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Gender/Racial Realness: Theorizing the Gender System in Ballroom Culture

Marlon M. Bailey

KC Prestige, a butch queen (a gay man) and member of the Legendary House of Prestige's Detroit Chapter at the time, attended the Xstacy Ball in Chicago, along with Prestige members from the Richmond, Cleveland, and Philadelphia chapters during the July 4th holiday in 2003. At 3 a.m. the venue where the Xstacy Ball was held was shut down, and the continuation of the ball was moved to an after-hours spot. When KC and his fellow house members stopped at a gas station on the south side of Chicago to pump gas, Prestige was approached by two men, one of whom hit him in the face and knocked him unconscious. Luckily for KC, his fellow house members, Rico Prestige and Father Alvernian, were at the gas station as well and came to his rescue.[1] Rico fought the men, apparently while KC was unconscious, and one of them pistol-whipped him. Soon after, Father Alvernian grabbed a bat from Jaylen Prestige's car and hit one of the assailants in the head. The two men ran off, but they took KC's watch, necklace, T-shirt, and earrings, and a diamond ring from another Prestige member.

This incident could have happened to anyone regardless of who they are or how they are interpellated. However, throughout my nearly ten years of research within ballroom communities and based on my own experiences growing up in Detroit, Michigan, I have learned that incidents similar to the one KC Prestige described are common for Black lesbian/

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gay/bisexual/transgender/queer (LGBTQ) people, especially in urban spaces. Many of my ballroom interlocutors expressed feeling particularly vulnerable to race, gender, and sexual violence because their queer gender and sexualities signal to a would-be assailant that queers can be robbed and beaten, even murdered, with impunity. My Black queer interlocutors overwhelmingly live in poor or working-class urban areas and consistently negotiate violence and oppression as a part of the quotidian conditions in which they are situated. These feelings of vulnerability are warranted given the wave of murders that have occurred recently, such as that of Black lesbian Sakia Gunn and transgender women such as Duanna Johnson, Rodney "Ebony" Whittaker, and LaTeisha Green, to name just a few. Poor or working-class Black queer people do not freely choose the neighborhoods or urban spaces in which they live and move; therefore, they must draw upon their creative resources to survive homophobic and transphobic violence.

One of the more obvious strategies that members of the ballroom community deploy to withstand, negotiate, or avoid violence in the urban space is to travel together. In KC Prestige's case, members from his house—the ballroom family-like structure—came to his aid to fend off the assailants and prevent them from inflicting further violence and harm to his body—perhaps saving his life. As the late Dorian Corey, a femme queen and icon of the ballroom community, suggests in *Paris Is Burning* (1990),[2] a house is a gay gang. Members of a house often respond collectively both in the performance competitions at balls and when fellow house members are confronted with violence. Thus, houses battle in the streets when necessary as well as in the popularized performance competitions on the runway.

Yet, how do individual ballroom members get through the day in an urban space, especially when they do not have the protection of their fellow ballroom members at the moment of impending danger? Another strategy, and thus the subject of this article, is to "work the body" through performance and the overall presentation of self. Black queer members of the ballroom community use performance to unmark themselves as gender and sexual nonconforming subjects. Unmarking oneself through performance or "passing" is a necessary strategy by which to avoid discrimination and violence in the urban space. As I discuss below, ballroom

members literally perform and present their bodies to make an impact on how they are "seen" in a society where the Black body, specifically, is read as a text. And if such a person's body is read as "queer" in terms of gender or sexuality, they will be treated as such, making the person vulnerable to a tragic end in a homophobic and transphobic environment. Much of the recent popular and scholarly–albeit limited–preoccupation with the ballroom community underemphasizes both the conditions under which its members live and their use of performance as a way of surviving such conditions.

Ballroom Culture

Contemporary ballroom culture, sometimes referred to as the "house/ball community," is a community and network of Black and Latina/o women, men, and transgender women and men who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, straight, and queer. The Black and Latina/o queer members of this community use performance to create an alternative discursive terrain and a kinship structure that critiques and revises dominant notions of gender, sexuality, family, and community. Ballroom culture consists of two inextricable dimensions: houses and balls. Houses are familial structures that are socially rather than biologically configured. Although in some cases houses serve as homes where members live and congregate, by and large, houses are social configurations that serve as sources of support for the diverse membership of the ballroom community.[3] Houses are typically named after haute couture designers, but others are named after mottos and symbols that express qualities and aims with which the leaders want the house to be associated.

These alternative families are led by "mothers," who are mostly butch queens (gay men) or femme queens (transgender women) and "fathers," who are mostly butch queens or butches (transgender men). Houseparents provide guidance and life skills for their "children" of various ages, races/ethnicities (usually Black and Latina/o), genders and sexualities, and from cities and regions throughout North America. For instance, Levin, a femme queen in the Detroit scene, who was taking hormones and had implants, told me that one day she plans to get "the operation"–a sex change. While Levin lives as a femme queen, a pre-operative transgender

woman, she said that she talked to Tori, whom she refers to as her "gay mother," in the ballroom scene. "She [Tori] could talk to me about stuff, you know, transsexual things, [and] just be here to talk and everything. She was there for me when I got my implants. She took me," said Levin. Because Tori also had a sex reassignment operation, she has taken up the parental work of ushering Levin through these critical stages in her life in ways that her biological parents are unwilling or unable to provide. Although it is beyond the purview of the concerns of this article, the kin labor undertaken in houses and among the larger membership in the ballroom community sustains the community and adds value to the members' lives.

Another important role of houses is to organize and compete in ball events. Members of houses produce and participate in these competitive and celebratory performance events on a national scale. Houseparents recruit, socialize, and prepare their protégés to compete successfully in categories based on the deployment of performative gender and sexual identities, vogue and theatrical performances, and the effective presentation of fashion and physical attributes. Participants compete against one another vigorously on behalf of their respective houses and, at times, as individuals, or as what members refer to as "free agents."[4]

Aspects of ballroom culture have existed since the early-twentieth century and have expanded rapidly throughout the 1990s and the early 2000s. Currently, there is a ballroom scene in almost every major city in North America. Jenny Livingston's documentary film, *Paris Is Burning*, continues to be the primary point of reference for members of the contemporary house/ball scene. The documentary initiated a spirited and fruitful debate among feminist and queer scholars on Black and Latina/o LGBTQ identities among this underground community that exists at the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexual marginalization. More specifically, the film marked one of the first explorations of the lives of Black and Latina/o transgender people.[5] Livingston's film highlights the experiences of femme queens–transgender women (male to female, or MTF)–in the ballroom community but does not include butches. Daniel Peddles's *The Aggressives* (2005), a more recent documentary, emphasizes, almost exclusively, the lives of butches–transgender men (female to male, or FTM)–or biological females or female-bodied persons who transgress gender norms

and who identify as "aggressive."[6] These films reflect the ever-expanding interest in ballroom culture and thus make evident the need for critical analyses of the various dimensions of this culture and its practices.

The Gender System

"The gender system" is a ballroom community creation that serves as the basis for its gender and sexuality and kinship relations. This system consists of categories that reflect lived experiences and are fashioned and rehearsed through performances at balls. The gender system is yet another woefully underanalyzed cultural practice of ballroom culture, and there is a great deal to be learned about gender and sexuality from this community. Elsewhere I offer an extensive examination of the overall gender system. Here, in brief, I highlight the experiences of butch queens and femme queens (MTF) and the strategies that they deploy to survive the dangers of largely heteronormative urban spaces.[7] In so doing, I bring into focus the central role that performance plays for this Black queer community. A serious examination of the gender system in the ballroom community reveals how race, class, gender, and sexual oppression shape members' lives and, perhaps most importantly, what these communities do to combat these convergent forms of oppression. Chiefly, the gender system is a fecund example of the role that culture plays in the construction, the revision, and the reconstitution of gender through performance.

Members of the ballroom community function under more expanded notions of sex, gender, and sexuality. Unlike in dominant U.S. society, ballroom communities view and adopt categories of identity as malleable and mutable. Although these categories do not break entirely from hegemonic notions of sex, gender, and sexuality, the ballroom gender system allows more categories of identity and articulations of sex, gender, and sexuality than those available to members in their lives outside of this sphere.

The gender system is made up of three inextricable dimensions: sex, gender, and sexuality. Sex is implicitly linked to gender, but these categories expand beyond the putative female/male binary in dominant culture. Community members view the category of sex as open and unfinished. Akin to their notions of gender and sexuality, the sex of a body is the result

of an ongoing process or an activity as opposed to a biological end result. Ballroom members conceive of three categories of sex: female (one born with anatomical female sex characteristics), male (one born with male anatomical sex characteristics), and intersex or transsexual (one born with both female and male, or indeterminate anatomical sex characteristics).[8]

Most importantly, although categories of sex in dominant culture are understood to be formed through and determined by biology, ballroom members hold the fundamental belief that sex categories are malleable and that the body can be altered through various means, such as reconstructive surgery, hormonal therapy, or padding. This belief serves as the basis for a six-part gender system: (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

A femme queen contestant, walking in the "femme queen body" category at the Love Is the Message Ball, held in 2005 in Los Angeles, California. Photograph by Marlon M. Bailey.

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.[9] This six-part gender system serves as the collection of categories from which all members select the one with which they primarily identify. The system is queer in that it allows for, and in many cases celebrates, sex, gender, and sexual fluidity. Similar to the category of sex, gender and sexual identification are understood as performative processes rather than immutable biological facts. As Susan Stryker notes, gender is what we do, not who we are.[10] This system is constructed through ways of knowing that best reflect the lived realities of ballroom members.

Sexuality is implicitly, if not explicitly, demarcated by the meanings that are embedded in each of the gender categories. The gender system in ballroom culture is always about sexuality and reflects the pervasive conflation of sex, gender, and sexuality in broader society. However, this system also reveals gender and sexual fluidity and the various configurations of romantic, sexual, and nonsexual affinities and interactions of the members. Again, sex, gender, and sexuality are malleable and mutable. And although this may seem somewhat of a banal point to most gender and sexuality theorists, in the quotidian lives of Black gender and sexually marginalized people, the notion that sex, gender, and sexuality are not inherent and fixed is a matter of common sense among members of the community, but not for those with whom they interact outside of it.

The gender system is a significant aspect of the cultural work of constructing community. Even though the performance labor involved in the production of the gender and sexual subjectivities is enacted primarily at the balls, it is important to keep in mind that the balls are always linked to the daily experiences of its members in society at large.[11] For this reason, I explain here the linkage between performances of gender and sexuality and the subjectivities that they engender. I cannot emphasize enough that these transitive and discrete gender and sexual subjectivities are the result of a considerable amount of work, a form of discursive labor

Godfather Reno Prestige, a butch, poses for a picture at the Legendary House of Prestige national ball, held in 2004 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Photograph by Marlon M. Bailey.

that often goes unnoticed and taken for granted by those outside of the community. Because identities are produced in large part through rituals of self and communal forms of representation,[12] performance rituals play a vital part in ballroom members' reconstitution of gender and sexual identities. 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.

Conventional terms used for gender and sexual identification, such as female and male; lesbian, gay, and straight; and transgendered–although I use these terms here–do not accurately reflect the complexities of gender and sexuality in the ballroom community. Again, gender and sexuality are queer in the aggregate, meaning that they are fluid, contingent, and relational. In general, practitioners of ballroom culture reject the rigid bound-

aries of gender and sexuality that buttress heteronormativity and its attendant heterogendered relations. For instance, if a femme queen, as a biological man who lives as a woman, dates or has sex with men, she may identify as straight. Yet, straight in this sense is queer rather than heteronormative. There are also femme queens who are romantically/sexually involved with women and, far less frequently, other femme queens. This can also be the case with butches. Although these scenarios are not common, gender and sexual couples vary in combinations because the gender system allows for it. Gender performance is intertwined with self-identification and can imply a whole range of sexual practices and identities in ballroom culture. And these identities derive most of their coherence through the multitude of performance categories at the balls.

Surviving Queerphobic Space

On July 16, 2003, Duchess, a butch queen and mother of the Legendary House of Prestige at the time, called me crying hysterically because he had been chased by a man while leaving his apartment on his way to work at Men of Color Motivational Group, a now-defunct Black LGBTQ HIV/AIDS prevention agency located on the far west side of Detroit. Duchess said that he took his normal route to work (he didn't have a car) when he encountering a man who asked for a light. After a series of questions, the man asked Duchess for money in exchange for sex. When Duchess refused, the man chased him until Duchess ran into a restaurant and asked the employees to call the police. The aggressor disappeared but Duchess was concerned that the man may have seen where he lived.

Similarly, when I first started going to clubs in Detroit in the 1980s and throughout the 1990s, most of the bars/clubs that Black LGBTQ people frequented were located in rough parts of town. During my younger years attending these Black gay bars, my friends and I would, at times, rush to our cars to avoid being seen coming out of the club by people driving by, particularly if there were people coming out or standing in front of the bar/club whose gender performance and presentation we believed marked the club and therefore us as queer. On some occasions, cars would pass by the club and someone would yell "fucking faggots," as they sped past us. At other times, along with hurling expletives at us, people would throw

objects from their car. The constant threat of gender and sexual violence that Black queer people endure in both public and private spheres should not be ignored. For instance, as Diva D Bvlgari, a butch queen, explains, it is especially dangerous for femme queens: "Detroit is very homophobic, even in the way the boys dress is homophobic. If it's fashionable it is seen as gay. If you wear tight pants you might be seen as gay. It makes people not want to walk the street and be themselves. Femme queens, real as hell, won't go out during the day." Although Diva D is mostly talking about his experiences as a butch queen, he poignantly describes the rigid criteria of masculinity and gender normativity to which Black queer people are forced to adhere in order to avoid being seen in ways that subject them to persecution and violence.

For men, Diva D's comments, as well as those expressed by other ballroom members, allude to the notion that masculinity is a set of signifiers that connotes maleness within a given cultural framework. However, these definitions of masculinity change and so do their attendant signifiers. Wearing tight pants has not always been a marker of femininity or gayness. Such definitions are fluid and change as particular cultures define and redefine them. Regardless, for the Black queer people I interviewed, homophobia is embedded deeply in the shifting notions of Black masculinity and the performances thereof. These performances of Black masculinity are expressed more explicitly in certain social geographies. Hence, Black queer people in Detroit believe that they are required to perform a double labor—the work of material survival and the work of self-presentation through the performance of gender and sexual disguise—in order to negotiate and survive the rigid heteronormativity that they confront in their everyday lives.[13] Most of all, Diva D signals the integral role that performance and body presentation play in the daily lives of Black queer people, irrespective of subjectivity.

Femme Queens and Butches: Transgender Subjectivities in Ballroom Culture

There is a dearth of scholarship on Black transgender people. Since the 1990s, the area of transgender studies has transformed into an expansive field that continues to shape academic, cultural, and political discourses

around the globe. However, heretofore, research in transgender studies has scarcely examined the identities and experiences of Black transgender people in the United States. Studies of queer genders or gender and sexual transgressors have privileged the experiences and activities of urban, white queer communities in the United States. By and large, these white, middle-class queer communities are represented as universal, and their experiences and identity claims are posited as the interpretive lens through which the lives of (often) working-class people of color are examined. The few studies that include transgender and queer gender communities of color typically fail to account for the ways in which convergent forms of race, class, gender, and sexual marginalization structure the experiences of transgender people of color, certainly constituting experiences that are very different from those of white transgender people.

Examining transgender or gender queer members of the ballroom community necessitates attending to subjectivities and experiences that are simultaneously impacted by race and class oppression. As Enoch Page and Matt U. Richardson suggest, these subjectivities reflect the multitude of experiences of nonconforming gender identities, sexualities, and bodily configurations, both anatomic and performative.[14] Femme queens and butches are the two explicitly transgender categories of gender identity in ballroom culture. Although drag performances (both MTF and FTM) have always been a hallmark of ballroom culture, new categories have emerged within the ballroom scene, and gender and sexual subjectivities have been codified to accommodate the vast diversity of gender and sexuality in the community. As a result, ballroom members have created categories that distinguish drag—or butch queens up in drags (gay men who perform as women)—from femme queens (biological men who live as women).

For both femme queens and butch queens up in drags, the fluid nature of ballroom gender and sexual categories allows ballroom members, who cannot afford or do not desire to get a sex reassignment, the latitude of exercising their chosen gender and sexual identities and leading lives based on their life preferences and experiences. For instance, in *Paris Is Burning*, the late Pepper Labieja, also a femme queen and icon of the ballroom scene, states emphatically that she has no interest in getting a sex change to become "a woman" because women get beaten and robbed, too.

For Labieja, even if she could get a sex change, there is no benefit, necessarily, to changing, anatomically, into an already disparaged category when performance allows for her/him to "look like"—pass as—a woman when it is desired and necessary.[15]

In *The Aggressives,* many of the butches, lesbians, or female-bodied masculine individuals, who identify as "aggressive," are members of the ballroom community. Interestingly, in Black queer communities, drag king performance does not enjoy the same prominence as does drag queen performance. And in the ballroom scene, there is no "butches up in drags" category. Instead, the butch category is a kind of catchall gender category for biological females that consists of FTM transgender men, masculine lesbians, aggressives, tomboys, studs, and so on. There is, however, at least a tacit understanding that there is a difference between an FTM who lives as a man and one who only performs and competes as one. With regard to sexuality, there is no category for lesbians who are femme or masculine as there is for the butch queen—a gay man—in the gender system. These elisions indicate that power and privilege are afforded to gay men and masculinity within the community. I suspect that as the participation of biological females and women in the scene continues to increase in the ballroom community, this disparity and the scene will be challenged to expand its gender system to more accurately reflect its membership.

When one considers the complex experiences of ballroom members, the important function of the relationship between performance and the gender system becomes evident. The performative identities that are a part of the gender system of ballroom culture extend beyond the ball events into practices of self-identification and self-fashioning in members' lives in the outside world. To return to a point about homophobia in Detroit that I made earlier, it is helpful to consider the perspectives of Brianna and Levin, who are both femme queens. When I asked Brianna from the House of Cristal whether she views Detroit as homophobic, she said, "when I was younger I used to always just hear people talking about gay people. So I like never really like came out like that, but they could always, you know, just notice about me." And when I asked whether they had experienced a certain kind of freedom since choosing to start living as women that they did not experience as men, Brianna chimed in: "Not necessarily, it's like

you live the life so it's hard. I probably lost the relationship that I had with my father because we were real close. It won't be like it was." Both Brianna and Levin point to some of the difficulties associated with being femme queens—living as transgender women—they face among their biological families and their communities within the urban space of Detroit.

The genders and sexualities in ballroom culture are subjectivities, insofar as members identify and fashion themselves by and through the convergent notions of sex, gender, and sexuality within ballroom culture and as those meanings are imposed on them in society. For, in the final analysis, ballroom members have to live in different worlds. One of these worlds imposes strict prescriptions of gender and sexual meaning and behavior. And as Jonathon David Jackson notes, the world of ballroom and its balls provides a space and occasion for community members to embrace their own gendered and sexual meanings more freely.[16]

Racial Realness and the Gender System

In much of her book *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler emphasizes the quotidian danger associated with gender nonconformity and unintelligibility and calls for scholars to examine the practices that queer people deploy to avoid or survive phobic violence.[17] Hence, when Diva D suggests that femme queens who are "real as hell" fear going out during the day, he brings into focus the perilous consequences that femme queens and butches believe they might face if or when they are seen as queer gendered. Moreover, his use of the term "real" is significant here because it reflects the integral function of the concept of realness within the ballroom community, a concept that also helps to explain the efforts of its members to avoid discrimination, violence, and exclusion.

What ballroom members refer to as "realness" has remained the basis for the fundamental performance criteria in the culture throughout the several decades that it has been in existence. It is a set of performance criteria, a strategy, and, as I argue, a useful analytic concept that emerges from the ballroom community. Realness requires adherence to certain performances, self-presentations, and embodiments that are believed to capture the authenticity of particular gender and sexual identities. These criteria are established and function within a schema of race, class, gender,

and sexuality. Racialized, classed, gendered and sexualized performances, self-presentations, and embodiments, to a large extent, give realness its discursive power in both the ballroom scene as well as in society at large. For instance, at the House of Ebony Ball in Atlanta in 2004, when commentator Jack Givenchy asked the judges, "Is she real?" or "Is he real?" Givenchy is asking them to determine who (or which body) presents and performs the coded aesthetic imperative that defines style and deportment to re-create and re-present the discursive ideas of femininity and masculinity in a given category.[18] Thus, "realness" ultimately signifies the possibility of deception—an enduring illusion—positioned at the crossroads between the ballroom world and the "real world."[19]

Generally, realness serves two primary functions for members of the ballroom community. First, it is a guide by which members formulate their performances and self-presentation to compete in runway categories at the ball events. Furthermore, these performances are judged primarily by a panel of prominent members of the community. At the same time, these performances of their bodies are used to create the illusion of gender and sexual conformity in the outside world. As the nexus between the gender system and the competitive categories of the ball, along with members' own experiences, realness furnishes the meaning behind the subjectivities, and, at the same time, it underpins the criteria upon which categories are judged.

Some categories are arranged in groups based on criteria associated with realness. Members of the ballroom community call them "realness categories," or "realness kids," to refer to the members who "walk" them. The most common group of realness kids includes "thug realness" (also called "realness"), executive realness, schoolboy realness, femme queen realness, butch realness, and butch queens up in drags realness. For all these categories, to be "real" is to minimize or eliminate any sign of deviation from gender and sexual norms that are dominant in a heteronormative society. In other words, the person must embody the so-called markings of femininity or masculinity by altering the body through hormone therapy and body modifications, such as breast implants and padding for hips and buttocks. The central aim here is to be undifferenti-

ated from the rest of Black working-class people in the urban space—particularly in Detroit for most of my interlocutors.

One of the ball categories that best captures the role of performance is "realness with a twist." As commentator Kodak Kadinsky chanted at a ball in Detroit, "realness, realness with a twist, these are boys that twist their wrist; realness, realness with a twist, a little bit of that, a little bit of this." The competitor walks the runway first performing "thug realness" and then in an instant the competitor starts voguing femme during the same performance.[20] This demonstrates the skill of the competitor to instantly change her/his gender performance from "unclockable," meaning they unmark themselves as queer, to "clockable," marking themselves as queer.[21] For each of these categories, the particular expectations of realness and what one needs to do to execute them are known and accepted throughout the ballroom community. The ultimate aim is for the competitors to perform them better than their opponents.

The criteria of realness are constituted by the ways in which the body is presented and performed within what Robyn Wiegman calls a visual epistemology.[22] This visual epistemology consists of convergent discourses of race, gender, and sexuality that undergird the performance and self-presentation of gender and sexual subjects. And the range of the performative gender and sexual identities that are performed at the balls are framed within a discourse of Blackness. Mirroring some forms of Black gender and sexual performances by which members are largely oppressed, the ballroom community understands that the material realities of their lives (including their safety) are largely contingent upon how they are seen—how their bodies are read—and how they are seen by and within the optic lens of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy.

Wiegman further suggests that vision is the privileged sense of modernity. Hence, meaning and perceived knowledge are conferred onto bodies through a visual epistemology of race and gender. Bodies located in and viewed through such a frame of race and gender determines what is considered real through naturalizing discourses that render the body as a text.[23] I extend Wiegman's theory by suggesting that for Black queer people, the race and gender knowledge, through which the Black body is read, marks, explicitly or implicitly, sexuality and even sexual practice.

Therefore, because the Black body is read through and within a visual epistemology, where gender and sexual hierarchies are corporeal, ballroom members refashion themselves by manipulating their embodiments and performances in ways that render them visible and remarkable within the ballroom scene but invisible and unmarked in the world outside of it. Former ballroom member and cultural critic Tim'm West, a butch queen who is also a former member of the House of Ninja in New York City, makes this point best when he describes how some ballroom kids in the city develop a broader range of performance because of the world in which they live: "A boy rides up to the Bronx on the D train every day and after a certain street he gotta act like a boy. He turns it on. But after 14th Street, girl it came right back off! In a certain a way, these performances do match a particular reality that people have to live in."

Ultimately, ballroom community members understand that they are seen through a racist and homophobic lens propagated and internalized by various sectors of society. Therefore, members seek greater agency in shaping how they are viewed by altering and performing their bodies in ways that disguise their gender and sexual nonconformity.

The Conundrum of Realness

Realness is a necessary strategy and a creative response to the dangers of the convergent forms of race, class, gender, and sexual violence; yet, there are some problems that need to be examined. First, realness is, in part, constituted through tropes of femininity and masculinity.[24] Levin illustrates this point in explaining why she is not ready to walk the "femme queen body realness" category, because "all I got is my implants now; I gotta get the rest." Later Levin made it clear that, for her, to be successful in a realness body category, "the rest" that is needed is a vagina. And it is worth noting that once a femme queen gets a sex reassignment, that person moves into the category of woman in the ballroom community.

With many aspects of the performance criteria in ballroom culture, the terms "cunt," "pussy," and "dick" reflect how body parts–genitalia, breasts, and buttocks–are sutured to femininity and masculinity and therefore instantiate one's gender and sometimes sexual subjectivity. At the House of Ebony Ball, Jack Givenchy asked a woman competing in a

"femme queen realness body" category, "Are you real cunt?" He placed his hand between her legs to confirm that she had a "real" vagina, thereby verifying that she was a "real woman." The woman responded by saying, "It's all real." After telling her that she could not compete in a femme queen body category as a "real woman," Jack turned the woman away from the judges so that the rest of the participants in the hall could get a better view of her, gesturing to her, and he said, "Now if you wanna see what a femme queen is supposed to look like with body. . . ." Jack showed this participant off to the rest of the participants as a model a femme queen should aspire to look like.

In addition, a man is often reduced to a penis, particularly if he is viewed as being well endowed. I have observed competitive performances for categories such as "sex siren," consisting of masculine butch queens or men, where members of the audience shouted, "You give me dick down boy." Members associate being well-endowed with sexual prowess and, in effect, with masculinity. I don't know of a sex siren category that includes butches, so the phrase "you give me dick down boy" refers to masculinity that is attached to and performed by a male-bodied man with a flesh-and-blood penis.

Regarding performance, the terms "cunt" and "pussy" refer to ultimate femininity. Members use these terms not only to refer to a particular style of performance like "voguing femme soft and cunt" but also to refer to categories such as the woman and the femme queen. For many members of the ballroom scene, especially femme queens and butch queens up in drags, because achieving "ultimate femininity" is the goal, they welcome such terms when they are conferred upon them. Ariel, a femme queen and the housemother of the California chapter of the House of Prestige at the time of my study, explained to me once that she believes that members of the community are jealous of her because she is "so pussy." For Ariel, when one refers to her as pussy, it means that the work that she has done with her embodiment, such as hormonal therapy and her performance, has paid off. She has achieved "femme realness" because she is seen as such within the community and on the street.

Therefore, realness, both as a set of criteria and as the ways in which ballroom members apply and adhere to these criteria, often conflates

notions of anatomic femaleness and maleness with performance and presentation. Members fetishize aspects of the body to represent ultimate femininity or masculinity when they are attached to specific bodies, either physically or symbolically, to signify one's achievement of ultimate femininity or masculinity. These cases demonstrate, on the one hand, that realness serves as a strategy of resistance to hegemonic gender and sexual norms in terms of the violence to which members are subjected if they do not disguise their gender and sexual nonconformity. Yet, on the other hand, members' deployment of realness ends up re-inscribing and relying upon these same norms to view and to judge each other within the community.

On Language and Context in Ballroom Culture

Although in dominant culture, cunt and pussy are deployed in a derogatory sense and may seem inherently misogynistic, I would offer a different, more complicated perspective. As pointed out above, both terms are criteria for gender performance in ballroom culture, as opposed to insults or demeaning expletives hurled at women and femme queens. For example, Brianna explained that she realized that she could be successful living and competing as a femme queen, and thus living as a woman in the outside world, when people were complimenting her drag performance (as a butch queen up in drags). Brianna said, "When I first got into drag, like a lot of people was telling me about it, saying you know, 'you look fishy' and 'you look cunt.'" That people conferred onto Brianna these terms, even before she started taking hormones, meant that she embodied and performed the ultimate femininity necessary to both identify as a femme queen within the ballroom scene and to live as a woman (unmarked as a transgender woman) in the world outside of it. Or when Ariel Prestige boasted about being seen as pussy, she certainly did not view this as a demeaning interpellation within the context of ballroom culture.

Finally, at the Ebony Ball that I referred to above, when Jack Givenchy asked the biological woman whether she was "real cunt," she did not appear offended at all. Instead, she responded with affirmation, "Yes, it is all real," suggesting that the terms signify and serve as criteria for authentic femininity. Moreover, when these terms are used, the speaker does not

typically say "*you* are a cunt." Instead, the speaker says, "*give* me pussy" or "you *look* cunt," meaning give me femininity in your performance and self-presentation. These terms are about the desire to achieve femininity, not to demean it. Granted, from outside the ballroom cultural context, these terms carry a meaning much different from what I argue is true within it, but it is important to take seriously the context in which terms are used and the varied meanings that they carry for people situated within that context.

Performance undergirds the gender identity system, the criteria for the competitive categories, and the overall social interaction between members and the roles that they play. For these reasons, I see the function of performance in ballroom culture in somewhat different terms from those in which some critics have heretofore explained it. As one example, Butler asserts in her earlier work that she is ambivalent about drag largely because it reiterates and reinscribes the same norms that it purports to subvert,[25] but I argue that the performance and the gender system that it undergirds in ballroom culture offer far more cultural import because they reflect the possibilities for reconstituting gender and sexual subjectivities, for reconfiguring gender and sexual roles and relations, and for creating ways to survive an often dangerously homophobic, transphobic, and femmephobic public sphere.

Ultimately, in this queer minoritarian sphere, Black gender and sexually marginalized people forge lives worth living. Other critiques asserting that ballroom members are obsessed with white femininity and illusions of material wealth discount the actual labor in which its members are constantly engaged to create an alternative existence for themselves within their marginality. Especially with regard to gender and sexual performativity, members challenge the power and consequences of interpellation by assuming greater agency in the dialectic between subjectification and identification. The gender and sexual performativity of ballroom culture emerges and functions at the interstices of hegemony and transformation to create new forms of self-representation and social relations.[26]

There is a lot to be learned about gender and sexual queerness from the ballroom community's gender system. In the outside world, commu-

nity members are required to adhere to the pervasive female/male, woman/man, hetero/homo binaries, and therefore they must behave and identify as one or the other or suffer discrimination, violence, and exclusion throughout their social lives. Even in the larger queer community, there is often an expectation for a transgender person to identify as such or for queer people to pick one of the limited categories of sexuality–lesbian, gay, or bisexual. Conversely, in the ballroom community, members can be and often are openly queer in terms of sex, gender, and sexuality; but members are understandably reluctant to make those same claims in the world outside of the ballroom sphere. I argue that these malleable, contingent, and strategic deployments of identity should not be read, necessarily, as a sign of internalized racism, homophobia, or heterosexism. Instead, these practices are strategies used by these Black queer people to negotiate and survive a sometimes perilous and complex social terrain. The performance of realness marks one cultural mechanism by which they can do so.

Notes

This essay is based on performance ethnographic field research that I conducted between 2001 and 2007, primarily in Detroit, Michigan, but also in Oakland and Los Angeles, California. Throughout my field work, in addition to the aforementioned cities, I attended or participated in several balls in Philadelphia, Miami, Louisville, New York, Atlanta, and Charlotte.

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1. Alvernian is the father and cofounder, in 1990, with Carlos and Ali, of the Legendary House of Prestige in Philadelphia.
2. *Paris Is Burning,* directed by Jennie Livingston (1990; DVD, Burbank, CA: Off White Productions, Miramax Home Entertainment, Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2005).
3. Emily A. Arnold and Marlon M. Bailey, "Constructing Home and Family: How the Ballroom Community Supports African American GLBTQ Youth in the Face of HIV/AIDS," *The Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services* 21, nos. 2-3 (2009): 174.
4. In ballroom culture, "free agents" do not belong to a house, so they compete at balls as individuals.
5. Enoch H. Page and Matt U. Richardson, "On the Fear of Small Numbers: A Twenty-First-Century Prolegomenon of the U.S. Black Transgender Experience," *Black Sexualities: Probing Powers, Passions, Practices, and Policies*, ed. Juan Battle and Sandra L. Barnes (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 57.

6. *The Aggressives,* directed by Daniel Peddle, DVD (IMDbPro, 2005). Wolfgang Busch's less widely known film, *How Do I Look* DVD, directed by Wolfgang Busch (Art from the Heart, 2006), includes some discussion of butches, but it mostly focuses on butch queens and femme queens.
7. There were very few butches in the Detroit community during the time (2001-2007). I conducted this ethnographic study; therefore, I have few data on butches. In my forthcoming book, *Butch/Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit* (University of Michigan Press), I discuss at length Godfather Reno Prestige who is a butch. However, due to the lack of adequate data on butches for the argument that I make in this essay, I have chosen not to discuss Godfather Reno.
8. Jonathan David Jackson, "Social World of Voguing," *Journal for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement* 12, no. 2 (2002): 27.
9. In ballroom, and in larger Black queer communities, "trade" refers to a masculine man who identifies as straight. In the ballroom gender system, trade is equivalent to the "men who do not identify as gay" category.

   The gender system is complicated and, as is to be expected, there are some discrepancies. In *Paris Is Burning* and in the debates that the film generated, there was no discussion of a gender system, even though the gender subjectivities existed. Conversely, in their studies, Jonathon David Jackson and Karen McCarthy Brown have come to some different conclusions about what is more commonly called the gender system. In his work on vogue performance in the ballroom scenes of Philadelphia and New York City, Jackson suggests that there is a four-part gender system (butch queens, femme queens, butches, and women) and there are three sexes (female, male, and intersex). See Jackson, "The Social World of Voguing," 27. Karen McCarthy Brown, in her study of ballroom in Newark, New Jersey, states that there is a five-part gender system that includes all the categories that I identify in the text except for biologically born men. See McCarthy Brown's "Mimesis in the Face of Fear: Femme Queens, Butch Queens, and Gender Play in the House of Greater Newark Public Policy," in *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion,* ed. María Carla Sánchez and Linda Schlossberg (New York: New York University Press, 2001). Lastly, an NYU graduate student, Frank Leon Roberts, who focuses on the New York scene also, identifies a six-part gender system that adds butch queen with a twist (a performance category). The gender system that I delineate in my study departs, slightly, from the aforementioned. I came to my conclusions about the system from analyzing numerous category descriptions on flyers as well as from discussions with the housefathers and housemothers whom I interviewed in Detroit; Fayetteville, North Carolina; and Los Angeles. I suspect that some of these discrepancies are due to difference in region and time (in part due to the advent of an increasingly diverse range of membership) in the ballroom community.
10. Susan Stryker, "(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies," in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York: Routledge, 2006), 10.
11. Brown, "Mimesis," 208.

12. Percy C. Hintzen, *West Indian in the West: Self-Representation in an Immigrant Community* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 34.
13. See Sherrie Inness and Michelle Lloyd, "G.I. Joes in Barbi Land: Recontextualizing Butch in Twentieth-Century Lesbian Culture," in *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Anthology,* ed. Brett Beemyn and Mickey Eliason (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 14; Jackie Goldsby, "Queens of Language," in *Queer Looks: Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Film and Video,* ed. Martha Bever, John Greyson, and Pratibha Parmar (New York: Routledge, 1994), 110.
14. Page and Richardson, "On the Fear of Small Numbers," 61.
15. Livingston, *Paris Is Burning.*
16. Jackson, "Social World of Voguing," 27.
17. Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 216.
18. Ibid., 110.
19. Brown, "Mimesis," 216.
20. These days the realness with a twist category is split into two categories; therefore, it requires two separate performances. The two performances are called "realness with a twist part one and part two." In my view, this category is most interesting and executed most effectively when there is only one category and the person changes in the midst of one performance.
21. For more on the notion of being "unmarked" or what members of the ballroom community refer to as "unclockable," see Peggy Phelan's *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
22. Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 4.
23. Ibid., 4.
24. E. Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 20.
25. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 125.
26. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentification: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 195.