishing mean by shifting the definition of success toward an ethics of self-cultivation. In the ballroom scene, performance and presentation provide members of this community with the language and tactics to rethink their relation to encompassing structures that hold together the world, thereby changing the tenor and pitch of how the ordinary is articulated. In short, this manuscript explores how a community makes the ostensibly rigid structures of contemporary life a little more elastic.

While looking at the everyday realities of members of this community in and between Chicago and New York—an everyday often plagued by food and housing insecurity, racial and gendered violence, and physical and mental health concerns—my ethnographic focus explores the relationship between ball members and the increasingly present figure of non-profit organizations who often act as a *de facto* social safety net for this particularly precarious community. While members of this community create and sustain their worlds in the face of an ever-increasing push to extinguish Black, queer life, I explore how these two communities—non-profit and ballroom—are in an ambiguous conflict over what it means to organize a life as a “good” citizen of the state, and how ball members use normative (and often cruel) standards, criteria, and categories as the source

material for experimentation. Each chapter is organized around a particular category in the ballroom scene (Realness, Face, Sex Siren, and Vogue) in order to show how these categories amount to robust strategies for living; and I argue that such strategies mark an ethical turn toward a reconceptualization of *flourishing*, one far beyond normative languages of social, economic, and political success.

Preface

...waiting...

If I were asked for a definition of myself, I would say that I am the one who waits.
—Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

It was a hot night. Made hotter still by the expanse of concrete emanating leftover heat from the long summer's day sun. Humid air clung to clothing, making clothes stick to the thighs and chests that moved slowly along the sidewalk. The car drove quickly west down the wide boulevard, passing a seemingly endless series of empty lots, dollar stores, and gas stations. *Are you going home?* the driver asked. *No, I'm going to a party,* I said looking out the window, trying to avoid the conversation that felt imminent. *What kind of party? This isn't a good neighborhood for a party.* I looked at his face in the rearview mirror then over at the meter increasing with every passing block, counting the distance in dollars from where I began to where I was going. *When I drop you off I'm turning off my cab light so I don't have to pick anyone up from 'round here.* His statement wasn't a question, so I didn't answer, turned away so I didn't have to catch his eye, and didn't bother asking him to explain—we both knew what he meant. This part of Chicago, so far from the lake and all the beautification efforts that it seems to mandate, always tends to feel forgotten, probably because it has been for a long time now. Much like the South Side, there was a time when it was possible to imagine a good life in sections of the predominantly Black neighborhood of West Garfield Park. And much like the South Side, the city has systematically disinvested in maintaining good schools, clean streets, or any semblance of care for the communities that live there (Seligman 2005; Biles 2001). While crime in this neighborhood has steadily increased since its abandonment, unlike the South Side, there seems to be little citywide investment in seeing West Garfield Park's transformation.

Stopped at a red light a block away from the party, I could see the STD/HIV testing vans parked outside the old community center and a couple of people standing close by. Unwilling or

unable to wait through the tension-filled silence of the never-ending light, I said *I'll just get out here*, and opened the door, clutching the headphones and makeup bag that hadn't quite made their final descent into the dark abyss of my oversized tote. The streets were empty save for the people at the gas station on the corner and the small group standing in front of the makeshift ballroom ahead.

Most balls happen at night—that special time when ordinary rules don't apply or at least don't apply in the same way. For many people, the night can be an intimidating time—darkness can provide cover for the illicit and dangerous. But it can also provide cover to the unconventional, the queer, the extra-ordinary. The night is an opportunity for time theft, when the mechanisms of surveillance shift such that one has the change to avoid certain forms of infiltration and cooptation. People gather differently when no one else is around. Advertised through flyers, on Facebook, and by word of mouth, this ball was scheduled to start around nine o'clock in the evening and go until around three in the morning, but by the time I pulled up at midnight, not a lot was going on. *See, balls run on ball time*, Tommy Avant Garde once told me with a side-eyed giggle. The very first ball I ever attended in Chicago started three hours late, or at least three hours later than when I arrived. I remember thinking that I must have had the time wrong. There were only a couple of people walking around, setting up, and I awkwardly asked whether I was in the right place. They laughed at me and asked whether it was my first time. It was. But my second time didn't feel much different. Neither did my third or fourth. Over the course of my research, it became clearer that waiting for a ball to begin was not an accident brought on by poor party planning. Instead, waiting should be thought of as the first part of the event, the part where all the other parts come together to make a temporary and episodic whole. Waiting is the time where butch queens, femme queens, transgender people, gender nonconforming folks, and others slowly gather to create a very particular collectivity whose power and coherence extends beyond its momentary formation at the ball. That hot, humid night would be no different, thus beginning the inevitable scene of waiting.

There are some people out back if you wanna hang, said Solomon Infiniti as he walked through the door and into the special VIP section holding a box of shiny decorations. I followed him to find a couple of people eating snacks and drinking Hennessy. *The DJ isn't here yet and lord am I gonna read his ass. That motherfucker better not come at me tonight.* I made my way through the large hall to the backyard and texted Terreance, *Where are you?* A handful of people were playing double Dutch, laughing at the ropes nearly missing the heads and feet they circled. *Are you gonna get in?* Travis asked. *No, I haven't done that in years and I don't feel like making myself look a fool*, I said. He laughed, and we watched as the young folks played their game. *Girl, I'm on my way. I had to run home to pick up some shit but I'm on my way.* This was the first ball Terreance was throwing by himself, and he was incredibly nervous that no one would show up. Music burst through the back door, momentarily suspending the game. I poked my head inside to check on the evening's progress, but there were only a handful of people walking around the space. *Someone was messing with the sound system, I think*, I said to Travis, who, with a look of longing anticipation, was searching my expression for a sign that our waiting might be coming to an end. I stepped into the air-conditioned space for a moment to cool down, and though a couple of people trickled in after me, the space still seemed ominously empty.

Yo, there's that DJ. Motherfucker, I can't. I told Terreance that he was an ungrateful lazy ass, said Solomon, who was still darting around with tape in one hand and a vodka soda in the other. The DJ walked briskly to the corner on the right of the stage and immediately started setting up his equipment. I walked back outside to tell Travis about the DJ's arrival. *Well, maybe this thing will start after all*, someone said to the group still gathered around the game that was starting to lose players to the now-heightened sense of anticipation that the ball would begin. Tables scattered in the back of the space started collecting purses, bags, and phones. It was already pushing 1:00 a.m., and the space was only available for another two hours. The DJ started spinning a smattering of old and new Top 40 hits, and people began walking around the space with more energy. The affective shift from

passive to active waiting can be such a subtle thing that you might miss it, only to realize you've been in this new state for some time. Even as the music filled the room, making it feel more alive, more full, most people present were walkers and were crowded in the bathroom, putting the finishing touches on outfits while looking in the two rectangular mirrors hanging over the only two working sinks. Some leaned over the sink to get a better look as others helped zip up, pin up, and squeeze them into outfits. *Is it close to starting?* someone asked as they struggled with a zipper that wouldn't make its way up a back. *Maybe? I think we have to wait for the commentator to get here and then things can take off.* I stood behind the group and fixed my mascara, which was starting to show signs of exhaustion, before going back into the main hall. More people had arrived. Music muffled the growing sounds of excitement as people hugged and said hello. Laughter pierced through the beat of the driving house rhythm that lingers through the episode. Terreance arrived moments later with a group of about five people wearing all white. *We should start in the next few minutes or else we'll get kicked outta here before Legends, Statements, and Stars,* he said over his shoulder as he walked quickly to the stage. It was 2:00 a.m., and we finally did.



What questions are raised when we explore the force of what Tommy called *ball time*, when we ask what the temporal mode of waiting, in particular, tells us about how we are clued into a different way of being present and attentive? And how might waiting help us understand something about how ball members restructure attachments from the world out there toward ones invested in building a world together? We know that in everyday life, waiting operates as a temporal tether that maintains attachments to something, someone, or somewhere. However mundanely present waiting can feel, it is a future orientation toward an elsewhere. We wait because we are invested in accessing something that's not quite within our reach. What interests me here is not that waiting happens at the beginning of a ball; rather, following Ghassan Hage (2009, 1), I am interested in asking what the

style and register of *this* waiting is and how it might change our understanding of the ballroom as an episode and this group of people as a collective. Starting at the beginning of a ball (which is of course always in the midst of things in the everyday), where we arrive only to wait, we begin to get the sense that waiting is doing something. When we wait, we slow down and recalibrate our expectations toward a present that is informed but not determined by our future dreams of the good life.

In his insightful ethnography of the ballroom scene in Detroit, Marlon Bailey (2013, 2) makes passing mention of waiting when he writes, “balls never start on time, at least not by the time indicated on the flyer.” It is true that though no two balls are the same, the one constant is that they always start late. But while the space between the “time indicated on the flyer” and the “beginning” of the ball might look like the same form of waiting we’re accustomed to; I argue that it is in fact an active moment of reframing and attunement. During the ball, waiting is not the attachment to an expectation/object but the expectation/object itself. Of course, waiting can be difficult, mundane, exhausting, or boring, but here, waiting expands the grounds on which this world is built. Waiting might look like catching up with people we haven’t seen in a while or playing a game of double Dutch, but in each of these instances, something is being prepared—which is to say that waiting is a time dedicated to gathering (up, together, around) all the differences between individuals to create a community. When we take a moment to pay attention to waiting, we start to notice how anticipation of the oncoming now structures the environment and architecture of the ballroom community, such that we recognize a collective where there was once a loosely felt coalition.

Throughout history, minoritarian subjects have been marked by their seemingly out-of-timeness to the throws and development of social life. For instance, in the United States, scholars have traced the violent ways in which Black life has been linked to a kind of slowness of thought and movement, historically binding Black people to “racist imaginings . . . used to justify their

domination and subjugation” (Adeyemi 2019, 550; see also Brown 2008; Wynter 2003). This coupling is perhaps why time itself, and slowness in particular, has been used as an everyday form of resistance to discriminatory laws and dangerous and unjust working conditions (Kelley 1993). Indeed, how one operates in time has the potential to be used as a technique for survival. But it is not just a slowness of pace that has been forcibly associated to black life; the act of being suspended in time (being made to wait) has also been used as a mechanism of control throughout history. When we are made to wait in the everyday, of course our pace is slowed, but we are also delayed, interrupted. As a temporal structure, waiting puts a pause on progression, dislocating individuals from community. But in the ballroom scene, waiting gets reframed such that these moments of pause, this suspension, becomes an opportunity for animation and individuals have the opportunity to form community. This prelude builds on this literature, arguing that while moments of waiting might be violent, burdensome, or mundane, they are also opportunities for pushing against an ordinary whose foundation rests on a temporality seeped in anti-blackness and anti-queerness.

On the face of it, a ball is a queer party filled with dancing and music, flashing lights and designer shoes, but push only a little past the fabulous facade and it's easy to see that balls are distinct and complex social worlds that carry their own logics and operate by, at times, a contradictory set of highly developed and specific standards. Gender, race, class, sexuality, norms of beauty and language are all thrown into a sort of kaleidoscope upon arrival at a ball—mirroring and refracting the world in creative and generative ways. In the chapters that follow, I move from Chicago to New York, from night to day, from ballrooms to community rooms and back again in order to trace the multiple ways this community holds itself together. Throughout the chapters I ask after the relationship between the episode of the ball and the everyday, focusing on how people develop attachments that necessitate the development and practice of a set of skills for living. But before I introduce the many brilliant people who have so generously shared their thoughts, feelings, fears, and lives with me over the many years,

I want to talk about how they ended up in this story, which is to say, how this diverse group of people from many walks of life comes together to constitute a collective that can be thought of as *a* ballroom community.

With this in mind, this prelude seeks to orient you to one of the key organizing logics of ball culture, that of preparation time, and asks how it organizes individuals around a common desire of community. Because so much of what it means to be in any scene is about showing up time and time again to participate in and support the community, it should be no surprise that how one orients themselves *in* and *to* time is of great importance for how we find ways (or moments) of belonging. Questions of temporality matter to the generation of worlds and I would argue that without attending to the ways that ball time reorganizes one's sensibilities, it is hard to imagine the great work that goes into creating and sustaining the ballroom scene. My goal is not to define ball time (as though I could!) but rather to outline this elusive yet necessary timescape by following the tempos, sounds, and rhythms of the activities moving into and out of multiple such episodes. To this end, I want to explore how the act of waiting gets taken up and reframed in the ballroom scene as a technique for building and sustaining community in the present. How preparation time becomes performance time. As you move through these essays that jump from scene to scene, methodologically and rhetorically mirroring some of the concepts generated in the ballroom space that this manuscript will describe, I ask you to stay in the unfolding now of these encounters.¹



¹ In *The Mana of Mass Society*, William Mazzarella asks, “What if one starts with encounter rather than with structure?” (6). He goes on to argue that by beginning with the encounter, certain questions are brought to the fore such as, “What resonates in the wake of the encounter? What doesn’t? What is activated in an encounter such that it might feel like a moment of promise, of agitation, of potential, or of threat?” (2017, 6). Taking up this invitation, these essays seek to similarly begin from moments of encounter in order to ask different kinds of questions about how the world of the ballroom “comes to seem structured at all.”

Is it almost ready? Kitty asked through the grate that separates the kitchen from the community room. *Give us like . . . ten more minutes,* I hollered back as Jahday and I rushed to put the pasta we had made in the serving tins for lunch. I had been volunteering at the New York–based LGBTQ+ community organization for some time in various capacities, and on Mondays (pasta day) I worked in the kitchen. In order to serve as many people as possible, we always made two kinds of pasta, one vegetarian and one with meat. It was important for the community center to serve at least two balanced and filling hot meals per day. Or at least that was the goal; funding is always a problem when donations eerily coincide with the news of this or that major threat to queer life. We served lunch from noon to one every day, but the community room opened early to give the clients a chance to sit down, see friends, check Facebook, and cool down or warm up depending on the weather.

Today was an anomaly. I had dropped the first pot of pasta all over the floor, which, beyond the frustration of wasting food, cleaning up my mess, and making a whole new batch, meant that I was also delaying what would be for some, their first meal of the day. *Do you need help?* Preston asked, popping his head through the sliver of space we left open to keep the kitchen at a reasonable temperature. *Not unless you can make water boil faster!* Jahday laughed back. The quickened pace of our hurried choreography around the cramped kitchen kept time with the shouts and laughs of the clients pulling up tables and chairs and settling into the comfort of being among friends. We were officially late. I pulled up the grate so people could see us working quickly, to make sure they knew we were not messing around. Chanel walked over to see what was holding up lunch. *It's my fault. I don't even know what happened,* I said as I stirred the sauce and cheese into the fresh pasta, steam billowing out into the room. *It looks strange but I'm gonna try it cause you made it. I only eat the lunch when y'all are here.* I laughed. Her subtle shade was not directed at us. We were two of only a handful of Black people who worked at the community center, and it was not the first time someone had

mentioned that they didn't eat the meals unless "we" had cooked them. Chanel's presence at the counter began to draw a crowd, and clients started lining up behind her. I told them we weren't ready, but they knew it was better to be in line and get the meat pasta than wait and be stuck with the vegetarian option.

Normally, after we had served everyone in line, we would wait for any latecomers before giving people more, but because we hadn't started on time and lunch can't go past one o'clock, we quickly called for seconds. People hurried back over to the line. *Is there no more meat? No, only the veggie,* I said. *Yeah, I'll take that and a little more salad.* As I got to the end of the line and had served the last of the pasta, someone came up to the counter and asked for lunch. *I'm all out of pasta but I have sandwiches and snacks,* I said as I walked over to the fridge to make sure I wasn't lying. *Man, they started, that really fucking sucks. I got stuck waiting for my case manager who never showed up for our meeting and now there is no lunch. I came all the way uptown from work and I have to go back down and like, why does this place always fucking play me like this?* I hated when this happened. I hated being in a position where I represented yet another institution that had made them wait for something they needed only to disappoint them in the end. It might seem so trivial but every time someone wasn't fed, couldn't eat the food, or didn't like the food I wanted to cry. It is such a privilege to only eat what you prefer. It is so hard to always be one step behind, be forced to take whatever scraps are left, because you were caught up in a waiting game.



Within a world governed by a normative timescape,² one's capacity to move through time

² Scholars of time note that what we currently think of as normative time, or time that has been shaped in relation to time-keeping technologies like the clock, developed in relation to particular forms of labor under capital (see Thompson 1967). Where there grew the need for organizing labor during the industrial revolution, so too developed technologies that served to quantify and record time in relation to monetary values, and this new way of understanding time in terms of productivity, efficiency, speed, and consumption disciplined the time-sense of laborers. Feminist

seamlessly, without interruptions, is a signifier of one's social location. Waiting is gendered, racialized, and distributed along class lines. It has the ability to interrupt progress and upset continuity by slowing tempo and delaying desired outcomes. And continuity matters—we often understand ourselves in terms of coherent and ordered narratives surrounding the efficacy of the self. When those narratives are put on hold for some reason, we feel the lag as diversion or obstruction to the flow of everyday life. But interruption does not break an attachment to a future but rather alters its form. We can recover from being interrupted, but we are never quite the same as we were before. There are many forms of interruption, some are *a priori* (inherent to the conditions of life) while others are *posteriori* (the ordinary glitches experienced in the everyday). In the latter, interruption is the occasion when the flow of the ordinary is only temporarily halted, and we are prevented from business as usual. But what does it mean to be pulled out of the “usual” operation of things as a way of life, to be prevented from comfortably moving in and among an ordinary whose affective landscape is loosely tangled with particular notions of being in time?

If time is money, then time wasted becomes yet another occasion around which one must find ways of negotiating socioeconomic impoverishment. And indeed, when the thing that you are waiting for is necessary for your basic survival, anticipation is overloaded. For Black and brown queer people, to be interrupted by a scene/occasion of waiting is such an ordinary occurrence that our conceptions of blackness and queerness have been shaped in part through such starts and stops.

scholars have worked to challenge conceptualizations and histories of normative time that are based solely on the development of wage labor and instead have looked to the ways that modern notions of time developed in relation to reproduction and its technologies. While the historical development of time in relation to (re)productive labor is beyond the scope of this essay, it is important to point out that in the United States, conceptions around time also developed under a particular moral regime in which one's productive capacity became linked to some notion of “goodness,” signaling a turn toward understanding time and timeliness in terms of proper etiquette and respectability. Of course, there have been many changes in the way we conceive of time since the 19th century but suffice it to say that in the United States, we remain deeply connected to the idea that there are right and wrong (good and bad) ways of being in time.

And with each start and stop, waiting has the potential to change relationships to the future. This is perhaps why queer theory has found it so productive to think through the (im)possibility of a queer futurity (Edelman 1998; Halberstam 2005; Muñoz 2009) and why Black feminist scholars are similarly invested in working through grammatical tenses as a way to understand the complex space-time of Black and brown life (Campt 2017; Hartman 2008, 2016; Keeling 2003, 2009; Spillers 1987).

“Queerness is not yet here,” declared José Muñoz (2009) in the iconic opening lines of *Cruising Utopia*. Here, Muñoz places queerness into the realm or grammar of futurity, inviting readers to consider a world where queerness is not a given but rather an aspirational elsewhere, one that needs to be activated. Here, queerness is a potential, “a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present” (2009, 1). For Muñoz, we are caught in a here and now that prohibits our capacities to access a radical opening into a (concrete) queer utopia. We need to throw off the burden of “being” and embrace a “doing” so we might orient ourselves toward another world. Muñoz is explicitly writing against what he terms an “antirelational” understanding of queer time wherein queer bodies and practices are situated in ethical opposition to normative (reproductive) time. This scholarship, made most popular by Lee Edelman (1998, 2004), argues that the future belongs to the realm of the child and family, to anxieties around reproduction, to notions of inheritance, and to desires of stability and duration. Edelman writes, “the child has come to embody for us the telos of the social order and been enshrined as the figure for whom that order must be held in perpetual trust” (1998, 21). As the nation invests in its own reproduction through political organization, social programs, and the preservation and protection of the child, it is also simultaneously invested in maintaining the figure

of the queer as outside the boundaries of citizenship.³ For Edelman, “there can be no future for queers” because the structures by which we arrive at fantasies of a better life reproduce the very conditions under which marginalization occurs.

While differently articulated, both of these understandings refuse reading queerness as an identity category that maps neatly onto nonnormative bodies; they are instead interested in tracing the capacious nature of the term, mapping out what Jack Halberstam (2005, 6) calls the “nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time” or what Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner (1998, 558) express as the “modes of feeling that can be learned rather than experienced as a birthright.” Both also agree that there is something peculiar about queer time and its relationship to desire; they agree that our present is in some ways structured by what we desire for our futures. But for Edelman, queer time hinges on how desire accumulates to endpoints that project a particular image of a future, activated through the death drive. For Muñoz, the future leaps out of and into the present, a Blochian prefigurative utopia making itself known as an anticipatory illumination.⁴ But what happens, then, when the duration of the “pre” is closer than we might imagine? What happens when desires do not accumulate to endpoints but to episodes? And what happens when embodiment is calcified such that the “then and there” isn’t always a given or is felt as a compression rather than an opening onto a horizon? Or when futures are delayed because they are interrupted by moments of suspension?

Black feminist orientations toward time address some of these lingering questions by making central the role of black experience through and in time, or the very racialization of time itself, taking seriously the immediacy of how it feels to inhabit black (gendered) bodies as always being

³ Of course, if this was ever true is up for debate. But with the more recent invitation of (white, cisgender, monogamous, “homonormative”) queerness into the social and political collective life of the nation, that this could be true now is an interesting question.

⁴ See also David Bell, *Rethinking Utopia: Place, Power, Affect*, 86.

overdetermined by the weighted history of The Black Body—a timespace that Frantz Fanon famously described as the interval. “Too late!” Fanon cries in *Black Skin, White Mask* as he explores how the fact of blackness upsets the epistemological and ontological foundation of the existence of the black (man) in relation to the white (man), rendering the project of decolonization an impossibility. “Too late!” Kara Keeling understands the interval as the spatio-temporal scene in which “the past overwhelms the present at the expense of movement toward a future that might be different from the past” (2003, 97). Here, in the interval, the present becomes “simply affect... a sensory perception that is the arrested action of the past on the present,” (2003, 101) and these affective resonances evoke (pre)determined responses—trapping the black body in the pessimism of a repetitious web of anticipation and explosion.⁵ But there seems to be a way out of the interval, for both Keeling and Fanon, for the interval is an effect of the historical structuring of blackness, not the structure itself.

In her search for the possibility of an otherwise (or a way outside of the interval), Tina Campt teases apart the suspended animation and impossibility of the timespace of the interval by turning her attention toward the future real conditional as a tense wherein the grammar of the present points toward a “performance of a future that hasn’t happened yet but must” (2017, 17). For Campt, black futurity hints at these binding pessimisms but does not stay there. Rather, as she writes, black feminist futurity “is an attachment to a belief in what should be true, which impels us to realize that aspiration... a politics of prefiguration that involves living the future *now* – as imperative rather than subjunctive – as a striving for the future you want to see, right now, in the

⁵ Keeling (2003, 103) traces the problem of waiting in the interval for a future (which is always a reemergence of the past) which sustains the very structure of violence it seeks to fight against: “The temporal structure of the colonial mode of representation of otherness that Fanon describes throughout his book and especially in Chapter Five is that of a closed cycle of anticipation and explosion wherein the Black’s explosion, because it is merely what has been anticipated, always occurs ‘too late,’ and the *explosion* – decolonization – is impossible (‘it is too soon... or too late’).”

present” (2017, 17). Here, Campt is thinking with Saidiya Hartman’s call to “[exploit] the capacities of the subjunctive” when dealing with the loss of an archive (2008, 11). But where Hartman uses the subjunctive as a grammatical mood that opens up the (future) space of wonder and invention when we have little to no (historical) materials to gather in our (re)telling of narratives of slavery, Campt argues, that we must command the future into our now.

When the future is condensed in such a way that the “then and there” isn’t always a given or is felt as a compression rather than an opening onto a horizon, when desires accumulate not to an endpoint but to episodes, the temporal structure of waiting and its relationship to the future must be reimagined. Waiting, as a capacity of the subjunctive, may very well look forward to an accumulated outcome, but it just as often defines the presence and practice of enduring (and surviving) the present. In the space of the ball, endurance is not merely what we do to survive; rather, endurance itself is recast as a playful and pleasurable scene, one that we revel in and dress up for. Waiting as a technique of enduring the present creates the space in which those hours before the ball begins is less of a waiting *for* or *on* something to come. It is more of a state of waiting *with*. Where the grammar of waiting in the everyday is entangled with the hopes and desires of a future otherwise, the waiting of ball time is the extended moment when we shift our orientation toward building a world here and now. Waiting is an elongated activation that doesn’t rely on a future desired end, but rather generates a temporary collectivity.



I once asked Linda LaBeija why people always show up so late to balls. Linda is the sort of friend that lets you ask the dumb question because she can tell that underneath, you are asking a question about how the world works. She is a stunning transgender activist and artist who has a witty sense of humor, a sharp intelligence, a limitless creativity, a radical sense of justice, and an overwhelming energy in life whose depths seem to know no bounds. Her youth only makes her wisdom and

thoughtfulness more arresting. She looked at me and laughed, throwing her head back with delight. *I know when I'm late it's cause I'm at home making sure I have everything I need*, she said, getting more serious. *And it's crazy because you're literally at home making sure you have everything you need for two seconds of glory, for the chance for the commentator to say "Keep walking! Keep going!"* She sat quietly for a moment, then added, *I think part of what makes people late is similar to the way that ballroom escape[s] other concepts of gender or dance or what have you. It escapes time.*

Linda took another sip of her tea. We were sitting outside the library in Bryant Park, and the weather had gone from slightly chilled to brisk overnight. *It makes me wonder about what it means to be Black in America. And it makes me think of James Baldwin and constantly being in this state of anger or frustration and it's especially common among Black LGBTQ folks. You know, we're constantly dealing with a lot of stress and a lot of triggers. Like, there's a reason why there is such a thing as CP time, you know?* Listening back on the recording of our conversation, I can hear myself agreeing. She went on: *I think the reality is that not only do we want to come in our best, but we wanna come in our best to see people we haven't seen in a long time; we wanna come in our best to leave a good impression on the judges; we wanna come in our best so when we see the pictures we can say "Yes! We look good!"* A man walked over and asked for change. Linda kindly told him we didn't have anything and without missing a beat, returned to her thought: *And it makes me think of excellence, you know? It's the difference between excellence and Black excellence, and Black excellence will make you late!*



As the opening vignette suggests and Linda confirms, balls don't begin on time because people are "running late." Indeed, lateness necessitates the waiting we experience; or we could say that lateness creates the conditions of possibility for this particular form of waiting. But if being "on time" is a pressure point around which people experience the heavy weight of being out of sync from normative time, being late to arrive at a ball is a gift the collective affords to its members. When Linda describes why she's late, she's describing the relationship between time and the collective, a

restructuring of the burden felt when we are required to abide by the temporal logics of the world, toward an investment in taking time to figure out how to be present together. And when she describes the desire to “come in our best,” she is describing a commitment to a collective life centered on Black excellence that stands in defiance of all that seeks to limit the conditions for Black life in general, and Black excellence in particular. Waiting is the generous gift of elasticity.

The ballroom community time and time again finds ways of using the (collected, created, borrowed, stolen, and purchased) materials at hand, transforming them into radiant and extraordinary things. And this collective work of bricolage includes the ephemeral materiality of time, where time itself becomes an opportunity to mess with what is available to create something in the meanwhile of the everyday. For Black and brown members of the scene, for whom the ball is a necessary pause from days spent working and living in an anti-Black and anti-queer world, and for whom waiting in the everyday most often operates as a sign of powerlessness, waiting for the ball refocuses attachments to the unfolding now by insisting that enduring can be exciting, spontaneous, creative, and exhilarating, even if it is only for “two seconds of glory.” Waiting reminds us that being together is, in and of itself, a moment of Black excellence.

When you look at the people gathered around the runway and judges’ tables—the people sitting at tables and the others pressing their bodies closer to the platform in order to get a better look or chant a little louder—and when we are brought into the fold of these moments of collective effervescence, when we’ve given ourselves over to these ritualized moments of togetherness, we sense what it feels like to escape one form of time and expand into another. This is the creation of the “we” that ball time allows, even if only for a moment. As this community coheres around a shared physical space or activity, there are moments when the people gathered around the stage act as an audience (captivated by “a look” or voguer) and moments when they act as a crowd (hollering and chanting for a family member or against a rival house). In so doing, each individual expands into

the whole and a world comes into view through this loosening and expansion of the self. Another way of saying this is the transition from being in attendance to being a member of the ballroom community is one deeply tied to being willing to wait for it. This is not to argue that we lose ourselves as a condition of membership to the ballroom community, but that our relationship to others and ourselves takes on a new form when we come into contact with this collective, in part through the act of waiting.

When we wait in the world, we are often waiting for something or someone. We can be passively and powerlessly held captive by the temporal modes we enter and remain there until we reach a fulfillment of some kind. Our attachment to the future event/person/place is what keeps us in the anticipatory space of waiting. But when we wait before and during a ball, normative time is suspended, and we lose a sense of the ground. We float above the ordinary, escaping the pressures and obligations it brings to bear on Black queer life. The urgency that routinely structures the everyday slowly begins to ease its anticipatory grasp, and we sink into the state of being here, together, still. Because we know the ball will begin but never really know when or how, and we know that people are coming but are unsure from where or how they will get here, and we know that the beat will drop but are often surprised when it does, waiting invites us to experience the now. Waiting for the ball to start signals a sort of elongation of the present in order to call attention to one's place within the community. Waiting is a necessary in-between that rejuvenates and restores, shifting our attachments that are always wrapped up in futures back to the present in order to make the demand that we stay suspended there together.

Introduction

(Extra)Ordinary Queens

In 1991, the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature was awarded to a film by Barbara Kopple and Arthur Cohn called *American Dream*. The film chronicles the unsuccessful strike of a group of union workers at a meatpacking plant in Austin, Minnesota from 1985 to 1986, and presents the audience with the small scale and devastating effects of what have come to be known as Reaganomics – the massive reduction in government spending, federal income taxes, and regulation that widened the income gap and increased the national debt threefold. As the meatpacking workers find themselves simultaneously fighting against a large corporation and their own international labor union for a fair and livable wage, the film documents the collective realization that the life they had imagined for themselves, and their families was slipping further and further out of reach. The title of the film is thus an ironic rendering of the complicated economic, political, and social landscape of 1980s American life that had promised a better future for those willing to work hard. In this way, the film captures a moment in history when the American dream was being thrown into crisis by then President Ronald Reagan’s economic and political policies (war on drugs, on immigration, on big government, on communism and the Soviet Union) that were actively reshaping the national imaginary and conversation.

In their acceptance speech, Kopple and Cohn present us with two ways to read the film and its title: Cohn, a Swiss producer whose Jewish family fled Nazi occupation during World War II, presents the film as a testament to the democratic ideal of freedom of speech that United States stands for on the world stage. Through Cohn, we get a sense that the American dream lives on, not in the form of a rejection of the exploitative forces enacted by corporations in the free-market economy, but in the very fabric of the nation; that the dream does not reside in the everyday lives of American people as an achievable goal, but as a governing and organizing principle of national

sentiment which, strangely, makes possible conversations about the very failure of those dreams. In turn, in her dedication of the film to the people of the Midwest, those hardworking people we might today refer to as the “white working class,” and her argument that their struggle to realize and fight for their “precious” and “vital” version of the American dream has been permanently replaced by corporate greed, Kopple presents the film as the documented proof that something has fundamentally changed in the shape and form of the dream. For Kopple, it seems, the failed strike represents a death of a realizable desire to live a good and stable life; or perhaps more precisely the death of any hope that the American dream is possible through collective bargaining.

In the same year (far away from Austin, Minnesota) as the strike was unfolding, a young woman came upon a group of people dancing a strange kind of dance in Washington Square Park. It was 1985 and, emboldened by an assignment for a documentary film studies class at NYU, she asked if she could take their picture and they agreed. Later she recalled: “They were saying things like “Saks Fifth Avenue mannequins” and “butch queen in drag.” They were basically saying category names; I didn’t know it.”¹ When asked what they were doing, the young people explained that they were voguing and if she wanted to learn more she should go to a ball and talk to Willie Ninja. And so began her four-year documentation of this group of black and brown queer people who collectively called themselves the ballroom community.

These two documentaries could not be more different. Where *American Dream* is about a group of largely white working-class people living in a rural town in the upper Midwest whose lives and futures were being altered by corporate finance, greed, and expansion, *Paris is Burning* tells the story of a group of black and brown queer folks who were—at least during the time of the documentary—largely ignored by corporations, politicians, and society more broadly. For instance,

¹ Interview with Jennie Livingston in BuzzFeed “Filmmaker Jennie Livingston on Life and Loss after *Paris is Burning*” March 22, 2013. By Saeed Jones.

when the film premiered in 1991, a New York Times review wrote that Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning* was a "journey through an exotic world populated by gay men, most of them black and Hispanic, whose lives revolve around lavish fashion balls in which they appear as figures drawn for the most part from the mainstream society that has rejected them."² But in addition to the very obvious aesthetic, racial, and locational differences between these two documentaries, *Paris is Burning* explores how a particular group of people, who had never been promised the assurances built into the dream of a better life, found ways of enjoying small flashes of it. There is no drama of collective bargaining with a union, corporation, or state yet there is a collective who bargains.

Paris is Burning has had its fair share of controversy regarding the (arguably unintended and yet somewhat obvious) political and ethical issues surrounding both its filming and distribution,³ but there is also no question that the documentary's influence has affected the ballroom scene and its relation to mainstream popular culture and shaped the conversations about the community since its premiere. Putting that aside for a moment (and only a moment), however, we might consider how these two documentaries tell resonant stories about a common ethos of American life, that of the American dream.

Scholars who write on the complicated web of attachments, desires, and affective resonances all sutured together under the casual title of a "dream" often begin by tracking the historical emergence of the term itself (Cullen 2003; Douglas 2001; Hochschild 1995). And this impulse makes sense given the fact that "the" American dream is often mobilized by different parties toward paradoxical ends. It is used to mobilize political discourses, social programs, economic policies, and

² "An Exotic Gay Subculture Turns Poignant Under Scrutiny" by Jennifer Dunning. NYTimes March 23, 1991.

³ bell hooks writes, "*Paris is Burning* is a film that many audiences assume is inherently oppositional because of its subject matter and the identity of the filmmaker. Yet the film's politics of race, gender, and class are played out in ways that are both progressive and reactionary" (149).

artistic expressions, all while simultaneously being a somewhat empty category and completely overdetermined. But this elusive dream finds its salience *in* its slipperiness. It has come to be grounded in a set of political principles and moral codes so contradictory that it *appears* wholly enigmatic.

Jim Cullen makes a similar point of the American dream when he argues that “Ambiguity is the very source of its mythic power, nowhere more so than among those striving for, but unsure whether they will reach, their goals” (2003, 7). For him, then, the project becomes one of tracing the many different “dreams” (from the Puritans and Founding Fathers to Martin Luther King Jr. and Hollywood) that he says “competed for the status of common sense” each of which rely on a particular understanding of freedom and agency (2003, 10). The most common-sense notion of the American dream people turn to when asked directly what they understand the dream to entail is articulated in the opening lines of the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.” These are the words which signaled the shift from the “European political, economic, and social structures” of subservience and deference and toward a “new order of ethical-material relations” structured around a meritocratic ideal (Douglas 2001, 28).⁴

It is this new ethical-material relation, a relation that assumes a necessary correlation between one’s labor and one’s happiness, that remains so deeply woven into the imagination of the United States. Even when the conditions of one’s life and liberty might convince them of the opposite, so many still hold fast to the fantasy that one’s labor and work (pursuit) will produce a good life

⁴ This is the claim made by Christopher Douglas through his reading of Crèvecoeur’s *Letters*.

(happiness). Of course, there are so many assumptions⁵ (certainly for my purposes, too many to name directly) that this ethical-material relation leaves unnamed and unaccounted for, thus creating the slipperiness of the dream. What did the Founding Fathers mean by “all Men”? Or “created equal” or “unalienable Rights”? What is meant by Liberty? Life? And what in the Creator’s name is Happiness? Students of history will point to the tragic irony of the document ascribing rights to all men while Indigenous peoples were being forcibly removed from their land and Africans were being forcibly moved to this “New World” to slave over this now stolen land. They might even trace how the dream changed as more people were legally (though rarely socially) afforded particular rights as citizens. They might also consider how the dream gained new meaning with the development of industries, the technological advancements of the automobile and the railway, and westward expansion. Or how the dream has been continuously articulated and rearticulated along racial, gendered, and class lines.

Good students would remind you that the term “American dream” was first coined by James Truslow Adams in his 1931 book *The Epic of America*. In the preface, Adams writes that his primary goal is to try map the historical progression of specific American concepts around business, national sentiment, and most importantly:

[...] that American dream of a better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank, which is the greatest contribution we have made to the thought and welfare of the world. That dream or hope has been present from the start. Ever since we became an independent nation, each generation has seen an uprising of ordinary Americans to save that dream from the forces which appeared to be overwhelming and dispelling it. Possibly the greatest of these struggles lies just ahead of us at this present time – not a struggle of revolutionists against established order, but of the ordinary man to hold fast to those rights to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” which were vouchsafed to us in the past in vision and on parchment. (xx)

⁵ It is interesting that the Founding Fathers seemed to have created this slipperiness intentionally through the use of the term “self-evident” as the basis upon which all else rests.

The struggle Adams is referring to is the advent of the Great Depression. For him, this noble dream of the good life is being threatened and thrown into crisis by the impending economic failures of the present. But isn't it true that we most often find ourselves dreaming of something better, richer, and happier when confronted with an obstacle? Isn't the struggle part of what keeps the dream alive, albeit always a little bit out of reach? For it is the *pursuit* of happiness and not its *achievement* that is promised?

Martin Luther King Jr. referred to this dream in his most famous speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963. "We've come to our nation's capital to cash a check," he said. "When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men – yes, black men as well as white men – would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." He goes on to explain that the "bank of justice" has defaulted on the note but that we know there are sufficient funds. His dream is that the nation repays this debt. That it is a *dream* and not a set of demands has a peculiar function: it makes his desires more palatable to a nation founded on white supremacy. But the invocation of dreaming here does something else. It also articulates the desire for a more just world as a temporal horizon in which the future is only ever confined by our imaginative capacities and only ever approachable through our belief in the fantasy. We know that for black Americans, the dream of the good life was never promised in those founding documents. But King's dream of the future is also dream of a past in which equality was guaranteed.

Cullen argues that part of what has made the American dream so enduring in American life is that:

At some visceral level, virtually all of us need to believe that equality is one of the core values of every American life, that its promises extend to everyone. If they don't, then not everybody is eligible for the American Dream—and one of the principal attractions of the American dream, and its major moral underpinning, is that everyone is eligible: this has been

the benchmark, commonsense notion of what equality has meant for quite some time. That the circumstances of everyday life routinely belie this belief is hardly a problem as long as the *principle* of equality is affirmed. The way we typically square the difference between principle and reality is to cite the concept of equality of *opportunity*. The notion that everyone has the hypothetical possibility of being equal in public life is a standard we consider practical, as opposed to equality of *condition*, which we typically do not. We can accept, even savor, all kinds of inequalities as long as we can imagine different outcomes [...]. (2003, 108)

But it is this principle of equality of *opportunity*, however that Dr. King, in an interview for a special report called “After Civil Rights: Black Power,”⁶ lodged one of his most poignant critiques of the American dream. He explains that:

Emancipation for the Negro was really freedom to hunger, freedom to the winds and rains of heaven. It was freedom without food to eat or land to cultivate and therefore it was freedom and famine at the same time. And when white Americans tells the Negro to lift themselves up their bootstraps, they don't look over the legacy of slavery and segregation. I believe we ought to do all we can and seek to lift ourselves up by our own bootstraps, but it is a cruel jest to say to a bootless man that he ought to lift himself up by his own bootstraps. And many Negroes, by the thousands and millions, have been left bootless as a result of all of these years of oppression, and as a result of a society that deliberately made his color a stigma and something worthless and degrading.

What I'm trying to get at here is that black Americans have always already known this dream to be the farce that follows closely behind the tragedy. They have been well aware that the promise of the good life is a fantasy object whose contours, time and time again, map neatly on to unmarked bodies. But even still, many continue to orient their lives toward it, find sentimental value in it, and (even on their most cynical days) cherish it as something to work toward.

This is what Lauren Berlant (2011) calls the cruelty that underlies our optimistic attachments to fantasies of the good life. For Berlant, the “good life” is a fantasy object/scene created and sustained through the play between moral, economic, social, familial, public, and private imaginaries which arise within distinct contexts and work to structure the way people organize their lives as they struggle to attain some sense or measure of success: from where they choose to live and with whom,

⁶ May 8, 1967 (only 11 months before his murder) in Ebenezer Baptist Church for NBC News.

to what sorts of jobs might provide them with proper access to upward mobility or even mere stability. As I've been trying to demonstrate, the American dream is a particular version of the good life that is distinctive in terms of its optimistic presupposition that material success will be reached through hard work and perseverance, the ethical-material relation. It is a "cruel jest," as Dr. King put it, to think that one could beat the system through hard work and equally distributed opportunity when neither opportunity or condition has ever been afforded or promised.

This is—and perhaps always has been—the premiere melodrama of American life: that we hold these truths to be self-evident when nothing ever has been or ever will be about how to pursue a good life in a place so unimaginably entangled with violence. This brings us back to these two documentaries. The national context in which *Paris is Burning* was shot is of course the same as it was in the *American Dream*. However, the pressure points of those national policies were felt differently in the world of black queer New Yorkers: these are the years when Representative Jessie Helms' attack on the National Endowment for the Arts plagued the art world and thus those sustained by it, the years of the rise of the Moral Majority's influence in guiding social and economic policy that would directly affect the lives of those considered deviant, and those early years when the world was becoming increasingly aware of and was being devastated by a new and extremely deadly virus that would completely change the shape of queer life. This is the history that lingers in the background of the film that we rarely encounter. It is a kind of sleight-of-hand sidestepping of the everyday that obscures the tragedy of racialization and gendered violence:⁷ the quick moves from dramatic scenes in the ballroom to the intimate telling of personal hardship and struggle are timed in such a way that the hardships are left floating and quickly covered up. But staying with those intimate moments, you

⁷ This is one of the *many* issues that bell hooks had with the film when she writes that "as though there were two competing cinematic narratives, one displaying the pageantry of the drag ball and the other reflecting on the lives of participants and value of fantasy" (1992, 153).

see a group of black and brown, queer people, whose lives have been shaped by particular sets of historical, political, and social conditions, and who have created a world, against all odds: what is that if not the American dream?

In this world of ballroom, the fantasy of a good life is not encouraged by a deeply held belief that its pursuit has been promised or is even possible; nor is it a floating signifier in need of a sign. It is a meticulously cultivated set of practices that actualize around a set of standards. It is a self-contained and collectively realized ethical-material relation. Put differently, what Livingston gets right, and I say this with the utmost cynicism, is how her film moves from the ball to the everyday. How the struggles attached to the fact of living as black queer subjects of the state are consciously reworked, reimagined, and refigured in the space of the ballroom itself. It may be off-putting that the good life fantasies in the guise of the American dream so often look like a celebration of whiteness.⁸ But might we slow down a bit and attend to the strategies being deployed, the practices being explored, and the questions being asked by the community itself? What can we learn from those material cultures that seem counter-revolutionary, those performances that seem reactionary, and those beauty standards which feel like bad politics?

The Scene: the ball and the streets

The manuscript you are about to read is not necessarily the manuscript I set out to research or write, and yet, here we are. I started doing research with the ballroom community in 2013 almost by

⁸ This is the primary critique of the film from bell hooks. She writes that the version of whiteness that is being celebrated, “is not just any old brand of whiteness but rather that brutal imperial ruling-class capitalist patriarchal whiteness that presents itself—its way of life—as the only meaningful life there is. What could be more reassuring to a white public fearful that marginalized disenfranchised black folks might rise any day now and make revolutionary black liberation struggle a reality than a documentary affirming that colonized, victimized, exploited, black folks are all too willing to be complicit in perpetuating the fantasy that ruling-class white culture is the quintessential site of unrestricted joy, freedom, power, and pleasure” (1992, 149).

accident. I was volunteering with a LGBTQ+ nonprofit organization in Chicago in the youth program, making dinners and teaching hip-hop and modern dance classes. After a while, I learned that many of the staff tasked with caring for the overall wellbeing of the youth were members or former members of the ballroom scene and many if not all of the youth were in houses. I started learning (although as you'll see in Chapter 5, *learning* is not really the right word) how to vogue, learning about categories, and learning how to take it on the chin when someone would say something playfully unkind about my outfit or hair. It wasn't until I was invited to my first ball by a friend that my interest in this community blossomed into something of a "project."

Even in those early days I knew that this project (in whatever form it would end up taking) would be difficult. For starters, the ballroom community – like so many black communities which center black expression, art, and culture – has been and continues to be appropriated by people in the mainstream since Livingston's documentary. Because of this, I knew that the way I engaged, the relationships I would develop, and the things I could say about said relationships would have to be made explicit from the start. *So many people come into our community for their little "research,"* Tommy Avant Garde said to me once, sarcastically using compulsory scare quotes to shape the contours of this thing I called fieldwork. *So, if you're not going to put a spin on it that will help elevate the community, they have issues with it.* This statement and others like it gave me pause and slowed me down. How does one write about a community so deeply skeptical of how, what, where, when, and why their representation gets taken up in popular culture? Or worse, in the lofty towers of academic culture? This skepticism is not born from a paranoid attempt at control. Ball culture has been studied, photographed, filmed, adapted, satirized, etc.

Furthermore, the way I came to the research, through relationships built in nonprofit organizations, had to be addressed and explored. That so many of the ballroom participants worked at or were somehow affiliated with nonprofit organizations was strange to me because there seemed

to be a very noticeable tension between the expectations, standards, and investments of each. All of this translated to a “research agenda” that, according to an anonymous reviewer (the only one who didn’t find the project “Excellent”) of my National Science Foundation Doctoral Dissertation Research Grant, wasn’t scientific enough, and research questions that didn’t even, “approximate something that could be considered a hypothesis.” That reviewer was not wrong in this one respect.⁹ The research for this project was as fluid, as interrupted, as confusing, and as embodied as the community tends to be.

I began in Chicago, the city of my birth and the city that my family, like so many other black families before them, migrated to in the late 1940s with the hope that they would be able to find a better life for themselves outside of the South. This “Great Migration” was nothing if not motivated by those very principles that fall within the realm of the dream. At the beginning of the 20th century, northern cities saw a large influx of black people fleeing the Jim Crow laws of the southern states in search of expanding opportunities in growing sectors of the economy. These laws, enacted after Reconstruction (1865-1877), severely limited the freedoms that were gained after emancipation by introducing the doctrine of “separate but equal.” This doctrine, codified into law through a series of standards creating the pretense of equality,¹⁰ created a situation in which black people were forcibly segregated from and oppressed by white society. They were unable to find employment, move freely, vote, or experience equal protection under the law. Because northern states did not abide by

⁹ Though I do hope they were wrong that this research would only be important to or impact “minority communities in the United States.”

¹⁰ Cullen writes: “The great irony of *Plessy v. Ferguson* is that the legal basis of the ruling sowed the seeds of its own destruction. The Louisiana lawmakers who crafted the original state railway law knew the federal government would never let them get away with ‘separate’ unless they at least made a *pretense* toward ‘equal.’ This is why most Jim Crow laws meant to deny black their constitutional rights never actually *said* African Americans could not vote but instead created standard (like literacy tests, poll taxes, and the like) that were supposedly racially neutral but effectively prevented only African Americans from exercising their rights.” (2003, 109)

these restrictive codes supported by law, individuals, families, and communities ventured north in what scholars have mapped into two time periods: the so-called First Great Migration taking place from around 1910-1930 saw an estimated 1.6 million black people move to cities like Detroit, New York, D.C, and Chicago. After World War II, another 5 million black people would leave the south to those same cities, some of them venturing westward to California. During these migrations, neighborhoods like Bronzeville in Chicago and Harlem in New York City developed into cultural hot spots attracting black scholars, politicians, artists, writers, and musicians from around the country.

It is a sad truth that the black migrants to Chicago experienced social and economic difficulty upon arrival. Chicago had long been established as an important site for the development and distribution of goods across the nation due in part to its located on the southwestern bank of Lake Michigan which was connected to the Mississippi River in 1848 via the Illinois-Michigan Canal, in an awe-inspiring feat of human innovation. As a hub for industrial advancement in meatpacking, farming, and shipment, by the time the United States entered the First World War, the need for largely unskilled, manual labor to work in the factories and in the stockyards grew. Black people flooded into the city to meet the demand. But increased migration also meant increased hostility in housing, employment, policing, and mobility. In the introduction to one of the most canonical sociological texts of black life during and after the Great Migration, *Black Metropolis*, Richard Wright wrote, “Chicago is the city from which the most incisive and radical Negro thought has come; there is an open and raw beauty about that city that seems either to kill or endow one with the spirit of life” (1945 [1993]: xvii). These words feel just as true today as they did before. The history of black migration north is the history of the struggle and pursuit of the good life but wearing a more sinister veil.

In New York, the birthplace of the ballroom scene, the historical trajectory of this sense of disillusionment followed a different path in part because the history of black life is much older and the opportunities for black flourishing seemed a bit more possible for a bit longer. Because of its location and designation as a port city during the transatlantic slave trade, New York has had a black population since its early years. These small communities of black workers lived close to the industry of the day on the lower end of Manhattan. The upper half of Manhattan remained a relatively uninhabited area of the city due to its inaccessibility until the early to mid-Nineteenth century when, because of the establishment of a railroad connecting the lower to upper half, developers expanded into the area building homes specifically designed for a growing white middle to upper class in the city. John Jackson Jr. explains that in terms of development, Harlem became a black neighborhood by accident: “an economic recession coupled with competition from the newly annexed city of Brooklyn and other neighboring areas even further north meant that Harlem could not attract the number of white middle-class residents that had initially been anticipated” (2001, 25). This resulted in a relaxing of the normally strict housing rules and regulations that were meant to curb renting and/or selling property to the black residents of the city. Black people, or those who could afford to, moved from all over the city into the newly developed Harlem neighborhood. And by the beginning of the first waves of the Great Migration in the early 20th century, Harlem had been established as a predominantly black neighborhood.

It is thought that the ballroom of today began as a response to the drag and costume balls and gay beauty pageants of the 1920s and 1930s in Harlem. In exploring the history of black gay and lesbian subcultures in Harlem during that time period, Eric Garber (1990) writes that the main attraction at bigger balls was often a beauty contest “in which the fashionably dressed drags would vie for the title of Queen of the Ball” and where the white avant-garde and Harlem elite could be found on the balconies of the ballroom “straining their necks to view the contestants”. In those

early years of the costume balls, the audience was surprisingly diverse in terms of gender, sexuality, race, and class but, in some sense, it was this eclectic spectatorship who were there to be entertained that, for the queer black folks in attendance, made these “drag balls” less of a social event than an opportunity to compete for money and/or fame.¹¹ By the 1960s and 1970s, gay pageants and drag balls were happening across the country and were still an exciting attraction in Harlem. But it was around this time, in the late 1960s, when issues of racial discrimination began to pull the community apart.

A fascinating documentary from 1968 by Frank Simon titled *The Queen* inadvertently captured the growing rift that would end in the creation of the ballroom scene we know today. The film follows a group of drag queens¹² preparing for and then performing in the 1967 National beauty pageant in New York City. As the queens take the stage, the largely white judges scattered throughout the audience evaluate each based on their outfits, makeup, hairstyles, and talents. The queens walk in bathing suits and eveningwear and smile for the crowd. Things come to a head when “Miss Crystal” (who would go on to be one of the founding members of the Legendary House of LaBeija) gets third place and walks off the stage. After the pageant has ended, the camera moves backstage where Crystal is speaking about the injustice of her loss. In reference to the winner, she says, “she is not beautiful, she has no qualifications, and she is bodiless.” Later when someone tries to explain that it was the judges, and not a rigged system, that chose the winner, she replies, “the

¹¹ Interestingly, one of the only other ethnographic accounts of the ballroom scene by an anthropologist was in a 1996 book by William Hawkeswood (published posthumously) entitled *One of the Children: Gay Black Men in Harlem*. In a footnote he writes, “These formal balls are not to be confused with the balls of the younger ‘house queens’ occurring in Manhattan, the Bronx, and Newark in the 1990s. Although undoubtedly part of the inspiration for these smaller events, the large Harlem balls remain major annual social events in Harlem. They are attended by as many of Harlem’s non-gay elite as its established drag celebrities.”

¹² Some of whom would have perhaps identified as transgender but who, at the time, for several reasons (financial, society, safety, etc.) identified as drag queens.

judges didn't have any taste!" and continues that her friends warned her not to come because they all knew a black contestant would never win: "that's why all the true beauties didn't come." When someone says to Crystal that she's in bad taste and showing her true colors with the way she is handling her loss, she snaps back, "I have a right to show my color, darling. I am beautiful and I know I'm beautiful."

This short, and heated, exchange marks one of many moments when the questions "who is beautiful" and "who gets to decide" were revealed to be answered along racial lines; put differently, the regime of beauty which determines how the answers to those questions are determined was revealed to be structured around whiteness as the norm. In 1970, Pepper and Crystal LaBeija would go on to be the founders of the Legendary House of LaBeija, one of the first houses in ballroom culture, along with friends who were also increasingly dissatisfied with the blatant anti-blackness of the pageant scene. They began to throw their own balls where the judges looked like them, where they could compete against people who looked like them, and where the categories could more accurately reflect black life and black desires. There are so many ways to think about what initially brought the ballroom community together and so many reasons why it remains a community.¹³ Chapter 3 (Part 1) argues that without a clear sense of how beauty, taste, and (most importantly) judgement intersect(ed) with blackness, however, we fail to understand how the competitive nature of the ballroom scene both subverts and reinforces standards. And consequently, and more importantly, we fail to grasp why and how competition matters for developing strategies for living.¹⁴

I tell this brief, and inadequate, history of black life in Chicago and New York only to gesture to the broader landscape out of which the ballroom scene was born, and in many ways still

¹³ See Marlon Bailey's discussion of houses and redefinitions of kinship in *Butch Queen Up in Pumps*, 2003.

¹⁴ In another moment where Crystal is explaining her issues with Harlow (the winner of the Nationals) she exclaims, "She's beautiful but she wasn't looking beautiful tonight! Look at her!"

resides. It is a similar story of hope followed by a profound disillusionment in the reality of achieving a better life that had played out in cities across the North and Midwest by the middle of the 20th century. This is the historical legacy in which this ethnography of the ballroom community is situated. I was particularly curious to explore how this community existed within these two cities where the promise of a good life, or at least a better life, seemed most clearly articulated and then (perhaps most cruelly) taken away. My research has taken on many forms: I've been to balls, volunteered with various nonprofit organizations, sat on the boards of some others, went to house meetings, did a clothing drive, found emergency housing for someone, handed out sandwiches and condoms, went to dinners and lunches, went to more balls, helped organize a ball, talked to police officers, aldermen, and doctors, rode the subway, flew on planes, and took oh so many buses, went to a funeral, took many late night cab rides home, helped raise money for someone who had experienced a violent assault, went to more balls, and interviewed elders and young people. I stayed up too late and woke up too early. I wrote grants, went on long walks with people, purchased food (and alcohol) for various events, and developed a strange wardrobe (more sequins than I could have ever imagined). I taught dance classes, took photos, made friends, sent money through PayPal, talked on the phone, and smoked so many cigarettes. And although so very few of these scenes have made their way into this manuscript, they have shaped my thinking and writing about this community in such important ways. They have taught me to be mindful of the little things, slow down to process the big things, and to always carry mascara and lipstick in my purse.

But most importantly, so much of my ethnographic journey taught me how to *not* be so *good* at politics. What I mean is that as a good black queer feminist, who was raised both literally and figuratively by older and wiser good black (and queer) feminists, so many of the situations I encountered while doing research came to me already conscripted by specific critiques, articulated through specific language, and situated in specific historical legacies and intellectual genealogies. Of

course, the very reality of that the ballroom scene exists and that black and brown queer people have a space in which they can thrive and express themselves without fear of being ostracized or killed is political. But in those early days of my ethnographic work, I could find nothing recognizably “political” about wearing haute couture and nothing “political” about judging someone based on how beautiful or sexy they were. It is difficult to see the political and liberatory potential of the ballroom scene because of its glorification of excessive displays of wealth and material success, often rigid ideas of the relationship between gender/sex, and all-around competitive structure. We often assume that our politics should be oriented toward a vision of the world we desire so I asked myself “What world was being created or imagined?” and through those “good political” readings, I wasn’t sure if this world was a good one. Should we be fighting for membership into a system that is built on a foundation of white supremacy? Should beauty standards be the criteria for excellence? Should people be so strictly understood through their gendered and racialized identities? However, those very things that on their surface seemed like violent enactments of norms, things that seemed very clearly pointing toward one interpretation, were often surprisingly more complex and more difficult to name.

For instance, many of us were raised to think that most (if not all) standards were exclusionary to some degree, and that “standards of excellence” were particularly violent ideological and historical systems that we should strive to abolish. So, when confronted with the fact that standards, categories, criteria, and all things “excellent” make up the grammar of this community, I found myself rather stuck. Of course, norms are not always bad, we could say. They make it easier for us to move through the world without getting constantly tripped up. But the thing is, in our contemporary moment, even this provides us with no clear distinction between exclusionary standards and standards of excellence—we have no sense that criteria might actually arise from a particular ethical universe. We could think of the former as those ideologically rooted apparatuses

which bind people to positions and identities. Here, standards are derived from traditions and expressed through norms which govern attitudes and actions. But might the latter be something else? Something hard to explain because, as Alasdair Macintyre points out, we've lost the conceptual tools to understand how they might be different projects? This is Macintyre's main assertion in *After Virtue* when he writes that we only possess, "fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance derived" when it comes to understanding morality and ethics (1984, 2). Though these two indistinguishable standards have been fused together through physical, metaphysical, social, economic, and political forces—forces we might call white supremacy—I would like to consider how the standards, categories, and criteria that structure the ballroom scene operate as the grammatical underpinnings for a particular way of life.

Ballroom Ethics

This manuscript argues that the ballroom should be thought of as a laboratory for articulating, experimenting with, and living the good life in a world structured against the very notion of black and queer flourishing. It is about how the ballroom becomes a site in which a group of people who live in proximity to various forms of violence, poverty, and illness find ways of living full and playful lives. Through various twists and turns, it ethnographically traces how practices for living in a world structured around anti-Blackness and anti-queerness are shaped by the development of performance categories—and their requisite standards and criteria—in the episodic space of the ballroom. I argue that these categories express an alternative to commonsense notions of the American dream *even while appearing* deeply entangled in neoliberal sensibilities and ideals of how this dream might be achieved. The following chapters, then, consider the techniques through which the ballroom community practices, rehearses, and establishes norms of etiquette. It does so by showing how everyday ideas of flourishing bump up against the daily struggles of poverty, lack of safe and stable

housing, access to medical care, and micro/macro forms of anti-Black and anti-queer violence, and yet find ways of becoming the source materials for performing the very flourishing they seem to foreclose. Paying particular attention to the language, sound, space, moments of play and improvisation, temporality, and movement, I show that the contradictions observed in ballroom arise from disagreements between notions of flourishing and nationalistic ideals, from the problem of defining the good life itself.

Before talking about what I mean by the good life, it might be helpful to understand what I mean by performance categories. There are a number of categories in the ballroom scene and each one is a specific performance activity governed by a set of standards, gender identities, and criteria. The most common categories are Realness, Beauty (Face), Runway, Fashion, Sex Siren (Body), and Vogue. In advertisements, organizers explain which categories will take place and what the specific criteria is for each. Most balls have a theme and so the criteria for the categories often explore different aspects on that theme.¹⁵ Part of the work of preparing for a ball is learning how to interpret

¹⁵ At the Latex Ball that took place in June of 2018, the theme was “KINGDOM,” and this is the description of the theme and how that theme was expressed through the categories taken from a flyer:

It’s been millions of years since the initial split of the people. The world was once united when we were one supercontinent. The motherland Gondwana was home to many cultures, tribes, religions, and traditions, and we all lived in harmony. Eventually, after all the continents separated, our people were spread wide and far, with magnificent kingdoms in almost every major country of the world. However, the people who stayed in the Kingdom of Africa were envied for their ability to see love as a connection, to see past gender identity, sexuality, wealth, race, and creed, and kept us many steps ahead of others. We were able to rise above what divided other nations and used our differences to truly enjoy what it was to celebrate life.

Our advanced technology could have easily wiped out those who were threatened by our existence, but we chose to create a magical shield that would hide our civilizations and protect us. These shields were placed in every major country in Africa, making us invisible to the naked eye. Africa thrived because we were not seen. Now, the civilizations that once rejected us are trying to make peace. Tonight is the night that the many Kingdoms of Africa will let down their magical force field to make one with those who once shunned us. This will be an attempt to unite all the peoples of the world as one and the Gondwana Kingdom will once again rise to the top and unite us at this special celebration of the world.

the criteria in performance and dress and learning to make one's interpretation original. As you can see in example quoted at length in footnote 9, the criteria are open and fluid to some extent; however, if one doesn't follow them ("make sure to wear yellow socks" say), they run the risk of being "chopped" (unsuccessful) so one must stay as close to the demands as possible.

I suggest the performance practices that take shape in these categories are deeply connected to narratives of the American dream, pulling apart different aspects of that peculiar ethical-material relation, in order to dispense with some measure of the cruelty of the attachment. Take Face, for instance, a competitive category that demands that the person walking present their face to a panel of judges who will judge them based on their beauty. On the surface, for this is surface work at its best, it appears as though this category is reinscribing traditional Western standards of beauty within a community whose historical condition has forcibly excluded them from such a regime. But in Chapter 3 (Part 1), I show that the category actualizes the possibility of accessing beauty not as a

"The Hidden Gems," Face: It was time to show the beauty of continental Africa and how rich her cultures were. We knew all the secrets of the land; the African land was one of the richest on the planet with its fields of gold and land of hidden gems. There was no other way to showcase the people than a magical reveal of her allure and beauty. Enter and as you make your way to the judges, you will reveal the precious gems and gold of the land! Fem Queens Face (1 trophy) \$500, Butch Queen Face (1 trophy) \$300, Women's Face (1 trophy) \$300, Drags Face (1 trophy) \$300, Legendary (1 Trophy) \$500

"Dancing Creatures," Voguing: The continent of Africa is very well known for its beautiful wildlife and the people of Africa know how to embrace this beauty. In the isolated land of Madagascar, unique and unusual species of wildlife storm the land and the oceans. Tonight, in the tradition of the people, a celebration of the species is performed. Enchant us with the animal spirit in you. Bring these beautiful and colorful symbols of beauty to life. Vogue with grace! Twisters (1 trophy) \$500 Sponsored by Blink Fitness, Butch Queen Performance (1 trophy) \$500 Sponsored by Blink Fitness, Pop, Dip, and Spin (1 trophy) \$500, New Way (1 trophy) \$500, Drags Performance (1 trophy) \$300 Sponsored by Blink Fitness, Legendary (1 trophy) \$1000 Sponsored by Blink Fitness, Icon (1 trophy) \$500 Sponsored by Blink Fitness, Fem Queen Performance (1 trophy) \$500 Sponsored by Blink Fitness, Women's Performance (1 trophy) \$500 Sponsored by Blink Fitness

fundamental feature of the self but as something that has the potential to be revealed through careful and meticulous skilled practices.

What interests me about these categories is that they provide the opportunity to explore the contours of this dream. Each one focuses on some aspect of the self's relation to the body and the body's relation to the world—beauty, material wealth, style, gender, and proper physical comportment—and in so doing, allows the performer to try out, mess with, and potentially master ways of being. The categories start from the assumption that it is the self's holistic development that allows one to access some aspect of the good life, the inverse of the way attachments to the future are normally considered. Inversed because where desires to live well often begin with a fantasy object “out there” toward which our lives become oriented (through labor or even “self-care”), the categories in the ballroom orient that better life in and on the body as tools through which one might develop the capacities to do, say, look, and feel anyway. Each chapter is organized around a different “category” in the ballroom scene. I use them as entry points for exploring the techniques through which affects, aesthetics, and sensibilities are cultivated in performance and presentation. So, what is this good life, this alternative version of the American dream to which I am referring? Perhaps strangely, I want to turn to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* in order to answer these questions.

Aristotle begins his rumination on ethical dispositions and virtues by saying, “Every craft and every discipline, and likewise action and decision, seems to seek some good—that is why some people were right to describe the good as what everything seeks” (2019, 1). For the builder, this good end might be a house and for a graduate student, this good end might be a PhD; but, he argues, those ends are only means toward something else, something more good toward which we should be oriented. Thus, his project is to determine what the “good” is, to find what he calls the “best good” toward which actions, activities, and decisions ought to be oriented, and to establish a path for achieving it. One of the main features of this “best good” is that it must be an end in itself,

something “complete without qualification” (2019, 8). It cannot be a means to some other end; “for the complete good seems to be self-sufficient” not simply for the individual but for the community in which the individual is merely a part. This higher, best, and complete good toward which human actions seek is what he calls happiness (*eudaimonia*), but happiness is itself tricky. While “the many and the cultivated call it [the best good] happiness [...] they suppose that living well and doing well are the same as being happy” (2019, 3). So, what is this “function of human beings”? This happiness of being which gets to the heart of the question of how ought we to live?

Aristotle describes three different arenas wherein the “good” is located and can be traced—the external, the soul, and the body—and argues that these three goods must be in harmony in order to achieve happiness. The problem is that people identify these different aspects of the good as ends in themselves, as states of being where, once achieved, people are thought to be happy. People assume that material success, beauty, and/or a pleasant disposition is synonymous with the good life (“for we cannot, or cannot easily, do fine actions if we lack the resources”), but they fail to recognize that those are only means toward flourishing. We must cultivate a virtuous life through learning, exploring, and attention. There are two kinds of virtues for Aristotle: virtues of thought and virtues of character. Virtue of thought is acquired through teaching, experience, and takes time to cultivate. Virtue of character, he writes, “results from habit <*ethos*>; hence its name ‘ethical’, slightly varied from ‘ethos’” (2019, 21). They are not natural human capacities, but humans are “by nature able to acquire them, and we are completed through habit” (2019, 21). Virtue of character is the mean between different extreme states of feeling or action; for instance, between fear and confidence, we should strive toward bravery. The goal is to first identify the intermediate and then strive to act and feel in that way. In this sense, the best good is not a state of being but rather a practice of deliberating around those things we can control. Bravery, temperance, generosity, calmness, friendliness, truthfulness, wit, justice, prudence, understanding, and wisdom are all virtues that we

must actively practice (exercise) through good deliberation, action, and feeling. The good life, in this sense, is not a fantasy object/state “out there” that one orients their lives toward. It is rather a present and intimate practice that one continually activates in everyday life. To flourish, for Aristotle, is to hold all of the virtues together in harmony, instead of a being or becoming it is a *doing*.

Throughout this manuscript, I suggest that Aristotelian ethics provides us with a different lens through which we might explore the categories, standards, performances, and practices developed in the ballroom scene. To be sure, these categories, standards, performances, and practices appear to map neatly onto desires, motivations, and feelings we might associate with the individualistic nature of the American dream. But to believe that appearances provide an assurance of association is to fail to explore how those desires, motivations, and feelings might be oriented otherwise. Within the space of the ballroom which, as I’ve described in the Preface, operates around its own temporal structure—a structure supported in part through its own peculiar sonic landscape (see Chapter 4)—a world is created that has its own language, its own style of dress, and its own ways of moving. But more importantly, the ballroom scene has its own teleological orientation toward the good, where the good is the continual cultivation of a set of practices for living well.

It is helpful to explain, here, a couple things about how the ballroom works. It is first and foremost a competition between different groups known as houses. These houses are alternative family structures which provide various forms of support to its members. When you walk in a category, you are competing against people from different houses. It is challenging, terrifying, and requires preparation. But every ball you walk is also an opportunity to learn about your own patterns, fears, and desires. When you win a “category” you can get a cash prize or trophy but to be Legendary in the ballroom scene is to be recognized by your peers for the effort, work, and perseverance you’ve put into your category over the course of many balls. One is not born Legendary, and one is not gifted the title through natural ability alone. It is an honor given to those

who continue to work at it. But the thing is, you can be Legendary and still lose to someone in a battle because each battle is an opportunity to try. Battling (competing) is never a make-or-break individual activity. They inform the whole person's character. The graciousness displayed when one experiences loss, the generosity that they provide if they win, and the bravery of getting on the runway in the first place all speak to how the ball works to train particular ethical subjects whose commitments are on the collective success of the whole.

Here we could think with Aristotle again who writes, "Just as Olympic prizes are not for the finest and strongest, but for the contestants—since it is only these who win—the same is true in life; among the fine and good people, only those who act correctly win the prize" (2019, 12). One can only win if one is willing to act, to put themselves in situations that demand deliberation around the correct action. This is how the ballroom rearticulates the American dream. Where the commonsense notion of the American dream as an ethical-material relation oriented toward the individual achievement of the fantasy of a good life has been particularly cruel throughout history for black people in general and black queer people specifically, the ballroom scene has reimagined it toward their own ends. These ends center the work on, in, and to the body; on, in, and to the community. Taking up of various aspects of American life as the source material for these ethical practices changes how one relates to them and what modes of attachments are available, making them a bit more elastic. That one might never be famous or rich can be disappointing. But in the ball, one's character, actions, and modes of being are what matters to one's flourishing.

Ordinary Queens

Part of what makes the ballroom a site of ethical cultivation is how it is organized alongside everyday life and how strategies for performing and practicing within the space of the ballroom become strategies for survival in ordinary life. But the title of this manuscript, *Ordinary Queens*, is also nodding

toward the ways in which the ordinary gets taken up in the ballroom and how the ordinary gets refigured through the activities that the ballroom cultivates. While many New York City balls are lavish affairs drawing spectators from around the world and Chicago balls are still for the most part underground, what they share (besides family) is a complex entanglement with the “external” life outside the ballroom, and fundamental to this story is the rise of the HIV and AIDS epidemic as a crisis of health and governance, and the political activities, social discourses, and cultural artefacts this crisis produced. Under the banner of this crisis, many of these activities, discourses, and artefacts sought to humanize those suffering and dying from HIV/AIDS, normalize non-heterosexual relationships and recuperate a sense of pleasure in sex/sexuality. Crisis is a loaded term that presumes an ordinary until it becomes ordinary itself. As an organizing principle, crisis illuminates the mechanisms and institutions we work hard to ignore. As an event, crisis interrupts the flow of everyday life. As a relation, it (re)defines the criteria of how one comes to be connected to a group/community. In Chapter 1, I more fully explain how this world historical moment created the condition for the uneasy and fraught relationship between the ballroom scene and the nonprofit organization. Here, however, it is helpful for us to consider what crisis is and does, as a concept, to the framing of this community in particular, a community whose narrative is often told through the genre of crisis.

We most often understand crisis to be a time of intense change marked by the advent of some disaster. Importantly it is also, as Joseph Masco explains, “an affect-generating idiom, one that seeks to mobilize radical endangerment to foment collective attention and action” (2017, S65). Crisis conveys a particular relationship to time: it signals a temporal horizon in which an event has occurred that has drastically shifted the flow of the everyday such that we must act—for if we fail to act, we might shatter. Janet Roitman writes that crisis, in this way, “implies a certain telos because it is inevitably, though most often implicitly, directed toward a norm” (2014, 4). When thrown into

crisis, ordinary life (and the norms that support it) can be interrupted or punctured in such a way that it feels imperative to develop strategies for living with and in a new normal. Meaning, crisis isn't just about the new and often destabilizing event; crisis also teaches us something about the ordinary, the before, the past. So, in that sense it is also a judgement on the relationship between the past and the present state of being – what Roitman following Reinhart Koselleck would call a “crisis-claim” – where the continuity of institutions, practices, and systems are at stake. Crisis forces one to confront the breakdown because it illuminates and makes intelligible the inner workings of the machine.

As a temporally and affectively rich mode, crisis creates a dynamic that generates certain thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and actions while obscuring others. It organizes and divides populations and individuals, creating disparities of feeling and experience. It demands particular kinds of interventions that are often about restoring or recuperating something lost in the break. In his genealogy of the term “crisis,” Reinhart Koselleck explains that the word is said to have originated with the ancient Greeks: *krino* which means “to separate, to choose, to judge, to decide; as a means of measuring oneself, to quarrel, or to fight” (2006, 358). The concept was used across the domains of theology, law, and medicine to describe a point at which the continuation of history required a decisive action. Interestingly, Hippocrates, the grandfather of medicine whose commitment to treating patients with care inspired an ethics of medical intervention we refer to as the “Hippocratic Oath”, used the term crisis to mean both “the observable condition” and “the judgement (*judicium*) about the course of the illness” (Koselleck 2006, 360). In this way, Koselleck explains, “the concept is applied to life-deciding alternatives meant to answer questions about what is just or unjust, what contributes to salvation or damnation, what furthers health or brings death” (2006, 361). Meaning the term diagnostically refers to an intervention into the physical body that will either prolong or end a person's life as well as the turning point in an illness.

We don't think of crisis in this way—as both condition *and* intervention, a physical state of being *and* the ultimate judgement. For the ancient Greeks, crisis was an unmediated relation between condition and intervention, observable reality and action. Today, we think of crisis as a condition which demands interventions and forms of management targeted at relieving the pressure points crisis has made visible. Crisis is not *the* decisive action; rather crisis makes it possible to justify decisive actions in the name of future survival from impending destruction. The repetitious and seemingly endless management of crisis, as Cameron Hu writes, “generate[s] a looping temporality dense with perpetually-renewed threats to the present order of things” which orients us “toward a shallow future whose particular indeterminacy stimulates neither aspirations to gradual improvement nor revolutionary transcendence of the given, but instead motivates a logically endless cycle of anticipation and pre-emption, aimed to postpone a future whose contingency is taken for an urgent problem” (2017, 3). Put differently, crisis stunts our relationship to the future by distracting our attention away from potential flourishing and toward a narrow vision of surviving the present. As both the situation and the intervention that prolongs the situation, perhaps we could read crisis more along the lines of the normalizing genre of life under neoliberalism (and racial capitalism and heteronormativity), what Lauren Berlant has named the genre of ordinary crisis.¹⁶

This normalizing genre of crisis (management and intervention) is often used to explain the lives and histories of black queer people, and in Chapter 1 I show that this framing is what introduced “the nonprofit” into daily life for many ballroom members. It is here where I also demonstrate how the nonprofit's mission, to help support and encourage the wellbeing of its clientele, is often in an ambivalent conflict with the demands set forth by the ballroom itself. This is because the genre of crisis as a condition of life structures the how one understands the past,

¹⁶ Lauren Berlant in unpublished paper “Austerity, Precarity, Awkwardness,” p. 2-3

experiences the present, and imagines the future. Crisis seeks to recover and recuperate some lost ideal form of life, but for the black queer people in the ballroom, the “before” of ordinary life was always already structured around what Saidiya Hartman has called the afterlife of slavery. And where crisis seeks to manage the present, for the members of the ballroom the everyday is but a continuation of those familiar kinds of violences. I argue that the dynamics of crisis make the desires and sensibilities of the ballroom unintelligible because the subject of post-crisis (the subject who has been saved from the “crisis event”) ought to prioritize basic survival, understood as the continuation of mere life, over what Derrida called *sur-vivance*, survival as both life and surplus life. When one’s attachment to the good life is not quite optimistic and not fully pessimistic, when one’s American dream is not organized around a promise out there but a set of practices of the self, a difference set of questions become available. This manuscript seeks to open the space between optimism and pessimism as each chapter explores how categories in the ballroom work to cultivate attachments to the self and the collective life of this community.

Chapter 2 explores Realness as a category that, like all the other categories in ballroom, teaches you something. It is a study in exploring the nature of norms and teasing out how one comes to inhabit or experience them, how one becomes attached to them. I argue that Realness, however complex and potentially harmful, is a way to explore how one’s exterior self is taken up in the social and suggest that we can read this category as a citational practice of playing with the iterability of the type that allows people to learn how, why, and under what conditions they are intelligible. Realness, then, is a practice of self-reflection and self-cultivation, and perhaps most importantly, a practice that does not determine any particular identity, character, subject position.

In Chapter 3 (Part 1) I turn to the category Face. I argue that this category trains the individual to pay particular attention to their corporeal body and is the art of managing (what Aristotle might call “deliberating” through) the ambiguities of aesthetic experience. As an aesthetic

experience, Face explores how social, racial, and other scripts that seem to determine one's standing in the social get activated differently. In Chapter 3 (Part 2), I move through a series of ethnographic scenes where the commitment to "sex positivity" for nonprofit organizations becomes a problem. I place these scenes alongside the category Sex Siren (also known as Body) to consider how sex and sexuality are understood, performed, managed, and critiqued.

Chapter 4 is about noise: loud, rhythmic, and extralinguistic. It explores how noise invites a particular mode of listening, a different way of experiencing and inhabiting interruptions of ordinary life. As a sensorial experience, balls have a peculiar sonic landscape that moves from high intensity house music to what could be considered a kind of "white noise," from clear linguistic utterances to a collection of scat like vocal improvisations, from the background to the fore. In attending to the oscillation between moments of aural attention and inattention, this essay argues that we can catch glimpses of how balls provide a temporal grammar that refigures attachments to the future and past, creating a scene in which affects and sensibilities are learned through the practice of listening.

Chapter 5 explores a dance style developed in the ballroom scene called vogue. It is organized around a series of steps known as the "five elements" and is an improvisational movement practice that pushes at the limits of speed, physical ingenuity, and flair. And like other styles of improvisation, it relies on a deep sense of memory and play within a set of normative gestures. I argue that while we often consider improvisation to be one of the few techniques available for discovering and enacting freedom from norms or conventions, voguing provides an opportunity to improvise and experiment *with* limits, norms, conventions, and clichés. In this way, what is ordinarily seen as an obstacle to freedom (the cliché) becomes a strategy for learning about what prevents us from reaching it. Put differently, this chapter argues that for a community that experiences the precarious effects of living as the constitutive other to the standard in a heteronormative and white world, voguing teaches those who practice it what it feels like to inhabit

the norm, what it looks like to perform the convention, and what it means to move within the cliché. And finally, *Ordinary Queens* ends with a Coda, that reflects on the premiere party for the final season of the FX television show *Pose* alongside the last ball I attended in person, just before the first Covid-19 lockdown in Chicago. I ask what ballroom can teach those who make up its community about flourishing beyond survival—about the good life beyond success.

Chapter One

(Dis)Enfranchisement and (Dis)Enchantment: reading the ballroom through fairy tales

Fairy tales begin with conflict because we all begin our lives with conflict. We are all misfit for the world, and somehow, we must fit in, fit in with our environment and other people, and thus we must invent or find the means through communication to satisfy and resolve conflicting desires and instincts.

-Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion*

You could say that the ballroom is the fairy godmother of the Ali Forney Center, Carl said to me in his office with a little laugh. This was his clever way of explaining to me how the ballroom scene and nonprofits like AFC operated on different levels, one based in reality and the other steeped in the fantastical. We had been talking for over an hour about what he referred to as the pre-history of AFC: the rise of the AIDS epidemic in New York, the “Disneyfication” of Times Square, the overwhelming need for a fully comprehensive organization dedicated to providing specifically tailored care for LGBTQ+ homeless youth who were becoming more and more prevalent. A decade before he founded AFC in 2002, Carl Siciliano was running a drop-in center for youth experiencing homelessness called Safe Space. *There was nothing LGBTQ+ specific,* he explained, *but we had a lot of AIDS based funding because homeless youth are much more likely to be infected with HIV and AIDS and much more at risk.* At this time, there were only around 200 “homeless beds” available in the whole city and the majority were through the Catholic charity Covenant House, which meant that young queer people were far less likely to access those resources for reasons beyond their overall scarcity. This is one of the many reasons why places like Times Square and the Chelsea Piers had become the designated living room for young LGBTQ+ people: they could congregate, sleep, and work without constant harassment from the NYPD.

But the 1980s and 90s brought unprecedented changes to the landscape and character of the city. Carl explained: *When Disney started moving in and when all these corporations started buying property, there*

was a real concerted effort to “clean up” the neighborhood... and I hate that language because to me it means that our young people were the dirt that had to be swept away, but that’s what they called them: the police would do these “sweeps” and just disseminate on the neighborhood and arrest everyone. For those who worked with these youth, the loss of what Samuel Delany (1999) might call a queer sociality based in communal pleasure¹ practiced in the shadows of theaters and stores in Times Square was less pronounced than the increased and horrifying loss of life the gentrification efforts produced. As more young people began moving around to the other boroughs to avoid being swept up in the raids, more of them became victims of gender-based and sexual-based violence.²

We were seeing the ballroom kids from a very different angle, Carl explained with a laugh, *and whenever there was a big ball they wouldn’t show up to the center or their internships because they would be out stealing their outfits.* He got more serious and added, *there is sort of like a contract between the LGBTQ movement and LGBTQ people, and it’s like “ok you come out and we’re gonna fight to make it safe for you so your life doesn’t go to hell” yet somehow youth, especially youth of color, never ended up in that contract. They were the foot soldiers and fought the hardest because they didn’t have anything to lose but they are still the most dispossessed even after 35 years.* For Carl, the ballroom scene of the 1980s and 90s was an example of a group of people whose lives had been shaped by poverty and racism struggling to create housing, economic opportunity, and family for each other and themselves. But, he explained, they didn’t have the resources to deal with the vastness of the problem which is why nonprofits like AFC became important. The ballroom scene was the fairy godmother because they operated in the space of (or created the space for) fantasy where the real-life problems didn’t apply to the same extent. For Carl on the other hand, AFC’s mandate was to save LGBTQ+ youth from a world that was out to get them. It was clear that

¹ See Samuel Delany *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999), 15.

² When Carl met Ali Forney, a young black gender non-conforming person, at Safe Space they had been aggressively advocating the police to investigate the murders of multiple friends.

he knew this was a simplistic way of explaining a complex problem that had created a strange entanglement, but crisis has a habit of making the messes of the world simple and manageable.

And that's the thing... I don't sit down and say how can programing [for AFC] be in line with ballroom. I'm much more "how do I make sure the young people are fed, how do I make sure the young people are safe, how do I make sure that the environments that the young people are living in are affirming and supportive, how do we bring resources together to help young people get jobs." We're responding to the same set of situations that the ballroom scene is responding to, the same crisis, so it just lines up in certain ways. When I asked him to clarify what he meant, Carl paused and explained, we've tried to remove the utter disenfranchisement that the ballroom scene, as it existed in the 1980s and 1990s, wasn't able to do. You know? The ballroom scene was functioning within the disenfranchisement.

The goal of this chapter is twofold: first, I am interested in exploring how non-profits, and those who work in them, come to imagine themselves as responding to the “same set of situations” as the ballroom scene, and how these situations, articulated through the language of crisis, elicit (often) divergent views of what it means to survive. As a concept, crisis orients us toward a particular understanding of what it means to survive and outlines a set of practices to get us toward that goal. For nonprofit organizations, survival practices look like strategies for sustaining life through individual health, education, job, and mental/emotional stability. Of course, survival in a literal (bodily) sense involves similar strategies, but survival for members of the ballroom scene seems to prioritize a more expansive notion of self-cultivation that hinges on the recognition, support, and encouragement from and to the community making it feel and look much different. I argue that these two understandings of survival come from divergent ways of understanding crisis as an orienting force and arises from an internal conflict between practices of surviving and practices of flourishing. Put differently, where the nonprofit sees a life in crisis, ball members see the reality of living in black and brown queer bodies. This means that the *translation* of what should count as

priorities for living well diverge and are sometimes at odds. This chapter, then, seeks to present the tangled web of these different horizons of surviving that the nonprofit and ball members articulate.

Second, I want to explore the implications of framing the relationship between the ballroom scene as the “fairy godmother” to the non-profit organization and interrogate how the non-profit’s primary goal of removing the “utter disenfranchisement” that the ballroom exists and operates within differs from the supposed “primary goal” of the ballroom scene itself. Put differently, I want to take seriously the somewhat dismissive invocation of the fairy tale as an alternative genre through which we might understand enfranchisement. In the genre of the fairy tale, the fairy godmother arrives in a moment of crisis to help the protagonist escape their devastating and squalid condition. They present the protagonist with choices which, if the character makes the morally correct decision, will set them free. Here, survival is closer to what we might call flourishing than mere survival, and the fairy godmother’s job is to enable the possibility of a good life for the protagonist by guiding them on a path that had previously seemed impossible. If fairy tales asks us to imagine a life beyond mere survival—for as bleak as it may seem, Cinderella was surviving before the arrival of her fairy godmother—then what is the relationship between survival and (dis)enfranchisement, survival and flourishing?

It might be helpful to pause briefly to think through what enfranchisement means; or to put it in the form of a question: what are the desired ends toward which “enfranchisement” is directed? Definitionally speaking, enfranchisement is most commonly understood to be the process by which individuals or groups are extended rights or privileges under the state. To be enfranchised is to be afforded the “constellation of rights, laws, obligations, interests, fantasies, and expectations” that fills in what Berlant would call the “modern scene of citizenship” (2020, 44). Meaning, as Steven Seidman explains, citizenship is not merely a juridical classification; it is also the “symbolic incorporation into a national community” (2001, 323). In this way, to be enfranchised is to be in a

binding relation to the state such that one's participation in collective life is repaid in the form of certain protections—economic, social, medical, political, etc.

This is what Carl desired for the young people, to be protected by the state from the state and the society that surrounds it. But Carl was also no fool. He knew from his experience working in nonprofits that those protections were and are not “free.” He knew that based on the color of their skin, the clothes that they wore, the way they talked, the gender they presented, the places they lived, the people they loved (or fucked), and the confidence they manifested, the clients he worked with were considered threats. He knew that the same activities that he himself could take for granted, as a white, cisgender, gay man, could get his clients jailed, harassed, or even killed—not simply by the state but by people in society as well. Removing disenfranchisement, then, is translated to care work that looks a lot like training the clients to be good law-abiding citizens, citizens who “deserve” those protections. Clients who are compliant with medications, hold steady work, are in school, and find a healthy outlet for their vices. This is, of course, a cynical reading of what nonprofits do but, as you'll see in this chapter, it is one shared by many of the people who work in and run these institutions, including Carl. They are well aware that part of their job is to make sure the client is stable enough to live on their own and stable enough to have little to no interaction with the law or problems in the world.

The story of the connection between the ballroom scene and the nonprofit world begins with the rise of the HIV and AIDS epidemic, understood as a crisis of health and governance. Under the banner of this crisis, HIV and AIDS became the primary means through which the state (through the nonprofit) intervened in the lives of ballroom members and the ballroom scene more broadly. But, as I explained in the introduction, as an organizing principle, crisis stunts our relationship to the future by distracting our attention away from potential flourishing and toward a narrow vision of surviving the present. It needs to be said here at the outset that in no uncertain

terms am I arguing that the AIDS epidemic³ was (or more accurately is) not a traumatic world shattering and life altering event. Indeed, one could read the entire relation between the ballroom scene and nonprofit organizations as one born from a situation so devastatingly and existentially overwhelming that it is difficult to find words to describe it. How does one wrap one's head around the loss of a generation (of artists, poets, playwrights, performers, activists, novelists, etc.) without resorting to the sentimental genre of the melodrama? Perhaps this is why Susan Sontag describes the bureaucratic, medical, social, and emotional *effects* of her friend's illness in her essay "The Way We Live Now" – avoiding the source and center of her community's collective pain – instead of naming the illness (or her friend) outright. It is as if getting too close to the reality of illness might shatter any possibility of living on in a world so radically changed by the absences left in its wake. Or as if naming the illness and the individual might wed the two indefinitely and solidify the dreaded outcome. But is this a function of the HIV/AIDS epidemic or a function of crisis itself? Sontag writes that "the difference between a story and a painting or photograph is that in a story you can write, He's still alive. But in a painting or a photo you can't show 'still.' You can just show him being alive" (1991, 30).

Governments, nonprofit organizations, social and medical service providers, educators, pharmaceutical companies, artists, and activists alike speak of and encounter the HIV/AIDS

³ Interestingly, the term epidemic itself dates as far back as Homer and was used to mean a range of things resulting from an action. The etymology of the word is a combination of the prefix epi- (to put on, within) and demos- (the people, the country) and was used to mean various activities that involved the citizens of a state (like civil war or rumors) as well as the act of residing in a particular place. It was Hippocrates who first adapted the word "epidemic" to mean a medical event. In the 5th century BC, he wrote a series of books (collectively known *Corpus Hippocraticum*), a number of them under the title *Epidemics*. In them, he describes and documents diseases which "circulate [] or propagate [...] in a country" (see Pappas et al. 2008; Langholf 2011). What is important to note in the earlier meaning is the sense that as a condition (epidemic) circulated through a population, it simultaneously demarcated the boundaries of the community. More simply, epidemics were situations that made intelligible those who were and were not citizens of the state.

epidemic as a crisis in the sense of an overdetermined and unfolding situation that can (must) be solved and thus requires decisive and swift action. This, in turn, creates a normalizing horizon (Petryna 2018) in which the strategies for survival are condensed into a set of practices that may or may not actually include a notion of the good life. While the differences between these bodies generate different styles of management, the invocation of crisis activates anticipatory and pre-emptive activities teleologically oriented toward a future without crisis all while normalizing the very crisis that they are trying to end. In this way, crisis management around HIV/AIDS often prevents a future orientation toward flourishing in its justification of any action in the name of survival—where survival is defined by the nonprofit as the keeping alive of populations and integrating those deemed peripheral into the center. But, when we consider how members of the ballroom scene “function within the disenfranchisement” as Carl said, we find a different set of practices being developed that are oriented differently, practices that might seem contradictory within the grammar of crisis. The activities and practices developed in the ballroom reorder the *weight* of Carl’s pronouncement away from a focus on “disenfranchisement” and toward a kind of improvisation that moves beyond mere survival. More than that, these practices do not seek to recuperate what was lost, are not about finding ways to survive outside of or beyond “crisis,” but rather invite members to find pleasure in the tiny spaces, gestures, and sounds within an always already broken world.

Trauma Bonds

According to the United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), approximately 75.7 million people have been infected with HIV and around 32.7 million people have died from AIDS-related illnesses globally since the beginning of the epidemic in 1981.⁴ In the United States alone, it is

⁴ <https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/fact-sheet>

estimated that 1.2 million people are currently living with HIV (seropositive), a number that fluctuates because many people living with HIV are unaware of their status, and around 675,000 people have died.⁵ Even in the era of Covid-19, where the news is filled with staggeringly high numbers and unsettling statistics organizing a (newer) ordinary way of life,⁶ it is safe to say that the majority of people do not and cannot fully comprehend the concrete experiences that these abstract numbers encapsulate. This is especially true when the statistics affect a particular segment of the population already forced to the outside of the national political, social, and economic landscape. Thus, translations become necessary political, social, and ethical tools to make the abstract real, to make abstractions manageable—or at least knowable. Of the many strategies the queer community has utilized to translate the HIV/AIDS epidemic as an abstract phenomenon into a concrete situation, three modes of translation interest me here: political, theoretical, and institutional. These are the modes that influence the rise of “the nonprofit” as a site for survival. These are also, of course, not so easily distinguishable, or distinct and overlap in meaningful and generative ways. But I would like to think about how each one uses the language of crisis to express the unsayable, unthinkable, and unbearable, and what that does to the continued unfolding of the epidemic in the lives of ballroom members.

The rise of the HIV/AIDS epidemic coincided with the election of President Ronald Reagan who took office about 6 months before the first cases of HIV/AIDS were reported to the CDC—it would be another 4 years until he publicly mentioned HIV/AIDS.⁷ The story of the Reagan administration’s agenda to transform the national social, economic, and political landscape is one

⁵ These numbers are complicated because HIV/AIDS wasn’t always identified as the source of illness. No one dies of AIDS; they die of other illnesses that attack the body that has been made vulnerable because of AIDS.

⁶ See Talal Asad’s “Ethnographic representation, statistics, and modern power” for more on how statistics organize social life.

⁷ September 17, 1985 while responding to a reporter, Reagan called AIDS a “top priority”

many know, and many have written about. In his first inaugural address he famously said, “In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem,” which amounted to slashing social programs in the name of free market interests and limited government, inserting right-wing Evangelical Christian ideology into policy under the guise of introducing morality back into politics, and trickle-down economic policies that devastated the working and middle classes. These policies would have a profound impact on various communities around the country, but perhaps none would feel those impacts more directly than the queer community. The first cases of HIV were identified in 1981 and identified as a “gay cancer” or gay-related immune deficiency (GRID) as it was named. Doctors and nurses, confused by the number of previously healthy and young gay men coming into their offices with sores on their bodies, high and sustained fevers, and rapid weight loss, were overwhelmed and anxious. While some refused to provide medical services others tried desperately to identify the source of the illness and begged the government to fund research initiatives to study the virus.⁸

But no swift policy, dedicated funding, large-scale study, or acknowledgement materialized. So, from the Reagan administration through the Bush and Clinton presidencies, appeals to the national public and government for medical intervention and care took the form of announcing the epidemic as a crisis, but a clear tension concerning how to frame crisis was at the heart of AIDS activism from the start. On one side we could put something like The NAMES Project Memorial Quilt, the world largest collaborative public arts project originally conceived of by AIDS activist Cleve Jones. Part of the motivation behind the quilt was trying to find ways of expressing that which is impossible to express; but it was also an attempt to honor the many lives lost at a time when the social stigmatization of the virus often prevented public displays of grief and memorialization and to

⁸ “When AIDS Was Funny”

force the public and the government to confront the sheer scale of loss. In 1987, this massive quilt made up of 1,920 3'x 6' individual panels, each one the approximate size of a grave, was placed in front of the National Mall in Washington DC. Jones would later explain to the BBC that “I wanted to show how much land would be covered if all of these bodies were lined up head to toe.”⁹

On the other side, we could put a group of “individuals united in anger and committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis”¹⁰ known as the AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power (ACT UP). Members of this group staged die-ins, large scale demonstrations in front of hospitals, and brought lawsuits against airlines that refused people living with AIDS to board their flights. Rallying around the slogan “Silence = Death,” ACT UP demanded that the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) fund research through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the National Institute of Health (NIH) and, importantly, demanded that the gay community turn their grief to anger.¹¹ As Deborah Gould writes, when the Names Project Quilt was being shown at the National Mall, ACT UP passed out fliers which read “Show your anger to the people who helped make the quilt possible: our government” on one side and “Before this Quilt grows any larger, turn your grief into anger. Turn anger into action. Turn the power of the quilt into action” (Gould 2002, 7).

In his now seminal essay “Mourning and Militancy,” Douglas Crimp (1989) explores this tension between AIDS activists who desire public rituals of mourning versus those who desire militant action – a tension that is importantly not about framing the epidemic as a crisis (or not) but about how to *respond* to the logic of crisis itself. For Crimp, this antagonistic relation, where the

⁹ BBC World News – AIDS Memorial Quilt interview with Jones

¹⁰ <https://actupny.org>

¹¹ The Queer Nation Manifesto “Straights must be frightened into it. Terrorized into it. Fear is the most powerful motivator. No one will give us what we deserve. Rights are not given they are taken, by force if necessary,” pg. 3.

question of political mobilization embodied most forcefully through the words of Larry Kramer seems to be pitted against and antithetical to questions of mourning, misrepresents the political salience of contemplation as a social and ethical response to loss. He writes, “But if we understand that violence is able to reap its horrible rewards through the very psychic mechanisms that make us part of this society, then we may also be able to recognize—along with our rage—our terror, our guilt, and our profound sadness. Militancy, of course, then, but mourning too: mourning *and* militancy” (1989, 18).

Two of the great challenges to any political movement are sustaining momentum and clearly articulating a message. What we find when confronted by crisis is that its dynamic provides an orientation toward a particular end that mobilizes people around a coherent narrative, and the urgency of the logic makes it possible to obfuscate and justify the means by which we arrive at those desired ends. Put differently, crisis is politically useful because it both presumes a non-crisis state from which we have departed (a nostalgic past) and presents us with a series of actions that direct us forward to a better future without crisis. This helps to explain why Crimp, Kramer, and other AIDS activists found it imperative to interrogate and determine the proper responses—and why it was important for Crimp to more fully integrate psychic pain into political activity. What concerns me here is not a disagreement with the profound importance of taking mourning seriously as a necessary reaction to loss; rather the hyper focus on the “proper response” leaves untroubled the category of crisis itself.

What we see across the political spectrum of AIDS activists are demands for those protections as citizens of the state where the state’s authority is clearly articulated through what Foucault termed a regime of biopower: “the power to ‘make’ live and ‘let’ die” (2003, 241). There is a version of this story that could be told with (and perhaps against) what Berlant has called “slow death”: “the physical wearing out of a population in a way that points to its deterioration as a

defining condition of its experience and historical existence” (2011, 95). For Berlant, the scene of slow death unfolds in the elongation of crisis that has become ordinary where the various techniques of power, used to regulate, manage, and control a population’s health, “organize [...] the reproduction of life in ways that allow political crises to be cast as conditions of specific bodies and their competence at maintaining health or other conditions of social belonging” (2011, 105-106). This seems to ring true for how the AIDS/HIV epidemic as a crisis was reframed by the state away from questions of political governance to questions of moral responsibility—this seems to be one of the many reasons why AIDS activists used crisis language as their rallying cry. And yet, one can’t help but notice the desire to be included as subjects of the biopolitical state across the various “responses” outlined above. Meaning, enfranchisement as a desired end established through crisis not only looks like economic stability, cultural visibility, and political inclusion; it also looks a lot like a willingness or desire to be a biopolitical subject whose life is worthy of being governed, managed, regulated, and controlled. And that’s the weird thing about crisis—by illuminating the uneven distribution of power across social, political, and economic domains and clearly articulating a set of possible pathways to overcome a life altering event, it also clearly defines who is and is not a citizen, who does or does not belong, whose life is worthy of intervention.

It is interesting to point out that the word crisis is genealogically linked to the term critique. Thinking back to Koselleck’s etymology of the word crisis,¹² we might remember that the term expresses both a judgement and an intervention, but he goes on to explain that “crisis” was also used to indicate a decision that was reached through “a verdict or judgement, what today is meant by criticism (*Kritik*)” (2006, 358). For Koselleck, crisis was a key concept through which Enlightenment thinkers considered the relation between the progression of history and reason, making “critique”

¹² See Introduction

the mode through which we represent, understand, and explicate the unfolding events. In other words, understanding historical progress (as crisis) requires that we approach the world through critique.

That the birth of queer critique coincided with the AIDS epidemic, then, is perhaps no coincidence. While AIDS activists were fighting to combat the crisis of health, scholars such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Judith Butler, Lee Edelman, Michael Warner, and Leo Bersani found themselves wrestling with how the HIV/AIDS epidemic was changing the shape and nature of queer sociality by suturing together the prospect of death/dying with the experience of pleasure/desire. This strange and uneasy coupling presented a kind of crisis of theorizing and became a focal point for exploring the life-worlds of LGBTQ+ peoples. We see this entanglement in Sedgwick's "White Glasses," a pre-emptive obituary for her friend Michael Lynch that moves from desire and identification to illness and politics with sincerity, humor, and a critical eye. For Sedgwick, writing an obituary for her friend who had not yet died (a crisis in the genre form) when she presented the paper at a conference in the spring of 1991, mirrors the crisis of the AIDS epidemic wherein the question of how to live and survive in grief, how to write through illness, becomes a problem of analytic importance (1993). We also see it in Leo Bersani's essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?" where the public health crisis of AIDS becomes a "crisis of representation" around sexuality, sexual pleasure, and sexual acts (2009).

In explicating the relation between crisis and critique, Janet Roitman writes, "a critical relation to norms inheres in a reflexive relationship to modes of categorization and the forms of rationality that organize and give sense and significance to practice" (2014, 33).¹³ Critique, and queer

¹³ See also Foucault (1984) "What is Enlightenment?" and Butler (2002) "What is Critique?". Roitman is thinking with Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, two scholars whose writing was critical to the formation of the queer theory.

critique more specifically, should work to illuminate the way we come to organize the world (and ourselves) in terms of language and action, uncover or unmask the way we come to identify with objects and subjects, and “bring into relief the very framework of evaluation itself” (Butler 2002, 214). But as Roitman explains, the problem remains that “crisis is a blind spot that enables the production of knowledge” (2014, 39).

In the space left vacant by the health care system, a number of LGBTQ+ led nonprofit community organizations opened up around the country and were presented with the impossible task of trying to deal with the fallout from this acute crisis without large-scale support from the United States government: the Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC) in New York, Kaposi’s Sarcoma Research and Education Foundations (later San Francisco AIDS Foundation) in San Francisco, and AIDS Project Los Angeles to name a few. These organizations worked to raise funds through benefits, provided emotional, financial, legal, and end-of-life support for the sick, and became the primary source of disseminating information about new developments in HIV/AIDS research. They, in some sense, became the *de facto* welfare state.

But something changed when, in the early to mid-1990s, under pressure from a growing constituency who recognized the potential for AIDS to affect more than the socially outcast,¹⁴ Congress began pushing the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to fund research through the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the National Institute of Health (NIH). As the government began investing in research and testing, pharmaceutical companies began developing drugs to regulate the virus, and the reality of living with illness became more and more possible, those non-profit organizations that were once dealing with the acute crisis with very little

¹⁴ Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Resources Emergency (CARE) Act finally signed into law in 1990 under President George H.W. Bush. White, a teenager from Kokomo, Indiana who contracted AIDS through a blood transfusion, became a national spokesperson for the disease. See The Waxman Report.

government support became the mediators between the queer community and the state's intervention. But the intensity (from acute to chronic crisis) of the HIV/AIDS epidemic only shifted for certain populations.¹⁵ From 1996 to 2000, of the total number of people living with AIDS (264,405) the majority of people who seroconverted were black (118,665) and brown (52,092).¹⁶ And as this population shifted, so too did the mandate of non-profit organizations established to support the queer community. Nonprofits that were once largely supported through community donations and volunteering began receiving federal and state funding which simultaneously expanded the scope of their outreach and diminished the kinds of political activities they could engage in. Because nonprofits were now beholden to state funding, crisis management took the form of compliance. This was the beginning of a now longstanding relationship between the queer community and nonprofits who found themselves in the business of providing services to those most “disenfranchised,” to those who had been “left out of the contract” as Carl said.

Fairy Godmothers: Part 1

I just watched as all this madness passed me by. I had to break up a fight! Like literally deescalate a fight outside the drop-in! Preston explained, recounting the scenes of his introduction to AFC. The Ali Forney Center was founded in 2002 and has grown to be the nation's largest organization dedicated to providing services to LGBTQ+ homeless youth. Being the nation's largest organization, however, comes with its challenges. Preston and I had finally found a time to talk privately in his office—although

¹⁵ When antiretroviral therapy (ART) started at \$8,000 a month, only a small few who—because of their access to medical care, family money, or employment—could find ways to pay the exorbitant costs. In short, the crisis became chronic for only a select few and remained acute for those who were historically already at the periphery. By the early 1990s, the population of people affected by the AIDS epidemic largely consisted of individuals who were always already left behind by the health care system: minorities, youth, drug users, sex workers, etc.

¹⁶ See <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5021a2.htm>

“privately” implies a kind of calm that the anxious sounds of the receptionist calling for a case manager or intake officer over the intercom and the seemingly endless stream of staff knocking on the door asking if we could help deal with an “emergency” of some sort wouldn’t allow. As a health counselor, one of the three positions that make up a client’s care team, Preston was in charge of helping clients enroll in Medicaid, figure out any insurance issues, and organize and keep tabs on medical history and paperwork.

One of my biggest jobs is to meet my HIV testing quota though, Preston explained. Each health counselor is assigned a specific population of clients to work with in accordance with the contractual obligations written into AFC’s municipal funding to ensure they were doing direct service work. The city divides the population of clients into three categories based on assumed risk: assigned female at birth and/or white, assigned male at birth and MSM of color, and everyone who has already tested positive for HIV. If your client population is the first category, you tend to mostly provide education around safe sex. The second category is considered by the city to be acutely at risk and is also the largest populations of clients; meaning the health counselor for this group doesn’t have to try very hard to meet the quota. If your job is to manage individuals in the third population, testing is replaced by making sure your clients are medication compliant. Preston’s case load was around 30 to 40 clients each month, a number in constant fluctuation.

When a young person finds their way to AFC, they first encounter an intake worker and a program assistant. The intake worker, a position filled by any staff person or intern, follows a questionnaire that covers the new client’s housing situation, sexual health, food and nutrition, access to food, mental health, substance use, family and trauma history, and the program assistant assigns them to a case manager. The program assistant continues works with the various case managers in making reports and filling out all the necessary paperwork for mandatory audits to the different funding sources. The care team, which includes a case manager, a health counselor, and a mental

health counselor, all work together to tailor their practice to each client. AFC has a total of 125 beds available across their emergency and transitional housing programs, and between the different apartments and the drop-in center, clients are provided four meals a day, basic hygiene supplies, clothing, showers, washers and dryers, and legal support. The primary goal of this support staff is to help clients become good citizens of the state by connecting them to these services so they can transition into independent living: get all necessary forms of identification in order (help them legally change their names or work with immigration services if necessary); assist them with enrolling in and finishing high school, GED courses, or college; help them apply for internships or jobs; get their overall health in order.

But in order to access these resources, clients must be compliant. This means that they must show up to meetings with their care team, take any and all medications prescribed to them, and attend at least one of the client and/or staff led groups that are designed to target the other interests, passions, or support they might have and need: reading group, art therapy group, singing group, vogue group, trans discussion group, gender non-conforming group, etc. In this way compliance is not simply an issue of adherence to a set of social and medical standards; it also serves to establish and organize emotional and psychic health; what Foucault would call subjectification. But this version of “care of the self” under the banner of compliance is not enfranchisement. It is the necessary conditions for enfranchisement’s possibility. Besides being, as Joseph Dumit explains, a “bureaucratic analytic for assessing health outcome trends,” compliance at AFC also mediates relations between clients and staff, staff and funding agencies, funding agencies and mainstream social life (2010, 245). As then Deputy Director of Programing Heather Gay explained to me, part of the issue is that staff have to simultaneously manage their client load and the funding requirements from at least five different sources such that for the youth, AFC appears to be one cohesive

program. *We are beholden to the funding we get*, she repeated. And being compliant with a granting agency or a federal department meant that the staff had to demand compliance from their clients.

Looking for ways to pay for all of these services requires an entire staff of people who consider themselves to be the second line of defense: they apply for private grants, city and federal funding, and plan largescale events. Each pocket of money comes with different reporting criteria, contract obligations, and direct service language which means that tracing funding as it follows the client from their first interaction with an intake worker all the way to aging out of the program (now 25 years old) allows you to see how the language of crisis gets actualized in the services provided, in the social and emotional educational activities, and the relationships developed between clients and staff—crisis management becomes compliance accounting.

It is not a stretch to say that these services are vital to the basic survival of so many young people who have run away or been kicked out of their homes, have experienced emotional, physical, and/or sexual abuse, and have come to New York from all over the country and the world to find community, safety, and a new life. Staff consider themselves crisis managers, front line workers, and emergency service providers tasked with the (almost certainly) impossible responsibility of assisting someone through what is often the most vulnerable and terrifying moment of their lives. Clients' behavior can be unpredictable – fights break out, feelings get hurt, property gets damaged, words are exchanged – and staff tends to react out of a layer of caution and concern that stems from an ethos of “do no harm.”¹⁷ *A lot of people say the drop in is really chaotic*, Preston explained, *but when you've grown up with chaos it doesn't feel difficult or stressful. Coming from a similar background means that you meet the youth on*

¹⁷ AFC is a sex positive space (see Chapter 3: Part 2) which is a difficult line to navigate for the staff and volunteers.

their terms. But the hard truth is, as Preston explained, *the retention rate for staff, particularly black staff, averages only about a year and the clients know that.*

There are two points I'd like to highlight here in Preston's comments. The first is the issue of retention rates of social workers, regardless of race or background, which has become a major problem in the last decade. Studies have shown that social workers who provide direct service to "at risk" or particularly vulnerable populations experience heightened levels of emotional and psychological burnout, "vicarious trauma," secondary traumatic stress, and compassion fatigue (see Newell, MacNeil, & Gordon 2010; Jacobson, Rothschild, Mirza, & Shapiro 2013; Diaconescu 2015; Harr & Moore 2011). As staff navigate the utter disconnect between necessary and time-consuming bureaucratic accounting and the "chaotic" scenes of adolescent and young adult life unfolding "in crisis," many of them personally struggle with exhaustion such that they become immune to the pain of others, desensitized by the general at the cost of the particular, or overwhelmed at the sheer extent of the crisis at hand. This often translates to an increase in punishments instead of working through the complex issues that might be at play in any given situation. The staff knows this and work hard to navigate their own emotional wellbeing. But the staff are also overworked, underpaid, and are almost always made the bad guy for the clients. There is no question that if they didn't do this work there would be no one else. Yet for those who feel called to this work out of a sense of duty and deep love for "their community" (most staff are queer themselves) it doesn't take long for them to realize they are putting a Band-Aid on a gushing headwound.

The second is the assertion that those staff who have experienced similar forms of disenfranchisement can more easily relate to the clients. Indeed, clients would tell me that one of the many reasons why they, the majority of whom are black, prefer working with the very few black and brown staff at AFC, many of whom are or were affiliated with the ballroom scene themselves, is that they tend to feel less judged for things. For example, one of the clients bought a \$500 purse and was

waiting anxiously for packages to arrive at the front desk for fear someone might try to steal it (or staff might misplace it). Upon hearing what was in the package, the staff member working at the front desk started giving them grief about sleeping in emergency housing at the drop-in while buying an expensive purse. To their surprise, however, the client responded that they *didn't give a fuck about sleeping at the drop-in*. The purse made them feel good about themselves, it affirmed them in their identity, gave them something to be proud of. I will come back to this story later, but for now it is important to point out that Preston's comments point to the painfully complex ambiguity of this work: that black staff might be more comfortable in these settings, provide more wholistic support, and yet be the first to be burnt out is all true.

Whether or not one agrees that similar racial, familial, or economic experiences create the conditions for belonging and understanding, clients seek out and trust staff whose life experiences seemingly mirror their own and are the first to say that they recognize the difficult that brings to the staff in general. Queen, one the clients who was originally from Chicago explained it to me this way: *They want to do their jobs but they can't cause they have to sit here and watch us like we're animals and they feel some type of way. And it hurts them to see us like this and to see the same faces every single day and they can't do anything to help us cause they have to sit here and watch us. Their job is to take people in and get them out of here. But they can't do that job cause they have to just sit here and watch us... its calling for an admin staff, like they need somebody to do that shit and also new tiles for the floors cause this shit is nasty! If I had 80 million dollars, I would give them a million dollars to redecorate this place. Make it feel nice, make it feel homey. Like, people never felt that before. It feels like jail in here. Oh my god, it really does.* Queen who had been a client for about a year when we talked, knew the issue was compounded, knew that it wasn't the staffs fault or the clients fault. She recognized that the demands for compliance made it impossible for staff to assist the clients in more meaningful ways. That the clients were considered (by the state) to be "in crisis" solidified a relation between the clients and staff as one of constant management and surveillance. I quote Queen at

length here because I was also struck by the last part of her comment, that if she had 80 million dollars she would give the drop-in money to make the space feel like a home. Even though she feels like she and others are treated like animals, her impulse is to make it better.

There so many ambivalences wrapped up in this relationship. *My name is Armani and I'm from Charleston, South Carolina.. and, you know, I'm a woman of trans experience.* Armani and I were sitting in one of the offices in the back of the community center. Armani had been working two different internships at AFC and another one at an animal shelter taking care of kittens. She was, by all accounts, doing great. *So how long have you been in New York?* I asked. *I've been here a year which means a year of homelessness. Entering homelessness is crazy, a lot happens. Like, I try to tell all the youngs I encounter to take control of your situation, don't let your situation control you. But when you are entering that [homelessness] you don't think about that. And I didn't have nobody to tell me that. I had to learn that.... But here I am a year later with three internships.* One of Armani's internships was in the kitchen where I also worked a couple days a week. She was creative with flavors and always had a playlist queued up for every meal. *I live in New Jersey. I finally got roommates and they are so freaking fab. That's amazing,* I said. *Yeah, I dedicated my life to doing it. Cause I gave it a year and I was relying on other people and that's something I never did in my life. Gave what a year?* I asked. *Homelessness! No like real shit I never depended on nobody and the only time I did, like, I'm still fucking here sleeping in the drop-in and its fucking triggering like god damn y'all taught me to depend on ya'll. That's a trigger for me.* Here, Armani is expressing the uneasy feeling many clients and staff have that the structure of the nonprofit actually prevented individual growth.

But the structural problems seemed impenetrable because there were so many different scales of crisis that needed to be managed – financial costs of providing care versus the emotional experience of working with disenfranchised minority subjects. In order to do so, AFC developed a Standards of Care philosophy and Policies and Procedures manual which lay out the best practices, goals, LGBTQ+ specific contexts, and procedures to be followed in various situations. And as Beth

explained to me, *part of the standards of care is learning about the ballroom scene*. Beth was in charge of mental health at AFC, which meant that they had therapy clients but were also in charge of the intensive case managers, the other therapists, and the large number of interns who work at AFC as part of their field placement requirement. *When we train new staff, we have to explain certain things that they don't teach in school and that some of our staff just don't know. The ballroom section teaches them about how houses are families and about voguing and walking. But it really mostly focuses on reading and shade*. There is a strict “Shade-Free” policy outlined in the Policies and Procedures manual for staff states that says, “AFC provides services to clients who respect themselves, others, and the space they are in.”¹⁸ It goes on to explain that clients will be asked to leave if they are being disrespectful or shady. Reading, a term that comes from the ballroom scene and normally refers to calling someone out or talking about them (most often to them directly), is by definition a shady business. But it is also a way of poking fun at, and getting a rise out of, someone else. It can be cruel and hurtful just as easily as it can be hilarious and innocent of any ill will.

Nadia, who was an intensive care manager who worked closely with the youth who were interested in activism, jumped in and explained further: *we have to inform ourselves on the words and specific gestures to fully understand what is being discussed. Like when young people are talking about their uncle or mother, they are probably not talking about a blood relative or legal guardian. And even for clients who are not part of the ballroom scene, that culture is our youth culture and it's the language we use to communicate with the young people*, she paused and continued, *and let's be honest with each other too!* Here we see that the language and gestures of ballroom become objects of study in so far as they have become synonymous with the language and gestures of queer youth culture in nonprofit spaces. The anxiety felt around

¹⁸ AFC Policy Handbook

(mis)understanding “the culture” however, speaks to a more fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of crisis itself.

The way “crisis” appears in the training manuals and best practices literature is as an object of prevention and intervention. “Crises often occur” it says, “when one feels unheard, afraid, attacked or misunderstood.” Staff is tasked with deescalating the situation by engaging in attentive listening, making sure to be aware of both verbal and non-verbal cues, and removing the audience if one has gathered. Staff are told to avoid “preaching, giving unsolicited advice immediately, lecturing, criticizing, blaming, diagnosing, belittling, presuming, interrupting, collecting unimportant information, finger pointing, standing above a sitting client, and closing in on a client’s personal space.” The goal is to safely and supportively help the client through the crisis. Crisis, here, is a failure to adequately provide care.

Tracing the complicated relationship between client, staff, and funding allows one to notice an internal relationship between assumed and future risk, definitions of what disenfranchisement entails (and its necessary responses) for nonprofit organizations, and surveillance of bodies through various forms of testing and compliance, all of which is expressed through the language of crisis management. Here, the end result of a successfully managed (or prevented) crisis is the physical, economic, and social stability of the client where the nonprofit has taught clients how to be good citizens by disciplining behavior, educating them on risk, and making sure they know the right way to spend their money. This is what survival means – gaining a level of stability such that the client can become sovereign in their own life – and staff work hard to orient their practices of managing crises toward this ultimate goal.

But back to the purse. The staff person’s confusion around how someone who was living in poverty at a shelter might want to purchase an item worth as much as one month’s rent speaks to the divergent notions of survival at play. They saw the client’s purchase as a failure to comply with

social norms, economic sense, and properly placed desire. If the client was to survive, they would need to learn, through discipline and consequence, how to save money and spend it on rent, food, and other utilities; not on extravagant designer purses, a new set of nails every week, or those limited-edition shoes. Those items are off-limits, unimaginable, and completely illogical when presented within the realm of crisis – crisis makes them unintelligible.

It is important to point out that crisis does not cause a set of actions, bodily comportments, or desires from those who find themselves within its logic. Another way of saying this is that crisis does not make them illegible in actuality.¹⁹ Rather, when we live in the genre of the melodrama organized around through the language of crisis, certain actions, desires, and styles are framed as questions of morality, or more precisely moral successes and moral failures – crisis determines the moral logics by which we make sense of actions, desires, and styles of dress. In so doing, the possibility of survival becomes hardened into a set of practices, habits of sociality, thoughts and feelings, and future orientations. The seeming contradiction of desiring a purse “more than”²⁰ economic and social stability, then, points to a different emphasis on, orientation toward, and definition of survival. If enfranchisement is the teleological endpoint of survival then what do we make of the purse? And if enfranchisement as a mode of belonging to the social is not the goal then how do we understand survival? Put differently, what happens when we read the purse against crisis (which suggests a relation to morality and survival as the instantiation of enfranchisement) and instead follow a different path toward an alternative understanding of the category “survival”?

In her explication of how scenes and situations of emergency the foundation of democratic politics, Bonnie Honig writes that questions of emergency are most often framed in terms of either

¹⁹ Of course, we desire things, act, and organize our bodies in ways that are contradictory to our own flourishing. Lauren Berlant might call this cruel optimism.

²⁰ I say “more than” here not because the client in this story expressed a preference; rather I’m interested in how staff interpreted these competing desires as an instance of preference.

good or bad responses/decisions which tend to “focus attention on the moment of emergency and not on the afterlife of survival” (2009, 9).²¹ For Honig, survival is a complex constellation of political, social, emotional and ethical puzzles that emergency tends to simplify as questions of merely enduring, mere life. But enduring and thriving are fundamentally different activities that produce a different set of moral considerations and demands. In order to argue for a survival based in integrity, which she terms a moral care of the self, she turns to Jacques Derrida’s rendering of the French term for survival “*survivance* as *sur-vivance*—more life, surplus life” (Honig 2009, 10). Derrida’s disagreement with Arendt (who argues that survival (mere life) needs to be dethroned as a central concern and goal of political life and replaced with something more akin to the Classical notion of “overliving”²²) on the grounds of refusing to prioritize one over the other, clears a path for considering survival as both “*plus de vie* and *plus que vie*: both more life and more than [mere] life” (2009, 10).

The title of this manuscript, which includes the phrase “beyond survival,” seeks to gesture toward a similar kind of move, a similar rejection of the truly impossible yet seemingly ubiquitous choice between merely living and more life. What we see in the example of the client who both sleeps in emergency housing and purchases a wildly expensive purse is an expression of what it looks like to stake a claim for *sur-vivance* as an alternative orientation to crisis—an ethical claim whose temporal horizon extends beyond the rupture or break. Many of the stories in the following chapters describe the consequences of choosing to thrive in a world governed by emergency management for this community of black and brown queer people. Indeed, because crisis often overdetermines the ethical, social, and political landscapes of life, the consequences are often met with confusion, or

²¹ See also Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against*.

²² Honig writes, “Overliving applies to those who ought to have died but go on to more life... it is a dividend—that surprise extra, the gift that exceeds rightful expectations, the surplus that exceeds causality” (10). See also Jacques Derrida’s “Deconstruction in America” and “Living On.”

worse, judgement. But for this particular chapter, I want to ask that we imagine survival not as enfranchisement but as a practice of world building where the subject's relation to the social is not understood through rights alone. Where economic emancipation is the means through which the "nonprofit" realizes survival, the ballroom scene flips the script and argues that economic emancipation will only get you so far. Survival should (must) include a kind of flourishing that gets expressed through gestures, aesthetics, and language that isn't always in relation to the subject who exists as the citizen of the state.

Fairy Godmothers: Part 2

When you go to a ball in Chicago (and elsewhere), chances are you will encounter a nonprofit in one form or another; so much so that it is difficult to express just how common it is that questions of "health" and "risk" are entangled with scenes of pleasure. There are some organizations who announce themselves and others whose presence is obscured – donating money to be used for cash prizes, renting or gifting their space to be used for balls or house practices, providing support to members of the community, and/or hiring members who act as liaisons with the community. The deep ties between these communities was made clear to me from the beginning of my research with the ballroom scene in Chicago back in 2013 when I was invited to a ball by a dear friend, Donté, who texted me information about the location and theme of the night. To my surprise, the location was familiar to me: the ball was to be held at the School of Social Service Administration (SSA) at the University of Chicago (now known as the Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice). As I walked from Haskell Hall, the building that houses the Anthropology Department on campus, across the Midway over to the glass and steel building, I noticed the four security guards standing guard of the door, frisking people as they entered the large hall. After being searched myself, I walked into the room where a stage and runway surrounded by circular tables and chairs

had been erected. During the day, this room was normally filled with aspiring social workers learning the ins and outs of proper clinical ethics and organizational politics. But tonight, those social workers were seated at tables that surrounded the makeshift “ballroom” displaying information about various non-profit and city programs, various social services that the school itself provides, and literature about safe sex practices.

But why would SSA put on a ball? I asked Donté, even though we had met while I was volunteering at an LGBTQ+ community center in Chicago where Donté worked as a social worker. *For a lot of reasons: to show love to the communities they serve, get more underserved people in the door and acquainted with services, get people tested, as an educational exercise for social work students...* This last reason seemed particularly true. Walking around the space and talking to the young, mostly white students, it was clear that part of the exercise was to create a controlled environment in which certain forms of intervention could take place. As I engaged with the people around the tables, a pattern of address emerged: they asked me questions about myself, explained the many campaigns they were working with, and then asked me to take a brochure. No pushing anything on me or preaching anything to me. They were polite, inquisitive, and (perhaps overly) excited for the ball to start. But, importantly, they also interpreted my presence as a signifier of my own risk. If I was there, I must be in need of particular forms of care. And since I was there, I must not have access to a particular set of resources.

A couple of months later, I attended another ball, this one in Bronzeville. It was being thrown by the Committee for Black Gay Pride in Chicago, a committee I was invited to join, and the evening promised to be an extraordinary event: the Legendary Jack Mizrahi was to be the commentator and three prominent Chicago Drag performers were to kick things off. When I arrived, however, I found that while the outside courtyard where the stage was set up was decorated with bright lights, ample amounts of glitter, and balloons, the inside hall was filled with those same

tables. I had figured the tables were an anomaly befitting the strange marriage between an institution like the University of Chicago and the ballroom scene – and yet there they were. I found myself walking around the room experiencing many of the same interactions.

Going to a ball and talking to the people sitting at the tables became a ritual for me. I would introduce myself as a researcher, ask them about the programs they were representing, take a brochure, and move on. *The thing is shugga*, Tommy Avant Garde would remind me whenever I expressed a sense of ambivalence at their presence, *There was a period between 1995 and 2000 when everybody died. There were 25 people in our house. Girl, there's only two or three of us now. Everybody died.* In the 1990s, Tommy was working with a community organization that worked to provide resources to queer people in Chicago and specifically people living with HIV. *It's sad because I feel as though it could have been prevented. People were just scared to talk about what they were going through. Nobody would say anything and I'm like, y'all saying things when it's too late. Can't do anything now. You all done waited till you got four teeth in your mouth.*

About a month after that, I went to a ball in Garfield Park, one of Chicago's most economically devastated and violent neighborhoods. As I pulled up in the cab, I could see a van parked in front of the community center where the ball was to be held. In bold lettering, the van boldly announced itself as a mobile HIV testing site operated by a nonprofit health organization based on the southside. I had met one of the people “working the van” before at another ball and so walked over to chat before heading inside. *We are one of the organizations funding the ball. Basically, we set up here and offer free testing for free entry.* Perhaps desensitized by the frequency of nonprofit organizations showing up at balls, I wouldn't ask Sharon to clarify until the next ball when I saw her once again leaning against the van and smoking a cigarette. *Well, these kids are the most difficult population to get a hold of, you know? I mean, I was the same when I was that age.* Sharon was an older black trans woman who had been involved in the Stonewall Riots of 1969. *I'm from Chicago originally but moved out*

there when I was young cause I got kicked out of my house. The fact that I'm still alive is wild to me. I left New York cause everyone I loved died in the 80s and 90s. Sharon worked with this organization and the deal was that she would give them a wrist band so they could get into the ball for free if they agreed to be tested. Balls range from being free to being upwards of \$30 to \$50 so free entry is often a huge perk. This is especially true for young people, many of whom are struggling with stable housing and/or employment.

But like, I stuttered a bit, *what happens if someone tests positive?* My question was a way of getting at my own discomfort in thinking about how I might respond to this kind of health news right before walking into a party. *To be honest, most people already know their status and so they do it just cause they know it means they can spend their money on other things. But if the information is surprising, we give them information about where to get a more thorough test, what HIV is (cause people still think it will kill you), how to get medications, and other things.* Our conversation wasn't continuous because we kept getting interrupted by people approaching the van to get tested and testing takes about 30 minutes.²³ What I gathered was that these testing sites were less about trying to provide direct support or direct services to people as much as they were trying to gather as much information about this population as possible so as to prevent the spread of HIV. The CDC has used many different surveillance techniques to track behavior in populations considered to be most at risk: men who have sex with men (MSM). Since 2003 for instance, one of their primary programs, Project CHAT - National HIV Behavioral Surveillance (NHBS), use what they call "venue-based, time-space sampling methods." They partner

²³ I should say that I never asked what kind of testing these vans (or sometimes booths inside the ball) use. There are three kinds of tests most used in the United States: nucleic acid tests (NAT), antigen/antibody tests, and antibody tests. NAT is the most thorough test and is done by drawing blood which is sent to a lab (takes days); the antigen/antibody test looks for the antibodies in your immune system that the body produces if it has been exposed to HIV and can be either taken from blood from the vein or a finger prick (around 30 minutes); the antibody test is similar to the antigen/antibody test but is the most rapid test available, using either a finger prick or oral fluid (20 minutes).

with local nonprofits to identify locations, days, and times where they might find black and brown men who have sex with men and send people to conduct interviews about behavior, ask about their access to medical care or PrEP, and provide testing.²⁴

This is only one program out of truly dozens that cities, states, and the federal government use to surveil populations they see as particularly at risk of contracting HIV. These programs are designed around the belief that in order to prevent the spread of HIV, they must understand the intimate details of the lives of “at risk” people: where they hang out, what they eat, their education level and employment, family history, etc. And because the state is in no position to gather this information outright, they turn to nonprofits to gather this data for them. This is just one of the reasons why from the tables around the perimeter of the stage to the vans parked outside providing free HIV testing,²⁵ the persistent presence of risk and its management quite literally surrounds the experience of going to a ball. And since this community is considered to be at heightened risk of contracting HIV, for experiencing homelessness, and/or for falling victim to gender-based violence, heightened surveillance seems to be the logical response. For Tommy, these new surveillance technologies should be read as a positive turn in the care of people living with or at risk of contracting HIV. There is a part of him that wonders whether the extensive loss of life of his friends could have been prevented had people sought medical attention or social services sooner and he would say to me, in conversations where illness and risk were being discussed, that very little has

²⁴ For more information about Chicago’s partnership with the CDC see: https://www.chicago.gov/city/en/depts/cdph/supp_info/data-reports/project_chat_-_nationalhivbehavioralsurveillancenhs.html

²⁵ According to the Center for Disease Control, “the rate of new HIV infection in African Americans is 8 times that of whites based on population size” with an estimated “44% of all new HIV infections” in 2010 being African Americans. <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/group/raciaethnic/africanamericans/>

changed in that regard — generally people don't ask for help or guidance when it comes to health management.

The body of scholarship that considers how medical technologies have affected understandings of the body, sex, and pleasure since the beginning of the HIV/AIDS epidemic is useful here because HIV/AIDS has fundamentally changed the shape of queer life. But as medical technologies have developed to preemptively intervene in viral transmission (PrEP) or monitor viral load (antibody testing), one's status has become a measure of personal responsibility to comply, and risk is considered a question of moral import. Here we could think with scholars like Tim Dean (2015) who have pointed out that as prevention has become another way to mandate pre-emptive treatment, the desire for unmediated intimacies no longer seems as politically resistant to the “encroachment of health-and-hygiene imperatives” (2015, 233). Or alternatively with Kane Race in his critical investigation of Gary Dowsett and David McInnes' term “post-AIDS” as a signifier of the changing face and nature of the previously felt communal crisis of HIV/AIDS, who writes that the possibility of technological intervention has created a potentially harmful narrative in which gay life might once again thrive if only each of us were “armed with just the right amount of behavioral modification” (2001, 170). The language of risk, as something that can (and should) be managed by the individual patient, creates a scene in which “the sense of the epidemic... becomes undetectable” (172). Meaning, the affective consequences of knowledge about one's health creates subjects who are individually responsible for their own survival and are no longer part of a collective fighting for the right to survive.

But these debates around how the changing technological landscapes has altered relations between individual subjects, desire, politics, and regimes of biopower seem to miss the many ways in which these new developments have affected people differently depending on their proximity to whiteness. For instance, at the end of his article, Race writes that perhaps “crisis may not be the best

way to describe the current atmosphere of the HIV/AIDS epidemic among gay men in wealthy countries,” but this pronouncement itself (perhaps ironically given his name) fails to consider how racialized subjects of a biopolitical state have always had a different relationship to the epidemic as “the crisis,” even in wealthy countries (2001, 186). Meaning, as the crisis has become undetectable for some, the crisis has been made even more detectable for others. But that is not completely accurate either. What has happened is that for black and brown people, particularly those who are in the ballroom scene, the “crisis” of living in the aftermath of slavery has been made so very ordinary (for the state, for institutions, etc.) that the language of crisis doesn’t fully capture the issue. It instead simplifies a compounded problem into a neatly manageable scene with clear and doable (even when they are hard or ignored by the likes of a Reagan administration for example) strategies for recovery.

When one’s access to spaces of pleasure is conditioned on one’s willingness to be a subject of surveillance—one’s participation in collective life requires that one complies with the prescribed crisis of an epidemic—the sphere of possible negotiations with and against the logic shrinks. Now the problem appears to double: first, as I’ve explained above, the introduction of crisis as a logic to explain the HIV/AIDS epidemic temporally presumes a common state of non-crisis before, thereby obscuring the complex ways in which black and brown queer life was differently conscripted into the “demos” of the crisis. Second, as the duration of crisis has increasingly transitioned from being an acute catastrophe to a chronic issue of individual concern, made possible through various surveillance technologies which seek to mitigate and manage risk, the logic has loosened (albeit in ethically and politically fraught ways) for some and become rigid for others. In other words, the constant presence of nonprofits as managers of crisis creates individuals who are only intelligible as subjects of risk.

Ball members know this, they feel this, and so one might expect that equipped with this information they would do everything in their power to fight this form of subjection—refuse to be tested, refuse to take the brochure at the table, refuse to attend a ball at a social work school. And yet, think back to Tommy and his semi-appreciation of the way nonprofits intervene into the space of the ball. What you notice is a kind of ambivalence at the prospect of being a biopolitical subject of state governance and an ambivalence toward being conscripted as a subject of crisis management. There is neither rejection nor full embrace. Rather, ball members seem to play along just long enough to access services or gain free entry. In other words, they use the logics meant to control them not as the political grounds on which to fight against these forms of control but as the materials from which to build something different.

Genre Trouble

Throughout this chapter, I have been hinting at something I wish to explain outright; namely, that reading the ballroom scene through the genre of the fairy tale provides insight into the motivations, desires, activities, and aesthetics cultivated by and for this collective. Further, we can more clearly see this genre at work when it is set against the backdrop of another, indeed more pervasive, genre characteristic of modern American life: the melodrama. Fredric Jameson (1975) argued that, “Genres are essentially contracts between a writer and his readers; or rather [...] they are literary *institutions*, which like other institutions of social life are based on tacit agreements or contracts” (135). He goes on to explain that while everyday speech is made intelligible through context, gesture, and intonation, written language uses generic conventions to guide the reader’s understanding. Of course, genres are not relegated to textual materials and can be found in many spheres of social life. For instance, in describing the development and maintenance of feminine cultural conventions in the United States, Lauren Berlant argues that considering feminine sexual cultures as a genre form

provides a useful analytic to explain how individuals become attached to national cultures. Berlant writes:

A genre is an aesthetic structure of affective expectation, an institution or formation that absorbs all kinds of small variations or modifications while promising that the persons transacting with it will experience the pleasure of encountering what they expected, with details varying the theme. It mediates what is singular, in the details, and general about the subject. It is a form of aesthetic expectation with porous boundaries allowing complex audience identifications: it locates real life in the affective capacity to bracket many kinds of structural and historical antagonism on behalf of finding a way to connect with the feeling of belonging to a larger world, however aesthetically mediated (2008, 4).

Here, genre is an aesthetic, affective, and performative mode through which we filter our individual experiences of fears, risks, crises, pleasures, and desires and translate them into manageable chunks of common sensation. It is a way of gesturing toward those characteristics that make it clear that we belong to something bigger than ourselves. Genres are the governing principles used to establish the boundaries of a world and the points of clarification for situations and scenes which might otherwise be illegible.

In the opening pages of her book *Orgies of Feeling*, Elisabeth Anker recites a version of the story of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11th through the conventions of melodrama. She explains that the genre has become a common political discourse through which we understand moments of crisis where, “dramatic events” are explained “through moral polarities of good and evil, overwhelmed victims, heightened affects of pain and suffering, grand gestures, astonishing feats of heroism, and the redemption of virtue” (2014, 2). For Anker, the framing of narratives around the 9/11 attacks recasts the crisis not as an end in itself but as a beginning, as the tragically fantastical means through which the United States was able to continue its efforts as a force for the spread of democracy across the world.

Similarly, there is a version of the story that I’ve been telling here of the complex and somewhat fraught relation between the ballroom scene and nonprofit organizations that could be expressed through this genre. It might go: Once there was a group of people whose love of life and

pleasure threatened the old-fashioned and strict moral codes of society and thus forced them to the periphery of the mainstream. In a tragic twist of fate, the very thing that made them different from (and frightening to) the masses became the point of transmission for an unknown virus that swept through the population, killing many young and healthy souls. Unjustly abandoned by the state and unfairly blamed by the society, this group banded together to establish an alternative safety net for themselves and to fight for their rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Through perseverance and persistence, the group would eventually gain recognition from the state as its citizenry, and in so doing, these previous outsiders would help to begin the hard work of creating a more perfect union based in the fundamental belief that all men are created equal.

This seems to be the version of the story that nonprofits tell. It is about how to frame crisis through the genre of melodrama such that the emotional excess becomes just another aspect to be managed and controlled. In this narrative rendering, the melodrama is used as a political discourse which consolidates state power in so far as it has become the only avenue through which survival seems possible. But framing the crisis this way also allows the consolidation of particular kind of *subjects* of state power: white gay man versus black and brown queer folks. Surveillance and risk management are where we see these differences clearly. Where the melodrama creates the grammar around which the story of building a collective national identity through crisis gets told and, importantly, the story of how people fight to belong to the nation itself, the problem remains that black and brown queer folks are continually left out of the entire frame and so the “citizen” that crisis produces, and that melodrama makes morally and politically salient is never the kid from the ballroom. The ballroom kid is and remains the background character in the plot. If they are included, they appear as the character whose life doesn’t fit the script, the character in need for a total transformation in order to be legible and worthy of support.

But what if we were to tell the story as a fairy tale? As a genre, Jack Zipes writes, fairy tales “are predicated on a human disposition to social action – to transform the world and make it more adaptable to human needs while we try to change and make ourselves fit for the world” (2012, x). This is the great drama of the fairy tale, the relationship between the environment and the protagonist, both in need of change in order to be livable. But where the environment is presented as the great hurdle to overcome (Cinderella’s evil stepmother holding her hostage and making her work as a servant) it can only ever change once a more personal transformation has occurred. Zipes goes on:

Fairy tales are not unreal; they tell us *metaphorically* that ‘life is hard,’ or that ‘life is a dream,’ and their symbolic narrative patterns that assume the form of quests indicate possible alternative choices that we can make to fulfill our utopian disposition to transform ourselves and the world. The metaphors used in the composition of fairy tales are very much in touch with empirical reality. Fairy tales test the correlation between real social practices and imaginative possibilities that can be realized but are thwarted in our everyday interactions. Fairy tales interrogate the lack of correlation between real world practices and ethical idealistic options. Therefore, even the sentimental and contradictory happy endings in standard fairy-tale romances and Hollywood films are somewhat subversive in that they compel us to consider what is lacking in our lives that prevent us from fulfilling our dreams and utopian longings. Certainly, the contrived happy endings of standardized fairy tales are delusional and misleading. Yet, we must always ask that the protagonists succeed in finding love, wealth, and contentment in fairy-tale melodramas, what is preventing us in reality from having the same success? (2012, xiii, emphasis added)

I want to return to where we began – the assertion that the ballroom scene is the fairy godmother of the nonprofit. What Carl meant, in his characteristically cheeky way, was that the nonprofit is the hero in the story for survival. The ballroom scene, in his estimation, provides a little levity but isn’t equipped with the resources to actually help its members survive. But Carl’s dismissal misses the point; the ballroom is not the fairy godmother *of* the nonprofit. The ballroom is the fairy godmother for the black and brown members of the community. The fairy godmother represents a particular archetype in the genre of fairy tales and plays a pivotal role in plot development, determining the possible set of choices one can make, and rewarding good behavior. They are the magical savior, the supplier of choices, the giver of hope, and fulfiller of dreams and desires. They

appear suddenly in feminine form and assume the role of guardian, mentor, and/or parent to those who find themselves befallen by a crisis and without any other source of support or means of escape. As folklorist Katharine Briggs explains, fairy godmothers, first introduced to England by Perrault's classic fairy tale *Cinderella* (1697), "made human morals their chief concern" and were "goddesses of fortune, who could bestow not only such trinkets as rings of invisibility and bottomless purses, but qualities of beauty and wit and even virtue" (1957, 223). In this way, the fairy godmother's goal is to teach and encourage their human protegee²⁶ and is selflessly invested in working for the betterment of "her" individual beneficiary. She is there to make possible a different way of life when life itself seems not worth living. Most commonly associated with the genre of the fairy tale, the fairy godmother's presence turns what would be a story of the harsh and brutal realities of life (poverty, enslavement, abuse, neglect, etc.) into a dreamscape of infinite possibility. Put differently, the fairy godmother's blessing helps inaugurate the protagonist.

So how might this version of the story go? Perhaps something like this: Once upon a time, there lived a group of people who had been stolen from their homeland by another group of people and sold like livestock in a distant land. For generations and generations, they experienced unimaginable hardships that changed in ways both big and small as time went by. At some point, some of these people, who were some of the most downtrodden and abused of them all, got together and decided to have a party where they could, just for the night, be whomever they wanted to be, speak however they wanted to speak, and move however they wanted to move. They didn't realize it then, but they had summoned their fairy godmother who would grant their wish: from

²⁶ This is vastly different from other fairies and magical figures who commonly demand specific codes of conduct if they were to be of assistance to their human and can be motivated by their own interests and desires: "Kindliness, courtesy, open-handedness and orderly ways, these were essential to gaining their favour... It was important, too, to speak the truth in dealing with them and to keep contracts; [...] this was perhaps not so much because they were honorable as because they were spirits, and dangerous" (Briggs 1957, 222).

sundown to sun up and whenever the group is gathered, the ball will appear. So even though these people continued to encounter hardship, they had moments of collective joy and pleasure.

Through fantastical narratives of hardship and ultimate triumph against all odds, fairy tales tell us about what it means to belong to a world governed by social norms, customs, and codes. In a fairy tale, the protagonist is often presented as being able to determine their own fate if they would only abide by norms, but they are unable to do so because of their position or ability. The world the character exists within is cruel and has set them up for failure. It is at this point when the fairy godmother arrives to illuminate a different path and provide the space to test “the correlation between real social practice and imaginative possibilities” as Zipes says. That you can be a good person and do all the right things doesn’t matter sometimes. You might be virtuous and law-abiding, but if your life has been trapped by an evil stepmother, you have no real hope. Good training, good behavior, and good looks will not save you. But in the fairy tale what is rewarded is the how one responds to hardship.

When we use the term ball, right? Um, like I could say to you have you ever read Cinderella? Have you ever seen Cinderella? Junior LaBeija said to me an hour into our interview. He had brought along a photo album to show me what the balls use to look like and to help him paint the picture of his past. Holding up a photograph of himself as a young man in the most lovely outfit I had ever seen, he went on. *The connection is, I never imagined that this could be me. So, this is me and now you can’t take it away from me. Even if you try to destroy it or dismantle it like the mother and the stepsisters did, the reality is that they saw me, honey! Too late! They’re gonna come after you, of course they want me! And that’s the thing, that’s big thing, you see in the balls then.* In this fairy tale, the magical transformation might not last past the evening. The prince might not find the glass slipper and search far and wide for the precious foot on which it belongs. You might not end up living in the palace with fancy jewelry and clothing. But for one

night, you get to be the main attraction, the diva, the queen and no one can ever take that experience away from you.

Cinderella, like most fairy tales, ends with a series of morals²⁷ that are there to help you interpret the point of the story. What we learn is that beauty, intelligence, and common sense are not enough to succeed in the world, won't give you a good life. We need fairy godmothers to guide us, need them to magically reveal the queenliness lying hidden within ourselves. In the chapters that follow, I explore how people prepare for and perform categories in the ballroom scene, and how that preparation mirrors the kind of ethical self-cultivation articulated in the fairy tale. That the ballroom scene might not lead to a change in the material conditions of one's existence is often painful. But, like Junior said, no one can ever deny that you were fabulous at the ball.

²⁷ Cinderella Morals: "Beauty in a woman is a rare treasure that will always be admired. Graciousness, however, is priceless and of even greater value. This is what Cinderella's godmother gave to her when she taught her to behave like a queen. Young women, in the winning of a heart, graciousness is more important than a beautiful hairdo. It is a true gift of the fairies. Without it nothing is possible; with it, one can do anything. Without doubt it is a great advantage to have intelligence, courage, good breeding, and common sense. These, and similar talents come only from heaven, and it is good to have them. However, even these may fail to bring you success, without the blessing of a godfather or a godmother."

Chapter Two

Realness: A study in citations

“It is creative apperception more than anything else that makes the individual feel that life is worth living. Contrasted with this is a relationship to external reality which is one of compliance, the world and its details being recognized but only as something to be fitted in with or demanding adaptation.

Compliance carries with it a sense of futility for the individual and is associated with the idea that nothing matters, and that life is not worth living.”

--D. W. Winnicott, *Creativity and its Origins*

When I was young in South Carolina I learned the five elements at drag shows and in gay clubs, Armani said to me in a conference room toward the back of the community center. Then I moved to New York and was getting political, so I went to the Philly trans conference and there was a ball after, and I was so excited to see all these girls. When I got back to NYC I started walking in the Kiki scene. We talked for a while about the differences between the Kiki scene and the ballroom scene and Armani admitted that the ballroom scene freaked her out. It's the same scene, but Kiki still feels like it's for us, you know? As was explained in the Introduction, the difference between the two scenes has to do with the age range—the Kiki scene is mostly comprised of people much younger than the ballroom scene and is, in some ways, like the little sister of the ballroom scene. As people get older, they often “graduate” from a Kiki family to a ballroom house. Armani was still exclusively walking at Kiki balls but would go to “big balls” with friends to support them.

She explained, they call for Realness and I walk... but when it's time for the battles I just sit down. I interrupted her, but you battle at Vogue Group! Yeah, she explained, but that is just amongst friends. Like, I enjoy battling in spaces where those judging me are people who know me, love me. Like, that is really different from going to a ball. I go support my girls, but they can have that. I asked her to explain, and she paused and thought about it awhile. I walk for my tens but that's it. For a woman of trans experience also, it's really good for our self-esteem and our own confidence. It like reminds us that we're beautiful even when we are feeling gender

dysphoria. And this is like real shit. It's that moment inside like bitch when that light is on you, you think you're Nicki Minaj or Cardi B.

This manipulation of how one engages with Realness as it is regularly understood fascinated me. Armani walked to get her tens meaning that she was only being judged against herself and not another person walking Realness. She was in charge of her performance and was the sole author of her fate. *In that moment you feel like.. everything. It feels like you get that feeling in your stomach like you get on your wedding day. It's all about me. I got the man that I want. I got the car that I want. At the end of this runway bitch is your pot of gold... it's a prize. And at the end of the day all you see is you.* Armani described getting her tens in Realness as self-affirming. It was a way of feeling like others were acknowledging the work that she's put into becoming the person she is. The problem for Armani wasn't Realness per se, it was the idea of battling that was the issue. *I don't battle because I have a sister and she got chopped and it triggered her dysphoria. I would never tear down another woman. I'm not giving that,* she explained. *Transitioning is a process, you know? It don't start today, and it damn sure don't stop tomorrow... like I'm not going to battle you because I don't know you or where you came from and you don't know me or where I came from and we are equal and deserve the same amount of respect. And we deserve to give that to each other. You want to be legendary. I don't want that...* Listening back to our exchange, I am in awe of how nuanced the category of Realness was for Armani. I wondered what it felt like to walk Realness since the performance seemed loaded. She laughed to herself and moved around in her chair. *I walk body and Realness and when I walk I feel like... 'look at me. Look how far I came,' You know what I mean? Like, When I walk I am exploiting myself. I'm giving my all... putting in this work. I am showing you a beautiful thing. My body is a work of art, like van Gogh.* For Armani, Realness created the possibility of being both recognized and misrecognized, and she had figured out how to avoid the latter through her negotiation of the former. *That's the thing about the ballroom scene. For the black and brown queer community, it's the one place in our lives where we can ever feel fucking*

safe. But safety was not a pre-given. It was something that she felt as responsible for as the other people at the ball, including the judges.

Realness is one of the many so-called “categories” in ballroom and could be most commonly explained as the performance of an archetypal character from the world (say “schoolboy” or “executive”). During a ball and according to a predetermined set of criteria, walkers try to pass as that character to the best of their aesthetic, affective, and physical ability. Realness is actually really difficult to write about because fundamental to its performance is a reliance on an axiomatic classification system of gender, sex, and sexuality, what Marlon Bailey (2013) has explained as the “gender system” in ballroom. While the gender system in ballroom is more fluid and allows for more nuance than normative gender systems dominant in western culture, it presupposes a deep entanglement between gender, sex, and sexuality such that the categories become almost as rigid as their mainstream counterparts. Bailey lays out what he calls the six-part gender system as follows:

(1) butch queens, who are biologically born male who identify as gay or bisexual men and are and can be masculine, hypermasculine, or feminine; (2) femme queens (MTF), who are transgender women or people at various stages of gender reassignment—through hormonal and/or surgical processes; (3) butch queens up in drags, who are gay men who perform drag but who do not take hormones and who do not live as women; (4) butches (FTM), who are transgender men or people at various stages of gender reassignment or masculine lesbians or women appearing as men regardless of sexual orientation (some butches use hormones and have surgical procedures to modify their bodies); (5) women, who are biologically born females who identify as lesbian, straight, or queer; and (6) men/trade, who are biologically born males who are straight-identified men.

We could add to this list “Female Figure” (trans women, cisgender women, and drag queens) and “Male Figure” (butch queens, butch women, and transgender men). Note that these two identifications mark and prioritize the figuration of gender over sex. There is also a category known as OTA which stands for “open to all” and signals that anyone of any gender or sexuality can perform. The gender system becomes important for Realness because walkers must perform in relation to the way they identify so although the gender system seems to include a more expansive

set of relations, it in fact still works to separate and assign people to particular groups based on the combination of how sex, gender, and sexuality operate in their daily lives: butch queens battle butch queens and femme queens battle femme queens, etc.

What further complicates the category is the language used to describe Realness. For starters, that the category is called “Realness” already assumes a relationship between reality (or the real) and its opposite (fake, counterfeit, fantasy, etc.). Then there is the other problem, that the “category” of Realness encompasses a whole set of different performance types: pretty boy Realness, thug Realness, etc. Meaning, there is not just one “Realness”, but many Realnesses that can be experimented with. And within each of those categories is an additional set of criteria. Before each ball, a list of each of the categories is circulated beforehand by flyer or online, and this list serves as a kind of structure for how you should approach the category. For instance, perhaps one of the categories will be “B.Q. Realness” (B.Q. stands for “butch queen”) and under that category will be more detailed information about how that particular performance should be interpreted: “with a bowtie” or “don’t forget to throw in a little gold.” Here, the theme of the ball helps to narrow down the kinds of garments or adornments that must be included in the performance. If this sounds very technical—and in some sense it is because if you don’t follow the detailed directions, you will get chopped—it is because the structure is there to keep the performances similar enough that they might be judged against each other during a battle. So, between the strict (albeit nuanced) gender system and the detailed criteria for each Realness category, interpreting how the judges might evaluate a particular performance becomes essential to the calculation of what is and is not a successful performance.

For all of these reasons, Realness has come under increased scrutiny in the ballroom community, as writer, performer, and activist Sydney Baloue explained in an article titled “Has the Ballroom Scene Outgrown ‘Realness?’” published in the opinion section of *The New York Times*.

Baloue explains that Realness was historically imagined as a portrayal of straight culture where “to be considered ‘real’ at a ball, a performer must ‘pass’ as straight if they are gay or as cisgender if they are transgender.” This is how the category was framed in *Paris is Burning* where the simple act of dressing as an executive or schoolboy was considered to be an act of defiance in the face of overwhelming ostracism (or forced exclusion) from the mainstream. But, Boule argues, the world has changed for Black queer people and for their representation in popular culture such that there is “no longer a novelty in seeing openly gay men in business suits or seeing trans women look like glamorous movie stars”. There is nothing necessarily subversive about being a black, queer college student, doctor, or lawyer. Worse still, as Baloue explains, the category seems to suggest to transgender walkers in particular that there is one standard of beauty and performance, and that standard is cisgender; meaning that Realness creates “a narrow view of trans identity as dependent on hormone replacement treatment and gender-affirming surgeries”. People in this camp see Realness as doing little more than solidifying dangerous notions of identity as natural and immutable.

This is a sentiment that I heard from so many of the people I spoke to in both New York and Chicago. For example, when I talked to Queen about Realness, she made her displeasure with the category known. Realness brought up particular feelings of failure and inadequacy. *Like, this bitch is realer than me? How dare you... bitch I'm equal*, she explained when I asked her about walking. *I don't beef with nobody and I don't need no beef with nobody. If they say I'm realer than somebody or somebody realer than me I'm like don't be looking at me... girl what you givin'? Girl I'm from the hood*. Queen hated walking Realness, although she said it was her category, because she felt like her gender was being judged instead of her performance.

But there is another side to this debate that believes that while trans women and gay men have and can occupy places of power, the vast majority of black queer people are still relegated to

the periphery, are still targets of racial and gendered violence, and are still far more likely to experience discrimination in healthcare, education, housing and employment settings. This side argues that representation has not drastically changed the everyday lived realities for the majority of black queer people in the United States and thus Realness is still a necessary evil—teaching people to pass might still save lives.

Baloue stages this debate in order to make space for a third option, to rethink how Realness might be salvageable and adaptable to the contemporary moment. He writes:

It would be powerful if the category began to place less emphasis on aesthetics and more on character [...] As the general public evolves in its understanding of gender identity and sexual orientation, and as the need to ‘pass’ (either as a measure of acceptable gender aesthetics or as a mode of survival) becomes less pressing, the ballroom scene can alter its views on the category of ‘Realness.’ This shift will make life a little easier for members of the community and open up new areas of artistic and creative opportunity within ballroom’s future.

Baloue is suggesting a change in the ends not the means—moving away from performing archetypes of persons and toward performing fictional characters, like in a play—which both relieves the pressure to pass and leaves untroubled the activity of passing.

For all of these reasons, Realness is by far the most problematic category in ballroom and is perhaps the most difficult to write about. There seems to be nothing neutral about the category which is only made more real when we consider how the category has been discussed by scholars. Bailey has explained Realness as “practices of self-identification and self-fashioning,” which, according to Bailey, helps people learn how to be undetectable in heteronormative society; it teaches them, through practice and failure, how to blend in with the rest of the world. It is clear that the displeasure associated with Realness stems from a rejection of the necessity to pass, or more accurately, the refusal to let passing be the sole standard by which one is judged. In general, when scholars and ball members speak of Realness, it is often described as the activity of aligning one’s intimate sense of self with a coherent subject position in the world, where the process of aligning

cannot be separated from instances of violence and terror people experience in the outside world if they are seen as deviant or different to cisgender and heteronormative society. For Bailey, Realness is set up as a response to the failures of passing in the world and a strategy for learning how to do so with greater surety. He writes, “the ball is the space and the occasion for the rehearsal and the safe critique of gender performance among fellow participants. These performances produce a counterdiscourse of identification and serve as the machinery of the social relations of ballroom culture and the group knowledge that underpins them” (2013, 372).

In 1996 (five years after *Paris is Burning* was released to critical acclaim), in her book *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler also wrote about Realness—what she called “a standard that is used to judge any given performance”—as the “ability to compel belief, to produce the naturalized effect [that is] the result of an embodiment of norms” (1996, 129). For Butler, Realness is performative in that, through impersonations of gendered and racialized “legitimizing” norms, it actively works on the body to constitute subjects through their identification with and mastery of a particular standard. Butler uses the tragic example of Venus Xtravaganza from the film in order to illustrate how, in her estimation, Realness becomes a vehicle through which one’s identification with gender gets worked out to devastating effect. She writes, “this is not a subject who stands back from its identifications and decides instrumentally how or whether to work each of them today; on the contrary, the subject is the incoherent and mobilized imbrication of identifications; it is constituted in and through the iterability of its performance, a repetition which works at once to legitimate and delegitimize the Realness norms by which it is produced” (1996, 131). It is not that the subject plays around with ways of being through various repetitions of particular gendered and racialized norms made possible through the performance of them; for Butler, the subject is made “real” through their perfection of those norms.

In some sense this chapter seeks to displace a bit of the psychic weight attributed to the Realness category. I want to tell a different kind of story that takes in all the ways that it can be hurtful, hopeful, challenging, and dated. One that does more than rehash old arguments about the liberatory potential of performing or the unnecessary (and painful) activity of trying to become intelligible to the world in order to survive. Importantly, I am not interested in trying to resurrect the category or find ways of saving it from its awkward beginnings. Nor am I invested in making it useful for my own theoretical aims. Instead, this chapter tells different stories of how people come to understand the category itself, how they have theorized its usefulness or injury. Through this, I wish to show how people work with and against the category of Realness, in all of its complexity, in order to practice a kind of ethics that is both singular and abstract, what I will call an ethics of citationality. Here, it is important to explain what I mean by “an ethics of citationality” because in recent years, citationality has become a political minefield where one’s political allegiances and investments are assumed to be located in and demonstrated through who, why, and how one chooses to cite. This increased interest in the politics of citational practices is a response to ongoing debates about uplifting and centering those voices that the academy, in particular, has historically either rejected outright or dismissed as being “not serious enough” for rigorous theoretical consideration. This is not entirely what I mean—though, as you’ll see throughout this chapter, it is also not *not* what I’m talking about.

Colloquially, citation, which comes from the Latin *citationem*, is a command or summons or can be the act of quoting someone, historically used in reference to a legal decree or standard. For anyone who has ever written a paper for a class, citation is simply the thing we do when we are trying to explain how our argument fits into a broader conversation or how we build on someone else’s point. But citation has a more particular meaning in semiotics. In particular, I am interested in

how Constantine Nakassis has theorized the activity of citation. He writes that we can understand citation(ality):

as a kind of interdiscursivity (Silverstein 2005)—as a discursive act that links two or more events (minimally itself and another, or even itself and a figuration of itself) within the same frame. By linking together multiple semiotic events, citations weave together the multiple “voices” and identities that inhere those distinct events into one complex act. Citation is a form of reanimation, the breathing of life into an event of discourse through another discursive act that, in one way or another, re-presents it. But more than this, the citation points to itself as a reanimation. (“Brand, citationality, performativity” 2012, 626)

Citation, in this sense, is the process by which some event, utterance, or action is repeated, re-presented, or reanimated. Importantly, however, while that event, utterance, or action holds fidelity to another past event, utterance, or action, it is always just slightly different than it was before. It is a form of reanimation because as citation pulls from the past to bring it into the present, citation gives it new meaning by putting the event, utterance, or action up against a different backdrop. By situating two events next to each other, citation creates what Briggs and Bauman (1992) call an *intertextual gap*, or what Nakassis explains as “an irreducible difference” that exists in the space “between the indexical source and its target, the citing and cited events” (2012, 626). Focusing on the mechanics of citational practices, this sameness marked by a necessary difference (is this what Derrida meant by *differance*? The “*sameness* which is not *identical*”?) creates a discursive field of new possible meanings.

The semiotic distinction between citationality and performativity is worth thinking about here, what Nakassis describes as the difference between “the citation of the performative and the performative’s citationality” (69). Where both are citational, “the explicit performative turns on obscuring the gap between token and type, on conflating them, on treating what is otherwise a difference as an identity without residue” (2013, 69). Meaning, where performative linguistic utterances inaugurate particular actions through their enunciation, citations inaugurate a relation to a prior form and rely on a reflexive understanding of being similar and yet different from that form.

According to Nakassis, “the performative brings into being the here and now [of a] cultural type, a social fact made real,” whereas citations create a “temporal envelope” in which the here and now is always a self-reflexive then and there made present through context (2013, 69). Performativity, in this sense, collapses the intertextual gap to bring into the world the cited *as* the citing, as a productive unfolding of a transformative event, whereas citationality maintains the gap in order to be made legible.

For Nakassis, citationality is interestingly expressed through the brand. He explains that brands such as Nike, Chanel, Disney and others are semiotically organized around calibrations between design, marketing, consumer engagement, and production such that the coherence between these different enterprises is a citational map recognizable as a brand (Nike shoes, Nike sweater, etc.). Citations can be explicit (quotation marks or the Nike logo) or implicit. He writes, “in such implicit citations, the metacommunicative work that belies that this is, indeed, a citation is filled in in ways nonlocalizable to the signal in question” (2012, 627).¹ You must be “in the know” to understand that what is being articulated is a re-articulation of something else. This is, in some sense, the work of the gap. It is temporal, yes, but it is not simply a temporal relation. It is also what Nakassis calls “those sites of fragility and potential indeterminacy” that linger throughout the semiotic organizational form or what we might call, in the language of Realness, the activity of passing.

¹ Nakassis goes on: “First, citationality is not necessarily linguistic in nature [...] The general form for citation simply requires that some act be construable as a reiteration of some other act and as reflexively pointing to itself as a reiteration of that other act. This may happen in any semiotic modality. Second, citations are perspectival, interactions achievements, subject to failures, reclassifications, and tropes of various kinds: plagiarism, or ‘ripping off’ when the citation is not sufficiently explicit; taboo when one doesn’t have the right to cite; falsity when the cited source is ‘wrong’; or ignorance when the reference is missed. There is no bird’s-eye-view of citation, and citation cannot function as a metaphysical or ontological pre-given. To speak of citationality, then, is to speak of the construal and uptake of some act as a citation” (2012, 627).

Passing is, of course, a loaded term and concept in both queer and critical race studies. It carries with it a long history of sexual, gender, and racial violence, psychic pain or pleasure, and social aspirations of a life lived otherwise. This is especially true for people of transgender experience whose lives very often get framed in terms of the ability or failure to pass as cisgender. As Janet Mock (2014) explains in her book *Redefining Realness*, the term passing is “based on an assumption that trans people are passing as something [they] are not” and “rooted in the idea that [they] are not really who [they] say [they] are, that [they] are holding a secret, that [they] are living false lives” (249). For Mock, the language of passing is problematic in a double sense. First, it frames the experiencing of living as a trans woman or trans man as a deceptive charade and second, it secures the standard by which being “real” is judged as being cisgender. This is again part of the displeasure with and reason for the recent rejection of Realness as a mode of performance in the ballroom scene. Instead of arguing for or against the practice or value of passing, I want to think a little more about the mechanics of such an activity. What if passing, not in general but specifically how it is utilized in the ballroom scene through the performance of Realness, was thought to be the more akin to a *marking* of the gap than processes of identification and subjectivation? What if marking the gap was a way of drawing attention to the aesthetic forms that uphold various standards?

In her article “Passing Through Hybridity,” Sara Ahmed explains that there is no inherent logic to passing because it is only ever intelligible as a social relation of difference (1999, 92). As she seeks to complicate the notion that passing can be (read as) a politically transgressive practice which upends dependency on the visual register as the site for understanding subjectivity and identity, she makes an interesting observation that passing is marked by a temporal lag between “an image that is already assumed in and by a subject” and “an image that is *always yet to be assumed*” (original emphasis, 93). For Ahmed, this temporal lag can create a crisis of reading where the previously concealed

technologies of identification are made visible; but the lag is also the space in which encounters between the social and national imaginaries embedded in the body and individual subjects are (mis)recognized as belonging. This temporal gap, then, is the site of negotiation between the social and self in which the histories and technologies that make the self legible as a particular subject in the world becomes an interpretive enterprise. But if passing involves a temporal lag between the image and image yet to be assumed, it is important to remember that in both instances, the image and its possible interpretations are not as stable as they appear. Indeed, as C. Riley Snorton (2017) reminds us, when image(s) are reflected through the prism of the historical legacies of blackness and gender in the United States, the associative referents often (or almost always) speak to a different series of relational criteria.

Putting the mechanics of passing (as a spatial and temporal configuration of social life emblazoned on the body) alongside the intertextual gap (made evident in citational practice), we can see a bit more clearly how Realness as a practice might be more nuanced than how it is theorized by scholars such as Marlon Bailey and Judith Butler. It should be said that there is an obvious way in which passing requires a kind of collapsing of the gap in order to be successful, and yet this chapter explores the many instances in which walkers found themselves enunciating the gap through performance as a way of marking their own expertise. If citationality requires a temporal gap between two different historically specific events made possible through the activity of passing as the negotiation of different ways of being read, then might we stave off our desire for (re)defining Realness and might we instead trace how people negotiate it, even when they find it to be hurtful or outdated?

It is helpful to go back to the intertextual gap here to think with how Nakassis uses Briggs and Bauman's work on genre in order to explain how it functions: "that the coherence of any genre is a function of the management of the gaps between texts and genres (that is, instances of a genre

and the genres they index)” (2012, 627). We understand particular texts as specific genres because they use tropes and negotiate around seemingly stable forms as a way of marking themselves. In the world of the ballroom, we can think of the genre such as “the executive” or “the thug” as that which is being cited. How that genre type takes shape in the text (here the individual walker’s performance of “the executive”) shows us not just the cited but also how the type changes in context. The space between isn’t a problem of becoming real but rather an activity of marking how particular bodies look and feel when they inhabit those characters. Put differently, the iterability of the character makes it appear as though there is an original type—we can think back to Baloue or Mock’s claim that Realness assumes cisgender and heterosexuality as its original referent—when in fact there is no true original type. Realness, then, might be more akin to a practice of learning how to cite that which is always already in motion—learning how to manage the gap. In that way, it isn’t necessarily a political claim toward becoming but rather an ethical relation to how one negotiates the temporal lag found in the gap. We can see this through Armani’s nuanced version of how Realness is both pleasurable and dangerous. She walked Realness but never battled because battling requires a negotiation of your own practice against someone else’s negotiation of theirs. There were too many variables in the mix, and she would rather just sit it out.

The remainder of this chapter is a series of ethnographic scenes, each of which seek to illuminate the varied ways that individuals calibrate their performances of Realness and manage various gaps between themselves and that which they cite. I will show how Realness reactivates particular standards and, in the process, offers new meaning in context. Those standards can be and often are violent, uncomfortable, and sometimes absurd but the practice of engaging with them is, in and of itself, a form of critique. Again, I’m not interested in reviving something that the ballroom community might be ready to leave by the wayside; however, the way that people negotiate and play

around with this form of passing is interesting to me in that it challenges easy readings of being one thing or another.

complicated citations

Realness is about expression... it is the space between our image and reality, Tommy Avant Garde said with a tone of conviction. He paused to pick up his slice of pizza and contemplatively took a bite. I waited with anxious anticipation. *It is a category in the ballroom scene that brings these two things together... There is nothing wrong with portraying who you are in your spirit*, he said as he took another bite of his pizza. *We want that* he said. *But now you have to portray that outside the ballroom. Take what you want to be and turn that into who you are. Don't give me executive Realness in the ball then give me Ray Ray during the course of the week. Make that who you are.* As Tommy and I spoke that afternoon, I was struck by the ease with which he described something so profoundly complex. It was 2013 and we were sitting in a food court in a government building. He had an appointment there through his job as a social worker and this was the only time we could find to chat.

Because Tommy was an Icon in the scene, I spent a lot of time trying to interpret his statement against what I noticed while watching Realness performed across Chicago and later New York. I would notice these small yet profound challenges to the idea that Realness was the means through which one took their inner most personal self and found ways of expressing that to the world. One such challenge came in the form of a friend of a friend, Sean, who was a smart, tall, strapping man who grew up in Texas and moved to Chicago to follow someone who he said used to be special to him. When we met, he was happy working with an organization that focuses on HIV prevention and advocacy but contemplating a move back down south where things were slower. He considered himself an Afropunk kid who lived in queer collectives, worked as a DJ on occasion and loved his grandma for teaching him how to sit up straight and use the right fork at the dinner table.

In a funny way, I was surprised to run into him at the Paragon Ball. We had known each other for some time and somehow it never came up that he was involved in the community. Laughing it off I asked him if he was walking. *Yeah, executive Realness* he said laughing quietly.

The goal of Realness is to present oneself as a convincing embodiment of whatever persona is at play. For Sean to successfully perform executive Realness, he would have to convincingly perform what a professional personal (an executive) might be. This meant that he had to dress the part, walk the part, and feel the part. Indeed, it is not simply about wearing a suit or carrying a briefcase; the suit must be tailored just right, the suitcase must be genuine leather and the shoes must be perfectly polished. Sean would have to walk as a confident and powerful executive who knows how to match socks and ties in a carefree and classy way. But to be successful, to win during a battle, he would also have to think about “the executive” beyond the aesthetic realm. Again, according to Marlon Bailey, Sean’s performance of Realness would, “require adherence to certain performances, self-presentations, and embodiments that are believed to capture the authenticity of particular gender and sexual identities” (2011, 377). For Sean, this meant playing it straight.

Sean was a radical queer—or at least that’s how he liked to describe himself. He was politically active, socially aware, and generous in spirit. He was always picking things up off the sidewalk and taking them home to reimagine the possibilities. He was raised by his grandmother, who took him in after his mother married a man who did not appreciate Sean’s gender-nonconforming ways.² He remembers coming downstairs for dinner with a towel wrapped around his head lip-synching to Whitney Houston and his stepfather yelling louder than the neighbors next door for him to *take that shit off your head*. The way he described it was that his family was filled with

² To identify as gender nonconforming is to identify beyond (or between or before) the gender binary of male/female or masculine/feminine. To put it simply, this group of people does not conform to either gender. Commonly people who identify as gender nonconforming use the pronouns “they” “them” and “their”. Sean went by he/him and they/them.

gay uncles and cousins, but the thought never occurred to him that he might be queer. It wasn't until he looked up the word "homosexual" in the dictionary after a family gathering where everyone was talking about his cousin that he knew he was gay. *But are you sure you're not a woman?* his mother pleaded. He explained that his mom had gay friends but none of that seemed to matter when he came out. *It's always easier when it comes to gender roles. It's like... I can deal with you as long as I can put you in a normative box. There are men and women and if you are born in the wrong body that isn't your fault.* But being gay was considered to be a choice, one his mother and stepfather couldn't support.

He moved out and moved north to the land of opportunity. He became active in the anarchist community in Chicago where he organized around queer issues. When we met to talk, he had just moved out of a collective living situation. They called themselves the "cunt collective" and had been squatting in the same building for over a year. He explained that he grew exhausted with being surrounded by people's radical political views and had to find a quiet peaceful home where he could close his door and be still. His new apartment in Humboldt Park, where we sat on the patio chain smoking cigarettes for hours, was practically empty save a poster here and there, a mattress on the floor in his bedroom, and a small but intricate shrine dedicated to his ancestors, biological and otherwise.

When we met to talk, Sean had just left his job with an organization that supports queer young people. He said that the majority of his job was babysitting, making sure they had a place to sleep, feeding them dinner, and finding them access to mental/physical health facilities. It was a stressful job that involved running around and wearing many different hats. He had to be able to speak to donors as well as to the youth. In both of these capacities, he explained, he had to make sure he dressed the part. If he looked too professional the donors might think they didn't need the support and the youth would not have faith that he was on their side. *Do you think that's why executive Realness appeals to you?* I asked. *Probably!*

Sean then walked me through what he thinks about when he is putting together his persona. He thinks of someone who has a totally different worldview from his own. For him, to be an executive is to fully participate in the production of a capitalist system; a system that he, ironically, spends his life trying to oppose. Once he has a clear image of this person, he tries to figure out the most potent attachments they might have. This includes the more superficial aspects of the working professional: the clothes, the watch, the shoes. But if you were to simply focus on those things without taking into account what those attachments signify, you would get them all wrong. Intention and signification matter. Once you have all those things down, he explained, you must put yourself into that place. You must imagine what it feels like to be bothered not by poverty or illness but rather by appointments, deadlines, and meetings. But it was the last thing that was most interesting to me. He explained that when he walks executive Realness, he imagines himself to be a masculine straight man. He explained that to be queer is to be beyond the boundaries of a particular lifestyle—a lifestyle that is heavily policed through various means of exclusion. *Queer black kids aren't executives girl* he said with a smile, then added *but I'm a badass exec on the runway, you know what I'm sayin.'*

I remember asking Sean why he loved the ball and how he got involved. He couldn't remember specifics, but he guessed it was a friend of a friend who told him to show up at some location for a fun party. He said he remembered thinking he could never do that as he watched walkers vogue down the runway to the thumping of the bass. But then he began paying attention to the art of it, the extreme artistry that one must use when donning and embodying an alternate subject position. He watched what worked and what failed and realized he wanted to try. It took many failed attempts to get it right. Indeed, he knew how to do it but the act of performing (and embodying) was an entirely new skill set, one that he had to develop a practice around. But he wanted to see how it felt to be someone else for a fleeting moment, and so he continued to work. As I watched Sean walk executive Realness that night of the Paragon Ball, I was struck by how different

he was in that moment. He was not that queer kid who used to live in the “cunt collective,” he didn’t look like that radical political activist I knew from a very different context. He looked and seemed like a penthouse owning, Mercedes driving professional. Indeed, the transformation was astonishing. He won that night. In the eyes of the judges, he was that executive. In that moment, he had become the type of person he railed against, and you could tell from his subtle smile as he walked down the runway that it felt good.

For Sean, performing Realness wasn’t a way of expressing his true self or learning how to pass in life as an executive. It was about finding ways to express the space between the image and the reality, as Tommy said. But what is this space that sits between? What is the cited and citing in this case? Is it the same as the image and the reality? In Sean’s case, the cited is a figure he learned to know through his rejection of all that the figure stood for. Put differently, “the executive” became familiar as the quintessential foil to his own sense of self. Sean had organized his life in direct opposition to what he understood to be those characteristics that made the executive a particular type of person in the world. Where he was a “black queer kid” whose work, home, and play life centered around his commitments to making the world a bit more livable for those on the periphery, the executive, to his mind, needed to look, act and walk as though none of that mattered. The executive should be explicitly ruled by the forces of heteronormativity made manifest through clothes, language, pace, and eye contact. Here, Realness emerges as both a method and a practice in the space of the ball. What I mean is that Realness is a method for the production of knowledges about the world, about oneself, and about the relationship between the two. It is active and in a constant process of being (re)articulated. As a citational technique of performatively bringing into the world a character that is the foil himself, Sean developed a practice of both playing *a* part (citing) and playing *the* part (managing the gap). But again, it was all really just for fun... and maybe that cash prize.

getting your tens

We don't do houses, we have families, Queen said to me in the community room. Queen is a young transgender woman from Chicago but had been living in New York for a couple of years by the time we sat down to talk. *This makes me feel so famous. She's making me feel like Nikki Minaj!* she kept interrupting herself to tell me. *Ok, back to the basics. What was the question?* I repeated my question. *Ok yes, Broadway Youth Center is where I started and learned how to vogue, they had a vogue school there. And you know, I was voguing at the Dyke March in Humboldt Park and I was only 16 years old, and all the girls were like "she so cunt!"* I began to ask if she knew someone from Chicago and she cut me off. *I don't get into the scene scene like that because I transitioned. Like I like to vogue and play around but I wouldn't go to a ball anymore to vogue because I transitioned to be a woman, I transitioned as a human being. I didn't transition to go to a ball to have a male judge my life. I don't need no more scaring in my life where a feminine person or a male or another female figure telling me if I pass Realness or dance on the floor better than the next person.*

Queen was one of the first clients I became close to at AFC—it might have had something to do with the fact that we were two midwestern girls trying to find our way and community in the big city. She was goofy and funny, quick witted and quicker tonged, and had a sneaky way of making herself the center of everyone's attention. *I got my first apartment when I was 18 but then got kicked out so me and my sister moved to New York. And we were doing what we needed to do to make those coins, you know?* she said to me with a little wink and smile. *Eventually, my sister brought me here to the Ali Forney Center and I was like what is this place ewe....* We both laughed really hard as we scanned around the room to make sure no staff was in ear shot since they do, as so many of the youth would tell me, try hard to keep it clean and make it a comfortable place for young people. *My first ball in New York threw me because Chicago balls are just small and nothing like the way they carry in New York. For a couple years I started living a normal life and doing some things that I needed to do for myself, so I left the ballroom scene alone... it is a distraction*

because people put their all into it and you know I applaud them and I'm not going to knock them because they really do put their art into it and their life into it! But I can't do it because of my anxiety.

But while speaking with Queen it was clear that she wasn't dealing with a bad case of performance anxiety. Realness brought up particular feelings of failure and inadequacy. *Like, this bitch is realer than me? How dare you... bitch I'm equal*, she explained. *I don't beef with nobody and I don't need no beef with nobody. If they say I'm realer than somebody or somebody realer than me I'm like don't be looking at me... girl what you givin'? Girl I'm from the hood.* I listened to her as she described how walking Realness made her feel like her gender was being judged instead of her performance. I asked why she thought her category was Realness because I was curious why someone would put themselves through that kind of experience. She replied, *Realness is my category... but like, my conflict with myself and the ballroom scene? Its unorganized and I will never really know my category because I'm already unorganized. I'll always go to support my girls but me and ballroom are taking a break... fab for other girls.*

Similar to Armani, I had watched Queen walk and battle Realness during Vogue Group for over a year by the time we were talking so I was, perhaps foolishly, surprised by the way she described her discomfort with the category. But Queen and Armani were not the only two people of trans experience who had expressed similar sentiments. I had been to a number of balls where arguments had erupted around whether or not a trans woman could walk Women's Performance or Female Figure. In an article from *Out Magazine*, Leiomy Maldonado, now famous for her role in *Pose* and known as the "Wonder Woman of Vogue" in the ballroom scene, explained one such example where, at the 23rd Annual GMHC Latex Ball in 2013, Mariah Lopez Ebony was publicly told that she couldn't walk a category because she was transgender. Leiomy told *Out*, "that was so disrespectful for them to treat her like that [...] I feel like they ridiculed her, and they just made fun of her. If she

wanted to walk the category and she feels like she’s had her full surgery and she feels like a complete woman, why wouldn’t she be able to walk?”³

This is just one of the many problems with how Realness has been previously understood: it presumes a level of interiority that matches the exterior self while simultaneously presumes a body that lives up to an identity. It assumes that performance is never simply just a performance. It is a reflection of the psychic reality of the performer and thus the corporeal self must reflect as much. But perhaps more confounding is the sense in which the presumed “self” (internal or otherwise) is understood to be a stable (or *organized* in the words of Queen) entity in which its own enunciation is worked out through the activity of performance. The “reality” of the self is not up for debate; rather, the way the self is translated to the world (the physical—i.e., gendered, sexed, racialized, etc.—manifestation of the self) is what Realness seeks to make intelligible. For Leiomy, the truly horrific scene that took place at the Latex Ball spoke to the absurdity of anyone trying to judge the relation between the internal self and the body: “she feels like a complete woman.” And yet, the language she uses, “she’s had her full surgery,” to describe the reasoning relies on a particular understanding of what a “woman” is or can be.

There are no easy answers here and there has been so much scholarship that looks directly at both trans identity and the lived experiences of transgender individuals. The overwhelming violence that trans people experience, to say nothing of the fact that the majority of this violence is directed toward black and brown trans women, makes the scene above and the many others like it all the more sinister. Since I started doing research with the ballroom scene, I have personally known countless black trans women who have been brutalized (and some who have been murdered) by police, strangers, lovers, or family members. Meaning, the stakes of the debate around Realness

³ <https://www.out.com/news-opinion/2017/4/07/be-able-blend-does-Realness-still-belong-ballroom>

matter to the lived experience and survival of trans people. Like Armani said, *For the black and brown queer community, it's the one place in our lives where we can ever feel fucking safe.* Realness can affirm and encourage those who walk it. But it can also create the conditions under which gender/sex/sexuality become uniquely intertwined. The rigidity of the gender system can make it impossible for people to shift and change. Queen stopped going to the balls because she didn't feel ready to be seen. She didn't feel as though her external self was in line with her internal self. And what's worse, she feared that the self would be seen as disorganized. How is it possible that we could demand as much from each other? Especially when someone is up against a whole world who doubts their existence?

racializing Realness

I got a text from a dear friend of mine in the fall of 2019 saying I should come to his house's practice, so one day after finishing up work in my office in Hyde Park, I walked a couple blocks over to the community center they were using for rehearsal. I rang the doorbell and was buzzed in. *You're early!* Antonio said to me even though I was running late. I laughed at the predictability and took off my jacket and put down my bag. Antonio walked me around the room and introduced me to the people warming up or changing for practice. *This is my sister who refuses to be in the house, but I love her anyway,* Antonio would repeat to everyone, like a script. I would laugh and say *nice to meet you* before explaining that I was a researcher who had been around for a long time doing research at the University of Chicago on the ballroom scene but who had been in New York for two years. *Oh, what is it like? Did you see this person, or do you know so and so? Different,* I would say.

After everyone gathered, someone put on a beat, and we all started moving around. It had been a long time since I had vogued, so I tried to do a little catwalk and realized that my open toed shoes were not going to take kindly to that kind of foolishness so stopped and walked over to the house mother I had just met for the first time. We started talking and laughing about people we

knew in common and how silly Antonio was being. As we were chatting, a tall white boy walked in the room and everyone said hey. He was a new member of the house and also a student at the University of Chicago. *That's Jason*, someone said. They had been telling me, “you have to meet this new kid,” every time I introduced myself, so I walked over and said hi. He was an undergraduate sociology major studying the ballroom scene in Chicago and his advisor was a faculty member I knew well. We exchanged niceties and then I walked back over to the mother of the house to finish our conversation. *Ok y'all, time for Realness*. Someone changed the beat to something a bit sexier so the walkers could try to catch the swing of the song in their hips. *My boy here is going to walk schoolboy Realness*, Antonio said to me. *Who? Jason? Yes, and he is gonna win. Look at him!* I laughed. *That is kind of cheating, no? I mean, he is an actual schoolboy. He came here from class!* Antonio cut me off with a *Right yeah! Come on, Emily. He's walking European schoolboy Realness. Why European?* I asked even though I could sense the answer. *I mean*, Antonio responded, *he's white as shit. He's gonna have to be some Harvard boy from England.*

I could never quite get this interaction out of my head. How strange it seemed that the way Jason would be legible as a schoolboy would be for him to try to be some perfect aesthetic distillation of The Schoolboy, who is of course from Harvard. Stranger still that he couldn't be American; if he was going to walk, he would have to be “European”. That “All-American” in the ballroom scene meant black translated to white being foreign. This shouldn't have been surprising since the majority of the white people in the ballroom scene are indeed foreign—some of the largest and most active ballroom communities can be found in Sweden, France, and Russia. But there is a hilarious kind of distancing at work here.

Realness is being used to cite something, and its success comes from maintaining the gap between the citing and cited. Jason *was* a real-life schoolboy. When he walked into the room, he was wearing his UChicago sweater and carrying a backpack. But in order for him to be “a schoolboy” he

had to distance himself from himself, through performance. He had to make the familiar strange, as they say. What stands out to me about this scene is how self-aware the gap is between cited and citing. How the cited is a particular figure, not of aspiration or desire, but of mastery. To perfect the figure is to calibrate oneself to the figure just enough for it to be an actual instance of citation. The category of Realness, here, chose Jason but how he could perform it was determined through his whiteness. His whiteness made him other and so his performance would have to be categorized as such. This instance of racial citation presents an interesting reimagination of who does and does not count as “American” within the world of the ballroom. Interestingly, Jason was being trained to see himself as other just as the other people walking who were black were being affirmed in their sense that white didn’t belong (or was at least secondary), so to speak, and that black was at the center.

strange citations

I love thug Realness. There is something haunting about it as a category. It is a performance of a historically embedded racial stereotype that indexes a particular lifestyle: one that rests in the social imaginary as being closely aligned to various forms of racialized criminality: a “thug” is a black man, dangerously heterosexual, sells drugs, sits on the corner, is probably packing, fatherless, etc. It is a pejorative title ascribed, often by politicians, to people society deems menacing. To be a thug is to be an outlaw, a vagrant, a criminal, a thief. A thug is considered to be a violent young man whose interest in accumulating wealth at the expense of the wellbeing of others is a threat to the social order. But those seemingly negative qualities are also why it is appealing as a Realness category: a thug is hard and hardened, strong and defiant, willful, and sure. A thug does not cower in fear nor bend their head to authority. A thug speaks their mind and holds their head high.

If Realness is a method through which an individual takes what they conceive to be the particular aesthetic figures of the world and embody them through performative play, it is also a

method for working with and against specific genres of everyday social life that is centered on the ways in which blackness is narrativized, capitalized, and demonized in the social. Walkers push themselves to embody differently structured personas, allowing them to inhabit alternate worlds, even if only for a moment. For people and judges to recognize the persona at play, members of the community have to gather information from their everyday lives about how this persona is constructed, how it is perhaps criminalized or praised, who it applies to and how they (whoever they may be) are somehow held responsible for it. In order for them to perform the category they have to exaggerate the aesthetic and affective qualities that make it distinct without pushing it into the realm of caricature. Performing thug Realness is not simply a question of style or swagger; it is also a way of marking the disparate ways in which a “thug” emerges as a subject position in the world. I want to think through two different examples of thug Realness in two different cities to consider how the cited (a “thug”) gets worked out.

Let’s start in Chicago at a ball in the summertime of 2014. I was already pretty tired by the time some of the Realness categories started and was, by that point, standing toward the back of the room with a friend talking about things I don’t recall. Each ball has their own order and often they save the most exciting categories (B.Q. Vogue Fem or Sex Siren) till the end. Thug Realness, if it is included in the night’s categories, is often among those final performances so if you want to see it, you must be patient. I was feeling anything but until I heard the countdown begin. *Five, four, three, two...* and then the walkers appeared, slowly taking the stage one weighted step at a time. *The category is Thug Realness, professional style!* the emcee said into the microphone. I turned and literally burst out laughing when I saw what was happening on the stage. And I wasn’t the only one. Walking closer to the stage, I watched as a construction worker, line cook, Walgreens employee, FedEx delivery driver, cable installation guy, sanitation worker, barber, medical assistant, CTA bus driver, and some kind of security professional (perhaps a bouncer?) walked onto the stage.

One by one, they took to the stage, walking toward the judges with confidence. The emcee kept saying things like, *Yes! Get you a job!* and *This is what it looks like to have a J-O-B!* as they strutted to the table. The construction worker was wearing a black shirt and high-vis orange vest, carrying a toolbox and donning a hard hat and work boots. *Tens across the board!* The next “thug” to take the stage wore all black—black boots, black pants, a long-sleeved black shirt, a black bullet proof vest, and black hat. The words “security” printed in white across his shirt. *Tens across the board!* Next up was a CTA bus driver. He had on dark blue shorts, that baby-ish blue shirt with the CTA logo on the sleeve, and a baseball cap to match. And they just kept coming. The medical assistant wearing pink and white scrubs (pink pants and little pink dots on the shirt) and clunky white shoes. Then the FedEx delivery man, then a janitor of some sort. It was truly one of the most amazing lineups of what jobs were available to someone who the world might characterize as a thug.

How might we interpret this scene? Is it aspirational? Is it the practice of learning to pass or be legible in the world as a particular kind of subject? Is this a performance of some kind of desired becoming or internality made real and possible through its own enunciation? I find thug Realness to be an interesting example of how these kinds of readings fail to recognize the nuanced ways in which people who walk Realness are themselves using the category to theorize and make sense of the world. Indeed, not one person I talked to who walked thug Realness was trying to “become” a “thug.” Instead, they spoke of the interpretive work that goes into preparing for a ball—how one must spend time thinking about how the category and the criteria would (could) intersect.

Embedded in this performance of thug Realness was a multi-layered critique that was realized through the process of citation. What and who is a thug? Primarily black cisgender men who are between the ages of 14 and 40. What kind of jobs are available to him? Low paying, labor intensive, non-unionized, and often unskilled. Some might be able to work for the city or state but not with a criminal record so that might not be an option. Some might be able to work as a medical

assistant but that also requires education and certifications which are often unavailable to people who live in communities that have been neglected for decades and decades. The overwhelming lack of resources dedicated to schools in lower-income and inner-city neighborhoods with mostly black students means that you can (should) assume that medical assistant isn't going to make it in a battle. What about a Walgreens employee or a FedEx driver? Maybe. But would they hire someone "like that" to work for "them"? Would that person have a valid driver's license? Would they show up on time and can they be trusted with handling money? In a single performance, the whole history of racialized policing and violence, segregation and redlining, economic and educational disinvestment in black communities, and aesthetic and affective stereotypes were brought together and put on display for all of our amusement. My laughter (and the laughter of those around me) was that laughter that comes from recognizing how misrecognition works to shape the lives of black people daily.

This is the cited: the massive web of historical traumas made real. And that is the thing, right? When are they not really real? To cite something this wildly difficult to experience on a daily basis is to think creatively about how one marks the gap between oneself and how one is perceived in the world. Frantz Fanon talked about something similar to this doubling as a kind of temporal lag, what he called the condition of waiting, where the body is both too soon and too late. To mark the gap, in this sense, is to experiment with inhabiting a character that both is and is not you. It is you because the world assumes that black men, however effeminate or docile one may be or appears to be, are a threat. It is you because, as a black man, your body stands in as a representative of all black men. It is you because, as a black man, you have most likely experienced racial profiling with the police or other authority figures. But it is not you.

In 2019 I drove with some of my New York friends from the House of LaBeija to Washington DC to attend the House of Mugler Ball. It was a huge and highly produced event with

lights, special effects, and special guest judges (one of them was Rihanna!). Because this was a big ball with big cash prizes, people from all over the country were there—including friends from Chicago and Atlanta. Midway through the night was F.Q. Thug Realness, a category I had only really seen a couple times. As a reminder, F.Q. (which stands for Femme Queen) is part of the ballroom gender system and almost exclusively refers to a transgender female. As the walkers took to the stage, some wearing tight jeans and shirts that barely covered their breasts and others wearing more butch attire (baggy jeans and sweaters with chains and grills), I saw something happen that I hadn't see in a long time.

The performance of Realness has changed in recent years. In the past, one would walk and either get one's tens or get chopped, but if one made it past the first round, one would battle someone else who had to be from a different house. During a battle, the two walkers would demonstrate the layered and intricate detail of their performance—opening up their briefcase to show that they had a planner or laptop, paperwork, and other indicators that they were in charge if they were walking executive Realness, say. But interestingly, they would almost always have a photograph or picture on their phone of what they looked like in their day to day lives that they would show the judges. This photo served as way of showing, in real time, how complete the transformation was. Put in the language of citation, the photo was used to show or mark the gap between the figure walking before the judges (cited) and the person behind the curtain pulling the strings (citing). The photo held open that space between the image and the reality. But it also served as another standard by which the judges can determine if the walker is really passing.

During the battle of this performance of F.Q. Thug Realness, I watched as one of the walkers who had knocked out a couple of contestants already faced another walker. She pulled out her phone to show what she looked like in her every day. As a “thug,” she was wearing a red sweater shirt, jeans hanging just below her butt, sneakers, chains, and a grill piece on her lower teeth. *That*

was me last night! she said to the judges as she walked the photo of herself to the judges sitting at the long table. In the photo, you could see her dreads pulled back from her face. She wore a little dress, heels, and was carrying a purse. The photo served as a way to mark the gap. She made it through that battle but was eventually cut when a skinny, cornrowed, baggy basket-ball short and white tank top wearing walker eventually beat her.

In this example, we can see how citation works to separate the person from the character, particularly through the photographic evidence of the gap. It is a visual exercise in showing the labor of articulation—the articulation of the prototypical standard of “thug” in the social imaginary. Through performance, thug is (re)activated as a token and (re)signified through the changing of the context in which it emerges. That “thug” can be evaluated based on its performance speaks to the iterability, or the possibility of its reproduction. In both of these examples, we see how Realness is a kind of activity for exploring the boundaries of citation. Is fidelity to the stereotype (or archetype or Platonic Ideal Form) of “thug” strong enough or too strong which then warrants a photograph as evidence of performance? Does the person understand the historical and social specificity of the category?

categories that choose you: conference edition

I had been back home (Chicago) from the field (New York) for almost a year when I got an email from a friend, not connected to the ballroom scene, who asked if I would be interested in participating in a roundtable discussion at an NYU colloquium organized by the Postdoctoral Committee on Gender and Sexuality, a group comprised of psychotherapists and psychoanalysts whose research and practices intersected with questions of gender and sexuality. The colloquium, titled “Realness: A Celebration of Ballroom Culture,” was intended to be an exploration of how the community has changed 50 years after Stonewall and my friend asked if I knew of anyone else who

might be interested in joining. I jumped at the opportunity to return to New York to see and reconnect with friends and knew exactly who to invite to join the panel, my dear friend Linda La. Linda was a member of the Royal House of LaBeija and, as a self-described transgender artist, advocate and performance poet who was, at the time, working at a LGBTQ+ nonprofit as the artistic director of programming, she was often invited to academic events like these to speak about the community's history. I texted her asking if she would be interested and told her there would be a small honorarium and she replied that she would do it if I promised to be there. I booked my ticket after a series of emails with the organizers and hopped on a plane.

The organizers had told us that we would be in conversation with two other people in the ballroom scene, Darrell Martin and Jevon Martin (no relation), and that we could talk about whatever we wanted to, but when I arrived, the lead organizer explained that the format had changed slightly: she would introduce the idea of Realness, each panelist would present for 10-15 minutes, and then we would move directly to a question-and-answer period. Somewhat confused and a tad anxious that I hadn't prepared any formal remarks, I found Linda to tell her the news. She, like me, seemed a bit annoyed but after pouring ourselves a glass of wine and catching up a bit about life and other friends, we resigned ourselves to whatever was just about to happen and made our way to the front of the room.

What happened next, however, was more shocking to me than perhaps it should have been. After a 20-minute video about the ballroom scene, made from clips of *Paris is Burning*, *Pose*, *My House*, and *KIKI*, the organizer stepped up to the podium and presented a paper on how to read and understand Realness from a psychoanalytic framework. Indeed, the paper sought to offer those in the audience, many of whom were practicing analysts, various strategies through which to engage clients who participate in balls and performed Realness. As the paper moved from Lacanian notions of "the real" and "fantasy" to questions of failed/flawed identification and investments in mass

consumer culture with sweeping generality, Linda opened the “Notes” application on her phone and wrote “what the fuck is she talking about? What is happening?” to which I mouthed the response “I really don’t know.” But I did know... I had written something similar (albeit less clinical) many years before while putting together my MA paper at the University of Chicago. I had also tried to think with Lacan and Žižek as key interlocutors for interrogating how Realness, in the words of Janet Mock, comes to be “the ability to be seen as heteronormative, to assimilate, to not be read as other or deviant from the norm. ‘Realness’ means you are extraordinary in your embodiment of what society deems normative” (2014, 229)—how Realness as an embodied performance becomes a way of integrating a fantasy object (however imperfect or potentially damaging) into reality.

Listening to her paper, watching the audience take it in as though this woman was giving them access to the secret internal world of these exotic others, and fielding Linda’s *wif’s* and eyerolls, I realized my own naivete in reading Realness through psychoanalysis. I felt a kind of embarrassment at how my own desire to explain and make sense of this performance category prevented me from truly exploring it. When she finished, she introduced the first speaker, Darrell, who explained that his career as a performer working with mainstream artists such as Pink, RuPaul, and the Backstreet Boys was made possible in part because of his participation in the ballroom scene as a young member of the House of Xtravaganza. He spoke about the history of the scene, his involvement in the film *Paris is Burning*, and the cultural appropriation of voguing in popular culture. Realness, for him, was about the imaginative possibilities of becoming someone else. It made sense in a particular historical moment when the strictures around black life seemed impenetrable and when survival was only ever possible through conforming to norms. Here, Realness was a kind of practice of learning how to belong.

Next up was Jevon Martin, the founder and CEO of a nonprofit organization dedicated to combatting LGBTQ+ homelessness through assisting in referrals and counseling called Princess

Janae Place, who spoke about his personal relationship to the ballroom scene and the category of Realness as a trans man. He explained that although one might assume that because ballroom is a queer space it doesn't rely on strict categories of gender. But this is not the case, and in fact, gender is one of the most central organizational concerns of ball culture. Jevon told the story of how he came to ballroom identifying as a butch who would walk drag categories but when he eventually started walking Realness and identifying as a trans man, he experienced push back from particular people who thought those categories were designated for cis gay men. His story was one of triumph in that he became one of the first trans men to win Realness, a house father, and eventually would go on to be named Trans Man of the Year multiple times. Jevon described Realness as an opportunity for other people to affirm their gender, to affirm their masculinity. Walking Realness was about proving that he was, in the eyes of those around him, who he always knew he was, that he could pass as a "thug" or a "schoolboy."

As Jevon was getting close to the end of his 10 minutes, Linda turned to me and said under her breath, *I'm not going next*, so when the organizer called her name, I stood up and asked, *Can I go next?* At that point, my head was spinning with questions. Three different ways of understanding Realness had been presented—psychoanalytically, historically, and personally. Was I being called on to support those claims? Translate them from those concrete experiences to the abstract? What could I add as the only "non expert" on the panel? Why did I invite my friend and interlocutor? I walked over to the podium and started talking. I talked about my dissertation project, talked about how one could track how Realness changes across time and location, and about Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous reframing of the common American ethic—that all you need in life is to pull yourselves up by your bootstraps—away from a question of capacity and toward the reality of material and historical conditions of life. In all honesty, I barely remember what I said because I was so distracted by the strange ethnographic moment unfolding before me. I finished speaking and took my seat and

mouthed to Linda, *I'm sorry* as she walked to the front of the room, just short of the podium. *I hate Realness, I really do. It can be violent. It can be judgmental. It can really shatter a person's perception of themselves as a trans woman. I hate it...* she paused. *But I walk it all the time. Sometimes you don't choose your category... the category chooses you.*

I was so curious about what this meant but Linda didn't offer an explanation during her talk and I didn't press it afterwards. But this assertion that categories "choose you," that Realness was something that befell one regardless of their feelings about it, was striking. *You don't really choose your category*, Armani said to me during our conversation and Queen would tell me that she was still searching for hers. As all the other categories in ballroom, Realness teaches you something. It is a study in exploring the nature of norms and teasing out how one comes to inhabit or experience them. Realness, however complex and potentially harmful, is a way to explore how one's exterior self is taken up in the social. It is a citational practice of playing with the iterability of the type and, as a citational practice, it allows people to learn how, why, and under what conditions they are intelligible. Realness is a practice of self-reflection and self-cultivation, and perhaps most importantly, a practice that does not determine any particular identity, character, subject position.

Chapter Three: Part 1

On Face-Work: An Analysis of Judgement, Beauty, and Blackness

Taste is the ability to judge an object, or a way of presenting it, by means of a liking or disliking *devoid of all interest*. The object of such a liking is called *beautiful*.
-Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*

Beauty [...] is not merely a descriptive term or even one of particular or localized approbation, but one that indicates an evaluation of aesthetic excellence that is presupposed in the descriptors “pretty” and “graceful” or that is the outcome of a certain kind of experience. We would not use these particular terms *unless* the object of our experience also and already was judged deserving of aesthetic merit.
-Jane Forsey, *The Aesthetics of Design*

As long as there have been men and they have lived, they have all felt this tragic ambiguity of their condition, but as long as there have been philosophers and they have thought, most of them have tried to mask it. They have striven to reduce mind to matter, or to reabsorb matter into mind, or to merge them within a single substance.
-Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*

“Every person lives in a world of social encounters, involving him either in face-to-face or mediated contact with other participants”¹: so, opens Erving Goffman’s article which explores the multiple ways people maintain, save, or lose face. “Face” is more than a mere physical feature; the face is the site through which thoughts and feelings are transmitted (expressed) from the internal self to the external world. For Goffman, the “pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts” that express someone’s interpretation of or reaction to a particular situation or event (what he calls a line) is a way for people to evaluate one’s position vis-à-vis the situation or event. Meaning, by interrogating the way people express themselves, we can track what he calls the “traffic rules” of social interaction, “the code the person adheres to in his movement across the paths and designs of others” (1967, 226). While Goffman makes it clear that we can never really know the motivations attached to one’s external expression, he argues that studying face-work allows us to see the way people navigate

¹ Goffman, Erving. "On face-work." *Interaction ritual* (1967), 222.

social encounters, the social expectations and pressures placed on the individual, and the work that goes in to maintaining the social order. The social pressures and expectations that permeate and structure the flow of everyday life are made visible precisely in moments where one either succeeds or fails to conform to the logics by which a particular culture demands certain type of external expression.

This work by Goffman is an extension of his larger work on how people perform in everyday life, the many masks that individuals wear to move through the world with ease. In both instances, there is an interesting assumption about the relation of the self to the social and the self to the self—what Talal Asad, extending Alvin Gouldner’s critique of Goffman, identifies as the “systematic separation of the self from its publicly observable behavior” that makes possible various strategies through which individuals are able to control how they are perceived by others (2019, 106). Asad explains that the distinction between the self and its figuration as a social actor assumes a kind of necessary coherence or internal consistency of self which can (and does) make calculated decisions. This creates the conditions for the “dismissal of sincerity” and, by extension, the “substitution of ‘gamesmanship’ for morality,” by which Asad further explains is not a pure replacement of morality with social manipulation but rather a differently conceived moral universe. For Asad, Goffman’s theory of the self (and Gouldner’s critique) has important implications for national politics in that the uncertainties and ambiguities of collective life become manageable through an understanding of human action as something that can be quantified, abstracted, and calculated.² But of course, this conception of the self that Goffman’s work introduces has implications for more than politics (national or otherwise); it structures the way we make sense of social encounters at the most mundane level.

² Thinking with Seligman 104 on ritual and social coercion

I start this chapter about a different sort of face-work than the kinds discussed by Goffman and his critics because his arguments establish an interesting tension between how one acts and how one feels that, when taken to their logical end, suggests a logic to social interaction that one can learn by attending to the surface of things. Further, this theory presumes a kind of interiority of the self which acts in the world in ways that benefit the individual. Because, for Goffman, the face is the primary site for expressive emotion, it is also the primary location for translating the internal world of the individual to the external realm. Face-work, in this way, might be another way of identifying nothing more than socialization or etiquette training. Goffman believes that we must learn how to control the surface of things so that we might more easily navigate in a world filled with hidden selves lurking behind all of these masks. But, as Goffman explains, the idea that we can, in some sense, control our encounters through this face-work is already a bit of a stretch. In a moment of high drama, Goffman writes that while individuals might recognize that they are not in control of so many aspects of their lives, they almost always imagine that they are at least in control over their face. But, like all other aspects, “It is only on loan” from society and can be taken back if said individual fails to live up to the expectations the social demands: “Approved attributes and their relation to face make of every man his own jailer; this is a fundamental social constraint even though each man may like his cell” (1967, 225). Meaning, although it is desirable to express oneself well and to be a master of masking one’s innermost thoughts, “proper” etiquette is no more than proof of one’s own social captivity.

This last sentiment is somewhat troubling; that the self has been duped by the social, whose work on the body has constricted it such that the body/self’s apparent coherence (and thus success) is nothing more than an existential example of Stockholm syndrome. Here it seems that Goffman, in considering face-work, is speaking directly to the critics his work would find in Gouldner and later Asad. There is no internal consistency of self that acts on the world to its advantage. There is no

coherence internal life manipulating the body's countenance. Rather Goffman suggests a (somewhat) willing captive who acts as best they can, even if they have no idea why, in order to move along, as if some people don't get a rise out of conflict.

You might be wondering what this has to do with what we could call the *explicit* face-work that takes place in the ballroom scene. What could these traffic rules of collective life (that reveal a split subject) have to do with a category in the ballroom scene known as Face? In order to answer that question, I should first explain what Face is. During the category, the walker presents their physical face to a panel of judges who evaluate them, and then determine whether or not their features meet a particular aesthetic standard. Like other categories, people walk for their tens then battle against other people for the grand prize. Marlon Bailey describes the category through an ethnographic example:

In Face categories, the competitor must learn to *present* his or her face as opposed to *performing* it. This requirement is exemplified in what I heard Selvin say at a ball during Black Pride weekend in 2010 in Detroit: "No clumps, no lumps, no bumps," he intoned into the microphone as he pranced up and down the runway during a Butch Queen Face category. Thus, what undergirds the criteria for this category is the belief that if one is beautiful naturally, with no clumps, lumps, or bumps, one does not have to perform; instead, the beauty or flawlessness is self-evident. Therefore, in this category, competitors approach the judges by drawing focus to the face and by using their hands to guide the eyes of the judges toward the head. They smile and show their teeth. They tilt their heads slightly upward to highlight the contours and shape of the face, nose, and chin. Most of all, competitors in this category must demonstrate that they are not "painted" and do not have blemishes or "bad skin" (2013, 168-169, original emphasis).

I quote at length because though Bailey talks about and references Face elsewhere, this is almost all the description we get. Of course, there is so much to unpack here. To start, I have also heard the saying "no clumps, no lumps, no bumps" to describe what is required to win the category. And, as you will see in the next section, the question of beauty as naturally occurring and in no need of anything more than its simple presentation is how people explain the process by which the judges judge. But is there anything self-evident in the judgement of beauty? And does the presentation of the face tell us anything more than that this person walking is beautiful?

Another question we could ask of Face and those who walk it is simply why? What does one get out of the experience of being judged on their “natural” beauty? These questions could be (and have been) answered differently by different people. But across almost all responses, it struck me that the question of judgement and taste kept coming up again and again. Therefore, this chapter explores the question of aesthetic judgement and the criteria from which such judgements are made. In so doing, I argue that Face calls into question how blackness has historically fit into (or has been forced to the outside of) traditional standards of beauty. But (and perhaps more) importantly, Face approaches the issue of this split self from the side angle. Going back to Goffman, if we agree (which we very well might not) the self is trapped by the social made visible through how one manages one’s encounters with others, then perfecting the art of management takes the social at its own game. Self-consciously learning to attend to, control, and alter the face, as the primary site for locating (external) beauty and (internal) emotion, acknowledges what Goffman called the “cell” of body habituated by the social, a cell that has been constructed differently (with thicker concrete and many more iron bars) for black people in the United States.

What if we considered gaining mastery of the surface not as an instance of gamesmanship beating morality or as proof of a self as a coherent entity operating in, around, and through the social; but rather, as instances of exploring the relationship between self-presentation and blackness, the simultaneous upholding and critiquing of standards of beauty, and the deep understanding of the processes by which the body is judged? What if Face was a training in aesthetic understanding and not aesthetic perfectibility? A training in activation and not actualization? A training in sincerity and not authenticity? Here, I am thinking with the distinction drawn between the two by John L. Jackson, Jr. who writes that where authenticity presupposes a “relationship between an independent,

thinking subject and a dependent unthinking thing,”³ sincerity presumes “a liaison *between subjects*” (2005, 15). For Jackson, this distinction matters to questions of and discourses around racialization and blackness in the United States. It matters for how we organize ourselves or are organized by social categories and classifications of race, gender, sex, sexuality, and class used as short-hands in the ordinary “in lieu of absolute interpersonal transparency” (2005, 17). Part of Jackson’s project is to account for the excesses of racial scripting, those instances wherein authenticity language fails to acknowledge those strange moments of racialization that don’t fall cleanly along the lines of identification.⁴ Sincerity is useful because it arrives in the vulnerability of encounters, is never sure of itself. Sincerity allows for the “possibility of performative ad-libbing and inevitable acceptance of trust amid uncertainty as the only solution to interpersonal ambiguity” (2005, 18).

Jackson’s sincerity complicates Goffman’s figuration of collective social life by introducing the idea that subjects might be, and indeed at times are, incoherent, unorganized, or potentially unintentional in the ways that they act in the world both to themselves and to others. But he also adds a different way of approaching the material reality of the body that is marked by race, class, gender, and all sorts of other things that make it a unique actor in the social. Part of the work of tracking sincerity, then, is also holding up the social and the self as never fully intelligible and always a little out of reach. It is to acknowledge the unaccountable in life. In a similar way, I want to consider the something-elseness of beauty, the excesses of the scripts and standards that cannot so

³ Jackson goes on: “Authenticity presupposes a relation between subjects (who authenticate) and objects (dumb, mute, and inorganic) that are interpreted and analyzed from the outside, because they cannot simply speak for themselves” (2005, 14-15).

⁴ Jackson writes, “Authenticity is only part of race’s story, and racial sincerity implies something more, what Ralph Ellison might have called the ‘something else’ or race, ‘something subjective, willful, and complexly and compellingly human.’ Racial sincerity is an attempt to apply this ‘something-elseness’ to race, to explain the reasons it can feel so obvious, natural, real, and even liberating to walk around with purportedly racial selves crammed up inside of us and serving as invisible links to other people” (2005, 15).

easily be understood through the language of racial ideologies. I want to consider the ways in which beauty, as it is illuminated through Face (work), becomes an interesting site for thinking about the ambiguity of norms and the slipperiness of standards.

On (Face-to-face) judgement

It's a battle! It's a battle! Queen chanted as G walked down toward the judges, showing off her face. She had improved since joining Vogue Group. She knew how to plant a smile on a judge then let her eyes drift lazily to another. Licking her top teeth then grinning from ear to ear. Turning the head ever so slightly this way then that so the angles of her jaw and neck were on display. Getting in close to the judges so they could see her skin, nose, eyebrows. She was walking against D whose sneaky grin and twinkling eyes flirted with the judges. D was taking a more aggressive approach, pushing her face in front of G so the judges couldn't help but shift their gaze. As one of the current judges of this "battle," a role I was somewhat forcibly placed into because of an injury I had sustained while voguing a month prior, I found myself in a strange situation. What was I looking for? And why?

As far as categories are concerned, Face has always been one of the strangest categories in ball culture to me. When a walker is "serving" or "presenting" their face, judges look with a critical eye at bone structure, teeth alignment and whiteness, eye color, and the shape of the eyebrows. They look at and make judgements on the length and curve of the nose, the size of the ears, and the shape of the lips. They look for symmetry and structure, beauty and grace, sexiness and sophistication. When one sees Face being served, and especially when two people are battling, it's hard not to read the showdown as superficial or slightly problematic because the category works to articulate and then manage what an ideal type of aesthetic comportment might be by signaling what counts as beautiful (who is legendary) then evaluating others based on that standard. Even the language used, that one serves or presents their face, seems to presume a kind of authenticity, a beauty that is

objective and in no need of assistance. This is further complicated by the long history of white beauty standards being central to considerations of whether black people are or are not beautiful. That these inaccessible standards for anyone considered other in terms of their gender/sex, sexuality, race, or class are not completely outside the presentation of Face is clear. And so, it might seem a bit counter-intuitive that a group of people who fall into the category of “other” would use “beauty” (with all of its hegemonic baggage) as a rubric for determining someone’s status in a community. So, what do we make of how beauty gets articulated in the ballroom scene? And does one judge such a thing?

The question ‘what is beauty’ has been central to Western philosophical understandings of aesthetic practices (and until the 18th century, aesthetics relationships to ethics)—there has always been the desire to understand how beauty arises in the world and how one determines whether or not something is simply pleasurable to look at or is in fact beautiful. Debates around determinations of where beauty come from, how to locate (recognize) it, and what happens to us when we’ve encountered it often center around whether beauty was something inherent to an object or whether beauty was a shared human faculty that arises subjectively. For Immanuel Kant, beauty was not necessarily inherent in objects and nor was it purely a subjective response to objects in the world; rather, beauty is an interesting example of aesthetic judgement and is importantly different from other forms of judgement that require the use of reason. We experience beauty spontaneously and although it is felt to be subjective it holds a claim over the universal. We judge this sensual experience, “not according to concepts,” writes Kant, “but according to the purposive attunement of the imagination that brings it into harmony with the power of the concepts as such” (1987, 217). Judgements of the beautiful must be made without personal (subjective) interest and cannot be subsumed within concepts. What we see in judgements of beauty then, in some sense, transcends our cognitive capacities.

Kant seems interested in beauty and the sublime in so far as they reveal particular aspects of aesthetic judgement. He writes, “Judgement in general is the ability to think the particular as contained under the universal.” Here, the work of judgement is the work of interpreting the relation between specific encounters with objects and universally determined senses of them. He goes on: “If the universal (the rule, principle, law) is given, then judgement, which subsumes the particular under it, is *determinative* (even though [in its role] as transcendental judgement it states a priori the conditions that must be met for subsumption under that universal to be possible). But if only the particular is given and judgement has to find the universal for it, then this power is merely *reflective*” (1987, 18, original emphasis). Meaning, if we understand the boundaries of the universal principle then judgement of the particular is the act of defining it in relation; if we only have the particular in front of us with no information about the general laws which govern our aesthetic taste, then judgement is a matter of contemplation, a matter of determining what it is about the particular that is universal. In this way, judgement is a kind of double action—judgement identifies a standard and/or seeks to engender one through identification. This is slightly different from how judgements of taste are made, for they are not conceptually determined by reason or through deliberation: “a judgement of taste requires everyone to assent; and whoever declares something to be beautiful holds that everyone *ought* to give his approval to the object at hand and that he too should declare it beautiful” (1987, 86). Because beauty is the pleasurable harmony between spontaneous experiences and human abilities (faculties of perception), our judgement of it as such is a subjectively experienced objective truth, a feeling together of that which can only be described as beautiful.

Many scholars of black aesthetics find Kant troubling and yet useful (citations). For instance, in her investigation of the relation between blackness and beauty, Shirley Anne Tate, argues that Kant’s writings on aesthetics necessitates a norm around which there must be consensus. For Tate, when taken to its logical end, the idea of a universal consensus creates the conditions for racialized

aesthetics “which attempt to be universal by uniting beauty with some bodies while othering others and extending this to everyone globally” (2012, 7).⁵ Tate—in extending Butler’s reading of Foucault’s argument that the constant negotiation between the self and its relation to norms (articulated as regimes of truth) is the grounds upon which recognition succeeds or fails—identifies beauty as one such norm around which judgements of who is and is not beautiful “delineate[s] who will qualify as a subject of recognition with regimes of beauty truth” (2012, 4). For her, the ossification of standards as regimes of truth, then, is not a neutral judgement (of taste). It is organized around (produced by) whiteness as a particular structure of feeling, an ideological apparatus hidden under the mask of disinterest. I find Tate’s rereading of Kant interesting in that judgement remains a central concern for how she approaches questions of beauty, its standardization, and its complications when placed against the fact of blackness. Further, her insistence that we pay attention to how beauty without a concept can (has) become beauty without a concept of difference is helpful.

And yet, what do we make of the spontaneity in Kant’s aesthetic judgement? The potential for something to strike us as beautiful, not in the register of the ideological but in the sensuousness of our being. Back in the community room where me and a few other people were sitting in folding chairs watching the battle between G and D unfold, I turned to Armani and asked how one judges Face. *I don’t understand the question*, Armani replied. *I mean like, what makes one face “better”* (and I used air quotes) *than the other? What are the criteria? Or like, what am I looking for? Well, it’s not really about better*, Armani said. *It’s about who is doing a better job presenting their face. What features they are highlighting, you know? So, is it about who is more beautiful or is it about performing something?* By that time, Linda had

⁵ Kant used race as proof of how beauty can be contingent: “That is why, given these empirical conditions, a Negro’s standard idea of the beauty of the [human] figure necessarily differs from that of a white man, that of a Chinese from that of a European” (1987, 82).

overheard me. *Look at how G is tilting her neck upward so you can see her neck. How she's smiling with her teeth. Now look at D. D is giving all sorts of energy. Go D!* Linda interrupted herself with a laugh. *Look at how D is tracing her hand down her face, showing those cheek bones.*

I was beginning to understand that judging Face involved impressions. It was about beauty, yes, but beauty that actualized in and through its presentation. The judgement of Face, then, needed to come from the energy that jolted me toward sensation. They were both beautiful, no doubt. They each had different qualities about their look that could turn heads on the street. And yet, Linda was explaining to me that I needed to pay attention to something else, something less ideologically bound or physically manifested. Their energy. As the judge, you are examining the particular against the standard. But there is room for the particular to grow into something more than itself. When someone is walking for their tens, they strive to present themselves in their best light. They work hard to accentuate their features so that any flaws can be excused as unimportant. Here, the norm of beauty, against which D and G were being judged, was an abstraction that one could judge in terms of proximity; and yet the aesthetic sensation of being in the midst of their beauty shifted the terrain. Two faces, both beautiful, but one must win. Judgement is no longer a question of whether one or the other is more or less beautiful; each is judged according to the way their presentation came alive in the act of the reveal.

Ambiguous Aesthetics

A hand floats up toward the high ceiling from the side of a body dressed in black. Fingers reach for the sky then the elbow breaks, softly, slowly allowing the arms to drift down close to the body. As the hand passes the top of the head, it pauses. The back of the hand gently grazes the forehead followed by the pinky finger that traces the curvature of the skin and bones of the face all the way to the chin. The hand lingers here, twisting around from the wrist, then retreating back the way it came

until it leaves the face and floats again, right above the head. The pointer finger drops down to the nose, following its slope down to the edge. All the while, the smiling eyes shoot a beaconing look to the people seated at and around the table at the end of the crowded runway front.

You actually didn't notice her when she walked onto the stage. She was being covered by a group of people, dressed to compliment her flowing gown which you had yet to see in all its glory, who were busy arranging themselves in formation to present their queen to the judges. They had rehearsed it this way. They were like courtiers, doing all they could to make the presentation as exciting and memorable as possible. When they are finally in position and their specific song is playing (each chosen with the utmost care and consideration), they will offer her up to the judges. They are not the star attraction; they are only there to punctuate the reveal, fading into the background so that she might present her face in all its glory. This is what it will look like once you're at the ball: lights dancing over bodies in motion, sequins twinkling and feathers twirling. Everything is just right for the presentation of that naturally glowing and perfectly proportioned face. But before one takes to the runway, they must prepare for this presentation. The majority of the preparation involves work on the body. The person walking must eat a healthy diet, moisturize, work out, hydrate, and keep their teeth sparkly clean. Some of them might get cosmetic surgery while others frown upon it. No matter what you do, it is all directed toward the goal of keeping the skin clear and the body fit. The walker must learn to apply makeup in such a way that it compliments (not distracts) the naturalness of their facial features. They must learn to style their hair so that it accentuates the face. This work on the physique is the long-term investment in the self that makes possible the presentation of Face.

The other work that goes into Face is somewhat more elusive: an aesthetic education of norms. Here the question of blackness and its sordid relation to the question of aesthetic judgement is important. To consider this form of education, I want to turn to Paul C. Taylor's extension of

Richard Shusterman's work on *somatic aesthetics*: the representation of the body as an object of aesthetic value and embodiment "which enables us to treat the body not as an object of aesthetic value but as a medium or site for the creation of aesthetic value" (2016, 107). In an effort to think seriously through questions of representation, Taylor adopts the term "sarkaesthetics"⁶ to mean "the practices of representational somatic aesthetic – which is to say, those practices relating to the body, as it were, as flesh, regarded solely 'from the outside'" (2016, 108). The outside here is what Fanon might call epidermalization or Spillers might call flesh. He argues that there are three dimensions to these practices – the descriptive, the normative, and the meta-theoretical⁷ – which, when taken together, help to tease out bodily stylization in relation to the norms that govern representation. For Taylor, focus on the sarkaesthetic allows us to recognize (or perhaps even make sense of) the multiple ways that black people work hard to cultivate or reject regimes of beauty whose histories and social realities are structured around whiteness. Here, he argues that there is a gap between "negrophobic and negrophilic somatic aesthetics," a gap he recognizes as in fluctuation throughout history, that opens a series of questions around the liberatory potential for black people in adopting particular norms. He asks: "Can we make sense of the thought, common in anti-racist activist communities and traditions, that blacks should not emulate anti-black styles of bodily stylization?"

⁶ Taylor explains that the use of the Greek word "soma" in reference to what Shusterman describes as the "study of the experience and use of one's body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation... and creative self-fashioning" (Shusterman as quoted in Taylor) sparked his desire to also use a Greek term "sarx" which he explains "the New Testament authors used to distinguish the body from the spirit or soul" (107). Taylor defines *sarx* as "the sensuous nature of man" and "the earthly nature of man apart from divine influence" and explains that he uses the word outside its evaluative senses.

⁷ He writes: "The descriptive dimension identifies the norms and principles that in fact govern the aesthetic evaluation of the body, and the practices that issue from and conform to them. The normative dimension prescribes rules and principles for our judgements and pursuits of bodily beauty. And the meta-theoretical dimension takes up broader questions about 'the basic nature of bodily perceptions and practices,' and relates these to still broader philosophical questions, pertaining for example to phenomenology, epistemology, ethics, and social theory" (2016, 108).

Or, put differently: How can black subjects authentically and responsibly inhabit and navigate anti-black aesthetic contexts?” (2016, 106).

These are obviously different questions from my own, but this work is helpful in that it challenges easy interpretations of either assimilation/integration of standards or the total rejection of traditional norms of beauty (white, Western, heteronormative, etc.). Face, in a somewhat obvious way, aligns with normative regimes of beauty: high cheekbones, straight white teeth, little nose, clear skin, nice full lips, etc. and regardless of how one identifies within the gender system,⁸ these are standards one must meet, the criteria that fill in the category. The rigorous corporeal work required is extensive and can be completely unattainable for those, like myself, with crooked teeth or disproportionate noses. But what is equally important as those physical attributes of the body and face is the stylization of the self within the confines of the body. Meaning, part of the work is learning, in intricate detail, what the beauty standard is and how to fully embody it through dress, makeup, and hair. But more than that, it is about learning to activate beauty, learning to make a last impression on the judges. In this sense, serving Face simultaneously identifies the governing principles of aesthetic judgement (what counts as beautiful in terms of the standards), clearly delineates the practices required to achieve it (put those features on display), and then, through the energy of the presentation, explores the latter against the former.

For those who walk Face, the cultivation and stylization of the body (as a vehicle for expressing aesthetic taste) demands adherence to practices that, for black people in general and black queer people in particular has a long history of both interpersonal and symbolic violence. Identifying this fact is perhaps the most dominant insight that runs through the vast scholarship on black

⁸ See Chapter 2 on the gender system in the ballroom scene.

aesthetics.⁹ But Face moves in a different direction too. Because the contexts in which these norms are being judged is a celebratory black space, white beauty standards are somewhat of an abstraction, and as such, they are made more malleable and ambiguous.¹⁰ Meaning, though the standards are always present (as if history could ever really remain in the past), their physical presence is absent. Part of the work of activating the energetic excess of the norm then is also a maneuvering around the boundaries of the norm. This kind of aesthetic training is about the excess, the remainder that is always possible even when “standards” and “norms” would suggest otherwise. It is a training in the ambiguity of aesthetic judgement.

I want to go back to the ball where our walker is standing before the judges. She’s made her entrance, got her tens, and is now battling against another walker. This is the time when the judges really begin to do their work. Some (most) take in the overall picture of her presence. They admire the lines and curves and little flourishes. They ask her to come closer so they can see her skin and eyes. They do the same to the other contestant. There are the judges who ask for more information. They touch the skin of the cheek and inspect the neck. They stroke the hair or head and look at the ears. They ask to see the teeth in a smile and demand a variety of facial expressions. We could read this kind of inspection as a desire to settle the reality of ambiguity. “There must be something,” we could imagine them saying to themselves, “that will help me determine whether this face is more beautiful than the other.” But I think there is something else going on here. Touching the skin, inspecting the ear, and stroking the hair are all ways for the judges to *feel* the beauty. They, more than anyone, know that the beauty is not merely a visual experience. It is the spontaneous activation of a

⁹ It is unmistakable when reading through the large body of black feminist scholarship of black beauty. For example, Janell Hobson asks, “Can a black woman hold up a mirror that reveals a different image divorced from this iconographic history in dominant culture?” (Hobson 2018, 15).

¹⁰ Jane Forsey writes that beauty is “useful as a term that signifies the occurrence of an aesthetic judgement of merit or excellence but one that is ambiguous as to whether this merit is located in the properties of an object or in the pleasures of certain kinds of experience” (2016, 76).

sensation. It should be said that these judges are not the most beloved of the bunch, for obvious reasons. Though I can think of no one who enjoys this level of scrutiny of their physical appearance, judges are allowed this invasive accounting because the ambiguity of aesthetic judgement requires a thorough investigation of the energetic pull. They are not judging the person behind the mask (the internal self's goodness or beauty) but the ambiguous relation of surfaces (where history and society has left its scars) to the excess of the standard.

To attend to the surface, where questions of judgement and norms are deliberated and upheld, where social and racial scripts are made manifest, invites a different way of thinking about both the social and the self. I started this chapter by saying that Face is an activity of learning to manage visual impressions of the self and is a practice of learning what labor and history goes into the formation of beauty regimes. But that is only part of the story. The category was Butch Queen Face at the Midwestern Ball Awards and someone I had met in Atlanta took the runway. His hair was perfectly cropped, and his eyes twinkled. Though he was a legend in this category, I found out later he wasn't actually planning to walk that night. When the commentator called the category, *No one else stood up so I thought, ok!* He was chopped, not because he wasn't beautiful, not because his face wasn't "giving it" that night. It was because he didn't conform to the proper criteria for the category. *It doesn't matter*, he said to me later. Two people ended up walking (but in true ballroom fashion waited till the countdown to make their presence known). They were both from the same house so they split the grand prize since you can't battle against your own family.

Returning to Goffman, where the self is thought to be determined or interpreted through its surface experience with and in the social, we could read "Face" work as the art of teaching walkers to pay particular attention to their corporeal body; Face as the art of managing the ambiguities of aesthetic experience. But as an aesthetic experience, Face is also about how social, racial, and other scripts that seem to determine our standing in the social get activated differently in moments. This

friend's position wasn't threatened by being chopped. He was still a legend. But his presentation didn't follow the rules and thus didn't spark the way it should. Many people who have been chopped or lost to someone else will tell you that their loss was because the other person was "on" or "had it" or "was giving it all." The "it" that they possess is the excess, the something-elseness at the heart of aesthetic encounters.

Chapter Three: Part 2

Sex Siren Songs

As is true for most people who work in institutions whose clientele are predominantly youth and/or populations considered to be “at risk,” I was required to attend a series of training sessions to volunteer at both The Center and AFC. Some trainings are through the state, such as becoming a mandated reporter or the federal background check, while others are organized by the nonprofit themselves. In Chicago, the training was minimal. I was given a short manual to read over at my own leisure and met with one of the social workers who told me about the history of The Center, the youth program, and what my specific tasks would be. Had I not worked with youth in the past and had I not been a black queer person myself, this “training” would have done little to prepare me for being in that space—but then again, how does one explain to someone that they should prepare to hold the bleeding wrists of a young person who tried to take their life in the public bathroom of the community center while you scream for help to whoever might be walking by; how do you train someone how to draw clear boundaries between yourself and someone who is struggling to survive. I had to repeatedly explain to other volunteers why it was unwise to call the cops for what appeared to be nothing more than argument between two teenagers and, on at least three occasions, deal with the police when they were called, because it is hard to train people that their reality is different from other peoples—even when there are shared aspects of identification.

This was wildly different from the training that I had to do to volunteer at AFC. After I was cleared in a background check, after I had done the training for and received my mandated reporter certificate through New York State, and after a flurry of emails explaining my “ethnographic research” were sent to a number of different staff, I arrived at the main offices located in midtown Manhattan to meet with one of the directors of programming. Bill Torres is a character. He’s a tall, handsome, gay man who was born in Mobile, Alabama to a white mother and Mediterranean father.

There is a lot of concern about me not being white enough when I was young, he would explain to me later. When I arrived at the office, I was ushered into a large conference room with another “potential” volunteer who worked for a hedge fund on Wall Street. He told me his company required that each employee do some kind of volunteering, but they could decide where. *So, as a gay man, I thought it would be nice to work with gay youth since I know I am where I am because of gay mentors in my life.* We sat close together at the far end of the table facing a projector where Bill took his place. I would find out later he was an actor, but I could have guessed that he was at the time.

What does LGBTQ+ stand for? Bill asked. The gentleman next to me tried his hand. *Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, and questioning*, he said with confidence. *Almost!* I interrupted on accident—my educator hat turned on. *Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (which is what we say now) and queer. The plus sign indicates other ways of identifying like questioning or intersex. Seems like we have a smarty pants in here*, Bill said with a laugh. He went on to explain a short history of each identification, the history of AFC, and the expectations placed on volunteers. *There are many different kinds of volunteers and we really hope that people will help us based on their own strengths. So, for instance, you’re an investment banker or something right? Yes*, the man said. *While it is noble that you want to work with kids, we could actually use help with funding and corporate outreach.* In hindsight, I can see what Bill was doing—this was his process of weeding out those he didn’t think were capable of working at the drop-in center. He continued: *many of the youth are going through a hard time, maybe, hopefully, the hardest time they will ever have to deal with in their lives. But the thing is, they are also going through this time while they are going through puberty, you know? So, the space is a little tense. A lot of fights, disagreements, a lot of name calling. You have to be prepared for that. But you also have to be prepared for them to hit on you. And sometimes, you’d be surprised at the person hitting on you cause people’s sexualities are fluid.* I could sense the man next to me getting uncomfortable. *And there is no question they would hit on you two*, he continued (much to the chagrin of my companion). *You’re both young and attractive. They will say things like “mmm, you look good” or “I want to sit on your face” or “I wouldn’t even charge*

you” and you have to make sure they know that one, you’re a volunteer and two, that you have boundaries and that you’re uncomfortable with that kind of comment. But you never want to make them feel embarrassed or belittled. AFC is a sex positive space which can be difficult to navigate at times.

Bill does this to everyone, including staff, he trains to work at the drop-in center. He intentionally tries to shock people by saying upsetting or even completely inappropriate things. He watches you while he says it, studies your facial expressions and tries to catch any sense of hesitancy. *Some of it is that we really do need more people who will help us get money, he said to me later. These investment bankers, hedge fund managers, and millionaire retirees come in and want to feel good about themselves. But the drop-in is messy and stressful and chances are, they will go one time and never again. They’ll find some place to go where the people they are serving are more “grateful” for their “care.”* Bill, and those who let him continue to run the training programs, recognized that if they could make people uncomfortable up front by appealing to their prudishness or sense of decency, they had a better chance of getting them to help in other ways more to their (the bankers, etc.) desires and AFC’s needs. But it is not just about getting people to help in other ways. Bill really was worried that people would enter the space without any sense of what a “sex positive” space was. When I interviewed Beth, she told me a similar story of Bill saying similar things: *Bill tests people to see if they can handle it by saying outrageous things to see how they react. For instance, he said to me, “you might be serving Thanksgiving dinner and a client might say ‘I love these mashed potatoes. They remind me of my dad’s cum in my mouth’” just to see how I would react.* I literally gasped when she said this, and then laughed. *The problem is AFC is a sex positive space, but people are also dealing with a ton of sexual assault and sexual trauma. The line becomes very nuanced.* Sex positivity looks very different at AFC and The Center than it does in the ballroom scene. This will not be surprising to anyone—of course it looks different! But this chapter considers how it is understood, performed, managed, and critiqued in either setting to ask how sex and sexuality become objects of intervention and management.

Let's not talk about sex

I had been working at The Center for about a year when one of the staff members asked me if I would be interested in helping organize a talent show. I jumped at the chance. I had been teaching a bi-weekly dance class for about as long as I had been volunteering and the clients who attended were definitely itching to perform. They had worked so hard and grown so much since we started. When we had started, most of them had laughed at me when I would switch up our warmup to include a little ballet or modern dance in the mix. But now, they could spot their turns and jump from (and most importantly land with) bent knees without injury. They had also been playing around with choreographing their own moves and I had encouraged them to teach each other. A talent show would be just the thing to get them into the collaborative spirit.

I know of no collaboration that isn't challenging – bringing together so many different personalities to accomplish a single project. And yet I was hopeful. Twice a week, a group of young people and I came together to rehearse. Each of them came with a song and a vision and we worked through different exercises to help generate movement material. They taught each other moves and explained what each song meant to them, and after about a month, we were ready for tech rehearsal. I had put all the songs together into a single track and sent it to the DJ of the event. When everyone arrived, we did a quick warm up and then figured out entrances and exits on the stage. A couple staff members were there to make sure everything ran smoothly toward our first run through. Midway through the dance, a staff member approached me where I was sitting yelling cues to the youth who were nervously trying to remember all the moves. *This is not really appropriate*, they whispered to me. *We've invited donors to come. The songs are too explicit, and the moves are way too suggestive.* I turned and asked them to repeat. Not because I didn't hear them but because I was confused.

After the first run through, I told the group to take a quick break and asked the staff member to step outside the auditorium so we could talk in private. *I don't really see the problem*, I said. This person didn't work directly with the youth program; they worked with fundraising in the front office. *Well, we want people to support the youth program but the way they are dancing is just a little too overtly sexual. They are kids, you know? Would it help*, I asked, *if we found bleeped versions of the songs? They've worked really hard to choreograph this dance and changing it now would be really difficult.* It would occur to me later that what we were arguing about was what it meant to be sex positive. *I think that would help and then maybe also separating them a little, so they aren't touching. Ok, I'll see what we can do*, I said and walked back inside. Explaining to the youth that we had to make changes was a challenge. When they found out why, however, they were pissed. *I'm in the theater group too, right. The director asked us to pull from our lives different challenges and hardships and we make a play from that. We talk about family abuse and sexual trauma and like, what the fuck? I don't see anyone saying that is inappropriate*, one of them said to the rest of the group. *That's cause it is about pain and shit. They love that shit*, another added. *I know this sucks y'all but let's just see what we can do. I don't want them to pull the piece out of the show!* We figured it out. I found edited versions of the songs and we changed up the choreography. And I still regret that I didn't push harder for them to do the dance they made in the way they envisioned to the songs they loved. But sex and sexuality are tricky at a nonprofit. So many of the activities that are allowed are determined by the funding they receive and this is especially true for anything related to sex.

Sexy Sexy: Part 1

Whew chile! Anthony said to me as we stood just shy of the runway. *Would you look at that!* The real question was how you could not look at that. The butch queen walking up the stairs was basically naked, save a little leather thong studded with diamonds and a leather choker to match. *This is my favorite category*, he whisper-yelled into my ear because the music was blasting. *Yeah, I know. You've told*

me many times! I yelled back. Sex Siren, sometimes simply referred to as “Body,” is a category where the walker shows off their... body. *It’s not rocket science, Emily!* Anthony said when I asked him to describe it. *You show your goodies to the judges, show your breasts and your dick and your ass. Gotta be tight and oiled. Glistening!* Normally, contestants wear very little to show very much. Or wear very tight things to show as much as possible. As Marlon Bailey explains, body categories are similar to Face in that walkers *present* (nor perform) their bodies to the judges; and they are similar to Realness categories in that they work around the gender system where “certain features of the body [are understood] to instantiate sex and gender authenticity” (2013, 169). Sex Siren is fun (for Anthony and others) because everyone gets to gawk. They get to holler and scream with excitement. Contestants grab their boobs or their penises, smile and wink at the judges and audience, and shake their butts. It like being at a strip club, at a ball.

An Allegation

As I’ve described elsewhere, I ran a dance group once or twice a week at AFC. We would do a little modern dance, a little ballet, but it was mostly a hip-hop dance class. I started teaching the class because the staff thought it might be a nice alternative from the Vogue Group and the Movement Therapy Group. But I mostly decided to do it because Linda, one of the clients who I worked with in the kitchen every day, said she wanted to dance. *I love salsa and reggaeton and you know just dancing.* Linda, a little Latinx lesbian whose confidence, sweetness, and all-around bossy bitch attitude made that overly tiny and extremely hot kitchen just a bit more bearable, had demanded that I do it. *They get their day to dance. I want mine. Everything is always ballroom ballroom ballroom around here. Some of us can’t move like that!* The way Linda talked about who she called “the ballroom kids” was hilarious since she was herself around their age (late teens early 20s). But it was also slightly racial: *Vogue Group is for the black queens, and we need something for us!* The “us” versus “them” mentality was strong for her even

when the real threat was a “them” not really present in the space. *Wait you’re black!* She said to me one day while Jahday and I were chatting about something I can’t remember. Jahday laughed harder than I’ve ever seen her laugh. *You didn’t know? You can’t tell? No!* Linda snapped back. *I thought maybe you were one of us. What Latinx,* I asked. *Yeah girl. You light as fuck. I thought maybe you were Dominican or Puerto Rican or something. But I guess your hair kinda gives it away.* Linda was my only consistent participant. She was there every class in the front row and took it very *very* seriously. Because I had been there for a long time and the staff felt confident that I could, if necessary, deescalate a fight, it was normally just me in the community room. Me and Linda that is because she was in charge of everyone in whatever room she was in. *I think its cause I feed them every day. Like, they don’t fuck with me because I got the good stuff in the back.*

I normally had around 15 youth come to each class. Inevitably someone would try to turn on a vogue beat, and Linda would proclaim that *this group is hip-hop* and demand that I change the song. *None of us mess* with Linda, Bill would say whenever she put her foot down. On this day, in the winter days when clients are more interested in being inside where it is warmer, I had almost 20 clients in the group. The space isn’t large enough for that capacity, so I split them into two groups. Most of the young people I knew, which mean that they knew the warmup, so I made sure to sprinkle the newcomers into the groups as evenly as possible. In the beginning, everyone seemed to be having a good time. It wasn’t until I started teaching a combination to Beyoncé’s “Upgrade U” that I noticed a problem. One of the clients I had never seen before (which is not uncommon since there are so many who come through the drop-in) was bumping into the people dancing next to them, talking over me while I was explaining the combination, and being generally disruptive. I asked them to stop twice before telling them if they didn’t cut it out, I would have to asked them to leave. And they did seem to chill once Linda walked over and told them to. Dance Group continued without much drama, and by the time we ended class, even the disruptor was dancing with a smile.

The next week, I ran into one of the regulars of the class, we'll call him Jared, who had taken ballet for much of his life. *Am I going to see you later?* I asked. *I don't think so if [the disruptor] is there. Ah yeah I don't know them but I think they enjoyed it and totally got with the picture after a while,* I said with little thought. *Please come! You're such a good dancer! Maybe,* he said with a smile. Later in the kitchen, while I was chopping veggies, Beth stopped by. *Hey, can I talk to you for a second,* she said. *There was an incident during your class. Jared mentioned to me that [the disruptor] was making him uncomfortable. Apparently, he said stuff like, "I want to suck your dick" or something and it really triggered him. Because I'm a mandated reporter, I have to bring it to the city. That is awful,* I said. *Ugh poor Jared. Is there anything I can do? I totally didn't see that happening. [The disruptor] was being so rude and was interrupting class, but I thought I solved the issue. Ugh, and I just asked Jared to come to dance group and he said that he wasn't sure because he didn't want to go if [the disruptor] was there. Well, that's the problem,* Beth explained. *Because you were the only adult in the room, I have to give the state your name. Ok, no problem,* I said. *What does that mean exactly? They interview you to make sure that they know everything for their file against [the disruptor].*

Sitting across the table from a New York City case manager from Child Protective Services to talk about an incident of sexual misconduct by a client to another client is a strange way to spend an afternoon. Beth was in the room, *just to make sure she stays within her purview,* she said. The questions were sweeping. Are you a mandated reporter? Do you have a background in education? What kind of research do you do? What is Anthropology? Did you witness anything unusual? What is AFC? Why were you alone with the clients? Is this common? What kind of dancing? And so on and so forth. Then she asked if I had questions. *Why yes,* I said. Tell me about how you make reports. What will happen to [the disruptor]? Will they have a permanent mark on their file? How long have you worked with DCFS? Is this common? Have you ever been to AFC before? We talked for a little over an hour, mostly because she was completely willing to let me ask any and all of my questions.

What I learned is that the specific grants that AFC have through the requires that they report all forms of harassment to the authorities. Jared told me later he didn't press charges and didn't even mean for this to happen. *I just said it was triggering to a friend, not staff. Like I didn't mean it really.* When we talked about it, I apologized for not catching the issue in real time. I felt awful that he was uncomfortable in a space that I oversaw, where I was the adult in the room. I also explained that it was good to say something, which he agreed with. But he insisted, *I didn't mean to make this a big deal.* To be a space that is both centered around youth and sex positive is incredibly difficult. It is challenging for several reasons including the long history of queer life being linked to illicit relationships with minors. But because so many young people who are experiencing homelessness have also experienced sexual traumas it is also always at the front of every staff person's mind. But to me, and I'm sure to the staff as well, a problem arises when the young people at The Center in Chicago can talk about their sexual traumas and not exhibit their sexualities. Or when an offhanded comment from Jared to a friend could set off an investigation that puts him in front of an officer of the state. As Beth said, the line is nuanced and not always very clear.

Sexy Sexy: Part 2

I wonder if Sex Siren is like a kind of training in sexual expression? I said to New York Mizrahi over barbeque. *Sure. I mean, sure yeah. You can only watch not touch. What do people say? You can read the menu, but you best not order nothing.* We both laughed. *I thought that was about cheating,* I said. *Yeah, but it's the same. The people walkin' are choosing to walk and show off their bodies. And like, its fab cause people get to show off all that hard work! Them girls go to the gym!* I appreciated the "sure" from New York. He, like almost everyone I spoke to was confused by my questions. *Like, it's just showing off your body! But why?* I asked in a somewhat begging tone. New York laughed, *Cause why not? They want to show, and I want to see!* *Ok fair,* I responded, *but like, other things have this long history to them and bring up a bunch of questions, not just for*

me but also for the people in the scene. I guess I'm just trying to figure out why Body, and kind of Face too, don't bring up stuff for people.

But why can't it just be for fun? Does a category need to do more than elicit pleasure or excitement? Thinking with the two scenes set in two different nonprofits who both pride themselves on being sex positive, I wonder if the category isn't already doing more work than others. Where sexuality is policed and often mediated through various institutional regimes, can it be enough to simply have the space to explore its pleasures? I wonder now why I couldn't hear everyone saying the same thing. *Look at our lives. We are harassed, made vulnerable, made to feel like and often are victims of sexual violence*, New York said. *We sometimes just want to have sex and be sexy!*

Chapter Four

Cultivating (In)Attention, Listening to Noise

For twenty-five centuries, Western knowledge has tried to look upon the world. It has failed to understand that the world is not for the beholding. It is for hearing. It is not legible, but audible.
-Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*

You've been invited to a ball. A friend texted you the flier earlier in the day with the address and descriptions of the categories and promises they will be there "on time" (a promise you know they won't keep). When you arrive, a little before Legends, Statements, and Stars, you meander around the room looking for your friends' house table to put down the few things you've brought along with you to survive the long evening (wallet, keys, phone, lipstick) and talk to folks about things neither of you will remember tomorrow. You won't remember, not because the conversation is lacking in wit and energy, the opposite really. Everyone around you is laughing loudly, slapping knees and hands together in exclamation. It seems as though the room is talking over each other with such speed and enthusiasm that you can barely focus on your own words as they spill out into the large room which only seems to get smaller as more and more people flood in from the outside. You hear snippets of conversations and words, the anticipatory extralinguistic excess of this extraordinary materiality, that mark the beginning of the event. These are the sounds that fill in the space of waiting. What do you notice? As your eyes dart around the space, taking in the iridescent decorations and glittering outfits, maybe you start to recognize a pattern in the dress, various interpretations on the theme of this evening's event. And as a shimmering, sequined top struts by, you understand why people try to capture this scene on film.¹ It is arresting: the style, the confidence, the swagger, the pure physicality of it all.

¹ See *Paris is Burning*, dir. Jennie Livingston, 1990; Ryan Murphy, *Pose*, (FX, 2018-).

What else do you notice? The handshakes and hugs; the random shrieks of joy that cut through the atmosphere of anxious anticipation. Maybe you notice the way people stay close to their house tables, these chosen families; or the way people stop to say hello and hug the elders of the scene who sit at these tables, holding court. Or the way people walk around the space to take in and size up the competition or see friends they haven't seen in a long time, too long really. But wherever your attention was being pulled before, there is always that one moment that you can't help but feel: when the music that was bouncing off the walls of the large hall when you arrived, enfolding everyone in a common groove and rhythm, isn't playing anymore. Your attention has shifted, has been pulled to the stage where a commentator is enthralled in an apparent one-sided conversation because you can't hear or see their partner standing somewhere off stage. Or maybe they've just called the first Legend to the stage, the volume of the beat has been turned up much higher than it was playing before, and the room is chanting their name, clapping and stomping to each syncopated step as they ascend the stairs to the runway. Captivated in a communal trance, everyone around you (including yourself) gravitates in choreographed unison toward the stage to get a better look, almost as if they are being pulled by some magnetic force that has taken over the collective body of the crowd. It is loud, deafening and driving, this noise. Do you even register when the commentator's call stops making denotational sense, when the words begin to break apart into unrecognizable clusters of sound and noise, when the stuttered repetition of bits of words grow louder and louder into a cascading crescendo? The siren song of the commentator, throwing rhyme and rhythmic twists toward the voguer/walker/performer, dances around your ears and you forget, however briefly, that you are standing still, watching from the sidelines.



What is "ball culture"? What is it about this group of people who participate in and belong to a community of performers and artists and who gather together at events known as balls that holds

captive the imagination of popular culture? Most people familiar with this community will most likely tell you it has something to do with the rich history of black and brown queer individuals coming together to create something for themselves, a space where they could be kings, queens, and business executives. Or maybe they'll comment on the style and virtuosity of the voguing. From Old Way² vogue of the 1980s to the New Way³ of today, this style of movement appears in music videos, in advertisements, and now in the very popular television shows *Pose* (2018-) and *Legendary* (2020-).⁴ This physically astonishing and artistically rich improvisational form has arguably been the breakout star from this underground community of historically black and brown queer performers, designers, and artists. But while it is a common refrain in ballroom to say that one should be able to “vogue to anything” and that a true voguer should be able to “catch the beat” regardless of the song, the sounds, music, and noises of ballroom mark a distinctive sort of blood that pumps through the collective body of the participants. Indeed, sound is perhaps one of the most powerful aspects of the sensorial experience of attending a ball—the music is loud, the audience is hollering, the emcee is chanting, the walkers are pounding the runway with every step, spin, and dip. It can be an overwhelming auditory experience for even your most experienced partygoer.

I want to consider the relationship between sound and the practices of attention and inattention that they develop in ball culture, focusing specifically on how noise cultivates an ethico-political capacity that opens up a distinctive temporality in which a community assembles itself and

² See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yx7OXO3MUwI> OR <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmmUw-kcRnU>

³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y2z4CXTjVUg&feature=emb_title

⁴ There is no question that the ballroom scene has been taken up and appropriated in popular culture. Most notably, people often refer to Madonna's music video “Vogue” as a good example of how people have profited of the creative work by those in the community—Willi Ninja was her choreographer. This is why shows like *Pose* on FX and *Legendary* on HBO Max have been so exciting for people in the ballroom scene. Members are involved with the writing and production and are the stars of the shows—telling their stories and being allowed to take credit for their talents.

its possible otherwise. I argue that the noises that saturate and demarcate the space of the ballroom work to train the body to respond in specific ways to its environment. Where interruption operates in the everyday as a source of temporal disruption, in the ballroom interruption becomes a tool through which this community learns how to be present and focused on the ongoing event. Classic vogue songs like MFSB's "Love is the Message" (1974), George Kranz's "Din Daa Daa" (1984), Junior Vasquez's "Work this Pussy" (1989), and Masters at Work's "The Ha Dance" (1991) all have elements of the kind of noise I'm referring to: in each of these songs, there is a point at which language begins to break down and disintegrate into repetitive and a cascading staccato of syllables.

At its most basic scientific level, both sound and noise are vibrations (sound waves) in the air that we sense with our ears. What separates noise from sound, in terms of our perception of the stimulation we experience, rests on the continuity (stability, consistency, intention) of the signal transmitted from a source to a receiver. Noise is what Shannon and Weaver would call the "unwanted additions" which distort and interfere with the signal as it moves through the air, the telephone wire, or radio, creating a veil of uncertainty when it comes to interpreting the original meaning or signal.⁵ In this sense, noise is most commonly understood as a negative sonic interruption in the transmission of distinct symbols that we interpret as a word or melody.

By most accounts, noise is a problem, as Garret Keizer so cheekily explains, that undermines human happiness and well-being.⁶ It prevents rest, thwarts sleep, and disrupts the natural landscape. Indeed, scholars have argued that noise, to devastating effect, is what modernist technologies throw

⁵ Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1964), 7-8.

⁶ Garret Keizer, *The Unwanted Sound of Everything We Want: A Book About Noise* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2010), 20. There is a reason why so many different techniques of torture have involved noise and why "noise pollution" has become a major problem for cities across the world. See Greg Hainge, *Noise Matters: Toward an Ontology of Noise* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EHzvPesHUyA>

*Te di te di gggrrrrrr ow! Te di te di gggrrrrrr ow! Now show me ya magic trick, oh! Show me ya magic trick, ow!
Show me ya magic trick, oh! Show me ya magic trick, ow! She she she she show me... She she she she show me...
Grrrrah ka ka ka ka ka ka! Grrrrah ka ka ka ka ka ow! Grrrrah ka ka ka ka ka ka! Grrrrah ka ka ka ka
ka ow! Now show me your m- m- m- magic! Now show me your m- m- m- magic! Now I'm the bitch that's got the
magic!⁹*



Notice how the sensation of feeling “cunty” gets broken up into “feeling cun, feeling ty.” How the position of the words “daisy,” “cunty,” and “yuck” creates a strange juxtaposition of meaning, as if feeling cunty should be understood as simultaneously feeling flowery and nasty. Or notice how “magic” falls apart into “m- m- m- magic,” further complexifying our limited understanding of such a mythical (mystical) request. In a Wittgensteinian register, one could say that there is no necessary correlation between concrete statements (“show me your magic trick”) and their propositional interpretation because symbols acquire meaning through context and use.¹⁰ And yet, these different strategies for playing with language’s form and structure point to, and undermine, a set of agreed upon meanings, meanings that have stiffened over time. What is revealed in this extralinguistic improvisation? What happens when snippets of sound that make up words begin to break apart? What kind of noise is this? Noises push the walker down the runway and mirror the twists and turns of a vogueur. The commentator is the ringmaster, the choir director, the final arbiter of all battles. These flashes of vocal gymnastics carry you throughout the ball, keeping time with the beat and

⁹ A transcription from the Legendary Kevin JZ Prodigy’s “Show Me Ya (MAGIC TRICK)”

¹⁰ See Wittgenstein, Ludwig, and G. E. M. Anscombe. Revised 4th Edition by P.M.S Hacker and Joachim Schulte. 2009. *Philosophical investigations*. Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.

bellows of the crowd. These sounds stay with you, lingering in your unconscious. They take up space in such a way that no matter where you go in the large hall (or crowded basement) they follow you. Coupled with the crashing cymbals, the whoops and hollers, and the side conversations, you will most likely still hear the ringing in your ears hours after you've gone home to bed. And then it stops. The music, the chanting, the whoops, and the hollers. It all comes to a screeching halt when a voguer lands their final dip, and the DJ cuts the music, and the judges deliberate. *That's a chop* says the commentator and it all starts again with a new voguer and a new beat.

These improvisatory sonic illuminations, the slippery move from signal to noise and back again, defer a kind of meaning making and in so doing, show the existence of the boundaries around what is possible to imagine, what is possible to say. When language dissolves into a series of nonsensical syllables, the impulse toward trying to grasp the structure and code intensifies—we try to find a pattern in these Ursonate-esque recitations.¹¹ But what if what you're listening for (the meaning) can't be determined against the backdrop of phonotactic criteria? What if this noise is training you to hear differently, is communicating something else? Perhaps we could read these vocal musings as carving out sonic space in the ball, drawing everyone's attention to the runway, connecting the ballroom community together in an affective field. Similar to what Saidiya Hartman and Stephen Best describe as “black noise,” the commentator's seemingly unintelligible sonic sparks gesture beyond sense making in the linguistic register – obscuring any intelligible political or ethical salience.¹² Indeed, what kind of utterance is “*Grrrahb ka ka ka ka ka*”? The repetition of the

¹¹ I am interested in the breaking apart of language presented in Kurt Schwitters' sound poem *Ursonate* (1922-1932): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6X7E2i0KMqM>.

¹² For Best and Hartman, black noise “represents the kinds of political aspirations that are inaudible and illegible within the prevailing formulas of political rationality; these yearnings are illegible because they are so wildly utopian and derelict to capitalism.” As they explore the abolition of slavery in relation to its redress, Hartman and Best describe how black noise emanates from the space between the “limited scope of the possible” and a deep desire to repair that which has been

consonant, vowel, consonant expands and slightly changes form as the cluster of noises build and dilate. In an endnote to the article entitled “Fugitive Justice,” Best and Hartman write, “What we call ‘black noise’ Robin Kelley would describe as a ‘freedom dream,’ or Fred Moten would describe as ‘the surreal utopian ‘nonsense’ of a utopian vision, the freedom we know outside of the opposition of sense and intellection.”¹³ How might the enactment of repetition, change, and time dilation admit the “nonsense” between sense and intellection? For Hartman and Best, black noise exceeds normative understandings of what is possible in the political, ethical, and social realm, and operates as an imaginative potential instead of an actionable set of commitments. How does this potential begin to elaborate a world? Could these noises of the ballroom commentator cultivate a sensual relation to space and to other bodies not governed by referential signs?

When we encounter these noises during a ball (repetition, the cutting up of words, and the blending of sounds), phrases that were at once familiar lose their commonplace semantic meaning and we are left with a series of rhythmic and syllabic sounds that nevertheless draw us into an affective fold that catches our attention. Following Fred Moten, one could argue that what we encounter in the commentator’s calls are particular sonic resonances that exceed music and speech. He writes that in black music, there is a specific kind of sonic excess which disrupts and resists, “certain formations of identity and interpretation by challenging the reducibility of phonic matter to verbal meaning or conventional musical form.”¹⁴ Like other activities in ball culture, there is a trickster quality to this noise, playfully manipulating the phonic matter in order to disrupt or reject

forever altered. Stephen Best and Saidiya Hartman, “Fugitive Justice,” *Representations* 92, no. 1 (2005): 9.

¹³ Best and Hartman, “Fugitive Justice,” 14

¹⁴ Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 6.

verbal meaning.¹⁵ In speaking of how sounds test the limits of traditional modes of communication, Moten writes:

Above all, they open the possibility of a critique of the valuation of meaning over content and the reduction of phonic matter and syntactic “degeneracy” in the early modern search for a universal language and the late modern search for a universal science of language. This disruption of the Enlightenment linguistic project is of fundamental importance since it allows a rearrangement of the relationship between notions of human freedom and notions of human essence. More specifically, the emergence from political, economic, and sexual objection of the radical materiality and syntax that animates black performances indicates a freedom drive that is expressed always and everywhere throughout their graphic (re)production.¹⁶

Moten might argue that it is not simply that these sounds and noises mess with syntax, words, and phrases. They do, but in their disruption, they also play with structure and grammar, probing the foundational logics by which we have arrived at concepts like “freedom” or “magic” or “cunty”—or to be less dramatic about it, in their excess, noises fiddle around with conventionally agreed upon codes of referentiality. Put differently, these noises are not necessarily a move *toward* different ideas of freedom, magic, or cunty; rather, they suggest a new avenue for discovering the conditions or boundaries of these concepts. These noises are themselves a critique of how we fill in these categories and concepts, they provide new ways of seeing, hearing, and feeling (at) the *limits* of our conventional understandings.

But consider for a moment how the interpretation above hinges on the idea that what we *ought* to do, in terms of our common relation to and use of language, is to decipher meaning or try to recuperate some forgotten or inaccessible understanding from that which exceeds the sonic landscape. I want to ask that we take a step back. I want to ask that we consider not the content of these noises but the form they take and relations they cultivate (we could call this a distinction

¹⁵ For Moten, these resonances might best be described by what Jacques Derrida refers to as “invagination,” or the process by which something participates but remains distinct.

¹⁶ Moten, *In the Break*, 7.

between reading these noises in terms of *interruption* instead of excess). If we read the breaking apart of language in terms of the way they refigure our temporal relations, noises of ballroom do something more mechanical, more rooted in the body, to our experience of listening. A thought experiment: you're having a conversation with someone, perhaps a conversation you've had many times before. Let's say you're ordering coffee at a shop. How often do you, dear reader, preemptively fill in the words of your partner in your brain? How often can you guess what they are about to say before they ever utter the words? I would venture a guess that this happens more often than you might think. Heidegger writes that this is because we do not simply hear others when they speak, "we hear language speaking": speaking "is a listening not *while* but *before* we are speaking"¹⁷. Heidegger argues that there is an interesting temporal dimension to the act of listening. Listening to language is an activity of letting language *speak* to us and we listen for the language we know (past) at the same time that we wait (in the present) for language (in the future) to encounter us. "What [language] says," Heidegger writes, "wells up from the formerly spoken and so far still unspoken Saying which pervades the design of language."¹⁸

Built into the grammar of communication is a temporal slipperiness that anticipates the future while extending the present. We might hear language in the present, but communication works because we inhabit language and discern its meaning based on our past experiences with it. And when we guess at what our partner might say—when we are at the counter about to order a coffee—we are guessing at our understanding of the logical unfolding of the common linguistic form. So, what, you might ask, does this have to do with the noises of ballroom? I want to focus on that moment when the commentator begins to chant and language begins to break apart and break

¹⁷ Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1982), 123-124.

¹⁸ Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 124.

down in order to draw our attention, as members of this community of listeners, not to the content of what is being communicated but to the *way* we listen. Listening in the ballroom is an activity of learning how to encounter a sonic interruption, is a practice of refusing to fill in what we might think will (or should) come next. This means that listening is less tied to what is being communicated and should rather be thought of as a kind of pedagogy of attention.

Attention is not a morally neutral state, and its failure (inattention) suggests a sort of inability to or disinterest in maintaining concentrated sensory perception. Indeed, Jonathan Crary argues that since the nineteenth century, “Western modernity [...] has demanded that individuals define and shape themselves in terms of a capacity for ‘paying attention,’ that is, for a disengagement from a broader field of attraction, whether visual or auditory, for the sake of isolating or focusing on a reduced number of stimuli.”¹⁹ In this way, modern subjectivities have largely been defined by and through their relationships to attention and inattention—as labor, education, and mass consumption developed under modern capital, so too did institutional technologies which sought to manage populations such that they would remain productive and, importantly, predictable.²⁰ Creating a standard in terms of productive output requires establishing a common way of being *in* time so many of these technologies were developed to measure the duration of attention.

There is a substantial body of scholarship that has long since identified the multiple ways in which minoritarian subjects have been differently yet uniquely affected by and constituted through such technologies of temporal surveillance.²¹ And as I’ve argued, Black feminist writers have argued

¹⁹ Jonathan Crary, *Suspension of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2000), 1.

²⁰ Crary, *Suspension of Perception*, 4.

²¹ Here, one could think with Elizabeth Povinelli who explores how tense (the grammatical formulation of past, present, and future in language) shapes relationships between event and narration. Povinelli argues that indigeneity is often linked to a pastness, making (im)possible certain forms of political discourse around questions of sovereignty, thereby holding steady the grammar of settler colonialism. Elizabeth Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late*

that throughout history blackness has been articulated through a kind of temporal lag (slowness, delay) characterized as a failure to properly participate in social, political, and economic life; thus time itself has become an important tool for resisting the totalizing force of normative renderings of time.²² However, minoritarian subjects are not simply *positioned* in time (tempo, pace, slowness) in ways that are racialized (not to mention gendered and sexualized.) They also operate within time, time their activity produces (duration, suspension, attention) and this requires further consideration. If we agree, as Crary reminds us, that attention, as the capacity to take note of someone or something, simultaneously demands that we “effectively cancel out or exclude from consciousness much of our immediate environment,” and we agree that noise is most often experienced as a sonic interruption that primarily affects attention, then what kind of training is happening here? What practice of listening is being enacted at the ball?

Balls are a different form of interruption: the kind of interruption you desire. For the black and brown, queer community of people who come together at balls, the everyday is so often overwhelmed by moments and scenes of violence and violation, moments, and scenes both big and small. Some of them personal, others more distant and abstract. The latter scenes are the ones we know: mass incarceration, systematic and sustained disinvestment in education and healthcare, the over-policing and hunting of black and brown queer life. These are the devastating narratives that give content to the experience of living in the afterlife of slavery. These viscerally overwhelming

Liberalism (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011). See also Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

²² See Robin D. G. Kelley, “‘We Are Not What We Seem’: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South,” *Journal of American History* 80, no. 1 (1993): 75-112; Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—an Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257-337; Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Kemi Adeyemi, “The Practice of Slowness: Black Queer Women and the Right to the City,” *GLQ* 24, no. 4 (2019): 545-567.

moments often interrupt the everyday, manifesting as intimate experiences. This is why balls are so much more than good parties. Beyond the glitter and glamour, balls are episodic sites of relief where who you are—as fact, aspiration, work-in-progress—is not a given, not always already determined from the outset.²³ In my larger project, I argue that balls are laboratories for developing skills for living—and flourishing—in the afterlife of slavery.²⁴ Learning to listen to the noises in ballroom is one such technique through which the body is invited to a collective.

The complex mix of sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell that merge and mingle together make ball culture a sensorially rich environment. When the commentator spits sweet fire pulling the audience into an unfolding and repetitive web, they are also inviting those crowded around the stage, sitting at tables, and walkers alike to participate in a particular mode of attention and inattention, opportunities to (re)group and (re)direct. It is a style of listening that summons a mode of being present in ways that don't wear one out, don't require a total accounting of one's intentions and motivations. Individuals are hailed into this collective by noise or, to say it differently, a world throws itself together when they turn toward this noise.²⁵ There is something almost meditative

²³ Here, I am referring to Frantz Fanon's work in thinking through the "fact" of blackness, the always already overdetermined problem of epidermalization. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask* (New York: Grove Press, 1967). See also Kara Keeling, "In the Interval: Frantz Fanon and the 'Problems' of Visual Representation," *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (2003): 91-117.

²⁴ See Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press: Durham, 2011).

²⁵ In his investigation of ideology and the state apparatuses, Louis Althusser argues that ideology interpellates individuals as subjects through processes of recognition. When we are hailed (by a police officer or friend) in the street, we recognize ourselves as the subject of the address. He writes, "ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing." Louis Althusser, *On Ideology* (New York: Verso, 2008), 48. This circuit of recognition that transforms individuals into subjects happens differently for Frantz Fanon who describes a similar example of being hailed in the street ("Look, a Negro!"); but where for Althusser the individual becomes the ideological subject of the address, for Fanon, the individual recognizes himself not as an ideological subject but rather as a black body whose subjectivity is an impossibility. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 112.

about the way the noise pulls each individual into a communal experience. Even though it is loud and energetic, this noise elicits a kind of calm concentration, an active idleness. It transfixes, holds captive, and fades into the background. And through practice, this community of listeners learns how to navigate those movements—they learn to listen for when their own reaction is called forth.

The commentator's quick and improvisational chanting forestalls the listeners ability to fill in future utterances or rely on past utterances as locations for understanding the present and this noise promotes a practice of listening that is active and attentive to the moment. Charles Hirschkind describes a distinction between inattentive (merely hearing) and attentive listening.²⁶ Listening, he argues, is a “complex sensory skill” one learns through practice that creates the conditions under which one develops an intimacy with what is being communicated. In the ballroom, listening is an embodied practice of refiguring one's attachment to the normalizing logic of communication such that the body responds to the present unfolding of the sonic landscape. For Hirschkind, the development of attention posits listening as an embodied practice and as a technique of the self which influences the subject in terms of how they move through the world.²⁷

²⁶ In describing how the practice of listening to sermon tapes shapes a particular “ethics of listening” for young Muslims in Egypt, Hirschkind argues that actively listening to the teachings of the Quran (versus hearing which is a “passive and spontaneous receptivity,” promotes a practice whereby the listener not only receives the messages of the tapes but is also called to respond as a godly subject, cultivating a “moral physiology” or sensibility. Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 70, 75.

²⁷ Here I am also thinking with Brian Larkin who argues that the relationship between attention and inattention have a different effect on the development of the self and the self's relationship to the world. In his article “Techniques of Inattention” he describes how in Jos, Nigeria, loudspeakers playing various religious sermons are a ubiquitous part of urban, everyday life. He argues that in a place that has survived and continues to live under the threat of religious violence, it is important to cultivate an attitude of inattention. He writes, “inattention is part of the process of ‘attunement’ (Elyachar 2011) to living in a city technologically mediated by the loudspeaker; it is a conscious, willful act and not simply an inability to attend as a result of the distractive nature of modern stimuli.” Larkin argues that inattention is also a skill for living well, a sensory technique one cultivates through practice. For both Hirschkind and Larkin, there is an ethical and political relationship to soundscapes that shape and are shaped by the self, but Larkin understands that inattention does not always signal a failure to pay attention; rather, it is useful to remember that

This mode of interacting with this acoustic environment inflates and extends a region of the present such that one can occupy its boundary. Because balls are episodic, there is a heightened desire to stay present, even in moments of stillness, as a collective, all working to produce a world, however fleeting it may be. Lauren Berlant argues that an episode is “a perturbation in the ordinary’s ongoingness that raises to consciousness a situation that follows from something without bringing with it conventions or prophecies about what its ultimate shape as event will be.”²⁸ If an event is described as a situation that holds fidelity to a future object/scene or a “genre calibrated according to its intensities and kinds of impact,” episodes are instead “occasions that make experiences” without completely breaking from what comes before or after.²⁹ When you are suspended in the episode of the ball, you can be anything, do anything, try on and out anything. Noise is an experiment in trying out and (re)invigorating ways of using what is ready at hand to create something new. In this way, balls are a kind of laboratory for developing skills and trying out techniques of living well in the afterlife of slavery. By refusing to establish a set of pre-existing conditions and thus changing our temporal relation to the activity of hearing, collective desires and

inattention can sometimes be an important mode for living in a world where sounds hold complex cultural meanings and where the stakes of being addressed carry political (and at times sacred) consequences. Brian Larkin, “Techniques of Inattention: The Mediality of Loudspeakers in Nigeria,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 87, no. 4 (Fall 2014): 1006-7.

²⁸ Lauren Berlant goes on to say that “episodes are defined first by causality, but their affective charge derives from confronting the enigma of their ultimate shape. Something has an impact: What will happen? I call this process the becoming-event of the situation. A situation usually gets its shape from the way that it resonates strongly with previous episodes [...]” See Lauren Berlant and Jordan Greenwald, “Affect in the End Times: A Conversation with Lauren Berlant,” *Qui Parle* 20, no. 2 (2012): 72.

²⁹ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 100-101. Alain Badiou writes that “there is an intelligibility of the event, but one that is created, and in many ways, this constitutes one of the definitions of fidelity: fidelity is the creation in the future tense of the intelligibility of the event.” The event, then, is something that we can only ever know in hindsight. See Alain Badiou, Tim Appleton, David Payne, Joël Madore, “After the Event: Rationality and the Politics of Invention: An Interview with Alain Badiou,” *Prelom: Journal for Art and Politics* 8 (2006): 180-94.

imaginings in the ballroom community are able to take shape in the possibilities presented by noise. The pedagogical power of noise is its continued unfolding, creating the conditions for imagination to flourish.

In the breaking down of language, we see the work that goes into the development of skills for experimentation and improvisation. Rather than forging a new language, a new logic, and a new way of sensing the possibilities of flourishing, members of the ballroom community find ways of messing with and refiguring the materials of the world. When the materials at hand (of language, of dress, of prestige) rest on anti-blackness and anti-queerness, the improvisation required to dream of an otherwise demands a kind of side-stepping, a kind of theft, a kind of fugitivity that we see when language breaks apart. The noise of the commentator, which is the space between the sayable and that which cannot be fully realized, invites new ways of hearing the unfolding present. By cultivating aural attachments and learning how and when to pay attention to the breaking up of linguistic patterns, one develops techniques for listening not for a pre-given projection into the horizon but to whatever comes next. Listening, in this way, is an activity which elicits a response and an embodied practice that inspires a sensibility. To think of this as an ethic of the self is to see a community embodying noise in the pursuit of another life *in* time. Building an affective community happens when we embody and learn how to respond to noise during a ball, happens when we encounter the ephemeral resonances of noise, happens when we move in and out of the sensation of being present differently in time, together.

Chapter Five

Pedagogy of the Cliché: exploring memory through improvisation and play

The apparent freedom of the improviser—the risk taking and spectacle of spontaneity—is rarely the inspired abandonment that it appears to be or is promoted as. Improvisation requires a powerful memory: memory of the parameters of an instrument, of the body, of available technology, the parameters of a work’s structure and one’s place within it at any one time, the parameters of an idiom, a genre and its history, its possibilities.
-*The Philosophy of Improvisation*, Gary Peter

The cliché appears in one’s own mouth only as an instance of ventriloquism; more than other kinds of language, clichés come to the speaker already intentioned, with the effect of influencing the attitudes and behavior of those who use and accept them.
-*Reciting America*, Christopher Douglas

This chapter explores a dance style developed in the ballroom scene called vogue. It is organized around a series of steps known as the “five elements” and is an improvisational movement practice that pushes at the limits of speed, physical ingenuity, and flair. And like other styles of improvisation, it relies on a deep sense of memory and play within a set of normative gestures. It is true that we often consider improvisation to be one of the few techniques available for discovering and enacting freedom from norms or conventions, but as I will show, voguing provides an opportunity to improvise and experiment *with* limits, norms, conventions, and clichés. In this way, what is ordinarily seen as an obstacle to freedom (the cliché) becomes a strategy for learning about what prevents us from reaching it. Put differently, this chapter argues that for a community that experiences the precarious effects of living as the constitutive other to the standard in a heteronormative and white world, voguing teaches those who practice it what it feels like to inhabit the norm, what it looks like to perform the convention, and what it means to move within the cliché.

Through a series of ethnographic encounters, I show how vogue improvisation and play challenge notions of freedom. If we are committed to the idea that improvisation creates the

conditions for freedom, then leaning into conventions, clichés, and norms would be seen as failure. And yet, when the world is organized in such a way that your (good) life depends on playing by the rules, then the total abandonment of norms might not be an option and failure might be your unfortunate and unavoidable fate. This might seem like a reiteration of Halberstam's insightful point that, "for queers, failure can be a style... or a way of life... and it can stand in contrast to the grim scenarios of success that depend upon 'trying and trying again'" (2011, 3); but voguing flips the script, reframing success as a repetitive *study* in failure. In other words, voguing takes failure not as a style, way of life, or the opposite of success but as the source material for learning a style, way of life, and success. From there, I move into a conversation that seeks to show how vogue relies on memory as a tool through which to understand the convention. I end with an ethnographic scene of my own failure to learn (how to learn) how to vogue. Besides giving you a sense of my own awkwardness (which I assure you is easier to read than inhabit), this last story fills in what I mean by the cliché and asks us to take seriously how our desires for an otherwise cloud out forms of living (and flourishing) in the present.

Studying (our anxiety around) the cliché

There is something strange about recounting scenes of ordinary life. Ethnographers know it well—we are in the business of writing down and recording the most mundane of circumstances "in the field" with the hopes that one day, when we are back in our study somewhat removed from "the world," we might stumble upon some previously unnoticed but interesting tidbit that helps to clarify or illuminate something *of* the world *to* the world. If done well, the end result, in the form of a dissertation, article, or (hopefully one day) a book, will look almost nothing like the endless pages detailing where you were, how you got there, who was there, and what was said or done. The goal is to pull from the ordinary something of its mystery, contradiction, or surprise; to show how people

find ways of surviving in the face of ordinary forms of violence, poverty, and loss; to explore how we make ordinary worlds in and against capitalism and its expansionist institutions. The flip side is equally true: to make ordinary those moments, situations, or events which baffle the mind; showing the ways we deal with scenes that feel unimaginable, overwhelming or devastating. This is what it means to “make the strange familiar and the familiar strange,” that cliché which purports to describe the mandate of ethnographic research.

Ordinary life is filled with these kinds of verbal clichés. So much so that they could be called a genre of the ordinary: “better safe than sorry,” “actions speak louder than words,” “the grass is always greener on the other side,” or maybe even “you can’t judge a book by its cover”. We tend to use them as a shorthand to express common feelings, insights, or advice about the world (and we tend to avoid them for the same reasons). They condense what are complex ideas about desire, envy, stability, or proper etiquette into easy catchphrases that slip easily off the tongue and float quickly out of the mind. Elizabeth Barry writes that the cliché has a dual nature as “borrowed, lazy and banal forms of thinking” and “a figure of speech felt to be repeated to the point where the original image has ceased to be striking” (2006, 3). Borrowed in the sense that each turn of phrase exists in a linguistic common, available for anyone intimately familiar with the language to activate at any moment. There may have been a time when to say, “the grass is always greener” didn’t instantly elicit the response “on the other side,” but constant repetition has created a strong sense that these clusters of words belong together. The irony, of course, is that even though we understand (if we are in the know) what the cliché seeks to convey, it is so common (so lazy, so ordinary) that it doesn’t necessarily call to mind the actual content of the phrase, those green(er) pastures over yonder. In this way, the turn toward the cliché reveals a failure to creatively express something and/or a failure to maintain the connection between the metaphor and its image, a disruption between the signifier and signified.

Of course, clichés are not only verbal phenomena; there are clichés of style and dress, sensibilities, and performance (see Berlant 2008; Douglas 2001; Molloy 2010; Butler 1999) that do similar work to their linguistic counterparts—all gesturing toward norms and conventions of a community, public, or nation and obscuring something through their constant repetition. And while the particulars vary widely, what clichés obscure is the amount of labor that goes into holding up, maintaining, and understanding the norm. We know from black feminist writers (Spillers 1987; Wynter 2003; Lorde 1984; Sharpe 2016; Campt 2012, 2017), queer theorists (Warner 1999; Muñoz 1999, 2009; Halberstam 1998, 2005, 2011; Edelman 2004), and classic anthropological scholars (Geertz 1973; Meade 1929; Benedict 1934; Lévi-Strauss 1962) that norms can be constraining or uncomfortable at best and violent at their worst – we know it so well that it could also be called a cliché – which is not to say that we don’t carry complex and strange attachments to them. This is perhaps why clichés are often framed as a kind of trap, one that we must work hard to break free from. This is indeed true for Deleuze who considered the cliché to be a “sensory-motor image of a thing” where, following Bergson, “we do not perceive the thing of the image in its entirety, *we always perceive less of it*, we perceive only what we are interested in perceiving, or rather what it is in our interest to perceive, by virtue of our economic interests, ideological beliefs and psychological demands” (1989, 20; emphasis added). In hiding the entire image, clichés organize the world such that we might bear the weight of experience, however horrifying. In accordance with to our particular positions as subjects, members of a group, or citizens, they are mechanisms for “turning away when it is too unpleasant” and “furnishing us with something to say when we no longer know what to do” (1989, 20). As Dumit says, in his explication of Deleuze’s writing, clichés remind us that “we are not awake when we are awake” (2014, 347). Is it any wonder, then, why we might fight like hell to turn away from the cliché or try to wake up from the mundane flow of the ordinary that it

works to hold in check?¹ But how can we break away from this sticky claim on our thinking?

Deleuze would turn to cinema's ability to shock us into fully living with our eyes wide open whereas Dumit, influenced by both Deleuze and Haraway, asks us to unpack our clichés by imploding them, dissecting the ways in which artifacts that are held together in clichés are always already discursively constituted through technology, labor, desire, history, and politics (2014, 350). The goal is to wake up to the world, become more attuned and receptive to those intolerable or unendurable things and situations. Freedom—of thought, action, feeling—resides “in the break.”

This chapter seeks to upset the assumptions at the heart of ideas of about ordinary life and the cliché. That freedom comes from art (and scholarship) that breaks from the norm and shocks us into a new way of seeing is a sentiment shared by many scholars, artists, and activists, but I would like to tell you a different kind of story about a group of people who find ways of improvising and playing with norms and conventions, not to break or change them but to investigate their shape and form: a group of people who learn how to situate themselves in relation to what might be oppressive standards (of race, class, beauty) not to struggle against them but to make sense of the world. The relationship between the ordinary and the cliché may seem a somewhat counterintuitive place to begin a conversation about improvisation and play within ball culture, a community perhaps best known for its outrageous glamour, inventiveness, and *extra*-ordinary events. But, as you will see, starting with what some would call improvisation's opposite gives us a different vantage point from which to explore the shapeshifting nature of voguing. It allows us to ask a different kind of question about what kinds of freedoms might be possible not outside, around, or beyond the cliché, but

¹ Luc Peters writes: “We perceive something, we are moved by it through affection, and know, from an a priori script for acting, which action is appropriate. In other words, the action is included in the perception. Thinking is superfluous. We know what we have to do.” *Cliché and Organization: Thinking with Deleuze and Film*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016: 55

within them, changing the demands we place on improvisation from a technique for turning otherwise toward a technique of dwelling in the present.

To say that voguing is an improvisational practice is to say that it is an exercise in trying to find ways of staying open and receptive to whatever one encounters. Improvisation begins with a moment or impulse where the opportunity to move differently is the clean slate upon which decisions get made. Improvisation offers possibilities and radical openings that suggest alternative orientations, experimentation, freedom, and surprise. Privileging the new and the unknown, to practice improvisation is to develop the capacity to think, move, sound, speak, turn and taste otherwise (or against the grain). Improvisation (the action, the impulse, the uptake, the gesture, the response to a call, the choice) is the answer to the question “which way could I turn?” that doesn’t rely on a map or destination as its motivation to move. This means that when we talk about improvisation, we are also talking about a cluster of desires – to surprise, to innovate, to stand out, to be new – that exceed the given set of constraints embedded in the “could”. You may notice that the language I’m using to describe improvisation admits a sort of seduction (and slipperiness) that sits at the heart of the project of improvisation itself and is one of the problems with how we try to conceptualize it. Indeed, what students of improvisation from all disciplines, mediums, and fields know is that improvisation is also about struggling to work within set boundaries, within or against structures of space, rhythm, and sound. In this way, the inventiveness, promise, and excitement of improvisation is the push and pull between openness and closure where the possibility of remaining open in the face of closure is precisely what makes improvisation seem, feel, and look like magic.

But the play between openness and closure is just one of the many embedded contradictions of improvisation. Another is the relationship between success and failure—where failure is not simply the motivation for returning to an unsuccessful project, scene, encounter but also a grammar embedded in the language of improvisation itself. A failed improvisation might be a cliché or a

repetition of nothing more than more of the same. It could look like a mimetic return to the ordinary or taking the road too often traveled. Improvisation is so tightly wound around a dialectic between success and failure that to pull it apart and to think through the negative gives us a chance at asking a different kind of question. If we know (or at least have a hunch) we will fail when we embark on an improvisatory exercise, then what do we make of its liberatory potential? Is it possible that improvisation is doing something else other than finding moments of freedom within the confines of history or breaking from repetitious activity? Might improvisation be more closely aligned with memory and return, not as a backdrop against which the “new” is formed but rather as its place of refuge? And if failure is the starting point, the beginning, the place of return, then how might we recalibrate our desires and attachments to the activity itself?

Across the literature on improvisation, there seems to be two loosely configured camps: those who see improvisation as emancipatory, as transcendence itself, and those who see it as a form of bricolage, a practice of reinvigorating the old into a new. In the former, we might think of Allan Kaprow’s “Happenings” of the late 1950s and early 1960s that refused to be confined to any one medium or style by playing with and against whatever was present to hand. In these instances, improvisation is understood to be unbounded by tradition or norm as it perpetually cries “yes and” to the spontaneous unfolding of the new in the present toward an untarnished future filled with potential. But is “free improvisation” even possible? Adorno was suspicious. In his essay “On Popular Music,” which looks at improvisation in the language and art of jazz, Adorno argues that the relationship between the “detail” (improvisation) and the whole is so mechanical that improvisation is nothing more than a variation on a theme. He writes:

Even though jazz musicians still improvise in practice, their improvisations have become so ‘normalized’ as to enable a whole terminology to be developed to express the standard devices of individualization: a terminology which in turn is ballyhooed by jazz publicity agents to foster the myth of pioneer artisanship and at the same time flatter the fans by apparently allowing them to peep behind the curtain and get the inside story. This pseudo-individualization is prescribed by the standardization of the framework... In a great many

cases, such as the 'break' of pre-swing jazz, the musical function of the improvised detail is determined completely by the scheme: the break can be nothing other than a disguised cadence. Here, very few possibilities for actual improvisation remain. (1941, 24)

It is not too difficult to see how this idea of improvisation might be a distorted notion nestled within a false promise of freedom. In his deeply pessimistic view, "free" improvisation that flutters across the surface of the whole without ever penetrating the standard structure, is closer to the opiate of the masses than an invitation to new beginnings. Meaning, Adorno's concern is that jazz fails to achieve "actual" improvisation in its structural form.

Gary Peters argues that we can read Adorno as defending "improvisation," the kind that messes with and alters the structure itself, but this only works if we agree that, for Adorno or others, improvisation's mandate is to change the foundation (2009, 78). Again, what if our investment was not centered around the success of improvisation to change the moment, offer us an alternative, or, through engagement with specific historical and material conditions, change the foundational structure upon which they rest? What if the failure to actually change much of anything was precisely what made improvisation worth spending time with? What if the value of improvisation was not entangled with forgetting but with memory, history, and repetition? What if the failure to forget was what gave improvisation its power? What if we could imagine improvisation as a technique of playing with the cliché instead of the act of avoiding its pitfalls?

These questions might seem like these questions are the starting point for those in the second camp, where improvisation is understood as a practice of re-inhabiting the old. Scholars in this camp think of improvisation as that which embraces what has come before to mess with it.² It

² Susan Foster argues that improvisation is about having a particular relationship to and awareness of events as they unfold in the world and while improvisation might appear to be spontaneous and surprising for the viewer, it is in fact a mode of engaging with the world that takes practice. She writes, "[improvisation] entails a vigilant porousness toward the unknown," a porousness that responds to stimuli but is not overwhelmed by them (Foster 2003, 7). Further, Danielle Goldman cautions us against assuming that, because improvisation is a presentist form, it does not rely on

resists and responds to repetitive impulses by learning to notice, play with, and play against the structural pathways. This kind of improvisation doesn't forsake all that comes with the moment of an encounter; it responds to limits, both in the world and in the mind, through an attunement and could be understood as a process of becoming rather than a moment of reckless abandon and success. It is the kind of improvisation that Moten (2003) finds indicative of black radical performance practices. Where Adorno might see the "break" as (over)determined and impeding any "actual" improvisation in the case of jazz, Moten listens for that which exceeds the structure in the break, this potential opening, this "erotics of the cut" (2003, 26). He writes, "black performance has always been the ongoing improvisation of a kind of lyricism of the surplus—invagination, rupture, collision, augmentation" (2003, 26). The freedom drive igniting this understanding of improvisation is not a denial of re-production; rather, improvisation for Moten takes seriously that "the *conjunction* of reproduction and disappearance as performance's condition of possibility, its ontology and its mode of production" (2003, 5). Here, the turn away from recitation can be (and often is) a turn toward and through the original moment and when improvisation recognizes itself as a return to the original, as a re-engagement, it doesn't try to recuperate but rather finds new ways of moving through that which has come before.

What I am trying to highlight in this crude and condensed rendering of what are two very complex engagements with improvisation is this: while these readings take different approaches to what improvisation is and how it manages to change a structure (the given), they are both trying to extract something from improvisation, namely a kind of freedom politics. An Adorno and a Moten

deep pasts or imagine alternate futures. She writes that because improvisation is spontaneous and based on intuition, people often assume that this "implies a lack of preparation, thereby eliding the historical knowledge, the sense of tradition, and the enormous skill that the most eloquent improvisers are able to mobilize" (Goldman 2010, 5).

might not agree on how we reach emancipation (or what it looks like when we arrive), but the commitment to improvisation as a potential opening into a new way of (or form of) life, say, is an impulse this chapter seeks to trouble. I argue that vogue improvisation requires (demands) a return to the standard, a repetition of the cliché, not as the condition for discovering the possibilities of the new (of freedom) but rather, as a method for learning what kind of physical, psychic, and affective labor goes into creating and maintaining the cliché itself.

Voguing is a practice of learning history as routed in the body that changes the question from “which way *could* I turn?” to “which way *should* I turn?” The shift in register from the structural based on one’s capacity to the intentional (or ethical) comes from developing a strong memory (a physical archive) but that shift is also why, as I will show, voguing cannot be taught. It is learned through practice and failure. To play within the cliché is a common practice in the ballroom scene, as the different chapters will show, but here, I wish to attend to the ways in which voguing becomes a tool for recognizing the ordinary and filling in its content, a kind of pedagogy of the cliché. And as you’ll see, when the clichés that voguing takes up are both structured around and used to maintain the structure of a society whose foundation rests in heteronormativity and whiteness, then inhabiting and playing with the cliché is a different kind of project – perhaps one whose pleasure comes from its refusal to necessitate freedom as its ends.

Learning to play (with failure and fantasy)

What are the five elements? Linda hollered over her shoulder at the group as she moved chairs away from the center of the room to the outer edges close to the overnight beds that lined the walls. It was a typical Monday afternoon in 2018 and we were in the large community room for Vogue

Group, AFC's most popular group.³ We had already gone around the room saying names, preferred gender pronouns, and answering the check in question "who is your favorite rapper?" which inevitably created more fissures than affinities. *Today we're gonna do something a little different. We're gonna start with pass the beat but I want someone to tell me the elements, first, for those who are new to the group.* Today was quieter than usual. Some of the groups' regulars were missing but that was to be expected on those early summer days when the temperature hasn't quite reached its scorching peak. *Catwalk, duckwalk, hands, spins and dips, and floor performance,* Armani said as she walked to the group standing in a circle from the sole mirror that hangs along the far wall. *Good,* Linda said looking down at her phone, searching for a beat that would satisfy everyone's demands—a truly impossible task.

Ok, we're gonna play pass the beat as a warmup. I'm gonna put on a song and we're gonna move through the elements starting with hands. When someone passes you the beat you tell a story with your hands, she explained as she brought her arms together in front of her body, tracing an imaginary figure eight in the air, one hand following the other to infinity *until you pass it to someone else.* With that, she "threw" the beat to the person next to her, the throw rhythmically timed to the back-crashing burst of a cymbal. *Again,* she said with a pregnant pause for clarity and maybe a little added drama, *we're starting with hands.* As she was explaining all this to the new and somewhat nervous faces of the young people in the group, a posse of regulars walked in, hugging their friends, and putting their bags, jackets, phones, and other belongings on the tables we had pushed into a clump in the back of the room to give us space

³ AFC has had a contentious relationship with voguing (and ball culture) at the drop-in center over the years. Before Linda started her Vogue Group in 2017, there was a workshop led by a very kind (but very white) cis-gendered female intern. The story is that there was some sort of fight that broke out during the group that had to do with drama that was somehow ball related and one of the staff members accidentally got punched in the face trying to break it up. They "banned" voguing for a couple years until Linda was hired and started her group. The thinking was that since she is a member of the ball community and the clients (young people) respected her, there wouldn't be any altercations in the space. That proved to be correct for the years that I was at AFC.

to “really feel the beat.” *We’re playing pass the beat*, Linda said to those who had just arrived. *And don’t forget to sign in.*

I had been volunteering at AFC for many months, working in the kitchen, monitoring the community room, mentoring clients, teaching a hip-hop dance class, and attending Vogue Group as part researcher, facilitator, and student. It took almost no time to recognize that while I had studied dance my entire life, voguing was unlike any “technique” or “style” I had ever encountered. One does not *learn* to vogue through instruction in the traditional sense. Rather, you learn how to pay attention, how to respond in real time to the people or objects around you, how to pull from the past those gestures and movements that seem obvious and second nature. Or at least that’s what Linda would tell me whenever I asked her to “teach me” how to vogue. For example, when you learn ballet technique, you practice rotating from the hips, bending the knees while pulling up through the inner thigh, and pointing the feet using your arches. These physical mechanics organize and position the body and, once they become second nature – whichever way I step, jump, or turn, my legs stay turned out – they operate as the structure around which subsequent moves and steps revolve. By contrast, when you learn to vogue, you learn the five elements but not how to do them. *Voguing is about telling a story. Use your dance training, your life, and just play with it. Improvise with it.* A better ethnographer perhaps would have asked what “it” was that I was being asked to play and improvise with (my training, life?), but I’m sure she wouldn’t have given me a straight answer because the “it” changes from moment to moment. The task is to discover the “it” in each and every circumstance.

Most forms of education involve a teacher who guides their student in their discovery of concepts and ideas of the world. Even for those who practice what might be called “critical pedagogy,” the teacher (as co-creator of knowledge for Paulo Freire or ignorant schoolmaster for Jacques Rancière) is still an important agent in the project of learning. But instead of guiding me through a move or step, Linda would often respond to my queries by telling me that “voguing is

about x” or “voguing is about y,” where the x and y were somewhat contradictory descriptors or activities. To say “voguing is about” instead of explaining what it is or how to do it displaces the responsibility of learning from the teacher and toward the student.⁴ It describes the unfolding project without allowing you to fully grasp its content, like a moral at the end of the story that doesn’t follow from any kind of narrative plot.

To figure out what “it” is that voguing is “about” is a reverse engineering game of self-discovery. English psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott (1991 [1971]) argued that the activity of playing is an essential characteristic in the development and growth of psychic health. While play is often associated with fantasy or unreality, Winnicott explains that playing in itself⁵ helps to integrate the external world of objects and situations into the internal world of thoughts and feelings, and vice versa. Indeed, playing is a mediating activity (a doing) in the world that uses various “transitional phenomena” to communicate to the self and others by organizing fantasies, expectation, and dreams around the materials in the external world. What are the fantasies here, what are the intimately felt expectations and dreams that voguing works to organize around the concrete reality of everyday life, a reality often plagued by scenes of aggression and dispossession both big and small?

Here, it might be helpful to fill in a little of what that everyday looks like for so many of the young members of this community. It is an ordinary marked by failures of all kinds. The most commonsense understanding of failure is the lack of success or a deficiency of some kind. For members of this community, there are the failures of the state and American society to properly “protect and defend” them against violence by members of law enforcement, government, and

⁴ Following Linda, I will also speak of voguing as being “about” something rather try to define or explain what it is.

⁵ Marie Lenormand explains: “The value of playing does not reside in what it might be possible to read ‘behind’ or ‘beyond’ it, whether in terms of an economy of the libido or of a symbolism of desire, but in its enactment insofar as it allows the individual here and now to try out new solutions and experiences” (2018, 85).

society at large. And there are the haunting failures of history—slavery, Jim Crow, mass incarceration—which, in such a profound way, linger in the background of so many aspects of ball life. The ball community has historically been one made up of individuals who, by virtue of their race, sexuality, gender, and class, are forced to the periphery of American society. To be both black and queer is to be situated as the constitutive (and necessary) other to the fully intelligible citizen subject (Weheliye 2014; Hartman 1997; Keeling 2019).

Many of the young people who flock to AFC and The Center in Chicago—the space in which I first became acquainted with the ballroom scene in 2013—feel this so deeply. The Center is located on the northside of the Chicago in a historically white middle-class neighborhood called “Boy’s Town” due to its predominantly white gay male population. The Center’s youth program has notoriously been a source of anxiety for the staff and surrounding community alike because the majority of the young people who come to The Center are black and brown, struggle with stable housing,⁶ and thus often have nowhere else to hang out except for in front of the building. The Chicago Police Department is often called for loitering or to break up any disputes creating a situation in which this small block where The Center resides is the most heavily policed spot along this affluent business corridor. But because The Center provides counseling, various health services, free STD/HIV testing, three meals a day, and various tutoring and job training programs, it remains one of only a few safe havens for these young people. The staff knows this and so, in order to receive any services, they require that clients take one of any number of staff and/or client led

⁶ LGBTQ+ youth experience homelessness at wildly disproportionate levels. Queer youth are 120% more likely to experience homelessness, a statistic supported by the fact that 40% of homeless youth are LGBTQ+ even though they are roughly 7% of the total population of youth nationally. See Morton, M.H., Dworsky, A., & Samuels, G.M. “Missed Opportunities: Youth Homelessness in America: National Estimates,” 2017.

groups; a requirement that is often met with frustration from the youth.⁷ Meaning, unless you are compliant with the rules, you are not eligible for basic services.

What kind of failures can we trace in this ordinary? Though there are many, I would like to think about two. First and at the most fundamental level, there is an ontological failure to recognize black people as human beings deserving of those most basic rights to life. Wilderson might call this a categorical failure that gets misrecognized as “a form of discrimination” when in fact it is that which sustains the “psychic health and well-being for the rest of the world” (2018 [2014], 7). This is the failure that creates the condition of possibility for Spillers to write “My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented” (1994 [1987], 65). Following this logic, we could argue that while the nation’s lack of an adequate social safety net to protect its citizens from suffering extreme forms of poverty might look like a failure, disenfranchisement is actually an example of success according to its founding principles. Indeed, this is what Spillers explicates through her reading of “The Moynihan Report” as a document that narrates the present through a misrecognition of the past: through a sociological blame-game, the “Negro Problem” is displaced away from the reconstitution and thus reproduction of a system organized around the laws of slavery and Jim Crow and toward the black body, read as a “metonymic figure for an entire repertoire of human and social arrangements” (1994 [1987], 66). Put differently, the over-policing, violent verbal and physical harassment, and general fear of the young people at The Center are examples of how racialization begets certain attitudes of conduct from the world to the youth in the everyday. For black people, these are the failures of misrecognizing history as it is lived in the present – or what it means to live in the wake or afterlife of slavery.⁸

⁷ AFC provides the same resources, in addition to housing, based on similar requirements for participation.

⁸ There is a large body of literature in black studies (see Du Bois 1999; Fanon 1967; Baldwin 1993; Gilroy 1993; Ellis 2015; Snorton 2017) and beyond that thinks about the ways in which that black

Second, there are the failures of (albeit well-meaning) organizations to tether care (or the right to life) to personal responsibility. That participation in groups or programming designed to educate good citizen subjects (or “proper” adult members of society) is the condition to accessing food, clothing, showers, or get medical care creates an uneven relation of power. If a young person doesn’t qualify for food, it is because they have, in some sense, failed to follow the rules. Foucault (2003 [1976]) might call this situation an instance of *biopower*, where the non-profit organization establishes itself as the source of any right to life through its ability to both “make live and to let die” (2011, 241). Berlant explains that biopower is “the power to regularize life, the authority to *force* living not just to happen but to endure and appear in particular ways,” reminding us that biopower is not simply a technique of power that produces particular subjects of the state/nation/society, it also produces forms of life in which subjects find meaning, agency, or the will to endure (2011, 97).

Berlant goes on:

Biopower operates when a hegemonic bloc organizes the reproduction of life in ways that allow political crises to be cast as conditions of specific bodies and their competence at maintaining health or other conditions of social belonging; thus, this bloc gets to judge the problematic body’s subjects, whose agency is deemed to be fundamentally destructive. Apartheid-like structures from zoning to shaming are wielded against these populations, who come to represent embodied liabilities to social prosperity of one sort or another (2011, 105-106).

This cruel yet ordinary form of life is what Berlant calls “slow death”: “the physical wearing out of a population in a way that points to its deterioration as a defining condition of its experience and historical existence” (2011, 95). Here, I want to emphasize how non-profit organizations come to constitute these young members of ballroom as problems, as successfully failing at being proper members of American society and thus in need of strict regulation and control. The political crisis

life has been conditioned by and is always understood in relation to different forms of violence. I would like to think about this “fact” outside of the language of crisis and instead think about how these violences become subtle, mundane, and quotidian.

(of blackness in America, of queer youth homelessness, of public education, of access to medical care, etc.) becomes the burdened responsibility (failure) of the young person as it is mediated through the institutional body of the non-profit in the form of programs and activities aimed at correcting behavior.

As Chapter 1 explores, non-profits are ever-present figures in the ballroom scene: many older members work for them, many younger members receive services from them; they set up information tables at balls and often provide financial support for prizes and/or the rental of spaces; they often offer STD/HIV testing at the ball for free entry; they are where houses practice or where you can easily throw together a mini-ball. To say the relationship between non-profits and the ballroom is deeply entwined is to highlight the forms of social, political, and economic disinvestment that surround black queer life. It is to name the often-unspoken ways that the non-profit steps into the space left vacant by family or nation. But it also speaks to how the non-profit understands its role as the savior figure here to help young people succeed in life according to the non-profit's own standards and criteria for success and failure.

What is interesting about these two examples is that they are in fact one in the same: even though it is an essential part of sustaining life, the non-profit exists as an infrastructure built to offset responsibility for those categorical failures surrounding blackness, making them questions of institutional compliance. At each scalar level, there are differing notions of success and failure that often shift and change depending on the situation. And in the midst of all of this there are the youth, who in no small way must learn how to distinguish between the complex and nuanced ways that success/failure appear at every juncture. It is dizzying to consider all of these differing registers of failure that permeate the ordinary of members of ball culture and constitute the "it" that we play and improvise. But Halberstam reminds us, "As a practice, failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed, failure can

exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities” (2011, 88). This means that as a constitutive quality of “dominant logics of power and discipline,” we could read failure less as an end and more as an opening, these historical and social failures not as the determining factor for a particular mode of life but as the source material for learning how modes of life are structured and maintained. If one of the true gifts of improvisation and play is that you use whatever is to hand as the source material for experimentation, then they can be used as tools for studying how to exploit the unpredictability of life. All forms of improvisation and play tell us about the ordinary, the norm, and the limits embedded in the given, but for many of the young people at The Center, vogue is an improvisatory practice of remembering and playing with the failures of the given, a turn toward the criteria.

It might seem strange to ask someone to play and improvise with failure. Putting Wilderson and Winnicott side-by-side we could ask, if the psychic health of the world depends on the misrecognition of black people as human, then what do we make of play, understood as a strategy for developing *psychic health* through integrating the external and internal worlds? This question might seem stranger still when we remember that Winnicott understood playing as thoroughly pleasurable activity, even as it is also always “the precariousness of the interplay of personal psychic reality and the experience of control of actual objects” (1971, 47). Of course, there is always a risk embedded in play as a technique of self-healing – of being interrupted from play or falling too deeply into the fantasy, for example – but play must bring joy. But if the goal is to manage attachments to the world through the use of transitional objections—objects that are both you and not you, both real and not real—play allows one to displace the anxieties built into the unpredictability of the world. Play loosens the psychic weight of misrecognition and eases the pressure to identify completely with the categories available.

So, when Linda told me and others to play, what were the stakes of her invitation? The process of turning toward the past and exploring the ways our bodies have been influenced and shaped by the world requires a developed sense of memory, but it is also an exploratory remembering that puts the voguer at the center. Having this level of control, deciding when and how to engage, is already an affordance not often given to many members of this community. It might seem impossible to integrate the psychic health of the world (which is violent) with the psychic health of the individual, but this is why there are rules to this game. Winnicott might read this as a kind of failure since for him, one of the conditions for playing, and thus creativity and eventual integration, was letting go of any rules which govern the form (citation 1908, 29, 35). As Lenormand shows, Winnicott argued that one must have “access to the ‘area of formlessness’ [in order to] have the foundational experience of chaos and nonsense” that play provides (2018, 95). In other words, play should lead to improvisational playing but not if the rules of the game are too rigid and determining of a set of possible outcomes.

French sociologist Roger Caillois is helpful here because, as a student of Marcel Mauss and an admirer of Emile Durkheim, he recognized that all play should be nonobligatory, separate from ordinary life, uncertain, unproductive, bound by a set of rules and/or fictions (Caillois 1958, 9-10; see also Henricks 2011, 166). This means that the world play creates is one opened through the subjunctive mood, a world that begins with an “as-if.” Here play becomes a kind of exploratory activity nestled within a set of confines that doesn’t produce any necessary ends but is an end in itself. Play is a kind of education of the body, what Mauss might call a “technique of the body” (1973), that involves inventive ways of ordering that which is disordered or finding the disordered in the ordered. The “as if” of fantasies and desires matters when the ordinary is characterized by failure. Indeed, voguing creates a space in which the “as if” is an embodied negotiation between

various temporal and experiential modes. The fantasy that you could go back to correct a moment or encounter that haunts the present.

I can't help but think of Nikki, a young person at AFC who stood with us around the circle back in the community room. She brought her hands in front of her body, twisting like a tornado then pausing, settling with fingers clasped together as if in prayer. Breaking apart to push her breasts together she began to mime someone performing fellatio with one hand and being strangled with the other. The troubling scene came to a climax when she performatively bit off the imaginary penis, threw it to the ground, stomped on it with her foot, then casually, and with a sneaky side smile, tossed the beat to me. Barbara Hardy writes, "we dream in narrative, day-dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative" (1968, 5). What kind of story is this? Is it a revisionist history? Is it a memory or a fear? Being in the presence of Nikki's hands performance that moved from chaos to religion to sexual violence to vengeance in the span of a minute, one gets the sense that this form of play, this story telling, that pulls from the everyday is a kind of cathartic release. But more importantly, it is a way of exploring the past *as if* we have power over it. One can replay the limitations embedded in the question of "which way could I turn?" from the position of the present where "could" is no longer determined by the tight hold of the past, but instead we get to ask how we "should" turn. Linda's call to integrate the past (movements, actions, habits, encounters) into the present through the *as if* is similar to Saidiya Hartman's call to approach the (im)possibility of the archive of black life (and captivity) through a what she calls "critical fabulation," a writing practice that "play[s] with and rearrange[s] the basic elements of the story," in order to "imagine what might

have happened” (2008, 11).⁹ It also finds resonances with Tavia Nyong’o’s concept of “afro-fabulation” as a theory of black time that deconstructs the “relation between story and plot” (2018, 3) so as to displace both in a search for freedom. But Linda’s call is importantly different from these ways of reading, learning, and writing about the afterlife of slavery. Voguing does not require that we learn something specific from such activity (productive), but asks us to learn about *how* we learn, organize, and digest the world out there in our bodies. In other words, vogue improvisation is an exercise in learning how to play with failure through the fantasy of game. And, as we will see, voguing asks of its practitioners to stay within the rules (the elements) through repetition and return, memory, and embodied practice.

Memory and Improvisation (with the elements)

Voguing was developed in the ballroom scene as a style of movement combat, the architecture of which is organized around the five elements. Each element is a kind of signpost, reminding you to account for the different planes of the body in space, and a point of return or a physical mnemonic that guides you around what you can do within the constraints of space and time. A “catwalk” is a maneuver that moves from point A to point B. The legs are bent at the knees, toes slightly turned inward from the hips, the body arched forward from the waist, and with every step forward the arms move back and forth from the elbow twisting the wrists and hands up toward the face then down toward the ground. The catwalk changes the body’s location and takes up space. As a performative mode, it both embraces and resists the pedestrian. The lean forward pulls the body toward the front, forcing it to follow the weight of the head, shoulders, and torso. The “duckwalk” is similar in that it

⁹ Voguing is a movement technique through which we might, echoing Hartman, exploit the “capacities of the subjunctive” (2008, 11) or as Mazzarella might say voguing activates the potentialities in the “mimetic archive” (2017).

takes the same general shape but rather than being more upright, the body sits in a crouched position: knees bent all the way down till the butt touches the heels, balancing on the tips of the toes. There are many ways to spin and how a voguer chooses to do it completely depends on their capacity, interest, and flair for the dramatic but when someone “dips,” they fall from a standing position down to the ground landing on their back, one leg tucked behind the upper body while the other is stretched out above the ground. There is no meandering through space, no hedging, and little preparation. Spins and dips rely on the body’s own momentum and gravity. They are dramatic, animated, vibrant and command attention. “Floor performance” is about making shapes with the body against the ground and finding interesting ways of interacting with it. And finally, “hands” uses the upper body to tell a story (concrete and/or abstract).

When you “learn” the five elements, you are learning how to stay in the game of improvisation, you are learning a shared language that does not follow any rigid or (pre)determined grammatical form. Voguing was developed in the ballroom scene in 1970s and 1980s in Harlem during the birth of hip hop and house music, and this style of movement pulled from the street and social dances being developed alongside. But it also pulled from photography and mass advertisements of luxury fashion brands, pageant performances, and the ascent of the runway supermodel. It is important to note that this first generation of elders, icons, and the original mothers and fathers of the houses,¹⁰ were predominantly black and brown folks born and raised during or in the immediate aftermath of the Civil Rights movement, developing this “alternative”

¹⁰ Houses are nontraditional family units that are organized around specific artistic and style choices rather than biological descent or affinity. Normally named after famous fashion houses, these families are where members find creative (and at times material) support. To be from the House of Mizrahi means something about your particular attachments in the ballroom scene. There are mothers and fathers of each house and some of them have chapters across the United States and the world.

and “underground” culture against the backdrop of a quickly changing political and racial landscape in the United States (Bailey 2013; Wilkerson 2011; Goldsby 2006).

There is no question that voguing has changed over the years: Old Way is the original expression of vogue that developed in the early days of the ball scene and New Way encompasses the more recent developments that are ever ongoing. It is easy to recognize the resonances of disco and break dancing in Old Way as it finds lines and angles to cut through the space. There is something almost photographic about it—the movement from pose to pose happens between the beats momentarily arriving in formation on the drop, making the physicality of the movement a sort of syncopated cascade of shots. But where Old Way plays with and around placement, control, lines, and angles, New Way invites the improviser to return without holding and experiment with looseness and imperfection. New Way is fast, flirty, and playful. It is emotionally expressive and physically daring. It is equal parts sexy, sophisticated, and silly. There are many different styles of New Way: dramatics, soft and cunt, vogue femme, butch queen vogue femme, twister. Each one highlights a slightly different way of emphasizing or patterning the ways of playing; where “soft and cunt” for instance, is recognized by its smoothness, sexiness, and aloofness, “dramatics” is forceful, aggressive, and fast. But no matter how you play with the elements, as Linda would say to the group, *you gotta catch that beat!*

New Way’s commitment to innovation and change can be read as a response to a world that has become increasingly fast paced, commercial, and consumable, one that specifically targets black cultural practices as digestible and easy material for appropriation. As an improvisational practice, Old Way is measured and steady, keeping time with the body and being in step. We could think of it as a strategy for marking the unmarked space. But as the technological and media landscapes of the late-20th and 21st centuries radically reorganized social and political life in United States for black life

and as the corresponding cultural productions¹¹ became prime targets for management by governmental, societal, and corporate surveillance, what Simone Browne has explained as forms of “racialized surveillance” (2015, 12-17), the performative investments of vogue began to shift. It is no longer enough to mark the unmarked; one has to be a shapeshifter to avoid capture. These forms of surveillance and control over black queer life changed the pace and virtuosity of the improvisatory practice. Indeed, to arrive and to master the pose (which was the hallmark of Old Way) became overdetermined. New Way finds a pose or shape only to quickly blow it up. It moves through space and changes shape thereby ducking and hiding from the boundaries that once held it together. There is an immediacy to the form that echoes the immediacy of everyday life. And where Old Way was about claiming and then making space and time that was black and queer, at a time when the conditions of life were such that the very idea of black queer spaces and times were unimaginable but necessary, New Way is about returning to those moments in order to question their fixity. Put differently, New Way plays with the resonances that still linger in the present (the elements of the Old) and by doing so, enact a sort of historical awakening into the now.

Both of these forms have particular qualities that make them unique and recognizably different but what is interesting to me is how they return to the same five elements however differently articulated. *When you come into the ballroom scene it's like music*, New York Mizrahi explained. *Everyone wants to follow the hottest trend. However, there's history behind those trends, something that came behind those trends, you know what I'm saying? Voguing has a certain essence when you know it from its roots and when you do it from the beginning, instead of you going up there and doing a whole bunch of stunts.* We can see that when

¹¹ Simone Browne writes, “racializing surveillance is a technology of social control where surveillance practices, policies, and performances concern the production of norms pertaining to race” (2015, 13). She is interested in the various ways that black life becomes a target for tracking, profiling and policing, a reality that both reifies “boundaries, borders, and bodies along racial lines” (16) and, in so doing, creates avenues for subversion.

New York talks about his frustration with the “trends” that he sees in voguing, he’s making an argument about the nature of memory in the ballroom scene and the shape that history takes. While the series of events that mark the birth and development of ballroom changes depending on who you ask, what is true is that the “roots” are actually always being performed through the elements. When you go to a workshop, a ball, or a house meeting, you practice this expression of historical knowledge through the physical archive, what Mazzarella (2017) would call the “mimetic archive,” that lives through the performance and study of the elements.

Returning to the initial questions of this chapter, what do we make of improvisation if it is understood as a technique of memory instead of an avenue through which we might access some form of freedom? And if what is to be remembered is the cliché, then is this simply an exercise in keeping our eyes shut, endlessly reproducing the reproduction ad infinitum? Again, if we believe that the promise of improvisation is the extemporaneous invention of something out of whatever is at hand, we assume a relation to the norm as one that can (indeed should) be broken through forgetting. For to forget what has come before makes it possible to act without constraint or expectation. Nietzsche explored such a forgetting when he argued that:

Forgetfulness is not just a *vis inertiae* ... but is rather an active ability to suppress, positive in the strongest sense of the word, to which we owe the fact that what we simply live through, experience, take in, no more enters our consciousness during digestions (one could call it spiritual ingestion) than does the thousand-fold process which takes place with our physical consumption of food, our so-called ingestion. (1994, 35).

In this case, active forgetfulness¹² allows one the (intellectual, affective, physiological) space to produce or create without the weight of endless repetition, rehearsal, or recitation: we must forget in

¹² Nietzsche continues: “To shut the doors and windows of consciousness for a while; not to be bothered by the noise and battle with which our underworld of serviceable organs work with and against each other; a little peace, a little *tabula rasa* of consciousness to make room for something new, above all for the nobler functions and functionaries, for ruling, predicting, predetermining (our organism runs along oligarchic lines, you see) – that, as I said, is the benefit of active forgetfulness, like a doorkeeper or guardian of mental order, rest and etiquette: from which we can immediately

order to find pleasure; we must forget to have the capacity for thought; we must forget to live fully in the present; we must forget so we can cope with the world around us. For Nietzsche, this kind of active forgetting is not a total denial of the past but rather a way of selectively remembering those scenes and events that benefit the present. Nietzsche is suspicious of memory because, if left unfiltered (or allowed to run wild through what he calls “techniques of mnemonics”), it tips the scale too far in one direction. To live a full life, one must strike a balance between active forgetting and memory.

There is a way in which ball culture is Nietzschean in its refusal to archive something of its past through language or writing, a kind of repetition of forgetting. But then again, Nietzsche’s active forgetting is a path toward freedom, a kind of creativity of thought that comes from remembering only the most important aspects of life. Mary Carruthers (2008 [1990]) argues that in general, modern scholars tend to agree with Nietzsche on this point: that creativity and originality come from innovation, that memory should take a backseat to experimentation, that invention requires the pushing of boundaries away from the past or standard or cliché. This notion, that memory of the ordinary stuff of the past obscures the possibility of discovery in the present, is markedly different from those ancient philosophers who saw memory as an essential tool for the development of the virtuous self (Carruthers 2008). Memory, developed through securing images through an attunement of one’s sense perception (what Aristotle would call *phantasmata* or *eikon*), helps organize and integrate the external and internal world. For these philosophers, the practice of attuning one’s memory was an essential part of a virtuous life because moral judgements and actions are difficult if we cannot recall how we should act or what we should say. In a strange way, this is

see how there could be no happiness, cheerfulness, hope, pride, *immediacy*, without forgetfulness. The person in whom this apparatus of suppression is damaged, so that it stops working, can be compared (and not just compared –) to a dyspeptic; he cannot ‘cope’ with anything...” (1994, 35).

what voguing does but from a physical standpoint. One develops their capacity to remember the past physically by returning to the elements and keeping the Old Way alive in the New, not as a way of finding movement beyond the form of vogue but as a means of playing *within* the form itself. And playing within the form doesn't mean letting go of originality or creativity; rather, memory makes possible a different kind of creative impulse by situating oneself within the archive in order to find novel ways of inhabiting it.

One of the goals of Vogue Group was to practice using our memory in various forms of play. To warm up our bodies and get into the habit of using our senses, Linda might challenge us to “vogue like your favorite butch queen.” As an exercise in recall, imitation, and recitation, playing “as if” you are someone else helps you notice the particular way someone moved their hips or used their arms by trying out what it feels like to dip this way or duckwalk that way. As we would work to shape our bodies into the likeness of an ideal through improvisation with a “favorite’s” style, we were simultaneously working to keep alive how others had interpreted the five elements, how others had learned to return to the Old in the New. Deborah Thomas might call this way of inhabiting and performing the archive a study in collective Witnessing 2.0, an embodied practice that seeks to “make visible the ways affects operate in multiple temporalities and across levels of consciousness,” where the expression of the past also helped to make legible those forgotten sensibilities and movements (2019, 5).

As a physical mnemonic to the Old Way of life, the five elements are a way of attending to the past through a form of lively embodiment without falling prey to the pressures that the past carries along with it—particularly since the body is the bearer of various instances of dispossession. Through playing with memory in the form of repetition, return, and imitation, voguers practice ways of integrating the past into the present. Or, to put it differently, the elements have become a kind of

habitus,¹³ a “strategy-generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever-changing situations, [...] always tending to reproduce the objective structures of which they are the product, they are determined by the past conditions which have produced the principle of their production” (Bourdieu 1972, 72). To think of the elements as a kind of crafted and intentional habitus is to think of them as a strategy for maneuvering *within* the given or as embodied dispositions that one learns through practice. When you are “learning” how to vogue, you are learning a regime of sense memory developed from a particular socio-historical position which subtly discipline the body (Hamera 2007). They make up a constellation of rich physical material for mapping out how to move from where you are, tracing the various areas of the body and the body’s relationship to space, place, and time. Each one acts as a reminder to the improviser to check in, take note of the space, and attend to the full range of the dimensions and directions the body might take. Through practice, a good voguer learns to sense how to seamlessly move from one to the other, challenging themselves to expand and contract within and without the elements, be more or less explicit (or on the beat), speed up and slow down.

The battle of the cliché

In early summer of 2018, I accepted an invitation to join the Legendary House of LaBeiJa. This was a difficult decision in part because when I began doing research with the ball community in 2013, I realized (rather quickly) that it would be best not to join a house so that I could remain neutral in

¹³ Bourdieu writes, “The structures constitutive of a particular type of environment (e.g. the material conditions of existence characteristic of a class condition) produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively ‘regulated’ and ‘regular’ without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goal without presupposing a conscious aim at ends or an express mastery of the operation necessary to attain them and, being all this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor.” (72, original emphasis)

situations where one's allegiance demanded certain forms of behavior unfitting for a researcher (I say this in jest but also in all seriousness). But I had been in New York for over a year doing fieldwork and found I was missing something that felt important; namely, I wanted to learn what kinds of work, dedication, and commitment went into being a member of a house. Linda LaBeija had become a close friend at that point and had invited me multiple times, so I finally accepted. I got a text one afternoon with an address and a time, so I hopped on the A train from my Bed-Stuy apartment and took the long ride to the Bronx.

I got out of the subway and walked about ten blocks to a community center, one I had never heard of until that text, where the House of LaBeija often held their practices and where the New York Father (Freddie LaBeija) had worked for some time. I had met many members of the LaBeija family before at balls and in other spaces so when I arrived, I was happily greeted by familiar and friendly faces. While Linda hadn't arrived yet, one of my dance students/clients from AFC was there so I talked with him about life and what he was doing there. His boyfriend had invited him even though Linda felt like he should stay with the Kiki scene for a little while longer. After we had moved all the furniture and I had introduced myself to the new people trickling into the room, Freddie started the meeting by pointing to me and saying, *first, I don't know who you are*. Linda would later swear to me that she told him I was coming but he either didn't remember or wasn't in the mood to meet new people. He asked everyone to start warming up and brought me to a room off to the side where he explained they were only taking members that could *add something to the house* and that I would essentially have to audition. This was not what I expected but I agreed and made my way back to the large room. After shooing everyone away from the center of the room, he placed me at the back close to the entrance of the space and said *show us what you got* in a calm and assertive voice before turning on a beat. Terrified and deeply unprepared, I started voguing. I quickly almost fell while trying to do a duckwalk toward where Freddie stood and paralyzed by my own failure, I

stopped moving. He paused the song and looked at me with an expression of sheer disappointment and said, *I don't know what that was. How about you try again? Just remember that you got to catch the beat. You gotta vogue for your life.* He restarted the song, and I took a deep breath and began again. While it is safe to say no one was impressed with my performance, Freddie said I could stay if I stood off to the side and watched the others practice.

Twenty minutes later, Al came over to my little corner of shame to give me some advice. He said he was watching me from the other side of the room and that I was too stiff, too placed, too in control. *You have to shake your titties*, he said. A little embarrassed, I replied, *what titties?!* He laughed and said, *well I don't have them either but at least I know how to shake mine!* A little later, a young woman named Layla and her two kids walked in the door and everyone greeted them with excitement. Freddie told her what he had told the others, not to teach me, just let me watch. *The issue isn't your legs, it's your arms. Right now, you're placing your hands like this when you move...* she said as she demonstrated what I was doing. *I always try to imagine myself imitating a woman... Like, I know I'm a woman but it's about performing like what someone might think a woman would do, does that make sense?* I said *not really* and as she started to explain, other members walked over to give their take. *Because you're a woman you don't have to try as hard. Just be the most girly version of yourself!* Rosé said as I repeated the catwalk over and over again. On the way home I scribbled a bunch of notes about the experience and put it away.

Looking back over my notes now, I notice how much I was struggling with the nature of the exchange: “because you’re a woman” had rubbed me the wrong way. I wax poetic about the fluidity of my personal sense of gender expression, not having “a girly side” in that way, and the farcical nature of imagining that women don’t have to try as hard at something, most of all femininity. It really isn’t until now that I understand what they were trying to explain; that I already knew the cliché which marked a convention and that voguing is about deliberately embodying it and

establishing a relationship to it. Here, the content of the cliché—the notion that as a girl, I have the ability to or knowledge of how to perform a kind of femininity or that since I have “titties” I know how to shake them—matters less than my ability to recall and play with it. Going back to Deleuze, I had read their instruction as a kind of reductive and essentialist comment about my experience of living in what Lauren Berlant (2008) would call the genre of femininity. It was a moment of misrecognition of how to deal with and in the cliché. My rejection and anxiety were wrapped up in a desire to push past the convention. What I failed to understand was that they were asking me to embrace the idea of the norm – not as a way of tethering the norm to my own personal experience – but as a way of recalling the norm, embodying and playing with it in order to feel and express its dimensions, and my non-teachers were trying to tell me that voguing is about learning how to situate myself in relation to the norm.

This creative way of reconfiguring the norm through play is similar to what Lévi-Strauss would call bricolage (1962), a process of rearranging materials in alternative ways than their original intent. But even for Lévi-Strauss, the goal is to find the new, the unintended. What do we make of Linda’s directive to tell a story through vogue, not through the abstract but using common gestures so others could follow along? Or Layla telling me to imitate what I thought someone would “think” a woman would do? The materials of the cliché are being reworked through the prism of the game, but does the cliché get pushed to the side in the end? Does my performance of feminine convention break me from the conventions hold over my life? These are important questions that ballroom’s many categories seek to answer. Voguing provides the opportunity to play within the uneasy boundaries of identity and experience how it feels. To improvise inside the convention, norm, or cliché, the voguer learns about what kind of labor goes into their reproduction. And maybe after a while, the convention, norm, or cliché might start to feel a little different.

The language used to describe a cliché can be awkward and uncomfortable because clichés empty out the content of experiencing a convention in order to make those experiences manageable or tolerable. They seem to lazily reproduce the very boundaries of identity we often work hard to free ourselves from. But, as Lauren Berlant reminds us, clichés are also ways of negotiating one’s sense of belonging to a community, group, or world. She writes, “convention is not only a *mere* placeholder for what could be richer in an underdeveloped social imaginary, but it is also sometimes a profound placeholder that provides an affective confirmation of the idea of a shared confirming imaginary in advance of inhabiting a material world in which that feeling can actually be lived” (2008, 3 original emphasis). In other words, conventions can be a way of signaling that you matter to a world governed by strict criteria of recognition. Here the failure to break free from the norm provides the safety and comfort of being legible. But, more importantly, this way of inhabiting clichés (in all their contradictions) and improvising with their form gives it a new energy, new resonances, and new ways of relating.

Beyond Survival

A Coda

I have still never seen *Pose*.

When I tell people this, they are first shocked then filled with a series of questions. How could I not see the show? Like *really* never? Didn't I support the many black trans folks who made and starred in the show? Did I have something against it? To be honest, I haven't seen it because it just felt like work. It felt like a task, like a whole entire project in need of its own set of questions and concerns that would completely derail the questions I have had with regards to the real-life community I had been working with for so many years. I imagine I will watch it at some point (or maybe I'm watching it right now as you're reading this). In any event, there is no question that it has changed the character of the ballroom scene. When I first started going to balls, even in New York, they were largely underground. A few people "in the know" might stumble into one or another, but it was still a predominantly black and brown space for black and brown queer people. But after the first episode aired and the first set of think pieces were published, something shifted in the scene. All the sudden, clothing lines, modeling agencies, and corporations were hiring ball members to star in their advertisements and walk in their fashion shows. Ball members were the new "it" girls in the mainstream. You could get your tens *and* get paid! Or as, the overall commentator of the ballroom scene, the Legendary Icon Jack Mizrahi put it during a ball, *We about to be the first black billionaires up in here!*

I was hurt, Junior LaBeija would tell me at some point when during our conversation, *because someone wrote that the Paris is Burning alumni were the judges in Pose... how are you going to overlook me?* It is true that not many people from *Paris is Burning* are still alive and while many are friends, some of them no longer get along, or never did in the first place. *But my life is an open book! So, my think is, Ryan Murphy didn't create that, he was told that. What do you mean*, I asked. Carl was in the room with us while

we chatted and explained. *Billy Porter is basically Junior. He's wearing junior's clothes, he says some of Junior's exact same expressions, and he uses Junior's, like, vocal timbre, you know? I mean, they have him being HIV positive so there's some differences but like, yeah, there was like a scene where like, there was an episode where like, you know, his lover is dying with him in the hospital. How do you feel about them portraying you as HIV positive?* Carl asked. It should be told that these two go way back. Junior said, *how do you think I feel about them portraying that [the name of his lover] had died and that [he] was dying? And they show Billy Porter going through that with his life, kin, mate?* He would explain later that if he was involved in the show, he wouldn't let them sugarcoat anything. He would show all the drugs, all the sex, all the dying. He would show how doctors would chain people to their beds and throw their food into the hospital rooms because they were scared of contracting HIV/AIDS. *So even this, you have to understand that we were dreamers. And some of this shit turned into nightmares, what the fuck!* We both laughed. But even still, Junior was supportive of the show. Almost everyone was really. They all talked about how amazing it was that so many cast members were black trans women and black gay men. How great it was to the community to give them a chance to see their stories portrayed. And yet, most would add a word or two about how it was more complicated than that.

And then, as I was finishing this manuscript, something happened. At the *Pose* final season premiere party in New York City on April 29th, Janet Mock, an executive producer, and director on the show, is reported to have given a speech. According to Page Six,¹ Paper Magazine,² and so many other publications, Mock stood on the stage at the Lincoln Center and yelled "Fuck Hollywood!" demanding to know why she was only making \$40,000 an episode when other executive producers were making more. "Does this make you uncomfortable? It should. It should make you fucking

¹ <https://pagesix.com/2021/04/30/janet-mock-reveals-infidelity-in-pose-premiere-speech/>

² <https://www.papermag.com/janet-mock-pose-speech-2652853830.html?rebellitem=2#rebellitem2>

shake in your motherfucking boots. This is speaking truth. This is what *Pose* is.” She confessed to cheating on her boyfriend, told Ryan Murphy that he “brought the girls in to help,” and apologized to Our Lady J for belittling her in order to feel better about herself. It was reported that she said “It’s a show, but it means so much to everyone to ensure that we enable black and brown trans women to make it” sarcastically before saying, “It makes you comfortable to talk like that because then I don’t scare you into facing the fucking truth. You all have stomped on us.” “I fucked up ya’ll,” she is reported to have said. “I forgot who the fuck I was. They want me to come up here and pretend. I don’t need Hollywood, honey. You know why? Cuz I’m fucking free.”

Throughout this manuscript, I have argued that we tend to assume the idea of living well is necessarily tied to stability and that the good life is inextricably linked to economic, social, and political upward mobility and/or maintenance. However, as this community pushes the boundaries of what survival means – expanding the conditions of the livable – the register of success is rearticulated through an “ethics of self” developed in performance practices. The good life here is a set of practices that build character and teach one how to behave well, to get free. Under the pressures of neoliberalism, the critiques available to those without political, economic, or social power have come in the form of performances that are both deeply embedded in the structures of an oppressive ordinary and, in changing the tenor and pitch of how the ordinary gets reworked, rearticulated, and played with. And in so doing, as I’ve argued, these structures have been made a little more elastic for those within this collective. I think Mock is right that what the ballroom is and does and what the ballroom can do, is to teach its community how to speak up for themselves, how to challenge each other and the world, and how to find the good life in a way that is not conditional on the “external” world’s ideas of success or inclusion.

Most people were stunned that anyone could complain about making so much money per episode or were horrified that Mock told her boyfriend she cheated in such a public way. But what is

striking to me is that while she was talking, the cast members started encouraging her from the audience. They rallied around her with shouts of support and love because Mock was bravely expressing the complete incommensurability between the Hollywood version of success and members of the ballroom's continued fight to stay alive. Paper Magazine reported that she said, "I was happy because I had to be happy. Because if I wasn't happy the girls wouldn't know that happiness is possible. I'm hurting y'all. I see injustice and it hurts me inside." That happiness had to be performed for the continued success of the show, that Mock had to feel like she lost herself in order to win at the Hollywood game, and that the only way to express these contradictory demands was to express everything is the tension this narrative sought to move between—to hold open the space between something that looks like optimism and something that feels like pessimism.

At around noon on March 14th, 2020, I texted Solomon asking if the ball was canceled. *Asking because of corona*, I said. *Not sure*, he replied before quickly calling me. *I am just stunned and horrified that they are not canceling this shit. Like, people are traveling in from around the country to attend and you know they won't be wearing masks or socially distancing themselves. Yeah, it doesn't seem like a good idea*, I replied. *Well, the crazy thing is that you know people going because they need the money from the prizes. And you know Ayanna, Tyanna, and Torrence don't want to cancel it because they already put down a deposit. But it just puts our community at risk! Yeah, it doesn't seem like a good idea*, I said again. Many of my conversations with Solomon tend to follow this pattern. *And honestly, someone should call them and ask them to cancel but I know that isn't going to happen. I mean, it's the 19th Annual Midwest Awards Ball! I think I might go just to see what it's like*, I said. *Well, be sure to bring a mask and hand sanitizer*. He paused. *And call me tomorrow to tell me who was there and how it was!* As soon as I got off the phone, I got a call from Antonio. *You going?* he asked. *I think so but I don't think I'll stay long*, I said. *You shouldn't go. Rona will be everywhere all over everyone*.

The Midwest Awards Ball attracts people from the ballroom scenes of Detroit, Minneapolis, and other cities around the Midwest. But because it is an awards ball, people also fly in from New

York, Los Angeles, and Atlanta to see old friends, walk their categories, and potentially win money. This year, the ball was being presented by South Suburban HIV/AIDS Regional Coalition (SSHARC), an outpatient location of Cook County Health, and was being held at The Grand Ballroom Chicago just south of the University of Chicago's campus in the Woodlawn neighborhood. Originally called the "Cinderella Ballroom," the Grand Ballroom was built in 1923 and is an ornate building with arching windows and intricate detailed designs along the façade. While the bottom of the building is often boarded up save the store on the corner, when you walk up the red carpeted stairs, the room opens up into a large hall filled with twinkling chandeliers and velvet curtains. And if you look hard enough, you might even notice slippers and pumpkins hidden in the hardwood flooring, above the bar, or around the stage. From the street, you'd never know that just upstairs is a fairy tale waiting to happen.

I decided to get there early and leave early so when I arrived there were only a few people there. I walked around and said hello to friends, many of whom I knew from the scene in New York, before stepping outside to talk to the people standing in front of the HIV testing van parked in front. Our conversation – interrupted by folks getting tested for free entry, people walking by asking what was going on, and the occasional hello to an old friend – was more anxious than normal. *Would corona even be a thing? How do you think it will affect seropositive people? Do you think we'll go into lockdown?* I must have lost track of time because I didn't notice a line forming down the stairs and out the door. Although I had already paid and had the stamp to prove it, I decided not to push past the line and stood behind a man dressed in Gucci from head to toe. After we had exchanged introductions and other niceties, I asked him, *were you nervous to come tonight?* Clearly confused by my questions, he asked me to explain the question. I tried again. *Like, with Covid-19 now being in Chicago and the Governor saying he might shut down the state and stuff. Seems kinda scary and like, everybody is saying we shouldn't gather in large groups because that's how it spreads.* As I spoke, I searched his face for recognition.

Was I making sense? Was I being dramatic?³ He gave me no facial or gestural assurance before saying, *Well, I just got out of prison a couple days ago—been in prison for about a decade now. So no, I'm not nervous about coronavirus. I'm more nervous about getting stopped on my way home.* With that, he turned around to say hi to a friend walking down the stairs.

This would be the last ball I would attend before completing this manuscript. This little encounter has lingered in my mind as I've tried to put words on the page to describe what I think is magical, brilliant, and powerful about this community. It lingers there because it so tragically and perfectly encapsulates many of the things that wish I could write about but have yet to find the language for. The very fact that people have found ways to be happy and experience pleasure in the face of so much violence, poverty, or precarity is truly amazing and I continue to be in awe of every single person I have met in the ballroom scene. I am struck by how many times people have welcomed me into their lives and, despite their own struggles, showed genuine concern for my wellbeing. I owe many of them much of the happiness I've found in the past ten years I've known them, and I sincerely hope that this text will play a small part in pointing out those injustices that hurt so these magnificent queens never have to spend another second pretending to be happy.

³ Governor Pritzker would end up shutting the city down on March 21st, 2020. As of writing, the coronavirus has killed over 582,000 people in the United States (73,462 of whom are black) and 24,590 in Illinois alone.

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