Fierce Pleasures:
Art, History, and Culture in New York City Drag Balls

Tavia Amolo Ochieng Nyong'o
CLASS OF 1995

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors from the College of Social Studies

MIDDLETOWN, CONNECTICUT APRIL, 1995
Acknowledgements

I received a Davenport research grant from the Public Affairs Center at Wesleyan University, which enabled me to conduct my research over the summer of 1994. Thanks to Steven Gregory, who helped me in the first framing of this project and was of periodic support over the course of that summer.

Colin Robinson at Gay Men of African Descent provided me with my first contacts in the ball culture. Arbert and Torrance Latex at Gay Men’s Health Crisis were helpful throughout. I also benefited from a conversation with Kathryn Stockton.

My debt to my advisor, Henry Abelove, is substantial. His support and influence has extended far beyond the writing of this thesis.

Friends and fellow travellers: Keith Donoghue, Amos Elberg, Tasha van Es, Rachel Fleet, Ben Foss, Marisa Joelson, Cheryl Mejia, and Doug Sabo.

Thanks as well to my family, particularly my mother Jean, whose enabling presence I have only recently come to truly appreciate.
# Table Of Contents

*Introduction: This Marathon Circuit*  
3

*Chapter One: A Walk to the Piers*  
8

*Chapter Two: The Rise and Fall of Drag-Ball-Ism*  
32

*Chapter Three: 'House' is Not a 'Home'*  
65

*Chapter Four: The Art of the Ball*  
86

*Conclusion: Poverty and Performance*  
117

*Sources Cited*  
123
Introduction

This Marathon Circuit

"The queer's invisibility in representation and his/her dependence upon
dominant structures of signification are not so much a negative condition to be
overcome, but rather, the very strength to exploit."—Moe Meyer

"It's a Merry-Go-Round, this Marathon Circuit
When you get Ball fever, you can't desert it
So hit the floor and let them judge.
Make them give you want
You can make them budge."—Marcel Christian

This thesis is about the black and Puerto-Rican drag balls of New York City and the people who stage and participate in them. It aims to provide an ethnographic account of a cultural milieu, to pose questions relating to the politics of representation, and to make an argument about the pleasures and possibilities that reside within the 'ball world.' I envision my work as a contribution to the growing body of literature on the contemporary queer subject.³

I approached the study of the balls with a number of questions in mind. What sort of history was there behind the contemporary balls? How had the balls changed over time? How had the period of mass attention, which was responsible for my knowing the balls even existed, altered the conditions under which they were held? Most broadly, I wanted to know:

---


³At a later point, I will explain more fully the way in which I use the term 'queer.' For now, it will suffice for me to indicate that I intend to reclaim it from its usage as a homophobic epithet, and to redefine it as a coalitional term that includes lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgenders and others labelled sexually deviant.
What role did the balls play in the lives and everyday struggles of their participants?

Balls provided a unique opportunity to study the cultural patterns of several subordinated social groups simultaneously: blacks, Puerto Ricans (or Nuyoricans as they call themselves in New York City), gay men and lesbians, youth, and the ghettoized poor. Because the balls were situated at the intersection of so many indices of social oppression and stigmatization, I felt certain that they would be an immensely difficult, but therefore all the more rewarding, topic to study.

As I entered into my period of participant observation, a second set of questions began to emerge alongside my initial ones. These questions concerned the relationship between the mass media and what have been called “subcultures.” I began to want to know more about the process of cultural production in American life. What is culture? Who gets to make it? And who benefits from the conditions under which it is made? In asking these questions, and without really expecting to generate whole or complete answers, I sought to place the balls within the context of a broader culture organized around the values of consumerism and the cycles of fashion. In what ways, I wanted to know, did balls work to refigure or recompose dominant ways of relating to commodities, to

---

4 Deciding to describe the ball scene as a form of youth culture is slightly contentious on my part, since the spectrum of ages who participate is more broad than any accepted notion of youth. It did seem to me, however, that balls were dominated by participants in their teens and twenties. Empirical ages aside, ball culture does seem oriented around the cultural category of ‘youthfulness,’ although this orientation is not wholly uncontested. I discuss this issue more fully in chapter two.

fashion, and to the body? Was there a place to consider the balls as a form of cultural resistance?

Rather early on, when this project was still in its formative stages, I remember being questioned by someone who deemed himself knowledgeable about what was hip in New York City. This person expressed mild surprise that I wanted to study the drag ball scene. Wasn’t it, he wanted to know, over by now? Four years after the appearance of Jennie Livingston’s ground-breaking documentary film *Paris is Burning*, whose release coincided with one apex of ‘ball fever,’ it seemed curious to him that someone would still be interested in going to balls, let alone devoting scholarly effort to them. Scenes come and go with alarming speed amongst youth in urban contexts, and it seemed only predictable in his mind that the balls would have similarly faded from sight once the white heat of media attention moved on to the next big thing.

One goal of this thesis, therefore, is to demonstrate that far from being a passing sensation, the drag ball scene is a leisure form with both a venerable history and a future grounded in its ability to adapt, change, and remain exciting. It is useful to point out, in this light, that ball culture has never been commodified to the extent that other forms of contemporary black expressive culture, such as hip hop culture, have. This has been due in large part to the continuing homophobic disavowal in popular culture of the specificities of lesbian and gay life. But the intermittent and highly unstable visibility of the culture in the mass media should not be taken as an indicator that the culture itself is similarly intermittent and unstable.
This thesis is organized into four chapters which deal respectively with the issues of belonging, commercialization, kinship, and art. The first chapter is an introduction to the Village and the Piers, where my participant observation was located. I argue that the lives of the ball children are caught up within the larger dynamics of a local ‘quality of life’ politics under which access to the public sphere is increasingly circumscribed, leading the children to fashion themselves oppositionally to the neighborhood, asserting their right to belong.

The second chapter looks at the rise of the balls and the voguing dance style into local and national visibility in the late eighties and nineties. I argue that this visibility was produced within a culture heavily conditioned by racism and homophobia, resulting in a delegitimation of the artistic worth of the voguing and balls and providing for the economic exploitation of the cultural producers responsible for them.

The third chapter looks at the forms of ‘fictive kinship’ the ball children have developed in response to a society that marginalizes and excludes them. I argue that this form of ‘gay family’ is organized in ways that contest normative ideas about how a family should be constituted, while at the same time providing crucial resources and coping mechanisms for everyday survival in a postindustrial landscape.

The final chapter looks at the balls as art and as performance, exploring the connections between performativity and the construction of queer and ‘of color’ subjectivities. I argue against the understanding of balls as a fantasy world within which an individual’s dreams are given free reign, stressing instead the collective aspect of the balls, and the way
ball competition becomes a form of bodily discipline. Balls, I point out, do draw heavily on mass mediated images of celebrity and the moneyed life, but they simultaneously function on a more everyday, mundane level, transforming the pleasures, dangers and banalities of lived experience into spectacular and imaginative art.

In proceeding, I will draw upon my own period of participant observation over the summer of 1994, combined with five recorded interviews I conducted with people associated with the ball scene. In addition, I draw upon primary materials from the ball scene such as invitations and pamphlets, and the occasional coverage in the local and national media. I make particularly extensive use of the *Idle Sheet* series of pamphlets produced by ball aficionado Marcel Christian over a period from the mid-1980s to early 1990s. These pamphlets, written as a form of supplementary entertainment for specific balls, provide rare documentation of the changing ball scene from the perspective of an insider. I also draw upon the somewhat limited secondary material that deals directly with the New York City ball scene, most of which concerns *Paris is Burning*. And finally, I make use of the scholarship that has grown up around issues of race, sex, gender, class and urban life as it bears upon my topic.

---

*Critical discussions of ball culture which are grounded solely in readings of *Paris is Burning* are in my view insufficiently capable of grasping the dynamics and longevity of the "Marathon Circuit." Neither are they equipped to fully address the complex issues around race, sex, gender, class, and desire raised by the film.*
Chapter One

A Walk to the Piers

"Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are, but to refute what we are."—Michel Foucault

"What is a Queen? Well, a Queen is... a person... who is very nice... and wants to be... be loved and understood... and... be left the fuck alone, quick!"—Marcel Christian

On Friday, June 24th, 1994, the New York Times ran a story entitled: "Efforts on Quality of Life in 'Village' a Success, the Police Say." The piece opened with a brief explanation of what the Times later termed 'this year's civic credo' — 'quality of life'. "Controlling minor infractions," adherents to this credo assert, "will make the city a more attractive place, improve relations between public and police and help prevent more serious crimes." The logic of this strategy was put simply to the Times: "You take care of the little things," an officer of the Sixth Precinct informed the reporter, "and the big things take care of themselves."


11"Efforts on Quality of Life," B1.

12Ibid.
The particular ‘little thing’ that so disturbed Village residents during the summer of 1994 was that “every weekend night young people from all five boroughs and the suburbs invaded Greenwich Village, drinking and urinating in the streets.” Washington Square was one epicenter for this activity, and the article indicated that the youths in question were mostly black, visually confirming this with an accompanying photo of one such young black man being led away from the Village between two police officers for underage drinking. The article ended with a fairly energetic recounting of this particular boy’s arrest:

As the patrol car screeched to a halt, Officer Mulcahy jumped out and grabbed the beer bottle out of the hands of a 15-year-old boy, spilling its contents into the street. When the boy failed to show any identification, he was handcuffed and taken to the precinct station house for questioning. As a minor, he escaped a summons but received a good-natured lecture about drinking and hanging out with older boys. The two officers drove him home, to the nearby Fulton Houses project, where his father greeted the police in horror, crossing his chest as if facing some desperate fate.

“It’s nothing major,” Officer Mulcahy said. “But he doesn’t need to hang out in the Village. Take care of your son.”

There are several interesting things about this story, not least of which is the particular the way it is told. We, the casual reader, enter the narrative riding ‘shot-gun’ — so to speak — in the police car, a position ubiquitous in ‘true crime’ television shows and novels. Impending violence is augured by the car’s screeching halt and Officer Mulcahy’s swift jump, its trajectory only displaced at the last possible moment from the boy’s body to his beer-bottle, which is spilled in the street. Violence is then replaced by the threat of incarceration, in the form of handcuffs and a trip to the police

13Ibid., 82.
station, again averted only at the last minute by his status as a minor. Since minors belong at home, not in jail, our unruly subject is driven there. Along the way, the police transform themselves from bad cops to good cops, offering ‘friendly’ advice about appropriate behavior for a young man. Once the boy is safely back in ‘the Projects,’ and after having met a father who seems to display appropriate concern for his child, we and Officer Mulcahy deliver the unnamed boy from the hands of state and into the care of the male-headed household with but these two warnings, spoken off-handedly and in a way to assure that they are “nothing major”: (1) Stay out of the Village, and, (2) “Take care of your son.”

This chapter aims to examine the micro-politics of belonging in a New York City neighborhood: Greenwich Village. I want to examine the mechanisms through which certain people come to have access to the Village, and others, usually black, poor, and young, increasingly do not. In initiating this argument, I want to address the relationship between a changing mode of development within capitalist relations of production and the contested social landscapes of the ‘quality of life’ campaign in New York City that was current in the summer of 1994.

I will ask how the presence of poor black and Puerto Rican youth on Village streets is understood in a community that, while priding itself on a reputation for laissez faire, is also concerned about maintaining its attractiveness as a residential and leisure district for a primarily white middle-class clientele. I will particularly inquire into the position of that segment of the Village which is currently seen as the ‘visible gay community,’ and suggest that one process through which this visibility is
gained — the conspicuous consumption of 'gay-oriented' commodities — excludes the kids on the Piers, who are visible as 'gay' only in unstable and unpredictable ways.\textsuperscript{14} This instability, I suggest, is the result of the conflicts and compromises between three competing ideologies on Christopher Street: (1) gay solidarity against homophobic oppression, (2) the pastoral institutionalization and care of potentially unruly youth, and (3) the policing of potentially criminal and disruptive black male, lower class bodies. Everyday conflicts over belonging and quality of life, I suggest, can be seen as part of this broader ideological struggle.

\ldots

The issue of police violence on poor urban subjects has been politically explosive in this country for a long time, and particularly so since the Los Angeles riots of 1992. The psychological and material devastation wreaked upon disenfranchised communities by the racist behavior of officers of the state has occasioned eloquent commentary from many contemporary intellectuals.\textsuperscript{15} Often missed, however, in the discussions of how police operate in urban areas as agents of state-sanctioned brutality, is their concomitant role as agents of pastoral,

\textsuperscript{14}In making my argument about conspicuous consumption, I do not at all wish to be understood as positing that gay identity is produced solely through such consumption. There are certainly numerous non-commodified means by which 'gay' and/or 'queer' is signified and sted in the Village.

\textsuperscript{15}For an excellent collection of discussions on this and related issues surrounding the L.A. riots, see Robert Gooding-Williams, editor, Reading Rodney King, Reading Urban Rebellion (New York: Routledge, 1993).
normalizing control. To explain how the police force has come to assume this double task, it is necessary to say something about the increasing double-ness, or fissure, in American urban life.

Of the extensive literature on post-industrialism, I want to begin here by mentioning just one book — Manuel Castells’s The Informational City. In it, Castells argues that in the past decades the capitalist world system has entered into an ‘informational’ mode of production characterized, in urban areas, by what he terms the ‘two-city’ effect. Castells argues that the industrial mode of production characteristic of urban capitalist social relations is being replaced by an ‘informational’ mode. Instead of producing manufactured goods, increasingly cities like New York are serving as nerve centers for decentralized information services. New technologies of transport and communications have allowed capital to reorganize itself in what Castells calls, somewhat mysteriously, the ‘space of flows.’ He writes:

> we can see a major social trend standing out from all our observations: the historical emergence of the space of flows, superseding the meaning of the space of places. By this we understand the deployment of the functional logic of power-holding organizations in asymmetrical networks of exchanges which do not depend on the characteristics of any specific locale for the fulfillment of their fundamental goals.

In other words, capital (along with the classes employed to invest and manage capital) is made mobile by these new technologies, and that this mobility places it at further advantage vis-à-vis the working classes, which

---

16 These roles are of course, not mutually exclusive, but they do seem to operate in distinct and separate points in space and time.

are still stuck in 'the space of places.' Two cities, one connected into the new economy and one increasingly isolated from it, come into being.

It might be useful to look at New York City as a possible example of Castells's two-city effect. One might, in this vein, point to the loss since the 1960s of blue-collar, unionized jobs in factories, and their replacement by routinized, de-skilled, un-unionized, and low-wage service jobs. This transformation has had the effect of rendering the geographical relationship between neighborhood and workplace more tenuous. As Mercer Sullivan comments:

The communal organization of the industrial cities of an earlier era was based on the location of residential neighborhoods in proximity to centers of manufacturing and distribution concentrated in large cities near major routes of water and rail transportation... In the postindustrial city this congruence of residential and economic organization remains only vestigially ... Residential neighborhoods now house either the more highly educated workers in these newer industries or, paradoxically, those who have been displaced by the decline or employment in both manufacturing and agriculture."\(^{18}\)

Sullivan's ethnographic study of youth crime in Brooklyn, from which this quotation is drawn, explores everyday patterns of resistance in the latter type of neighborhood, within which the un- and under-employed working classes reside and "are warehoused as a pool of marginal and surplus labor."\(^{19}\) The West Village, which is where my study is focused, stands as an example of the former type of neighborhood, housing people


\(^{19}\)ibid.
from a higher socio-economic strata with greater degrees of mobility and flexibility within the new economy.

It is not my argument that New York City has already developed along lines that would place it completely within the two-city model which, as Mike Davis has shown, does already exists in the example of Los Angeles. Central Park is perhaps the most visibly enduring symbol of New York's historical identity as a civic industrial city: a function of the public park has always been to provide common public spaces of leisure for people from all social classes. The civil engineering of the city orients it towards foot and subway travel that to a large degree necessitate daily interaction with the full 'gorgeous mosaic' of New Yorkers.

While it seems possible that New York could move, is already moving, in the direction mandated by 'informationalism,' it would still have to undergo drastic reconstruction to erase its more radically participatory heritage. Without predicting an ultimate destination for the city, I want to suggest both that the city is undergoing just this sort of

---

20 Mike Davis uses the metaphor of 'quartz' to describe the architecture of a city organized around privatizing the spaces within which the managerial and professional classes work and enjoy leisure. This type of civil engineering is 'quartz' because, unlike older city models which focused on public spaces open to all citizens (the library, the park), it instead constructs small islands of safety for the wealthy within which they do not need to encounter the poor, and whose outside walls, like quartz, reflect back on an threateningly chaotic public sphere, the streets, in such a way as to make these private spaces invisible. The public spaces outside these quartz areas are navigated by the upper classes only to get from one private place to the next, and the paranoia produced by even temporarily exposing oneself to the dangers of the street is alleviated, in Los Angeles, by a hermetically-enclosed car culture. See Mike Davis, City of Quartz (New York: Vintage, 1992).

21 The park, of course, has also had the purpose of 'enobling' the swarthy masses, and has throughout its history been literally contested terrain between social classes. For an excellent history of the park, see Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, The Park and the People (Ithaca and London: Cornell University, 1992).
attempted reconstruction, and that the ‘quality of life’ political strategy is an attempt to sort out, on a neighborhood by neighborhood level, those parts of New York City which are going to decay into warehouses for ‘the urban underclass,’ and those which are to be preserved, gentrified, and above all, hermetically sealed for the benefit of the urban — well — ‘overclass.’

It is important to point out that the ‘space of places’ and the ‘space of flows,’ to use Castells’s terminology, exist simultaneously within the same urban landscape; they are mutually interdependent, even if those without access to the latter are through that lack made subordinate. The West Village is not yet made of quartz, but the ‘quality of life’ strategy can be viewed as a concrete attempt to pretend that it is, to enact stepped-up policing and surveillance efforts as a second-best alternative to erecting new boundaries and physically reshaping the civil architecture of the neighborhood.

In a suburban mall, an example of a privatized public space, undesirables are easily ejected by private security forces. New York City streets and parks — still nominally ‘public’ and open to all irrespective of social status — require ‘civic credos,’ police action, and a state-driven ‘reform’ campaign reported in the mainstream press with a slightly hand-wringing, but ultimately supportive tone. All this in order to raise the disturbing but comforting presence of state-sanctioned violence closer to the surface of the body politic, to make evident the pulsating artery of ‘righteous anger’ always ready to symbolically spill out, as we do from the police car at Washington Square, wash over an unfortunate example, and
subside only when the unruly subject is vividly aware that while this was just a flood, the fire next time.

Hegemony, Dick Hebdidge suggests, involves the alliance of social groups to either contain or else attain social control over a subordinated group in such a way as to render that control naturalized and ‘commonsensical’.22 In the Village, I posit, the hegemonic coalition organized through ‘quality of life’ politics is comprised of the city government, the police, the local community boards, the local news media, most of the middle to upper income residents of the village, and the local merchants. The subordinated group targeted for surveillance leading up to possible expulsion from the neighborhood are those who are incapable of either residing in or conspicuously consuming the products of the district. This social group is heterogeneous, encompassing everyone from the homeless to the prostitutes on 14th street. The subset of undesirables I want to particularly focus on, however, are the youth who, in local parlance, are called ‘ball children,’ ‘the children,’ or, simply, ‘the kids.’

Who are the ball children? The short answer is that they are the primarily gay male, primarily Puerto Rican and black, primarily teenage people who participate to varying degrees in the semi-weekly drag ball competitions held in various places in New York City and the Jersey shore. Before saying more about them, however, I want to revisit the opening scene of “crime-busting ... but in a nice way.” Or, to return to that

first sentence, speaking the first half with a rising violence that is muted only by the reassigned safety of the second: Stay out of the Village! ... and take care of your son.

The body under question, the fifteen year old, is black and unruly, and therefore the deserving subject of state violence. But he is also young and in a public space that is shared with the well-heeled, who might start at the sight of actual violence. So he is first removed to the precinct, and then, when sufficiently shaken, is taken back to (1) the space he is being assigned to under a reorganization of the public/private, and (2) into the care of the patriarchal family whose absence, everyone from Daniel Patrick Moynihan to William Julius Wilson will tell you, is deeply implicated as a source of pervasive black poverty. In the above formulation, (2) provides ideological cover for (1), which is to say, it allows the police (and us) to relax at the end of the tale, comforted by the notion that what we were doing was not ejecting fellow citizens from a public space to which we all have equal claim, but placing a young man where he belongs: at home learning, from his father, how to be responsible. If only more 15 year-old black beer drinkers had fathers like this one to go home to, we are left to suppose, the underclass problem could well be remedied. Keep in mind: when the little things are taken care of (underage beer-drinking) the big things (crime, post-industrialism, racism, social dislocation) will take care of themselves.

The ostensibly heterosexual young man in the New York Times article participates in a street culture quite separate from that of the ball children. The social division between straight and queer youth is mapped
out by the young themselves: the straight kids play basketball in Washington Square, while the queer kids gather Sunday nights at the Monster on Sheridan Square for dancing and socializing, and are visible throughout the week spending leisure hours on Christopher Street and down at the Piers. However separate and even antagonistic these worlds may be, they both are made subject to the surveillance and disciplines of ‘quality of life’ enforcers.

Quality of life enforcement, as I have argued, emanates from a hegemonic social grouping that extends beyond just the police force and news media. A key intermediary institution that has taken up the task of ‘policing’ the ball children is the local Community Board 2. By way of entering into a discussion of this institution, I want to introduce a second piece of mainstream reporting on the quality of life in the Village. This article, also in the New York Times, appeared on June 19th, 1994, and was titled “Risk and Refuge: The New World Near West Street.” The article begins in similar fashion to “Efforts on Quality of Life in ‘Village’ a Success,” except that here the added phenomena of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people transform the tone from one of controlled outrage to a sensationalist and macabre fascination with perverse sexuality and its connection—through AIDS and street violence—with death. The article opens as follows:

Many of them first came to the waterfront edge of Christopher Street when they were barely teen-agers, brought by older friends or drawn, from wherever they lived, by a sense of wary curiosity. What they found was an exciting, sometimes frightening night life near the bustling highway and on the rotting piers. It was a place that some had glimpsed only in movies like
“Paris is Burning,” about transvestite life, or “Cruising,” with Al Pacino, a dark story about a killer who stalked gay bars. But despite the dangers associated with drugs and hustling, and despite the neighborhood plague of AIDS, the westernmost blocks of Christopher Street were a place where the teens found the acceptance they knew they would never find in their own neighborhoods in the city or suburbs. They say that the street is where they first defined their sexuality and their life style, that no other place will ever mean as much to them.\

What immediately stands out about this excerpt, in contrast to the earlier one, is that it has a theory as to why these “youthful offenders” are on the street to begin with. On the surface of things, it even seems to be a partial defense of their actions — “no other place will ever mean as much.” This qualified sympathy, however, is always ready to transform itself into a fantasy about the self-destructiveness of perverse sexuality. We see this in the maliciously inaccurate description of AIDS as a “neighborhood plague,” a comment which depends upon the reader “knowing” that the source of this plague is the high concentration of gay men in the neighborhood. The area the children hang out in takes on a macabre quality, the reference to “rotting piers” conjuring up imagery of decay and danger that is reinforced by the gratuitous reference to the “dark story” of Cruising. This last comment has an interesting function: it shores up a journalistic account of the milieu of the Piers by means of an admittedly fictional story about urban gay life. The author’s belief that people are drawn into the social life of the Piers through the medium of popular entertainment is a curious one. It serves, I believe, to play up the other-

worldly quality of the Piers, which are accessed, even by the people who use them, only through the medium of film.

Unlike our earlier narrative, we are invited into this one only as bemused, perhaps even scandalized, spectators. A surplus of goodwill is demanded, perhaps over and above the average New York Times reader, in that we are supposed to balance our concerns over street criminality (which is inarguably bad) with our concerns over homosexuality (which should at least be ‘tolerated’ and ‘understood’). There is no mention here of police action, and the distinct impression is conveyed that the threat, if such a threat there be, is of a different sort than that embodied in the first youth we encountered. The difference, I argue, has everything to do with how gender is figured within the dominant discourses about poor people of color. Minority youth who happen to also be gay, I argue, are feminized by a discourse which sees them as criminal, but in specific and self-destructive ways, as opposed to the other-destructive criminality of their straight peers.24

Particularly in the age of AIDS, same-sex desire is coupled in the dominant society’s mind with the social threat of contagiousness, whether of a sexual practice that is seen as intrinsically perverse, or of the halo of dangerous behaviors that are believed to accompany it. As Leo Bersani has shown, popular discourses about homosexuals today bear a striking resemblance to discourses about the prostitute in the nineteenth century.

---

24 Lower class men, within this logic, perform criminal acts which require dexterity and daring (car-jackings, armed robberies). Lower class women also perform criminal acts, but these are seen as involving uncontrollable passions and even self-destructive urges (prostitution, shop-lifting, having children out of wedlock).
Both were/are seen as the carriers of venereal disease, whose spread is enabled by a promiscuity grounded in the ability of women and anally-receptive men to be “multiply orgasmic.”

The presence of lower class, black and Puerto Rican youth who engage in same-sex sex, drug use and hustling almost overdetermines the manner in which they will be represented to the mass audience of the New York Times. Interestingly, in this vein, was the manner in which the article came to be written. What drew the Times attention to this ‘New World’ was the claim, corroborated by local community activists, that the population of youth on the street had been growing since the early 1990s. Socializing on the Piers, neighborhood plagues or no, definitely seemed contagious.

I should stress that this idea of a contagious youth culture was not simply thought about and worried over, but became the grounds for local community intervention. In 1992, Community Board 2 held a public meeting on how to address this increasing disturbance. As one Villager told the Times:

I think the neighborhood was freaked out, plain and simple...

In place of the 20- and 30-something mostly white gays, there was a growing number of ‘fem’ and ‘banjee,’ black and Latino teen-agers.

The quotation reveals the class and racial dynamics behind the concerns of the Community Boards. It reveals that even among lesbians, gays and their supporters, queer youth can still emerge as a social threat demanding some form of containment.

---

25 Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” October 43 (Winter 1987), 211.
26 Maurice Engler, quoted in “Risk and Refuge,” 1. By ‘fem’ and ‘banjee’ he was referring to the local parlance for the distinctive style and comportment of urban black and Nuyorican youth, a style associated with the streets and with hip hop and house music. In the above quotation, ‘gay’ becomes implicitly connected to a middle-class and white identity, and ‘fem’ and ‘banjee’ with a lower class, Puerto Rican and black identity.
And yet, the response of the community to the increasing number of ball children was by no means monolithic. Rather, it was shaped by the heritage of the Christopher Street area as a center for the historical flowering of a culture which celebrated same-sex desire and practice. Christopher Street has a unique claim to centrality in the history of gay and lesbian liberation: it is the street on which the Stonewall Inn (where uppity queers rioted back in 1969 and initiated a series of events still unfolding today) used to be. Here, the ongoing civic projects of criminalizing black bodies and institutionalizing youthful ones, is met by a third — gay bodies in solidarity against homophobic oppression.

Youth were constructed as a problem on Christopher Street for the same sorts of reasons that they were on Washington Square: their licentious and occasionally illegal behavior while in public spaces, coupled with a consistent failure to reliably serve as customers for the local stores. But the presence of an articulated discourse of lesbian and gay solidarity and pride interacted with the racial and class antagonisms to an unpredictable effect. Alongside stepped up enforcement of the 'quality of life,' local activists converted a vacated restaurant space at the end of the street, by the Piers, to be used as a under-twenty one youth club, an alternative to both the streets and coercive relocation.

This response, I argue, sought to negotiate on the one hand a commitment to neighborhood safety and on the other a respect for and desire to support youthful same-sexers. In the subsequent section, I want to look more closely at the dynamics of this resulting institution, which came to be called the 'Neutral Zone.'
Over the course of the summer, almost every visit of mine to the Piers began from the Sheridan Square stop on the 9 train. Usually, a couple of the ball children would be hanging out on the corner above the subway stop, with more gathering as the evening progressed. They would not go into any of the gay male oriented stores that dotted Christopher Street, and I learned to follow suit. Without explicitly associating them with the white, wealthier and older gay men who dominate Christopher Street by day, the children's behavior demonstrated to me a dismissal of these stores, and their specific forms of commodification. The feeling of unease might very well have been mutual; in one window I saw advertised a shirt that read "Warning Brothers: White Man with Big Dick."

The pride with which gay New Yorkers have sought to grasp hold of Christopher street and make it a bastion of visibility is intense, as made plain by an avowed heterosexual I met navigating the shops with a defensively-donned shirt that read "Filthy Hetero." Most of the businesses from the Square to the Piers are gay-owned and gay-oriented — clothing stores, bars, cafés, porn shops — and even those that aren’t often have window displays that attempt to attract a gay audience. In doing so, they deploy the increasingly shared symbols of visible gayness (an identity, which after all, must be constantly insisted upon publicly if the end goal is to make it as self-apparent as race, ethnicity or even social standing is in our society). These symbols include not only the pink triangle and rainbow flag, but also the various accouterments that are understood in
the local vernacular to signify ‘gay’ or ‘queer’: S/M leather clothing, a particular genre of club wear produced by gay male designers like Raymond Dragon, and most ubiquitously, the sassy t-shirts-with-a-message which lesbian and gay New Yorkers have managed to convert into a form of sartorial street warfare.27

The summer of 1994 represented perhaps one extreme of a strategy of visibility through conspicuous consumption of ‘gay’ commodities, a by-product of the conversion of the annual Pride march into an International March on the United Nations, coupled with the Gay Games and Cultural Festival, all of which occurred in June. Even the Republican mayor of the city felt compelled to welcome these events, in the face of stiff conservative opposition, because of the level of additional revenue they represented for the city. At a certain point, one could not successfully navigate Christopher Street and its environs without receiving any number of leaflets advertising gay clubs, parties, magazines, clothes, even credit cards. When the Piers became the site for a lesbian and gay street fair, I even came across one vendor offering a ‘coming out’ catalog full of items of specific interest to those just entering ‘the life.’

Unsurprisingly, the ball kids were excluded for class reasons from much of this consumption and display. They seemed to treat the events of June with a mixture of aloofness and slight resentment. Throughout the

27 These t-shirts are usually emblazoned with brief, witty and in-your-face statements such as “2QT2SSTR8,” “I’m Not Gay but my Boyfriend is,” or my favorite: “Nobody Knows I’m Gay.” They come in more subdued varieties, and, having worn some of them in public, I can affirm that it takes no small act of courage to go through an entire day, even in New York, outing oneself to everyone who even glances your way. Although not everyone wears these t-shirts, they are symbolic of the larger strategy of visibility used by the gay and lesbian community in New York City.
summer, I became cognizant of the degree to which the children carved out a separate sphere for themselves. The Neutral Zone functioned as a space of negotiation between the interests of the adult lesbians and gays involved in community and social service work, and the street-oriented children looking for a place to hang out.

The Neutral Zone began in July of 1992 as a free-of-charge night spot for youth (its original name was ‘Bratt’s’). Housed in a former restaurant space at the end of Christopher Street, a few doors down from West Street, the Piers and waterfront were visible from its doors. Much of the surrounding buildings were residential—a persistent rumor had it that one of the penthouse suites on the block belonged to the celebrity RuPaul. Across the street stood the Dugout, a gay rock and country club; further along, next to the highway, a large porn emporium.

Neighborhood complaints about noise and ‘gang activity’ led to the closure of Bratt’s, and its reopening in the fall of 1993 as the Neutral Zone. The dynamics of the institution I visited in the summer of 1994 was far different than it must have been originally. No longer a nightclub, it had become a ‘youth center.’ Support groups met weekly, leadership skills training sessions were organized, there was even a few camping trips conducted while I was there. But mostly, the Zone was used as a place to relax in the afternoon and early evening, practice dance moves in front of the large mirrors, and watch Black Entertainment Television on one of the two TVs in the building.
In the *Youth Voice*, a publication put out by the Greenwich Village Youth Council, one of the coordinators of the Neutral Zone described the mission of the center as follows:

The Neutral Zone is a place where they can feel safe. It’s a place where youth can both know that they are safe and know that they have the freedom to explore themselves and receive support for being exactly who they are. It’s an atmosphere where role models show the youth that being lesbian, bisexual, gay or transgender is a reality that has always been and always will be.28

Two forms of ‘safety’ are conflated in the above quotation: one the one hand it means safety from a society hostile to lesbians, bisexuals, gays and ‘transgenderals,’ on the other, it indicates safety from ‘the street’ and its associated dangers. Another Zone coordinator made this even more explicit, in an article explaining the origin of the center:

The truth of the matter is that young Blacks and Latinos were beginning to “come out” in ever growing numbers and, for the first time, feel proud of their Les-bi-gay identities. They came seeking refuge. The big problem was the fact that they were still teenagers. Without any kind of guidance, they were falling prey to the perils of street life that had made claim to their part of the waterfront.29

Here we can see clearly the presence of an attitude of containment taken towards youth, whose age is seen as “[t]he big problem,” who were without “any kind of guidance.” The “perils of street life” did not need to be enumerated; here images of the macabre are deployed, a zone of danger clearly demarcated, without directly specifying the nature of that danger, or why youth should be particularly susceptible to it.

The Neutral Zone as an institution was dominated by a middle-class conception of appropriate behavior for the young. Presented by its organizers and volunteers as an alternative to the Piers, its programming was concerned with such values as the establishment of safe space, appreciation of the individuality of others, staying in school, and staying away from drugs, violence, and unsafe sex. Making simultaneous use of both the Zone and the Piers was common but discouraged. At one point during the summer a policy was enacted restricting the number of times in a given night one could enter and leave the Zone, to cut down on traffic to and from the Piers.

For the ball children who made use of the Zone, conflicts frequently arose over their contrasting ideas about appropriate behavior. One clear example of this was the Friday evening drag performances, where anyone was invited to get up in drag and lip sync to an audience of about forty. Many ball children took a very participatory approach to their spectatorship, loudly voicing both approval, and more often disapproval of the performers, something which incensed the volunteer staff of the center, who made clear their insistence that “no one’s feelings be hurt.” For them, the model of appropriate behavior was to sit passively and politely, and to supportively clap at the end. The youth’s contrasting notion of what constituted a good time became the occasion for them to receive a lecture on their ‘anti-social’ behavior.

Another conflict was over the use of ‘shade,’ or the art of the verbal put-down. Within the ‘family’ of the Zone, a clear opposition was drawn between the youth who imbibed the values of the center, behaving
properly and taking up leadership roles at the center, and the 'catty queens' who displayed 'street values' in their very instrumental use of the Zone, their flouting of its rules, and their willingness to engage in verbal mockery of people who stood in their way. Cattiness or shadiness, interestingly, was connected in many peoples mind with gender deviance: the more femme a queen was, the more shady he was seen as likely to be.

Because of these sorts of conflicts, the Zone was looked upon with slight disdain by many of the ball children, particularly the older more experienced ones. Of the people who hang out on Christopher Street and at the Piers, only a small few used the Neutral Zone with regularity. Those who did tend to be the youngest and the newest to the area. Most street regulars use the Zone as a pit stop on the way to the Piers.

I do not want to downplay the startling fact that institutions like the Neutral Zone even exist in such a homophobic culture; even in New York City there are precious few spaces where young people can receive sex-positive messages about their orientation, obtain safer sex information and supplies, and have a relatively clean and calm place to spend some time in. The needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered youth are simply to acute to ignore.

Joyce Hunter recently provided evidence of the high rates of violence against the youth who sought services at the Hetrick-Martin Institute in New York City in 1988: lesbian, bisexual or gay identified, primarily working class, and primarily black or Puerto Rican youth. Of the

---

30I, for example, found myself hanging out in the Zone frequently, waiting for someone I knew to stop by to go to the Piers together.
500 youth studied, 41% reported experiencing violence, and 46% of those said it was gay related: of those experiencing violent assaults, 41% of girls and 34% of boys reported attempting suicide.31 Much of the violence experienced was at home. Paradoxically, then, the home to which youth are supposed to be confined to for their own good is revealed as the site of much of the actual violence they experience. The ‘streets’ could actually in this respect be seen as a space of respite from this threat of violence.

The Neutral Zone at once provided a much needed resource to young people in the Village and served the interests of local adults as a mechanism of containment. This containment was done in the name of ‘protecting’ the youth from ‘the streets,’ but can be more accurately viewed as protecting Christopher street from the youth. The Piers at the end of the street come to occupy a liminal space in the boundary-making of the neighbourhood. Beyond the highway and removed from the immediate concern of local resident and shop-owners, the Piers are a quite literally marginalized space which the children are able to claim as their own.

The claiming of the waterfront as gay territory is accomplished in part by the prolific and sometimes explicit grafitti, affirming everything from specific relationships (pairs of names encased in a heart) to the joys of specific sexual acts. Broken chain-link fences stand as reminders of failed past efforts to close off the Piers to the public. In contrast to the meat-packing district just North, sex is rarely bought and sold on the Piers. Rather it is a space to hang out, gossip, engage in intrigue, or just kill time.

By day, a cross-section of lesbians and gays came to sun themselves at the end of the Piers, and rollerblade enthusiasts traversed up and down the waterfront. By night, and particularly on weekends, the area became dominated by the black and Puerto Rican crowd, members of whom often engaged in spontaneous vogueing competitions to the beat of portable tapedecks. The discourse of the Piers stood in contrast to the language of inclusion, tolerance, and respectability promulgated by the Neutral Zone. Social interaction on the Piers was organized around cliques, competitive behavior, and shadiness. As one ball child explained vogueing to me: "You don't learn to vogue. You come up with your own style, and then someone cuts you down." But despite the ominous language with which the Piers were described in the New York Times, I did not witness or hear of any serious violence breaking out while I was there.

Not all the youth who socialized on the Piers were involved with the drag ball scene or were in houses. In fact, it rather seemed that those who belonged to houses kept themselves aloof from those of us who were not. Social life on the Piers served as one point of entrance into the ball culture, but the latter extended far beyond the Piers. Younger people would hear about the Piers, and then once there, hear about the balls that were being held, and the houses that organized the competition within the balls.

***

32 In chapter three, I will look more closely at the houses and how they function as alternatives to the 'straight family.'
It is a given that the quality of life strategy is easier done in the Village than “in the city’s poorer, crime-ridden neighborhoods, where the police say violators are more inclined to resist.”33 In this chapter, I have attempted to describe the ways in which social boundaries between rich and poor, white and of color, are policed within a progressive neighbourhood. The real struggle, I suggest, is not over petty crime, but over which spaces are for public use, and how narrowly that public can be defined. For poor and minority youth ‘coming out’ into lesbian and gay life, the Piers become a space for a collective self-fashioning oriented around the reclamation of ‘the streets’ for the purposes of socializing, dancing, and sex. It is also one locus for a vibrant culture minority gays and lesbians have created in the interstices of the dominant society. In the next chapter, I turn to an examination of the history of that culture.

33“Efforts on Quality of Life,” B1.
Chapter Two

The Rise and Fall of Drag-Ball-Ism

"American culture is dominated by a consuming thirst for the real thing that gets expressed in ridiculous (and endearing) flights of imitation and simulation. The genius of the ball opens up and exposes the condition of most of us as entrepreneurs and consumers of images. If looks are everything, it follows that you are who you appear. If the ball walkers walk better than their straight counterparts, who is inventing whom?" 34 — Georgia Brown

In the previous chapter, I looked at the conflicting ideologies that shaped one neighborhood’s response to the influx of black and Puerto Rican ball children. This chapter, turning an eye toward history, seeks to understand the development of the New York City ball scene, from the 1920s through the early 1990s. Much of this early history is undocumented and for that reason speculative. In the retelling of the past, I focus particularly on the decade from 1985 to 1994. This decade is singled out both because the most documentation is available for it, and because it coincides with what I am terming ‘the rise and fall of drag-ball-ism.’ 35 By this I refer to the changes wrought in the drag ball system by the temporary recognition conferred upon it by the New York City fashion and culture industries as well as the national entertainment and news media. I argue that this ‘rise and fall’ — Andy Warhol’s infamous ‘15 minutes of fame’ if you will — was governed by the dominant culture’s myths about

35 The phrase ‘drag-ball-ism’ was coined by ball legend Marcel Christian. He uses it, and I attempt to follow his usage, to refer to the constellation of gay cultural practices surrounding the drag balls, particularly cross-dressing and vogueing. (Marcel Christian, The Idle Sheet (photocopied pamphlet) (June 21, 1986))
transgenderism, gayness, race and class, and that what most mainstream critics took to be an important moment of 'recognition' for the ball children is more correctly construed as an elaborate sequence of misrecognitions. An important way in which this occurred, I will argue, was in the way the older ball participants were pushed to the sidelines in the presentation of vogueing as a 'youth' phenomenon. In furthering this argument, I want to look closely at the mechanisms that denied agency and voice to the ball children while simultaneously appropriating for commercial profit their cultural products of dance and music.

* * *

In the summer of 1986, self-proclaimed ball 'grandfather' Marcel Christian penned the following lines, which provide an excellent entrance into this chapter's discussion of the historical formation of drag balls:

As a New Yorker you live in the first culture. No place in the world is there another social set-up quite like this superbly unique drag house system. It's a system that works without written laws but understanding more permanent than The Declaration of Independence. It's a system that has temporary slow downs, triumphs, tragedies and revolution ... In any case I think YOU who are attending this affair should feel delighted being a character in a bizarre sort of play, the kind most other social systems will never be able to ever even dream about. Bravo for Ball Fever!

The quotation is drawn from a photocopied pamphlet entitled the *Idle Sheet*, which Christian researched, wrote, and made available for a small fee to interested members of the ball community in the mid-1980s. Intended as part of a book length project that apparently never reached
fruition, the original *Idle Sheet* was followed by ten sequels in the late eighties and early nineties. While they varied widely in content — featuring everything from poetry to small quizzes to Christian’s elaborate theorizings of psychology and astrology — a common concern throughout the series was the maintenance of historical memory within the ball scene, and the defense of the ball circuit against those agents whom Christian saw as corrupting it.

The first *Idle Sheet* had appeared at a period of great change in the ball system, one which was putting to test Christian’s claim that it “works without written laws but understanding more permanent than The Declaration of Independence.” Aware that the ball scene was changing rapidly under the twin pressures of the AIDS pandemic and the rising mass attention on ball cultural production, the *Idle Sheets* aimed to carve out an authoritative but conversational voice that would guide the ball scene through a difficult period through preserving a sense of communal identity and history.

What were the difficulties facing the drag ball system in the mid-1980s? To begin with, what had previously been a close-knit network of Harlem-based black drag queens had expanded steadily since the 1970s to include more masculine ‘Butch Queens,’ people from other neighborhoods in New York City, and people of other ethnicities, primarily Puerto Rican. In addition, Jenny Livingston, a white film student who had discovered the balls through contact with some participants in an East Village park, was beginning to film what would become her 1991 documentary film *Paris is Burning*. What had been a
relatively low-key, private, and even ritualistic set of cultural practices was steadily being transformed by newer participants into something more flashy, more competitive, and more consumption-oriented.

Christian's observation that "No place in the world is there another social set-up quite like this superbly unique drag house system" was probably accurate. The phenomenon he termed 'drag-ball-ism' has at times spread to other metropolitan communities, such as Philadelphia and Chicago, and the Manhattan scene had inevitably spilled over onto the Jersey shore. Notwithstanding, it remained quintessentially New York for a number of historical reasons that are important to note. By briefly visiting several historical moments in the cultural development of the city, we can see why New York was the ideal setting for drag-ball-ism to flourish.

The formation of erotic communities in New York City predates the Second World War. Historian George Chauncey has recently argued powerfully for the existence of a flourishing gay male culture in the 1920s and 1930s in Harlem and the Village. The Village was perhaps best known amongst the city's neighborhoods for housing 'faeries,' given its reputation for bohemianism, but in a segregated city, gay men who were black could find spaces to socialize only in Harlem.⁵⁷ Along with lesbian women, they built a social world organized around private 'rent parties' and 'buffet flats.' In these spaces, black and white queers alike were entertained by sexually risqué blues performers and erotic dancers,
participated in the outpouring of literary creativity that has been dubbed the Harlem Renaissance, and threw mammoth drag balls that were ‘society’ events.38

The annual Hamilton Lodge Ball, thrown by Hamilton Lodge no. 710 of the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows, had been held in Harlem since 1869, but became an event focused on female impersonation only in the 1920s.39 Although some Harlem residents expressed ambivalence and even objections to this event, dubbed the Faggots Ball by the late 1920s, being held in their midst, it was openly advertised and was faithfully reported on by the prominent African American newspapers of the day, such as the Amsterdam News. It drew in a cross-section of New Yorkers, black and white, although the actual performers were mainly working class, mainly black, and almost exclusively female impersonators.

Officially a ‘masquerade’ ball which required a police permit to be held, the Hamilton Lodge Ball allowed its audience, which often numbered in the thousands, to transgress the normally policed boundaries between black and white, gay and straight, poor and well to do. As Chauncey points out, even for those who were not female impersonators, the balls became an occasion for the development of a collective and


39Chauncey, 257. “Like most gay institutions,” he writes, “gay drag balls did not emerge sui generis in the gay world, but were subcultural adaptations of the institutions and social practice of the dominant culture.”[Ibid., 293].
public identity for gay men, an occasion made all the sweeter by the attention straight society seemed to lavish upon them.

The balls were liminal spaces, where the social boundaries were stretched but only temporarily broken. The arena of the greatest experimentation was the stage itself. At a 1932 ball, the Inter-State Tattler reported the following drag acts:

... a pair of Flora Dora girls in sweeping Empire gowns of red velvet trimmed in black velvet... an African chieftain, his tribal marks in gold, the sacred bull’s horn on his head and ropes of wooden beads around his neck; an oriental dancer with long hair; a belle of the gay '90s—parasol and all;... a barefoot east Indian in colorful flowing robes; a black and red be-ruffled Spanish senorita;... [and] no end of... Colonial dames.\(^40\)

As is evident from the above quotation, the balls drew much of their appeal from a burlesque of racial figures which extended far beyond men impersonating women.\(^41\) There was a large element of show business to these balls, which were structured on the lines of a beauty pageant. The line between performer and spectator were kept carefully demarcated, and they occurred within a wider cultural context in which Harlem was a coded as a space for adventurous white tourists — gay or otherwise — to 'slum' in.

When the city and nation became engulfed in a moral panic over homosexuality in the 1930s and 1940s, it became impossible to continue to hold public events like the Hamilton Ball. Gay and lesbian life in Harlem continued, but on a quieter, more underground, level. Balls continued to

\(^{40}\)Quoted in Chauncey, 263.

\(^{41}\)Significantly, Chauncey mentions, while black drag queens often imitated white celebrities of the day, the white queens did not seek to imitate black celebrities.
be held, but they became all-black affairs, advertised only through flyers
distributed at the balls themselves, and they went unreported in the news
media, black or otherwise.

Female impersonation as stage act, also continued in New York
City. As a form of entertainment, it was concentrated mainly in the Times
Square district, although there was an enormously successful and long-
running stage act called the Jewel Box Revue which played in Harlem. A
smaller, all-black version known as the Pearl Box Revue, played down the
street. Dorian Corey, a professional female impersonator who came to
New York to play the snake-charmer in this Revue, recalled for the Village
Voice in 1988 her recollections of the pre-1960s balls:

The old balls were big costume affairs like Mardi Gras balls ... 
There would be fabulous gowns and lots of beads and
feathers. They would sell out from all the so-called straight
people coming to see them and all the white people from
downtown. But then those balls started to die out.42

The re-emergence of balls in the late 1960s must have been at least
partially galvanized by the energies of the Stonewall riot of 1969, which is
the usual marker for the beginning of the modern gay and lesbian civil
rights movement. Marginalized and criminalized by society for their erotic
practices and gender-bending, drag queens found occasions to celebrate
their identities through performances, even in the seemingly unlikeliest
of places.

In the late 1960s, drag queens imprisoned in Riker's Island began
throwing holiday variety shows for the inmate population, which

42Dorian Corey, quoted in Donald Suggs, "Venus Envy," Village Voice 33(22) (May
featured costumes, sets, and performances of a stylized dance that would become known as ‘vogueing.’ Marcel Christian writes:

... from the very onset of this revelation, we know that Vogue-ing came from the direct combination of female impersonation and modeling, distinctly two separate arts... When these Christmas (and holiday) shows were organized, the entire productions were the sole product of the prison’s gay community. They created and performed the songs and dances, wrote and enacted the skits. They made all the costumes and built the sets... the performers would do exquisite pantomimes of the top female stars of the day: Diana Ross, Patti LaBelle, Dionne Warwick, even Barbara Streisand and anyone else they could pretend to be ... The organizers would combine dancing and modeling borrowing poses and positions from the still life pages of notable fashion magazines. It’s not for certain that Vogue was the primary or only magazine these people deigned to follow but it can safely be assumed that Vogue was one of the most influential in the basic creation of the new dance/movement craze.

The quotation illustrates the amount of creativity and work that went into putting on these balls. Alongside the venerable tradition of impersonating various celebrities (increasingly black as well as white), which focused upon the use of makeup to attain a likeness of a famous visage, vogueing developed as a newer cultural practice which focused more upon the body and ‘posing.’ The quotation also points out the ways in which the balls, as an art form, were strongly influenced by images of femininity drawn from the culture industries of film, music and fashion. The fashion industry in particular introduced signal changes to the way balls were held in the late 1960s and 1970s.

43The Idle Sheet, X, 2.
Ellen Lepold has recently provided an excellent history of the rise of the fashion industry in the post World War II period. This rise, she argues, was marked by the endurance of a pre-industrial artisan ethic in the 'haute couturier' system. She writes:

Fashion houses gained their appeal, through advertising, by downplaying the level of mechanization involved in the product. In fact, many of them only used sewing machines... The House of Chanel employed over two thousand people in twenty-six workrooms, each presided over by its own 'première', in charge of the sketching and sewing on his or her own staff.

In the 1970s, female impersonators who participated in the balls began to organize themselves into drag simulacra of these high fashion houses. Some of the first houses directly borrowed the names of couturiers: Armani, Chanel, Dior, and St. Laurent, for example. Functioning as gay sewing circles, these houses organized around the preparations for the ball competitions, which were held several times a year at the Crystal Ballroom, the Elks Lodge, and elsewhere along 125th in Harlem.

Vogueing, or Pop, Dip and Spin as it was originally called, developed as a competition category alongside the costume categories at the balls. And gay men who were not female impersonators, called Butch Queens, began to participate in the late 1970s. As Christian recalls "The movement had already been stamped with the feminine touch but at this time Butch Queens began to seriously challenge the art." They did so by

45Lepold, 109.
46The Idle Sheef X, 2.
introducing new moves, and incorporating props like "flags, batons, umbrellas, canes, chairs, even balloons." For their part, the drag queens countered with "feather boas and scarves and fans." Early on, the dance developed in multiple directions: Femme vs. Butch Queen, with props vs. without props, and so on. And individuals developed their own personal style and flourishes.

Vogueing proved to be the mechanism through which the profile of the balls began to be raised within New York City’s queer communities, beginning in the early 1980s. It spread from the balls to gay nightclubs downtown, and it proved to have a cross-racial appeal. Puerto Rican youth who hung out on the Piers in the Village became attracted to the dance style, and some of them started to attend and compete at the Harlem balls. This created a small crisis for many ball goers, who saw the balls as a carefully carved out space for blacks only. Hector Xtravaganza, one of the Puerto Ricans who began attending in the early 1980s, remembers the conflicts raised by his presence:

We were always in lower Manhattan, and the other black kids would say "We’re going to a ball," and Peppa [La Beija] was like "You should go to the ball!" But every time I went to a ball I always had to argue or fight with somebody. Cause they didn’t want the Latin kids to come through, you know. So, we all decided, let’s all go, but lets all go together, you know, because we didn’t know what it was about. So when we started actually competing... I literally had to fight my way out of the ballroom. So when I had a full trophy after I won, before I left the ballroom I just had the man, or just the bottom half, because I had to fight my way out, because I just

---

47bid., 3.
48bid.
won over someone that everybody else in the ball knows as legend.49

Hector and the other Puerto Rican ball-goers responded by forming an all-Latino house, the House of Extravaganza (later shortened to Xtravaganza).50 Each house developed their own signature styles and, as the categories for competition proliferated, individual houses sought to carve out reputations for excelling in one specialized area or another.

Vogueing continued to spread from uptown to downtown in the mid and late 1980s, and began to attract the attention of youthful New York City trend-seekers. Middle class and white lesbians and gays began to hear about the balls and about the houses. A white East Village clothing designer named Patricia Field was persuaded by one of her employees, who had been introduced to the uptown drag scene through the black and Latin gay dance clubs, to open up her own house and throw a ball in 1988. Called the House of Field Ball, it proved to be a watershed event in the ball system’s history.

For the first time in decades, a ball was held outside of Harlem, at a club called the World. As the invitation quote ran:

We acknowledge and respect all previous House Balls, but would like to announce that ours is extraordinary and unique. We invite each House to send representatives to walk and compete for trophies and a cash prize...51

49 Hector Xtravaganza (personal interview) (June 24, 1994).

50 The above account of conflict should not be taken to deny the great degree of cultural intermixing between Latino and black subcultures in New York City. In fact, as Pop, Dip and Spin were developing in the drag balls and gay clubs of New York City, disco music and dancing were becoming a national phenomenon. A reaction to the utopian rural imagery and languid, formless geographies of rock and roll, disco was quintessentially black, Nuyorican and gay. As a musical genre, it derived strongly from Latin salas.

The mixture of deference and brashness on the invite probably stemmed from the organizer's awareness that the event would be viewed with some suspicion by regulars on the ball circuit. To begin with, the newly minted House of Field had not regularly participated as contestants in the uptown Harlem balls. And its house members were drawn from an entirely different segment of New York City's population: they were primarily white, often middle class, and interested more in following or perhaps creating a trend than in entering long-term into a ball system in which it took years to develop 'legendary' status, either as an individual or a house. Brian Lantelme, a friend of Dorian Corey who was drawn into the ball scene as a photographer, recalls that

[Pat Field's] house was fiercely competitive for the short time it was out there. It was basically a white and Hispanic house... the voguer I think was black. I don't know, I guess you could say it was a multicultural event, as far as the House of Field was concerned. And they got into it because she, I would imagine, felt that she was feeling the pulse of the times.\[52\]

Lantelme's use of the term 'multicultural' was sardonic. The drag ball circuit lacked any rules or disciplinary proceedings to manage influxes of new interested but unacclimated people. Anyone was free to throw a ball, circulating invitations through the clubs or at balls themselves. As long as the basic framework of competition was adhered to, the rest of the balls organization was entirely up to the imaginations and interests of those who threw it. Pat Field's ball was widely publicized, becoming the subject of a Village Voice cover story, and definitely provided increased mass

---

\[52\] Brian Lantelme (personal interview) (August 24, 1994).
media exposure to the ball scene. But it also hastened the movement of
balls from Harlem to downtown.

The House of Field ball also established the first real connection
between the ball circuit and the fashion industry whose movements the
drag queens so closely followed in the pages of magazines like Vogue. It
opened up the possibility, for the first time, that the balls might become
profitable affairs, either directly through ticket sales, or through providing
added leverage in the tightly competitive clothing boutique market.
“Feeling the pulse of the times” was indubitably more than just a hobby
for Field and her employees; it was also a real opportunity to garner
publicity for her clothing line and 8th Avenue store.

In order to understand the importance of this, it should be noted
here that the Harlem balls were not profit-oriented even though they
charged admission fees. Most serious ball goers probably invested a great
deal of their personal incomes in their costumes, makeup and accessories.
The house that was throwing the ball itself had to cover the costs of
publicity, renting a space, hiring a deejay (and sometimes a caterer as well),
decorating the space and buying trophies. Given the relative poverty of
many of the ball children, the economies of the balls are best described as
consisting of reciprocal exchanges: money won at one ball would help
finance a new and more dazzling outfit at the next. What people
accumulated was trophies, which were of no resale value.

The position of the Harlem balls as ‘lower class’ phenomena was
reinforced by the kind of drag queen who attended them. Many were pre-
operative transsexuals, employed in the sex industry as strippers or
prostitutes. They took female hormones to enhance the effect and allow them to ‘pass’ as women outside of the balls. This lifestyle was viewed as extreme and déclassé by the standards of the hip crowd who attended the House of Field ball, and stood in contrast to the lifestyle of those drag queens who worked as performers in female impersonator shows. In the Village Voice, Donald Suggs quotes from Miss Diandra, a black drag queen who performed in the East Village, and for whom the House of Field ball was her first exposure to the drag ball circuit:

I have friends who went to balls. They put it in my head that it was for lower class people... It was too ‘sub’ for me to do—you know, too subcultural. I feel more comfortable down here. Their lingo is different and they dress differently.54

Suggs went on to explain the differences in sexual roles and identities that distinguished the downtown from the uptown crowd:

Like most of his downtown sisters, Diandra would be considered a butch queen uptown, because he doesn’t live as a woman or have hormone shots or breast implants. While femme queens from the balls—transvestites, transsexuals, and pre-ops alike—seek to live as women, downtown drag queens tend to view transvestism as an art rather than a lifestyle, using makeup, clothing, and wigs to embellish their performance.55

This neat opposition of art versus lifestyle does not quite capture the dynamic between uptown and downtown, but Suggs was correct to point out the degree of intensity with which the two forms of transvestism

53 Some queens, Dorian Corey among them, moved easily between the worlds of the ‘street’ queens who were largely sex workers, and the ‘stage’ queens who viewed themselves as part of ‘show business.’
differed. The House of Field’s aesthetic of ‘the more artifice the better’ was a far cry from the strategy of ‘realness’ the Harlem queens strove to attain.

In December of 1988, vogueing inched closer towards the cultural mainstream, and even respectability, in the form of an event entitled “An Evening Devoted to House Music and Voguing” held at El Museo del Barrio, a museum in Harlem devoted to showcasing Puerto Rican art and culture. The context for this cross-over was a six-week performance and visual arts series called Up Tiempo! which drew corporate sponsorship from companies like Philip Morris. The catalog for the show described vogueing as “an underground club form of entertainment which appropriates and subverts the images, fashion and music prevalent in mainstream culture.”56 It made only a passing and oblique reference to the system of drag ball houses, whose members, in any event, were not among the vogue performers that night.

The event drew the attention of New Yorker magazine, which ran an article in its “Talk of the Town” section in which it quoted at length from Willie Ninja, perhaps the most prominent voguer in New York City at the time. Vogueing, he explained,

\[\text{is the gay form of breaking ... At first, it was too black for the clubs. Too black, and maybe too Hispanic. And then white people started to take and interest, because they saw a new format—something to liven up their parties. But Voguing was before breaking ever was, I know that. How far back it goes I don’t know, but I believe it’s been twenty years, because I’ve been doing it for eight, and it was out for years before I}\]

\[56\text{Up Tiempo! catalog (El Museo del Barrio) (1988), 20.}\]
even knew about it. It was a gay underground dance, and it was so far underground nobody really knew it existed.\textsuperscript{57} Because of his association with the \textit{El Museo del Barrio} production as well as with the film Jenny Livingston was then in the process of making, Ninja quickly became established as something of an authority not only on vogueing, but also on the drag ball house system. This was ironic because, by his own account, his experience with the latter was minimal.\textsuperscript{58} The readers of the \textit{New Yorker} were thus introduced to the ball scene through a discussion of vogueing, which was being presented by now as an almost exclusively Butch Queen cultural form. Vogueing became pushed to the foreground because it could be presented as the cultural production of ‘gay Latinos and blacks’ — a risky move in a homophobic culture, but still more acceptable than presenting it as the cultural production of transvestites. It also lost much of its class associations, being generically described as the product of the young and avant-garde.

Willie Ninja did give the \textit{New Yorker’s} readers a peek into the tempestuous ball circuit, when he mentioned that a current “political discrepancy” had occurred: two houses, one black, one Latin, had thrown balls on the same night. And he extended a rare mass mediated invitation to a specific ball:

You should come to Dupree’s ball next month—the Paris is Burning Ball...Paris is the mother of the House of Dupree, one of the oldest houses around, along with the Ebony’s, the

\textsuperscript{57}“Talk of the Town,” \textit{New Yorker}, 64(48) (January 19, 1989), 27. By ‘breaking,’ Ninja of course was referring to breakdancing, another dance style, this one associated with hip hop, that also originated amongst the ghettoized poor blacks of New York City.

\textsuperscript{58}At the time the \textit{New Yorker} article appeared, he was already pronouncing the death of his own House of Ninja, and had joined up with the House of Field.
Saint Laurents. Dupree always hosts the first ball of the year... You know, everybody tries to be the Grace Jones or Diana Ross of being beyond fashionably late. Everybody’s done, head to toe, and wants to make a grand entrance. And so the ball never starts on time.59

Few readers of the New Yorker would have taken up Ninja’s invitation, or even taken it seriously. The ball was to be held in the Elks Lodge in Harlem, a space which in the 1980s retained none of the ‘slumming’ allure of the roaring twenties. ‘Uptown’, rather, was probably seen in the eyes of many downtown New Yorkers as the site of barely controlled street violence and anarchy. The de facto segregation of the city into areas exclusively reserved for poor blacks and Puerto Ricans had allowed the ball system to develop a strong sense of community and continuity from the seventies to the eighties. But with the apparent opening up of the mainstream to this new, exciting, and undiscovered ‘underground’ of queer cultural practices, the pressure was on to move the balls to arenas more likely to attract the higher-income crowd, both black and white, unwilling to travel up to 125th Street.

This pressure was accompanied by a generational conflict in the ball circuit between the older, primarily Femme Queen participants, and the younger more ambitious crowd, who were eager to up the ante both within the ball circuit and in the larger cultural arena the balls and voguing seemed poised to spill into. In his Idle Sheet, Marcel Christian found himself issuing stern dictums about proper behavior and attitude in the balls. His concerns seemed to center on maintaining a tradition threatened by a newer crowd that disdained the old ways. “[D]o not argue

59 “Talk of the Town,” 27.
with judges," he wrote, "do not fight, and pay cash prizes if they are offered." This last remonstrance suggests that some ball organizers were destabilizing the ball circuit through dishonesty: advertising cash prizes but then coming up with reasons for not giving them out. Most critically, and delicately, Christian approached the topic of theft:

The problem of theft is not as great as it is used to be, but it still exists. No one should ever take anything that does not belong to them before, during or after a drag ball because everyone didn’t steal their costumes, fashions or equipment to appear in a ball. A lot of people still buy and make their own things. They deserve the right to their possessions.\(^{60}\)

The phrase "everyone didn’t steal their costumes, fashions or equipment" suggests that enough ballgoers were stealing to create consternation. The issue had two components: the theft from commercial clothing outlets, and the sabotaging another contestant's entry by stealing at the ball. It was the second act, more so than the first, which so provoked Christian.

Younger ball participants were perceived as more cut-throat, perhaps even more declasse than the voguing pioneers, whose cultivated gentility and unity in the face of societal scorn had always provided counterpoint to the competition, gossip and rivalries.

These issues came together into a generational problem that, in 1988, Christian addressed head on:

There's a Silent War going on in The Marathon Circuit, so let's talk about it right here and now The war is between the so-called old Legends and the newly-claimed Legends. It's a war where nobody's going to win, so why wage it. The young people should respect the older ones because of their experience and wisdom. And the older ones should pay

\(^{60}\)The Idle Skeet, 7.
homage to the younger ones because of their novelty and originality.\textsuperscript{61}

What incensed Christian in particular was the idea, cultivated by some of the younger and more ambitious members of the circuit, that the old-fashioned queens were on their way out:

There’s a myth going around that most older Legends have retired to The Judges’ Panel... The one thing people are failing to remember is that this Ball-Marathon Circuit stuff is the Gay Life. And in the gay life, people do not age and get old. They really don’t. You think about it. Are you old?... As a special message to The Young Legends: Try to remember that these, supposedly old people are the ones that broke the gay ice and made it entirely possible for you to primp and prance up and down the street. Those old bitches fought to dress in women’s clothes. You young bitches ain’t doing nothing but sucking up the gravy. Young people try not to nail the older Legend’s coffin closed so soon. Some of them are still breathing. Let them live! They’re Alive! They’re Alive!”\textsuperscript{62}

The level of passion with which Christian insisted on the legends being alive reflects at least partially the omnipresence of AIDS as a subject of concern in the ball world. In his view, newer, materialistic values of conspicuous consumption absorbed from the Reagan eighties were replacing the older ethics of showmanship and performance, and that the older legends were dying off, unable to prevent these changes.

The generational rivalry, and the allusions to coffins, reflected the fact that the ball participants, like everyone else, were hard pressed to develop adequate responses to the devastation being wrought by the HIV virus. Adequate resources simply did not exist within the black and Puerto Rican gay communities, and the government’s response to the disease, as

\textsuperscript{61} The Idle Sheet IV, 9.
\textsuperscript{62} ibid., 9.
has been extensively described elsewhere, left much to be desired. The vacuum created by the sharply inadequate amount of resources being devoted to AIDS was filled, in some small part, by not-for-profit organizations.

The Love Ball was held Wednesday, May 10th, 1989 as a fund-raiser for DIFFA (Design Industry Foundation Fighting AIDS). It was organized by a club promoter and a men’s fashion magazine editor, and raised $400,000 for AIDS care and education, $50,000 of which went to a Harlem not-for-profit called ‘the House of Sweet Charity’ run by Avis Pendavis, another legendary house Femme Queen who, like Dorian Corey, had worked professionally as a female impersonator. This event drew corporate sponsors like CBS Records, and fashion celebrities such as the designer Thierry Mugler and model Iman were in attendance. An editor from Vogue was among the judges, as was Paris Dupree, whose annual ball would provide Jenny Livingston with the title of her documentary.

The Love Ball re-invented the ball from poor black after-hours entertainment, transforming it into a upper-class gala fund-raiser, which drew notices in the local television media, the New York Times and even Time magazine, which gushed: “Forget break dancing. So long hip hop. At the hottest clubs in Manhattan, on MTV and at Paris fashion shows, the ultra-hip are into vogueing.”63 Individual voguers such as Willi Ninja saw their careers in the entertainment industry temporarily skyrocket, as rock singer Taylor Dayne featured voguers in her video Tell it to My Heart

63“'They're Puttin' on the Vogue," Time (May 22, 1989), 103.
(1989), and house music artist Malcolm McLaren did the same for his video *Deep in Vogue* (1989). Most famously, pop artist Madonna recorded *Vogue* (1990), which rose to number one on the Billboard charts and brought voguing into the living rooms of middle America. Almost uniformly, the voguers who found employment as voguers in the music and video industry were young Butch Queens. Transvestism was completely written out of the performance script.

Mass attention crested with the release in 1991 of Jenny Livingston’s *Paris is Burning*, a documentary done in ethnographic style, interspersing scenes from Paris DuPree’s 1987 ball with interviews with various ball luminaries: Dorian Corey, Pepper La Beija, and Angie Extravaganza, to name the most prominent. The film brought into focus a fuller spectrum of ball participants, young and old, Femme and Butch Queen, black and Puerto Rican. The film, whose 1991 run at the Film Forum in New York broke local attendance records, was enthusiastically received in both the city and national media. The film was taken as a signal event in the increasing visibility of gays and lesbians, particularly black and Latino ones, in American society.

But the celebration of *Paris is Burning* for its path-breaking documentation of lesbian and gay existence was coupled in critical circles by a repeated tendency to construct the balls and ball goers as fundamentally tragic and pitiful. Balls had always seemed ideal candidates for the appellation ‘sub-cultural.’ The words used to describe them, both by participants and observers, are ‘underground,’ ‘marginalized,’ ‘invisible,’ and ‘mysterious.’ The people who produced them were ‘oppressed,’
‘subordinate,’ ‘poor,’ the ‘urban underclass.’ Yet at the same time, balls were also seen as ‘hip,’ ‘electric,’ ‘haute, haute, haute,’64 ‘stylish,’ ‘fascinating,’ ‘the next big thing.’ Queer producers of ball culture are ‘geniuses,’ ‘talented,’ ‘sophisticated,’ ‘incredible.’ And these contrasting descriptions were presented in a complementary fashion that seems oblivious to the readily apparent contradiction.

I want to argue here that part of this paradox involves the recognition of the invisible and the subordinate by the visible and dominant, but a recognition that almost invariably proceeds in the form of a misrecognition. If contemporary mass culture, by which I mean film, music, television, and dance, is focused upon an insatiable desire for the new, the as-yet-undiscovered, the avant-garde, then it seems obvious to look towards cultures that exist in marginalized relationships to it, the gay, the minority, the poor, the urban. But if the dominant is constituted by the marginal, in what sense is it dominant? Do we reproduce the operations of a discourse which seeks to make its presence invisible when we speak of a ‘subculture’ and a ‘superculture’?

In following this line of thought, I am drawing from the recent work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Michael Moon.65 In “Divinity: A Dossier, A Performance Piece, A Little-Understood Emotion,” they speak of “the culture’s need to revivify itself constantly with the energies of gay

---


experience, while maintaining a semi-plausible deniability about the gay history and sexual specificity. Their discussion developed as a reaction to the heightened visibility of cross-dressing, in both academic theorizing and popular culture, which they argued came at the cost of an insistent denial of the link between it and homoeroticism. To this I add only that missing as well are analyses of racial and class subordination, topics which the mainstream reviewers of the film *Paris is Burning* were clearly discomforted by. They dealt with this discomfort, as I have argued, by organizing their reviews in such a way as to domesticate and make safe the excitement and pleasures generated by the movie.

For example, *New York* magazine wrote of the ball children:

... whatever their penchant, they all want the same thing, which is to be somebody in a country consigning them to roles as nobodies. They aren't hostile to American society. In fact, they may be the most accepting Americans in the country.67

When *Paris is Burning* was reviewed by the *Village Voice* in March of 1991, the reviewer assumed as a matter of course that the ball scene had already disappeared, an indication of the way the media brought balls to mainstream visibility only to mark the inevitability of their disappearance.

Terrence Rafferty’s review in the *New Yorker*, however, was the most sustained and intellectually ‘safe’ reading of the film. The balls, he

66 Ibid., 222.
claimed in the article titled “Realness,” signified so promiscuously in so many directions as to produce a “semiotic daze.” He writes:

It doesn’t take an advanced degree to recognize the paradoxes of the world described by Paris is Burning, or to develop from it elaborate theories about reality and artifice, or the language of style, of the relationship of street culture to official culture, or the mechanics by which the dominant values of society are internalized even by those whom they oppress—you could go on and on. The material is almost too rich, too suggestive.

In the final analysis, however:

There’s no accounting for this sort of theatrical transport. It is, perhaps, a joy that only the most abandoned of performers will ever know, and all we can do is gaze on it, in delight and awe; its sources are beyond the reach of our formulation.

In other words, Rafferty argued, we (the bourgeois consumers of the documentary) need the balls to feel for us, but because they do so, we must reject a full explanation of them, or too intense an engagement with them. We cannot afford to get caught up in this ‘other world,’ but must maintain a relationship of voyeurism, as opposed to identification, with the subjects.

Rafferty also comments on the generational conflict within the balls, presenting it as between the older ‘wise’ queens whose “protective irony... has enabled [them] to survive in a hostile world” in contrast to the younger queens, who have “crossed a line between the attempt to create an illusion and the belief that they can incarnate it in the world.” The metaphor of crossing the boundary between reality and illusion was

69 Ibid., 73.
70 Ibid., 74.
71 Ibid., 73.
commonly deployed in discussions of the film, and emerged most provocatively in a sensationalist story printed by New York magazine in October of 1990, titled “The Vogue of Death.” Here, the explicit connection was made between vogue performance and pathology: it told the story of a vogue battle held on the Christopher Street Piers that accidentally led to the death of one ball child.

The incident occurred during the summer of 1990, when Madonna’s Vogue video had completed the cross-over of the dance style into the mainstream of America. Chino, a straight ‘experimenter’ who’d “left his pregnant girlfriend at home in the Bronx” was drawn to the piers, “a world where people dance for their lives” by gay friends.72 There he became embroiled in a vogue competitions and ensuing mêlée that led to his stabbing. Although the jury decided the Chino’s death had been an act of self-defense, New York went ahead and printed a photo of the accused with the caption “Killer Vuitton La Beija.”

The article painted the ball scene as oriented fundamentally around fantasy, the fantasy of society’s outcasts, but added the idea of ball participation and vogue dancing as a form of compulsion, and addiction like the many to which lower class bodies are supposedly susceptible. “All of them grew up in low-income, single-parent households or were farmed out to young mothers who couldn’t cope,” the article claimed (offering no substantiation), “For teenagers trying to make their way in areas ridden with unemployment, crime and drugs, being gay offered identity and

escape, but it added hardship to lives that were already hard enough. Here a complex of discourses can be seen collapsed into a single narrative of pathological urban subjects: the choice to become gay produces an affinity for beautiful but deadly cultural practices and a belonging in a peer group whose ethos is fundamentally tragic.

Ball children, of course, did not sit by passively through these depictions and descriptions of their ball circuit. But their visibility and voice in the media outlets that were spreading the news of the ‘vogue dance craze’ was severely constrained. Mass attention brought material rewards for a lucky few, who found their roles as cultural producers coinciding for the first time with something like the legitimate economies of the show business. Madonna, famously, employed two members of the House of Extravaganza as back-up dancers for her Blonde Ambition world tour. For her part, Jenny Livingston paid a half dozen of her documentary’s principals, although she did become embroiled in a set of prickly lawsuits over profits from the film. Individuals who already had burgeoning careers as performance artists, such as Willie Ninja, had their careers furthered by the mass attention.

But the hope, expressed by some of the ball children, that mass attention would provide transport into middle class respectability proved ethereal. Many turned bitter as they saw that however exciting it might

73 Ibid., 57.
74 Dorian Corey, for example, received $50,000, as did Willie Ninja and Octavia St. Laurent. Livingston and her Off White Production company also made donations to New York charities in the names of two of the movie’s principals who died soon after (one, Venus Extravaganza, died during the filming).
have been to have a film made of them, and have a major recording star appropriate heavily from their culture, these events did not substantially change the material conditions of the lives of most of them. Some, like Dorian Corey, adopted a posture of stoic acceptance of the status quo, while others, such as Marcel Christian, developed sustained critiques of what had transpired.

The tenth issue of the *Idle Sheet*, printed in 1990 at the height of ball fever, purported to tell “The Truth about Vogue-ing.” Christian wrote:

…”Okay Madonna has come, achieved her wondrous success and soon she will be out of the Vogue-ing picture—bankroll, dancer boyfriend and all. Vogue-ing will still go on. Life will still go on for most people but not for many. When we focus on those who are sick, we wonder how can Vogue-ing earn black people some financial success?"

Christian here raises the issue of exploitation, a theme which was richly resonant for other black commentators, including those whose introduction to the ball world came through the mass media and Livingston’s documentary. One critic, Robert Reid-Pharr, produced a critique of what he termed the ‘spectacularization of blackness’ in the cultural productions of well-meaning white gays and lesbians. This spectacle, he argued, resulted from a liberal desire to efface both history and power, and read race merely as a ‘diverse’ surface narrative, with the black gay or lesbian becoming the preferred self-representation of an ‘inclusive and accepting’ community. This, he argued, was how *Paris is Burning* was packaged and how it was consumed by the vast majority of its

---

75 *The Idle Sheet*, 8.
audience. For this reason, it amounted in his eyes to little more than an update of the minstrel show.76

A comparison might be drawn here to the Jazz Age Harlem clubs which catered to a primarily white clientele. In *Gay New York*, Chauncey quotes from a period New York City guidebook, which commented in 1925 on the spectacle created where audience were treated to

the antics of members of its enormous Negro population, many of whom show great ability in song, dance and comedy performance . . . Their unfailing sense of rhythm, their vocal quality, something primitive, animal-like and graceful in their movements, combine to make their performances interesting to all who can put racial prejudice out of their minds.77

The enjoyment of the spectacle is here presented ironically as an antiracist act. Chauncey adds that “The clubs thus played on their customers’ desire to feel they were transgressing the conventional boundaries of race while resolutely confirming them.”78 Similarly, Reid-Pharr argued, the consumption of ball cultural practices recouped this sense of safe transgression.

Reid-Pharr’s division of the film’s audience along racial lines, however, was not a very useful one. According to his argument, black audiences were able to glean race-affirmative pleasures from the film that other non-black spectators missed. Recalling his attendance at a 1990 pre-screening of the film in New York, Reid-Pharr wrote that “Black gay New

76 The analogy is an admittedly confused and confusing one, since *Paris is Burning* featured blacks (and Puerto Ricans), whereas minstrel shows involved white actors impersonating blacks.

77 Chauncy, 246-247.

78 Ibid., 247.
York had come out en masse to see its own.”

Exactly who “Black gay New York” is in this formulation is not quite clear, but it clearly ignores the very salient class divisions between New Yorkers who were black and gay. As I have suggested earlier, these class divisions are crucial in understanding the dynamics between ball culture and the wider society. Blacks, particularly middle class blacks, were in several senses as ‘outside’ ball culture as whites, neither more nor less privileged with insights into the conditions of the ball children’s lives.

Marcel Christian’s response to Paris is Burning stood in contrast to Reid-Pharr’s. To begin with, he straightforwardly rejected a cultural politics of racial insiderism, arguing that vogueing was not the “sole possession of black people,” but rather that “the dance is an artform, and nearly all artforms reach the level of Public Domain which is something that belongs to all of the people.”

Christian’s critique encompassed a liking for the film, but a disliking for the way it was packaged and, as it were, read by audiences unacclimated to the ball scene, both black and white. He took great umbrage at a line from the catalog at the New York International Festival of Gay and Lesbian film that characterized the ball children as “messengers, welfare recipients, salespeople and prostitutes.”

These kinds of people, he argued

---

79 Robert Reid-Pharr, “The Spectacle of Blackness,” Radical America 24(4) (September/December 1990 [Published April 1993]), 62. Reid-Pharr’s comparison of the black audience’s reception of the film to that of a white audience is in my view essentialist. Black audience-members “squashed our approval as ‘sisters’ vogue[d] their way across the screen,” whereas white audience were only able to laugh “on cue” and express uptight disapproval of the queen’s “gender politics.” [Ibid.]

80 Idle Sheet X, 17
... are not the only kind of people involved in Vogue. The catalog failed to even hint at the hordes of professional and creative people... didn't Jenny Livingston know of all the designers of all levels of talent who attend balls and spend hard-earned money and many hours in preparation of the array of categories? What about the ever-growing class of artisans like make-up artists, hairdressers, photographers, even writers who have found their niche in the Vogue World?

Christian seems to be here contesting the way balls and vogueing were automatically consigned the appellation 'sub-cultural' by outsiders. The "Vogue World," this quotation implicitly states, is not less valid than any other world simply because some of its participants are poor.

Christian's general critique of the mass media attention on the ball scene and on vogueing also differed from Reid-Pharr's on the primacy it have to a specifically economic form of exploitation:

With Vogue-ing having been elevated to such a wondrous height, the question remains: What will become of some of the great monetary profits accrued from the continuing Vogue-ing expose? Rightfully, money should be returned to the basic originators. If not them personally then to their descendants and the world from which they came. The Ball House World. This can be done by high finance contributions to organizations that are now helping people with AIDS. Another way could be for power organizations to sponsor fund-raising affairs like The Love Ball held at Roseland in May of 1989.

Christian, ultimately, expressed gloom at ever having the balls adequately represented in the media, or the money going to appropriate causes:

No, nothing will be done and can be done because the children have no power being messengers, welfare recipients, salespeople and prostitutes. We see that in the Vogue World now, all the Big-Timeliness belongs to the Power People (the Gold Man). The female impersonating black

81Ibid., 13-14.
82Ibid., 4.
faggots have noting [sic] to do with Vogue big money and Vogue international acclaim.\textsuperscript{83}

Christian’s sarcasm here underscored the audible anger of his words, anger at the relative powerlessness of his friends in the ball world to benefit from the commodification of the culture they produced. To reiterate, Christian’s understanding of exploitation is straightforwardly oriented towards the distribution of resources (“Vogue big money”). This contrasts it with Reid-Pharr’s fundamentally representational view of exploitation (i.e. stereotypical or negative images of a group harm and ‘exploit’ that group).

This is not to say that Christian was not disappointed with the narrow and often inaccurate uses to which ball culture was put in popular culture. Yet he acknowledged the good intentions of the “Press and Media” who have been

... most amicable when describing Vogue Life. Some have gently scratched the surface of the subject. Others have sought depth. And few have achieved it. There are many levels of understanding to this vogue business and you really have to live the life to know it and love the life enough to look past the thousand pitfalls to that momentary glimmer of light. Many people may look at what’s happening as just a thing that will pass or a new dazzling cheap form of vaudeville-type entertainment. However, there are those that take this Vogue-ing jive very seriously and they have incorporated it into the fabric of this existence.\textsuperscript{84}

Here Christian insists on the specificity of experience that cannot be attained without effort and commitment, a distinction best made by the insistence that one cannot simple understand balls through consuming, but

\textsuperscript{83}Ibid., 14.

\textsuperscript{84}Ibid., 15-16.
one must feel integrally part of their production. Indeed, the magic spark of drag-ball-ism so often missed by the mainstream media coverage of Paris is Burning and Vogueing, in their interest in the way the ball children were mimicking wider society, was the transformative potential of that mime. It was not so much that ball children were affronted by being made ‘spectacles’ — they were just affronted that, through racism and homophobia, their labor as entertainers was exploited and no one seemed to think they had a right to be outraged.

Christian’s voice, of course, is just one of many within the ball world, and his critique properly belongs to him as an individual. Still it exposes quite remarkably the hypocrisy and elitism behind much of the liberal discussions of the balls that dominated the media and, to some extent academe. By concentrating on the role of ball children as a form of exploited labour, Christian moved the debate away from a fairly non-productive one around cultural authenticity and towards a more useful one of ethical and political claims to product.

* * *

In April of 1993, a piece darkly titled “Paris has Burned” appeared in the Style section of the New York Times. Occasioned by the death of Angie Extravaganza, the mother of the House of Extravaganza and one of the principals in Livingston’s documentary, the article used the destruction caused by AIDS as a metaphor for the supposed unraveling of the ball scene.
By all accounts, however, the numbers of people involved in the balls had only grown, with dozens of new houses and balls nearly every other weekend. It is important to realize that the depiction of balls as tragically disappearing was a function of a dominant ideology uneasy with the existence of balls to begin with, not a reflection of what was going on in the clubs and ballrooms of New York City. Ideologically, however, the importance of an article like "Paris has Burned" should not be underestimated. For its readers, it provided closure, the necessary 'fall' in the 'rise and fall of drag-ball-ism.' The ball scene was returned to its condition of 'invisibility,' from which it had supposedly sprung.

---

85 I draw this conclusion from my interviews with members of the House of Latex project, which has been in place since 1990, and Brian Lanestime, who has attended balls regularly since the late 1980s.
Chapter Three

A ‘House’ is Not a ‘Home’

"Paris is Burning and the ball world play back and rework concepts of community and culture sacred to African-American discourse...‘Home’ no longer stands as the unproblematic site of Black cultural salvation it represented for DuBois: it is, instead, a fount of homophobia that damns difference and sponsors rejection, which, in turn, inspired the rebirth of the ‘house.’" 86
—Jackie Goldsby

This chapter attempts to give analytical specificity to the social structure called the ‘house.’ It may not be immediately apparent why such specificity is called for. Of all the phenomena one encounters in dealing with drag balls and ball culture, it is the house which perhaps seems most intuitively knowable. Can we not simply say, with the Dance magazine reviewer of Paris is Burning, that “Groups of voguers, known as houses, throw a ball; their names are...suggestive of the fantasies and aspirations out of which they are formed...” and be done with it? 87 Or, if this seems unduly brief, might we not expand with the Village Voice’s reviewer to explain that:

After the ball is over there is still the family—mother and children, often living and working in the same house...Houses may function like clubs or gangs, but the sense of shelter, or home, seems the most important one here. 88

While both explanations are at least partly accurate, they do not seem to me sufficient. Indeed, I would suggest that the closer we look at the above explanations the less explanatory power they seem to hold. Yes, houses are, in a sense, gay families. And yes, they do function in ways analogous to ‘real’ families. But providing a sequence of analogies for what something “is like” seems to expose a lack of adequate understanding of what it is.

What follows is an effort to flesh out some understandings, however tentative, of the lived specificities of the house system. In doing so, I attempt to negotiate the compromise Sherry Ortner has identified, between “the classical anthropological desire to see the cultures of these communities as having a certain authenticity in their own terms,” and “the recognition that [these communities]... operate within a larger structure of racial inequality and a larger cultural hegemony.” I will concentrate on the meanings that the “larger cultural hegemony” inheres to the category of the family, looking at the ways in which lesbian and gay people have responded to their exclusion from those dominant meanings. In particular, I will examine the symbolic opposition between ‘the family’ and ‘the gang’ as it exists within poor, ghettoized urban communities.

* * *

99To begin with, one might rightly object to the presumption evident in both quotations that knowledge about the complex patterns of these lives should be so easily revealed through the viewing of a film.

Families We Choose, Kath Weston’s 1991 ethnography of lesbian and gay families, provides a useful departure for this discussion. In it, she poses a central question: Are gay (or queer) versions of family to be understood as assimilating to dominant, heterosexist norms, or, alternately, can they be seen as providing a radical departure from those dominant notions of kinship, marriage and blood relationship?

This question is an important one, given the dominant mythologies about lesbian and gay existence. Among those mythologies that Weston explores is the idea that ‘becoming’ lesbian and gay necessarily entails ‘giving up’ the right to familial relationship. The lives of lesbian and gay people, when not seen as out rightly immoral or illegal, are often construed as ineffably miserable and ultimately lonely. Particularly vicious are the mythologies surrounding gay men, whose ‘rapacious’ pursuit of sex is thought to lead to necessarily to an atomistic, loveless life. Lesbians, to a lesser but still real extent, suffer under these same mythologies.

Within this cultural field, lesbians and gays have begun to articulate a reverse-discourse of ‘families we choose,’ claiming for their relationships with lovers or friends a legitimacy usually reserved for people connected by blood or the legal institution of marriage. This claim, however, is not the same thing as a simple mimicking. “Rather than representing a crystallized variation of some mythical mainstream form of kinship,” Weston argues,

... gay families simply present one element in a broader discourse on family whose meanings are continuously elaborated in everyday situations of conflict and risk, from
holidays and custody disputes to disclosures of lesbian and gay identity. Family, she argues, is not a “static institution” but a “cultural category” within which assimilation, challenge, and gradations between the two are possible.

In the contemporary context, the ‘broader discourse on family’ of course includes the concern over the ‘future of the family’ in the face of a changing moral and social order. This concern is particularly voiced in connection to the discourses of the ‘urban underclass’ or ‘ghetto-poor’ as well as to discourses about African Americans, whose failure as a racial group to achieve all that is promised in the American dream is often attributed, in various ways, to deficiencies in the black family structure. Lesbians and gays are often incorporated, in the more overtly homophobic versions of ‘family values’ discourse, as among the ‘threats’ to the stability of the family, black or otherwise.

The lesbian and gay responses to the exclusionary definitions of the family can be viewed as a form of at least partial resistance to hegemony. By de-coupling the family from the compulsory project of reproduction,

---

92 Weston, 199.
lesbians and gays open up that cultural category to a wider array of projects. As Weston argues:

By reworking familiar symbolic materials in the context of nonprocreative relationships, lesbians and gay men in the United States have formulated a critique of kinship that contests assumptions about the bearing of biology, genetics, and heterosexual intercourse on the meaning of family in their own culture.\(^5\)

For Weston, this critique begins in the symbolic opposition, created by lesbians and gays, between ‘straight’ families and ‘gay’ families. The ‘straight’ family, within this relation, is the one into which a person is born, and which often is unaccepting and condemnatory of same-sex or transgender inclinations. After ‘coming out’ into some form of queer community, individuals appropriate and re-fashion the ‘familiar symbolic materials’ into a product that is life-affirming in precise contrast to the way in which the ‘straight’ family was life-denying.

The opposition between ‘straight’ and ‘gay’ kinship should not, of course, be read as an either-or choice necessarily: many if not most gay people, particularly the young, continue to rely upon the ‘straight’ family emotionally, financially, or otherwise, after they come out and begin to seek out lesbian and gay kinship. The gay family can replace, but does not always need to replace ‘straight’ kinship. Often, when the person is not open to their family about their sexual identity and practices, the gay family functions as an ‘adjacent’ family, or ‘home away from home’ where someone can ‘let their hair down’ and be themselves.\(^6\)

\(^5\)Weston, 34.
\(^6\)Such, I argue, is the function of spaces like the Piers, where young people still connected to the straight family and are not ‘out’ to them can go and connect with
Hector Xtravaganza is an example of someone for whom both straight and gay forms of kinship coexist. He came out into gay life in his teens, and developed a kinship bond with an older Puerto Rican transvestite named Angie. Feeling that the large size of his straight family led his birth mother to neglect him, he found that Angie was able to fill his need for attention and acceptance. He recalls that:

Before we became the House of Extravaganza, I was already Angie’s first gay child. She was always giving me the hugs that my mother never gave me... she was also like a brother (again, she was a boy) so she was kind of like a brother too.  

At the same time, Hector kept up a relationship with his birth mother and family. Her acceptance of his sexuality and his participation in the balls came eventually, but he still feels that there is a world of difference between her partial tolerance and the exuberant belongingness of the gay family:

I live, eat, shit, everything, Ganza. I love my kids... If I had to choose between my real family and the Ganzas, and those were my only options, I would go with the Ganzas.

Over time, Hector has come to assume a more parent-like role within the House of Xtravaganza, particularly since Angie’s death, as evidenced by the possessive ‘my kids.’ In spite of this, he has never formally been designated house mother or father.

---

people of similar orientations. In a city as large and polyglot as New York City, there seems a relatively low risk of having such a double life exposed. One youth that I met remarked that although he had lived on Manhattan all his life, until he came out and, through the Neutral Zone, became acquainted with the Piers, he had not even known such a space existed.

97Hector Xtravaganza, (personal interview) (June 24, 1994).
98Hector Xtravaganza, (personal interview) (June 24, 1994).
For Hector, Angie's 'mother' and 'brother'-like qualities meant primarily emotional support and friendship. The metaphor commonly employed for this function of the gay family is that of 'safe space'. For instance, a member of the House of Latex described the genesis of the house system in such terms:

The houses originally came into being because some mature gay men wanted to provide a safe space for people who ran away from home or who got kicked out of their houses—to create a new home for them so that they could have some semblance of family in addition to being gay.\(^{99}\)

Safety in this context includes both safety from the cruelties of the unaccepting straight family, and from the dangers that go along with being homeless or living on the streets. And the gay family is seen as a self-conscious and directed effort to combat the myths of atomistic queer existence and compulsive, loveless sexuality with what a partial recuperation of "some semblance of family."

The gay family is partially, but not wholly about, demonstrating that lesbians and gays can form long term, emotional bonds with each other that do not necessarily include an erotic element. In the case of the houses, this shows up most clearly in the roles of house mother and father, whose nurturing of their kids is seen as usually prohibiting sexual activity with them.\(^{100}\) At the same time, however, the gay family can take on the task of

\(^{99}\)Robert Latex, quoted in the video *Having Fun Never Has to End* (Gay Men's Health Crisis, 1994).

\(^{100}\)This is at least, is my tentative conclusion based on my own observations. Clearly, a main point of this chapter is the variability of arrangements within the house system, so it could very well be the case that prohibitions between parent-child sexual activity are not always in place, and that, in fact, some houses might have found a special, perhaps initiatory, role for sex within their families. This is one of several areas that I will point out as meriting further research.
 contesting the system of taboos sex and sexuality are placed under our culture, putting to lie the folk belief that sex is a somehow lower or more degraded form of human contact. In these cases, gay family connections include a dimension of the erotic that is suppressed and taboo within the ‘straight’ family.101

Weston’s work points out that the queer alternatives to the conventional family are diverse rather than monolithic. This provides the answer to the question posed earlier, as to whether gay families are to be understood as assimilating towards a heterosexist norm or forging new ground in the variety of human relationship. For Weston, the answer must always depend upon the context, given the multiplicity of strategies queers have developed for building kinship systems. On the one hand, movements to attain coeval legal status for gay marriages can be seen as an assimilationist strategy that seeks to make lesbians and gays more like straights. On the other hand, the adoption of the language of the family to describe the social organization of drag queens and their fans into support networks that introduce and enculturate the young into the ball scene seems to be a clearly non-assimilative, even resistive, strategy.

In the first chapter, we looked at the mechanisms through which discourses of the family could be used within city and neighborhood politics to legitimize the relocation of unruly, youthful bodies ‘back where they belong’: in the Projects. The provisional victories won by queers in New York City, I argued, established an alternative destination for queer

---

101 Within the House of Xtravaganza, for example, it is common for siblings to be lovers, an occurrence that Hector takes much pleasure in as a sign that the sibling bond is strong.
unruly youths in the ‘gay and lesbian youth center,’ where they can receive partial support for their lifestyle, partial in the sense that same sex desire would be acceptable, but that excessively ‘street’ behavior would not.

Here I want to focus on the network of drag houses that exist alongside (and which preceded) the youth center as a resource for gay youth. Drag ball houses are a special case within the emergent varieties of ‘gay’ families. They are distinguished by their selectivity and in that sense unlike other queer families, such as the community at the Neutral Zone, a ‘safe space’ open to all under the age of 21 willing to take the actual step into the facility. By contrast, houses are not simply open to people on the basis of their needing forms of support. Rather, houses are exclusive societies, cliques even, with signature styles and a standard that one must prove oneself capable of upholding in order to join. Once you join, you take the name of the house as your new surname (some ball children have theirs legally changed), and often a new first name is chosen as well. This provides the name by which one competes and becomes known in the balls.

Customarily, although not always, one proves oneself worthy of joining a house by successfully competing in a ball category. Some categories are specifically designated for newcomers to the scene. Members of a house fashion themselves in relation to the four broad categories of ball performance: ‘Women’ (or ‘Real Women’), ‘Butch’, ‘Butch Queen’, and ‘Femme Queen’. These performance categories are closely tied to everyday lived identities; one is not just a Butch Queen during the few
minutes one is competing late Sunday night, but one is seen within house social circles as ‘living’ as a Butch Queen.102

‘Women’ (sometimes ‘Real Women’) are genetic women who adopt a ‘femme’ persona. Many, maybe most, are lesbian, but straight women are not excluded from the balls in the way in which straight men are. Lesbian ‘Women’ usually have sex with lesbian ‘Butches’ who adopt masculine clothes and braggadicio personas (unlike Women, Butches are invariably lesbians). At most balls, the number of contests for Women and Butches are far fewer than they are for genetic males, something which reflects the skew of participation within the ball scene towards genetic men.

‘Butch Queen’ is the category for those who outside ball circles would usually be identified as ‘gay men’: men whose preference is for sex with each other. ‘Femme Queen’ is the category for drag queens, genetic men who take hormone shots and pills, and sometimes undergo cosmetic surgical enhancement to look like women. Jennie Livingston provides an astute summary of the complexity of the categories when she writes:

...even at the drag ball, the gender definition is strict... ball-gopers also assume that, whether you date people of your own sex or of the opposite sex, you will always couple with someone of—more or less—the opposite gender. Participants adhere to commonly accepted codes of masculinity and femininity, as if even the queens—who are true gender

102It is for this reason that a number of ball categories are for ‘Butch Queen in drags,’ a category that is kept sharply distinct from ‘Femme Queen.’ A Butch Queen in drags would be expected not to wear women’s clothing anywhere else except the ballroom floor, and not to undergo hormone or plastic surgery treatments to attain a more feminine body structure.
astronauts—still require within their spaceship some conventions of the home planet. Just what the “commonly accepted codes of masculinity and femininity” are is left somewhat obscure by the above quotation. Within the ball world, I have observed, these codes are drawn primarily from the world of the working classes. The codes for both men and women are denoted by the tag ‘banjee’ which signifies loosely for the clothing, makeup style and comportment of Puerto Rican and black urban youth. Most houses have members in all four categories, although a number specialize in just one or two (the House of Aphrodite, for example, is famous for its members who compete in Butch Queen Face).

Houses usually consist of a mother, children, and sometimes a father. The matrifocal quality of the houses is pronounced, a reflection perhaps, of the matrifocality of the Puerto Rican and African American communities. Mothers and fathers are identified by their greater experience within the ball scene, if not necessarily by their age. The mother is usually a Femme Queen with some status as legendary, and is responsible for the selection of new house members. The father is usually a Butch Queen with similar legendary status. This status of being ‘legendary’ is itself complexly won. Although numerous ball children attempt to specify it in terms of numbers of trophies won, or years on the circuit, becoming legendary remains to some extent an unquantifiable mix.

---

of being recognized and declaring yourself as such. For example, forming a house that successfully competes and excels in competition seems to be one method of attaining or claiming for oneself legendary status, although normally, someone is already legendary when they announce the formation of a new house.

A primary purpose to the formation of gay kinship is, as might be expected, the reclamation of sex and the erotic. This is true for within the house scene. There are no set rules about sex within a house, rather, individual houses set their own rules and standards. But membership in a house, with the social connections it provides, facilitates the process of meeting people and consummating relationships.\textsuperscript{105}

Not all houses succeed in sustaining a presence in the ball community and providing camaraderie for their members. The system as it existed in the summer of 1994 was characterized by a semi-constant process of older houses dying out and new houses being formed. We saw in the previous chapter the relative porosity, at least at a particular moment, of the ball scene to newcomers wishing to have themselves identified as a ‘house.’ Although the experience with the House of Field, as well as the legal wrangling over the proceeds from \textit{Paris is Burning}, has soured some on the ball scene to all outsiders, new houses continue to crop up and be ‘accepted’ which is to say, win trophies, within the ball

\textsuperscript{105}One male youth who had recently joined the house of Mizrahi-St. Claire warned me against what he called “village relationships” — or romantic engagements with people one socialized with on the Fiers. He insisted that the gossip and innuendo that goes on inevitably destroys the relationship.
circuit. Over the summer of 1994, one particularly new house, the House of Infiniti, was doing just that.

But just as houses enter and get excited about the ball scene, other houses lose interest and reorient themselves. It seemed clear to me, for example, that such a reorientation has occurred within the House of Xtravaganza, which originated as an organized opportunity for Puerto Ricans to participate in a then all-black ball circuit, but whose interests quickly expanded to include self-promotion as a group of stylish trend-setters and workers within the local entertainment industry.

In an interview with me, Hector Xtravaganza conveyed his frustration with house members, whom he had attempted to interest in providing time and financial support behind his Transformation Ball, held in July of 1994.

"This one I wanted to do as a house," he told me. "And so I told the kids, 'I want to do it with you guys.' But I don't think they took me serious enough." While he voiced frustration at the kids desire to quit the ball scene and just stay as a family, he himself seemed to echo the weariness he attributed to the others. The New York scene, he felt, had become tired of the Xtravaganzas, since they had been around so long.

The sense of fatigue that seems to accumulate around older houses in part is a feature of the house scene's orientation towards being fashionable. The love of the new and exciting counterbalances the respect and loyalty to the older and legendary. In the previous chapter we saw

---

106 Hector Xtravaganza, (personal interview) (June 24, 1994).
how this tension was greatly increased during the period when the ball scene enjoyed media prominence. But it is also a continuing phenomena that is never completely resolved one way or the other.

Because of this desire to be in fashion, houses which develop names for themselves at a particular moment tend to grow in size, sometimes beyond the abilities of the mother and father to keep track of, as newcomers seek to become part of what’s hot, and existing ball children are tempted away from their old houses. One thing I saw occur frequently even over the period of a single summer was just such house-switching. One afternoon, for example, as I sat on the Piers with a member of the House of Pendavis, another ball child, a Femme Queen who worked on 14th street as a prostitute, passed by and casually informed my companion that she was changing houses. My companion expressed polite shock, mentioning that they had been ‘siblings’ for seven or eight years and that it would be strange to have her leave the house. She assured him, however, that they would still remain ‘siblings at heart’ even when she moved on to a new house.

The degree to which the younger members of the house scene change houses is a subject of concern for some of the older members, who see this is as a shift from loyalty to opportunism. Older ball children (I mean those who have participated in the scene relatively longer) often discuss a division between the new house children and the old house children. The old ones, it is thought, possessed greater degrees of loyalty to the house, while the newer ones move rapidly from house to house in what is taken to be something akin to social climbing. In contrast, some of
the younger house members often describe their loyalty as more to the scene as a whole than to individual houses. This, at any rate, is how one might understand the exchange I heard, in which the continuity of a relationship as ‘siblings at heart’ extended past the end of an official house tie.

Despite the high level of turnover within individual houses, and despite the devastation wreaked by AIDS, continuity and coherence is also stressed by house members. The annual ball thrown by the house often becomes the focus of such efforts. For example, the invite to the House of Ebony “Bounce Thru Ball” held in November 1994 opened with a list of members lost to AIDS and other causes. The program read:

Some of our members are no longer with us. The utmost respect and gratitude is given to such individuals. The Legacy is carried on by member who walk their categories. There will never be replacements for them but we walk in their names and will always love them.107

After naming the members, the programme also made an unusual move and named ball participants who were no longer a part of the house. “We have members who ventured off into their own endeavors,” it stated, but insisted that “THIS IS STILL EBONY BLOOD!!!!”108 The named individuals included fathers or mothers of the houses of Aphrodite, Xtravaganza, Overness, Revlon, Gaultier, Essence and Chanel. One particular individual had been father to no less than three different

107 Invitation to the Bounce Thru Ball (photocopied pamphlet) (November 27, 1994), 3.
108 Ibid.
houses, in addition to once belonging to the house of Ebony! Still, he was claimed as possessing "ebony blood."

If the primary form of competition takes place in the actual ball contests, we can see that the competition to attract and retain members is also fierce. Houses make a name for themselves by staking out symbolic and geographic turf: symbolic in terms of the sorts of categories an individual house will specialize in at balls, and geographic in terms of the public spaces where house members will congregate to socialize.\(^{109}\) And they also hold themselves collectively up to the responsibilities of taking good care of their membership. This care can take multiple forms, but an important aspect revolves around the prevention and treatment of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

One important responsibility in recent years has been the encouragement of safer sex practices, and support for children who become infected with HIV. The House of Latex, an invention of several staffers at Gay Men’s Health Crisis, has existed for several years to distribute safer sex supplies and literature at balls, and, lately, to train individual members and houses within the ball scene to become health advocates.

The resources the House of Latex project has been able to bring into the support of safer sex practices within the ball community has been

\(^{109}\)Most houses, for example, are rarely seen collectively socializing on the Fliers, which seems to be recurred, within ball circles, for the younger children just becoming acclimated to the scene and making tentative affiliations with various houses. My study was not wide enough to include participant observation at the numerous sites within the Manhattan metropolitan area where ball children hang out, so I can only speculate as to the degree to which geographic boundaries are seen as significant.
remarkable. Still, the project is focused upon prevention, and has not been able to expand to providing services to people already infected. It thus falls upon individual houses to support their sick members, something which houses are unevenly equipped to do.\textsuperscript{110}

Houses thus are highly varied in their structure and style, but ball culture exists within the context of various wider discourses about families, about cliques, and about gangs. The dynamics within drag ball houses provide a variant on what Sherry Ortner has identified as the pattern, within working-class culture, of introjecting wider class oppositions. Ortner writes that

> while we normally think of class relations as taking place between classes, in fact each class contains the other(s) within itself, though in distorted and ambivalent forms. This is particularly visible in the working class, where the class structure of the society is introjected into the culture of the working class itself, appearing as a problematic choice of “lifestyles” for working-class men and women—a choice between a lifestyle modeled essentially on middle-class values and practices and one modeled on more distinctively working- or lower-class values and practices.\textsuperscript{111}

Within the ball world, this split is understood in the distinction, drawn frequently by ball participants themselves, between houses that are more like ‘families’ and those that are more like ‘gangs’ and thus more lower-class. The qualities of support, nurturing and solidarity are associated with

\textsuperscript{110}Here again, further research would be useful into the ways in which houses organize themselves financially. The information I have is limited. It seems clear that houses tend to pool income and effort in order to compete in and throw balls, but in terms of day to day living expenses, I am not clear. Ball children affirmed to me the moral responsibility of a house to care for ill house members, and in the case of the House of Xhakanga I was able to confirm the acting out of that principle. But I am unable to make generalizations about the culture as a whole.

\textsuperscript{111}Ortner, 172. In her review of the anthropological literature, she sees this ‘split’ occur repetitively in both black and white communities.
the former, and the qualities of rivalry, gossip and violence are associated with the latter. This symbolic opposition is sometimes described in generational terms, with the ‘new’ kids seen as more prone to making the house scene gang-like.

At the opening of his ball in July, Hector Xtravaganza delivered an impassioned plea to the ball community to retain the sense of peace and love, saying “There’s no reason why we have to be against each other.” He urged them not to turn the houses into gangs, but to support unity. At 36, he complained, he is “too old for these pumps,” but kept holding balls because he believed the children need him.

The primary phenomenon associated with ‘gang’-like activity is fights breaking out at the balls. As Arbert Latex described one incident to me:

Security is a big issue in the house scene, because a lot of kids have fights, and a lot of kids try to destroy balls. So, mini-riots have started in balls. In the middle of January and February, every ball would end up in a riot... the worst one was the House of Richart’s ball where they almost destroyed the whole place...what happened was... a house got chopped during grand prize, and the kids didn't like that, so they just took chairs and destroyed the place. It wasn’t cute... it was my first riot in a long time.\(^\text{112}\)

It is apparent from the *Idle Sheets* that violence is a recurrent concern within the house circuit, although it is perpetually presented as something about to run out of control. This, I argue, is an effect of wider cultural fears and beliefs about the increasing violence in society, and is connected to the pathologizing of black, Puerto Rican, and lower-class bodies, particularly

\(^\text{112}\)Arbert Latex (personal interview) (June 9, 1994).
men. Ortner comments on “the displacement of class frictions into the
discourses and practices of gender and sexual relations” such that working
class women are “symbolically aligned” with respectable middle-class
values and practices, against which working class masculinity is
defined.113 This opposition is recreated within the house culture, where it
is the masculine Butch Queens who are seen as responsible for creating
violent scenes, disrupting and spoiling the fun atmosphere for the others.

There seems to be some evidence, however, to give grounds to the
concerns that inter-house violence has lately more prevalent. Over the
course of the summer of 1994, I heard of several venues in New York City
and New Jersey that were banning ball kids from holding events there
because of incidents, usually at the end of balls, that caused destruction of
property. At the House of Latex ball, despite strict security and warnings
that houses would lose all eligibility for competition if one of their
members engaged in a fight, a struggle broke out outside the doors of the
Marc Ballroom in the post-ball hours, over a dispute in which somebody
allegedly stepped on someone’s foot during a vogue competition.

If it is the Butch Queens who are held responsible for generating
much of the violence, it is the vogueing competitions that are seen as
providing much of the instigation. Vogueing is a highly competitive field
in part because, unlike the categories that involve costumes or fashion
statements, most vogue categories require no investment beyond time for
practice and the development of an individual style. The physicality and

113 Ortner, 171,173.
confrontational dynamics of the dance themselves make it something close to ritualized combat to begin with, and the boundary between competitors squaring off on the runway must be constantly enforced by the organizers to prevent the dance from slipping into a fist-fight.

Foucault has noted that the use of physical violence marks out the failure, rather than the logical extreme, of a relation of power. So, within houses, the very real aggression and one-up-manship is mediated through the symbolic battling of voguing and ‘throwing shade.’ And however concerned ball participants may be with the potential breakdown of competition into violence, violence manifests itself in far more constant ways in their lives: in the form of anti-gay violence.

Houses serve the important function of providing not simply a sense of safety and companionship in private spaces like personal apartments and rented ball rooms, but also, and as importantly, reclaim and render safer portions of the public for the use of visibly queer people. The following category description, drawn from the invitation for the House of Latex ball, vividly demonstrates this concern:

**FQ Bangy Realness:** The ball has ended and you are taking the train home. Will you make it? Or will the train have a fierce delay because you got spooked.

To be ‘spooked’ doubly connotes (1) to be exposed as a sex deviant, and (2) to be unprepared, unable to protect yourself from homophobic or

---

114 Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” in Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, editors, Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics 2nd Edition (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982), 220.

115 Invitation to the House of Latex Ball, (photocopied pamphlet) (June 19, 1994).
transvestiphobic assaults. Part of the purpose of the house ties is to provide safety in numbers, and to transmit street survival skills to younger queers, particular Femme Queens.

The way houses organize defensive strategies against a society saturated with the threat of violence compels us to see their gang-like qualities in a different light. To perhaps an even greater extent than their straight peers within urban communities of color, the ball children derive positive benefits from the loyalty structure and protections afforded by their houses when in public. More than simply exclusive cliques, membership in a house functions as a bona fide strategy for survival.

Houses, then, are a form of gay kinship that exist in opposition to, as an alternative from, both the straight family and the inclusive forms of belonging offered by youth centers. They enculturate young men and women into the ball scene, and provide the resources to combat everyday forms of homophobia. And even if they invoke the language of the family, they do so in ways that disrupt the usual connotations of family with domesticity and the private sphere. It is useful to recall, in this vein, that the genealogy of the term ‘house’ does not trace back to the normative ‘household,’ but rather, as we saw in chapter two, to the haute couture ‘houses’ of the high fashion system. Drag houses are similarly oriented around the production of a distinctive look and style for their public, only in this case the ‘public’ is the ball circuit itself.
Chapter Four

The Art of the Ball

"If perversion subverts it is not as a unitary, pre-social libido, or an original
plentitude, but as a transgressive agency inseparable from a dynamic intrinsic
to social process." — Jonathan Dollimore

"When you see me voguing on the Pier, that's just a ki-ki. But when I'm at
a ball, then it's In-fin-i-tah-tee peewah!" — Tiny Infiniti

This final chapter looks at balls as creative responses to everyday life
and struggle for poor and minority people in post-industrial New
York City. It is commonplace to suggest, in this vein, that people who are
both 'of color' and queer are doubly oppressed. In the case of women, this
becomes a triple oppression, and of course, class exploitation quadruples
the calumny. Within this additive model of oppression, any cultural
production at all by people who exist under such conditions is valorized in
a way that can become quite easily sentimental, even condescending.
Without denying the reality of these multiple oppressions, or of the way
they can intersect and reinforce each other, I want to move away from the
additive model, and suggest that the convergence of multiple
subordinations in a single social group can as easily be seen as providing
multiple resources for collective resistance.

In making this argument, I am drawing upon some suggestive
comparisons made by anthropologist Esther Newton in her important
ethnography of female impersonators. At numerous points in her

117 Esther Newton, Mother Camp (Chicago and London: University of Chicago,
1979).
discussion of the ‘camp sensibility’ in gay male cultures, Newton compares those men’s modes of coping and resisting social oppression with the ways in which African Americans historically have resisted white supremacy. Specifically, she argues that the “camp ethos or style plays a role analogous to “soul” in the Negro subculture... Like the Negro problem, the homosexual problem centers on self-hatred and lack of self-esteem.”

She highlights the way both ‘camp’ and ‘soul’ provide creative responses to the problem of self-hatred and internalized oppression, by “laughing at one’s incongruous position instead of crying.”

The Harlem/Village drag ball circuit provides a unique example of the convergence of African-American (and to some extent Puerto-Rican) cultural production with what I am going to call queer cultural production. This chapter attempts to look more closely at the convergence of these historically distinct yet curiously similar modes of self-articulation. Drawing upon the recent work of philosopher Judith Butler, I want to suggest that the pleasures of ball performance lie in a specific form of subversive parody of social roles, and in the subjection of the body to a disciplinary, regulatory discourse that, in the words of Walter Hughes, “paradoxically permits, even creates a form of freedom.”

119Newton, 105.

118Newton, 109. Newton is ambivalent about the radical possibilities, if any, in the camp and soul ethos. At one point she characterizes the former as “a pre- or proto-political phenomena.” [Newton, 111] At another, she comments that “It is clear to me now how camp underscores rage and therefore rebellion by ridiculing serious and concentrated bitterness.” [Newton, 109] She contrasts the camp, who accepts the oppressor’s definition of himself as degraded, with the radical, who rejects that definition.

***

I attended four balls over the course of the summer and fall of 1994, all but one of which occurred at the Marc Ballroom on Union Square. I also examined a sampling of ballroom invitations that stretched chronologically from 1993 to 1994, and included balls held in venues outside Manhattan (in Newark, Hartford, Philadelphia and even Washington DC). On this basis I was able to discern the basic format of a ball, which I will briefly describe.

Gay and lesbian New York City, as we saw in the first chapter, is far from homogenous in its lifestyle, sexual tastes and politics. Night life in particular is characterized by a high degrees of specialization, with particular neighborhoods known to be more accommodating to specific classes and types of people than others (in the Village, it is commonplace to distinguish between people who live and/or socialize in the West Village from those that socialize in the East Village, with the latter seen as more counter-cultural and 'grungy' than the former).

'disco' to refer to all pre-recorded, site-specific dance music, thus including contemporary 'house' music within its range.

121 They were (in order): the House of Latex Ball on June 19th, 1994, Hector Xtravaganza's Transformation Ball on July 24th, 1994, Eric Bazaar's Assassination Ball on August 7, 1994, and the House of Aphrodite's Greek Fantasy Ball on October 29th, 1994. The last of these balls was held at the Harlem Karate Institute on 3rd Ave between 121st and 122nd Street.
The significant and expanding venues for queer-oriented entertainment in the City are showcased in two ‘clubbing’ magazines distributed free of charge on a weekly basis: HX and Next Magazine. Significantly, balls are rarely if ever advertised within these publications. This demonstrates clearly the level of exclusiveness the ball circuit seeks to sustain, even within the sub-set of same-sex interested peoples. Rather, balls are advertised through invitations distributed at the balls themselves which take the form of brochures announcing the house or individual that is throwing the ball, the time and place, the categories, and often, the theme. Usually two or three photocopied pages folded over, these invitations surface several months in advance of the appointed date, and compete with each other to look the most attractive and slick. Often original artwork is commissioned for the covers of an invitation, and particularly ambitious organizers will spring for such features as color stock, one or full color copying, and even in one case, a yarn tassel on each invite, in the hopes of making the invite stand out from the others circulating at the ball.

The venues for ball vary, but they usually are held in ballrooms rented for the night, and set-up is minimal. The Marc is perhaps typical

---

122 The one exception to this was Hector Xtravaganza’s Transformation Ball, which was advertised in HX magazine. Interestingly, the Xtravaganza’s are viewed by many within the ball circuit as unduly concerned with publicity.

123 At the height of their popularity in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as we saw in chapter two, several balls were held at nightclubs with more elaborate sound and light systems, decor, etc. Access to these venues has been closed off to most ball organizers currently, in part because of the waning of their “fashionableness” and in part because of the real or perceived threat of property destruction present in the occasional fights that break out.
of ball venues in its layout: one large main room in which chairs can be set up on either side of a ‘runway,’ with a judges’ table set up on risers at one end of the room. Bathrooms off the adjoining hallway serve as dressing rooms for ball contestants, and a foyer in front serves as a place to sell tickets and for Gay Men’s Health Crisis to distribute its safer sex pamphlets and condoms.

Most balls occur on Sunday evenings, a few on Saturdays. The invitations invariably set a time close to 9:00 PM for the Grand March, which opens the ball, but it is understood that the ball will not get under way until several hours later. Fashionable lateness is a way of life for ballgoers. Legendary ball children who are competing will often not even enter the ballroom until their category is called: minimizing the length of their appearance ‘in public’ so as to make maximum impact.

Balls will have anywhere from thirty to forty competition categories announced, although several are usually canceled on the night of the event if there is a lack of interest, or because of time constraints. Categories for Butch Queens and Femme Queens usually dominate, with the relatively fewer categories for Real Women and Butches reflecting the lower rates of genetic female participation in the ball scene. Occasionally, a couple categories will be designated ‘Open to All’: this is particularly common for categories that call for people to compete as entire houses.

Traditionally, the boundary between audience and competitors is broken in the very first category, which is a competition for best dressed.

\textsuperscript{124} It is normal for a ball to go until 6:00 AM or even later on Monday morning; they are truly all-night affairs.
spectator. The subsequent ordering of categories is up to the organizers. Most categories fall into one of four broad kinds: 'face' competitions, 'body' competitions, 'runway model' competitions, and 'vogueing' competitions. The organizers of the ball will explain, in no more than a sentence of two, the specifics of a given category in the invite, and would-be-competitors will be held accountable on the night of competition for following the instructions (I saw one unfortunate person get disqualified for wearing dull blue when the category called for 'bright colors').

The judging pool of seven to eleven will be drawn from a cross-section of houses, to ensure fairness, and will usually be people considered legendary. Each will rate the contestants, offering either a '10' or a 'chop.' At most even moderately competitive balls, it is necessary to get 'tens across the board' to win the trophy. Frequently, more than one person will get 'tens across the board' and the judges will then be called upon to point out their preferred choice, with the person getting a plurality of votes winning the trophy.

Organizers usually place the categories that are likely to garner the most fevered competition late in their programs, culminating in grand prize competitions at the end of the ball which carry a cash award in addition to the trophy, usually between $500 and $1,000. These competitions usually carry the most elaborate instructions, and often involve people competing as a house. The theme of the ball is usually

---

125 The audience itself is drawn from the same demographics as the participants. Most audience members, even if they are not competing at some point that night, are members or partisans of a particular house that is.
worked into the category description: at the House of Latex ball, for example, the invitation called for outfits made completely out of latex condoms.

The above provides a bare-bones description of ball mechanics. As such, it perhaps fails to convey the more exciting and unique aspects of the drag balls. Inevitably, it must be mentioned here that balls really have to be experienced to be understood. This limitation forestalls attempts to convey a truly comprehensive discussion of the political and aesthetic issues raised by the balls. What follows is an attempt to work within these limitations to produce a tentative and necessarily incomplete picture of the fascination and power of ball performances. My technique is to select out interesting (as opposed to representative) moments in balls I witnessed to illuminate the theoretical discussion which accompanies them. Before I move to the analysis of specific ball moments, however, I want to discuss the theoretical challenges that frame discussions of black queer performance and subjectivity.

***

In the Fall of 1990, in an essay anticipating the release of her film *Paris is Burning*, Jennie Livingston reflected upon the manner in which social roles are destabilized and refigured within the world of the balls. She describes the impact made upon her, as a white lesbian college graduate, by the black and Puerto Rican Femme Queens from the ball
scene. Recalling her own memories of school-yard epithets directed at those who did not conform to gender roles (girls were ‘dogs’ and boys were ‘fags’), she delights as an adult in the discovery of youth who have shamelessly flouted heteronormativity:

These girls had perfect breasts, high heels, mincing steps. By exerting sheer will and by taking pharmaceutical hormones, they had become the ultimate antidog—or the perfect women... I was relieved to learn that if a bunch of buxom men in dresses—their shapes altered by hormones—could recreate the female gender, then perhaps gender itself is only something we learn.\(^\text{126}\)

Livingston’s delight in the drag queen’s parodic inhabitation of the femme fatale is worthy of note, providing as it does welcome contrast to the disapproving tones of cultural feminism, which has tended to read such parody as implicated in the patriarchal oppression of women.\(^\text{127}\) Her acceptance of social constructionism (“perhaps gender itself is only something we learn”) leads her towards a celebratory embrace of the drag queen, who does the work of imagining for her a world in which the cruel imposition of bodily ‘truths’ upon the homely are overcome. New

\(^{126}\) Livingston, Jennie, “The Fairer Sex,” *Aperture* 121 (Fall 1990), 6.

\(^{127}\) bell hooks’s essay on the film, which appears in her collection *Black Looks*, provides one example of this reaction. In it, she writes:

> To the extent that black men accept a white supremacist sexist representation of themselves as castrated, without phallic power, and therefore pseudo-females, they will need to overly assert a phallic misogynist masculinity, one rooted in contempt for the female.

[bell hooks, *Black Looks* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 147]. Peggy Phelan continues in this vein:

Gay male cross-dressers resist the body of woman even while they make its constructedness visible. The bodies of women do not “penetrate” these men because they do not erotically desire women. This is in part why the misogyny which underlies gay male cross-dressing is so painful to women.

technologies of gender (the hormones) combine with a dose of attitude ("sheer will") to produce a new kind of person, the "antidog" who has liberated herself and proudly exerts agency over her body.

In her enthusiasm, Livingston even wonders whether or not the subjectivities produced through ball participation point towards the "ground-breaking outer limits of sexual communication." She comments:

The care and expertise with which gender roles are enacted in the ballroom are mirrored by the demand for gender identification in the "outside" world. Except that at the ball, you can always change, from man to woman, from crisp executive to prim schoolgirl to savvy model. Gender roles and even social class become self-expression, self-exploration, even good-humored self-mockery. Livingston's reading can be positioned (although she does not herself explicitly claim this) within the emergent field of critical practice that goes under the appellation 'queer.' Her reading of ball culture can be seen as queer, I argue, because it cherishes the possibility of radical community between all people who have, for whatever reason, been defined as deviant for their rejection of prescribed sex/gender roles. In striking an openly admiring pose in relation to the Femme Queens, she opens up a space for identification between herself and them, their differential class, race and gender notwithstanding. And by extension, the reader of

---

128 Livingston, 10
129 Ibid.
130 There is a contrasting tendency in the above quotation, signaled in Livingston's celebration of "self-expression." I will say more about this in a later section.
Livingston's text is invited to include his or herself within this utopian community of dogs- and fags-no-more.\footnote{131}

Before raising the question of whether Livingston's openness is at all reciprocated by the Femme Queens, I want to explore more closely the grounds upon which her identification proceeds. Queer practices, I argue, derive their force and fascination from the manner in which they work against the grain of dominant cultural conceptions of selfhood and autonomy. As Moe Meyer has usefully noted:

What "queer" signals is an ontological challenge that displaces bourgeois notions of the Self as unique, abiding, and continuous while substituting instead a concept of the Self as performative, improvisational, discontinuous and processually constituted by repetitive and stylized acts.\footnote{132}

Queers, in this view, are people who display an awareness of the variability and instability of social categories like race and sex, and the way they must be enacted and sustained through performance. Crucially, heterosexual identities no less than homosexual or queer ones, are seen as having a performative constitution. Drag is the example \textit{par excellence} that demonstrates the manner in which a queer subjectivity might be fashioned. As philosopher Judith Butler writes:

\begin{quote}
In a recent essay, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests that this commonly springs in part from the power of the performative utterance "Shame on you," with which so many gender deviant people have had to confront. She writes that:
\begin{quote}
Shame effaces itself; shame points and projects; shame turns itself skin side outside; shame and pride; shame and self-display, shame and exhibitionism are different interlinings of the same glove: shame, it might finally be said, transformational shame, is performance.
\end{quote}
\end{quote}  

drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality’s claim on naturalness and originality.\textsuperscript{133}

The drag queen is made to do heavy representational work by queer critics interested in exploring lived resistances to compulsory heterosexuality. But in the understandable eagerness to celebrate the utopian possibilities of gender’s undoing, there is danger of reinscribing, within the center of the queer political project, the very liberal, not to say un-queer, discourse of possessive individualism. Balls, I suggest, are misunderstood if they are taken to be primarily about ‘self-expression’ and the ‘transcendence’ of gender roles.

In her critique of \textit{Paris is Burning}, Peggy Phelan suggests that Livingston’s subject position as a white female (a position Phelan shares) leads her to overestimate the ease with which individuals can ease out of prescribed gender roles. She comments that:

White women like myself have been encouraged to mistake performance for ontology—to believe that the role is real, and thus sufficient to constitute an identity, a sense of purpose, a reason for being. If performance can provide a substitute real, then “identity” can truly be an invention—not something susceptible to some external facts (biological, sexual, economic) which prohibit access to “femininity,” “beauty,” “glamour,” “power,” “wealth,” or whatever it is we desire.\textsuperscript{134}

The alleged popularity of a cultural production like \textit{Paris is Burning} amongst middle class white audiences, Phelan suggests, lies in the fact that

\textsuperscript{133}Judith Butler, \textit{ Bodies that Matter} (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 125.

\textsuperscript{134}Phelan, 165.
it can be seen to argue for the centrality of discourses of self-invention, of individualism, within the poor, oppressed communities of black and Puerto Rican queers. This last perception, I would argue, is a misunderstanding of ball culture based on a misunderstanding, or misuse, of the concept of performativity.

In *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler makes clear that her theory of the performativity of gender does not envision such performances as a single act or choice. Social constructionism must not be seen, she argues, as proposing that one simply selects and ‘puts on’ the gender, race or sex of one’s choice. Our bodies, in her view, are forcibly materialized through time, being brought into unstable being through sets of regulatory norms. Bodies are “the effect of a dynamic of power, such that the matter of bodies will be indissociable from the regulatory norms that govern their materialization.” From this perspective, notions of ‘self-expression’ become radically altered. Butler writes:

...the agency denoted by the performativity of “sex” will be directly counter to any notion of a voluntarist subject who exists quite apart from the regulatory norms which she/he opposes... Although this constitutive constraint does not foreclose the possibility of agency, it does locate agency as a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power.

We do not, then, choose our bodies or fashion them at will, but must operate within the naturalized regulatory norms of the prevailing sex/gender system. This leads Butler to locate the possibilities for

---

135Ibid., 166.
136Butler, 2.
137Ibid., 15.
resistance within the very reiterative and rearticulatory practices that themselves constitute sex. She argues that:

Where the uniformity of the subject is expected, where the behavioral conformity of the subject is commanded, there might be produced the refusal of the law in the form of the parodic inhabiting of conformity, a repetition of the law into hyperbole, a rearticulation of the law against the authority of the one who delivers it.138

This “parodic inhabiting of conformity” can be seen in the recognizably queer strategy of camp, which Moe Meyer usefully defines as “the total body of performative practices and strategies used to enact a queer identity, with enactment defined as the production of social visibility.”139 This “social visibility” is intimately dependent upon collective, rather than individual, processes and praxes.

Drag queens, with their “perfect breasts, high heels, mincing steps” parody and thereby expose the arbitrariness of what we think of as ‘feminine’; their visibility in popular culture thus has a ‘liberatory’ effect upon the rest of us who, if not ready to actually become drag queens, feel certain that it must be a very freeing and deconstructive thing to be. But is it? Are we to take Butler’s notion of ‘gender performativity’ to mean that all identities are, at least potentially accessible to each of us, that we can come to know each other’s subject positions as easily as we can come to know the inside of a wig and hose?

What does it mean, for example, to roundly declare, as East Village sophisticate and sometime Supermodel of the World RuPaul has, that

---

138 Ibid., 122.
139 Meyer, 5.
“everybody’s in drag”\textsuperscript{140} While this statement is very much open to interpretation, I want to suggest that what RuPaul means is not that each of us casts on a multiplicity of different identities every day, not that drag provides momentum towards some “outer limits” where our systems of social codification collapse, but in fact just the opposite: that each of us has identities painfully sewed to our skins, each of us is subject to involuntary disciplines. This I argue, is the proper conclusion one should draw from notions of gender performativity.

Drag, when it is seen as simply a matter of clothes, seems accessible because it seems to be easily undone. But transsexuality, which goes beyond sartorial exchanges to redesign the body’s surfaces, becomes more threatening when it demonstrates not the individual but the utterly and painfully social construction of sex/gender. To revisit Livingston’s remarks, do we not lose something critical if we gloss over the use of female hormones, shots and pills, to radically alter the structure of the body? As Marjorie Garber reminds us:

\begin{quote}

it is to transsexuals and transvestites that we need to look if we want to understand what gender categories mean. For transsexuals and transvestites are not concerned with maleness and femaleness than persons who are neither transvestite nor transsexual. They are emphatically not interested in “unisex” or “androgyny” as erotic styles, but rather in gender-marked and gender-coded identity structures,\textsuperscript{141}
\end{quote}

Ball performance does not seem to be about imagining a world without races, genders or even without a class hierarchy. The pleasure people

\textsuperscript{140}RuPaul, “Paris is Burning,” Premiere 6(120) (October 1992).

\textsuperscript{141}Marjorie Garber, Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), 110.
derive from attending and participating in balls seems very disconnected from a desire for the pursuit of an individuality free from the markings of hegemonic categories. In the following section, I examine the ways in which ball performances seek to destabilize these hegemonic categories from within, to produce unruly bodies that seek to redefine the conditions of their materialization.

***

Eric Bazaar, one of the most sought after commentators on the ball circuit, held his own Assassination Ball Sunday August 7th, 1994.\(^{142}\) It was held at the Marc Ballroom, and was eagerly anticipated within the ball world. Thirty five categories were announced, plus two grand prize competitions, one for Femme Queens, the other for Butch Queens, each carrying $500 plus a trophy as winnings. The Grand March, which the invite promised would start at 9:00 PM sharp, did not happen to 11:00 PM, two hours late, but still fairly early by ball standards. The crowd's high energy lasted through the night's sometimes interminable competitions, climaxing at 6:00 AM with the final arrival of the grand prize competitions. For the Femme Queens, the invitation category description read:

A star is born. Million dollar Covergirl Face 1994-1995 with production. At last the waiting—the anticipation is finally over, grand prize is for the babes who know they have cartas. We are looking for a 100% total makeover, a look so deadly and poisonous you will need a bodyguard to escort you

\(^{142}\)The 'commentator' in a ball is the MC, or Master of Ceremonies.
because you r [sic] about to unveil what it means to look like a million dollar cover girl.\textsuperscript{143}

The category description contained the quintessential script for ball competition: the (temporary) transformation of a poor, subjugated and marginalized body into a glamorous, wealthy and famous one. The language, borrowed half from Hollywood, half from the world of high fashion modeling, evokes images of dreams, of aspirations, of longings to belong, and most importantly, longings to be visible.

A first contestant appeared on the runway only to be peremptorily disqualified, after some hub-bub, because one of the judges insisted that he did not know her. Implicit in the concept of 'makeover,' he explained, was the idea that everyone already knows what you used to look like. The second contestant was Octavia Saint Laurent, of \textit{Paris is Burning} fame, followed by Mahogany Chanel, whose production includes several people dressed as plastic surgeons. But it was the last contestant who proved the most electrifying, both to the crowd and the judges.

For the production, the lights in the ballroom were dimmed, and after a period designed to heighten the anticipation, a young boy came out dressed like a newspaper vendor from the 1940s. He tossed some newspapers up to the judges, which proclaimed the 'arrival' of Onjenay Mugler as their headline. A smoke machine was turned on to enhance the mysteriousness of the moment, and a clump of people scuffled down the still-dark runway, only the outlines of their suits and bowler hats visible. Suddenly, like a flower blossoming out of a darkened pond, Onjenay

\textsuperscript{143} Invitation to the Assassination Ball (photocopied pamphlet) (August 7, 1994).
emerged from the middle of the clump, whipping off a green hood to reveal a transformed face that elicited a scream from the crowd. The ‘before’ photos that her assistants held up for the judges tell the story: a brown-skinned, black-haired Latina transsexual transformed through makeup and hair die into a blonde bombshell Marlene Dietrich look-alike.

A tear of relief and joy welled up in her eyes as the eight judges announced their decision, installing Onjenay as one of the premiere Femme Queens on the ball circuit. Her rivals departed icily, without congratulations, and were whisked into waiting cars by their fellow house members. After a lackluster Butch Queen finale, the ball ended and everyone spilled into the streets above, yawning and carrying away the detritus from the all-night sequence of competition.

Onjenay’s win was discussed on the ball circuit for weeks afterwards. In part, this was because someone had finally succeeded in defeating Octavia St. Laurent, whose ‘legendary’ status on the ball scene made her winning seem a foregone conclusion in any grand prize she deigned to enter. The excitement at the consolidation of this new ballroom legend raised a delicate political topic: the victory of a light-skinned Latina over three black competitors, and a victory garnered through a successful mimicking of a white silver screen legend.

In her critique of the film Paris is Burning, bell hooks makes the following comment about just such a scenario:

the subversive power of [drag] is radically altered when informed by a racialized fictional construction of the “feminine” that suddenly makes the representation of whiteness as crucial to the experience of female impersonation as gender, that is to say when the idealized
The notion of the female/feminine is really a sexist idealization of white womanhood... Within the world of the black gay drag ball culture [Livingston] depicts, the idea of womanhood and femininity is totally personified by whiteness.  

hooks's critique is echoed in the writings of numerous critics who, on the basis of the film, and in such a way as to suggest a dismissal, characterized the ball scene as about black men attempting to possess white womanhood.  

I want, however, to restore what I see as a missing complexity. Ball performance, I want to argue, is not simply about black, or for that matter Latino, desire for whiteness. Nor is it simply about lower-class internalization of the middle class values of conspicuous consumption and display. Rather, I suggest, ball performance is more appropriately seen as a claim upon culture from the margins, a demand for visibility and cultural participation enacted through a series of negotiations with dominant representations. Ball participants proffer an aesthetics that, as we shall see, are quite cognizant of the intricate politics of negotiation and appropriation, and of racialized desire.

In making this argument, I want to begin by stressing the importance of the collective nature of the ball experience. In a ball, everyone in the room is rhythmically united through the discipline of the beat, which is provides continuity from the first competition to the last, filling in the lagging spaces in the program where nothing else exciting is happening, inviting everyone to rock with it or even break out into

---

144hooks, 147.

145For example, the reviewer for New York magazine writes the following: "Lying on their beds, the younger stars of the drag-ball world say things like "I want to have a normal life"—that is to say, the life that they imagine rich white girls have, an endless leisure filled with consumption." [David Denby, "Movies" New York (May 13, 1991), 96].
spontaneous voguing on the sidelines. The music played is mostly house, a pulsating dance music that originated in the late 1970s in black gay dance clubs in Chicago and New York City. As Anthony Thomas has explained, the two salient qualities of house music are its speed (120 beats per minute or faster) and the foregrounding of an electronically-driven percussiveness. “In western music,” Thomas writes, “rhythm is secondary in emphasis and complexity to harmony and melody. In house music, as in African music, this sensibility is reversed.”  

The speed and splendor of the house rhythm provides the framework within which not only the voguers, but the other ball contestants as well, move while on the runway.

Recently, Walter Hughes has argued that house music represents a continuity with precursor forms of disco music, particularly in the way these musics are collectively consumed on the urban dance floor. Disco and house musics, he argues, as produced by the music industries, are deliberately incomplete and unfinished. The full actualization of the music only comes through the involvement of the DJ in remixing the music ‘live’ for a participatory dance audience. These musics have been used by urban gay men to produce a way of inhabiting the body that resists hegemonic constructions of the masculine. Hughes writes:

Allowing the beat to become a part of us disturbs the very foundations of conventional constructions of masculine selfhood; allowing ourselves to be penetrated and controlled by musical rhythm, by desire, or by another person is to relinquish the traditional conditions of full humanity and

---

citizenship, and to embrace instead the traditional role of slave.\footnote{Hughes, 151.}

Hughes traces the language of enslavement, to the dance floor, to the rhythm, to the beat, in disco and house music lyrics.\footnote{This voluntary subjection, he notes, is represented through the three categories of “femininity, blackness and mechanization.” [Hughes, 151] These are the themes taken up in the balls through the competitions for Femme Queens, the ‘Banjee’ realness competitions, and the ‘Bazaar’ categories in which the ball children create apocalyptic visions of the future with the help of wire, flashing light bulbs, and reams of metallic cloth.} The language is loaded, given the traumatic historical memory within African-American communities of slavery. But the paradoxical celebration of subjection in disco and house, Hughes insists, provides the key to understanding the nature of the pleasures and paradoxical sense of freedom they realize. As he argues:

> The identity that disco offers is sustained by the beat and its twin, desire; it could conceivably go on forever, like our dancing, if the music is right, but it will never be permanent, fixed, or naturalized. Therein lies the freedom disco constructs out of our subordination to it.\footnote{Hughes, 154.}

Similarly, at a ball, the endurance-testing length of the event, and the oft-repeated reminder from the commentator that no matter what happens that night there will another ball to compete in, the emphasis is upon open-endedness and unfixity.

It is useful, in this respect, to point out the connections between the balls and other forms of cultural production within what sociologist Paul Gilroy has termed the black Atlantic. African diasporic cultures, he writes, share a common link in their celebration of antiphony, or call and
response, breaking down the barriers between audience and performer, demanding the active engagement of the former. Audience actively participate in the “cathartic performance,” dissolving “Eurocentric notions, of the disjunction between art and life, inside and outside.”

Gilroy argues that:

The contemporary musical forms of the African diaspora work within an aesthetic and political framework which demands that they ceaselessly reconstruct their own histories, folding back on themselves time and again to celebrate and validate the simple, unassailable fact of their survival.

Spectating at a ball, like spectating at a football game, requires the development of a level of knowledge and discernment about the competition and its players. Balls emphasize “the simple, unassailable fact of... survival” through a powerful identification with specific celebrities whose success at making themselves visible represents the triumph of that survival. For example, when Marcel Christian offered up one genealogy of vogueing, which stands in contrast to the litany of white silver screen stars in Madonna’s song Vogue, he selected Diana Ross as the focus of identification:

She influenced all forms of art ranging from fashions to music to drama. She reigned Supreme and the Ball world at the time absorbed everything Diana had to offer. She’s been the subject of female impersonation and lip-sync pantomime for more than twenty years. Diana Ross’s make-up, gowns and stage movements have been copied by some of the most famous and infamous female impersonators every [sic] known. One exclusive pose that distinctly Diana Ross is her Superstar Victory pose. Diana’s arms stretched up forming a perfect V. Her head thrown back, her eyes dazzling. That’s the

151 Gilroy, 37.
very pose that is the finale of Vogue-ing. It’s when a performer stands on the end of the runway with upheld, angled arms and wave the fingertips upwards, singling [sic] to the audience to give them their just due. That final movement says “I have completed my act to the fullest of my ability. Do you recognize me ... or what?” ... Diana Ross, not even aware, had contributed to today’s Vogue-ing by simply being beautiful Diana Ross. By simply being charismatic with no pure effort. By simple being a black American woman.152

Pleasure here is taken in defiantly taking up representational space, in “being charismatic with no pure effort.” And it points to the powerful relationship carved out between gay men and women, particularly black women. Even though the participation of women in the balls is not as great as men, identification with what Andrew Ross has termed “black female assertiveness” is central to the balls.153 Female vocalizations of desire and defiance form the fabric of much disco music, and house as well, and the ‘diva’ figure is in some ways as important for the Butch Queens as it is for the Femme Queens. When Hector Xtravaganza, a Butch Queen, dons a black dress and pumps to become ‘Lady X’ and performs a lip sync of Whitney Houston’s “I’m Every Woman” (1993), the lyrical excess implicit in that claim is joyfully extended from black female pop star to Puerto Rican male vogue star. More than a chanteuse, more than the ‘object’ of heterosexual male desire, the vocalist of “I’m every woman/It’s all in me” lays claim to a defiantly multiple and hybrid identity, an emphasizes an agency grounded in the collectivity of women.

152Marcel Christian, Idle Sheet X (photocopied pamphlet) (June 27, 1990), 7.
In similar fashion, the meaning of blackness is also reconfigured in the balls to celebrate survival and even collective glory. Twenty-seven categories into the Assassination Ball was a "Father vs. Father" production. The program that was distributed before the ball had read:

Roll out the red carpet because you do deserve the royal treatment, after all you are the father of a house and before you enter the ballroom you presence should be announce [sic]. Coming from a foreign country of your choice wearing that countries costume with flag (It's time to make all the other fathers gag!!)²⁵⁴

The four competing houses were Chanel, Ferragamo, Ebony, Richards and Exotique. Each included an elaborate production involving multiple house members, not just the father. First, Father Chanel came out in Scottish garb, complete with a set of bagpipes. Then, the House of Ferragamo enacted an elaborate tableau, beginning with the rolling out an actual red carpet, onto which was laid a Ghanaian flag, followed by bowls after bowls of fresh fruit, vegetables, and sweet liquids, followed by candles. A female member of the house borrowed the microphone to announce that she was reporting live from Ghana, and that what we were witnessing was the coronation of the first person of African descent to be elected president of a nation: Kwame Nkrumah. Several women from the house, done up in African garb, strolled down the runway, spilling flower petals, followed by ‘Kwame Nkrumah,’ resplendent in a flowing white tunic and matching skullcap, underneath a white parasol, escorted by bulky guards. The production was magic, at least to me, in its sympathetic rendering of an important historical moment in the black diaspora.

²⁵⁴Invitation to the Assassination Ball.
The following production, that of the House of Ebony, was even more elaborate. A woman from the house spoke an African incantation over the public address system, as multiple members from the house set up a large throne at the head of the runway, bedecked in swaths of kente cloth. Palm trees were brought in and positioned around the throne as various and sundry house members, dressed as servants or slaves, made the preparation, complete with African instruments. The DJ, at the house request, interspersed tribal house music with recorded African drumming. At times the distinction between the two began to blur, and the male muscle-bound dancers, their torsos shining with sweat, moved as rhythmically to either. The entourage was at least twenty people before Father Ebony himself finally entered, bedecked in green with a crown, moved serenely and sat there at this throne, where he was fanned by a naked male house member holding a palm leaf, a clear touch of homoeroticism completing the scene. After the production was complete, the inevitable “tens across the board” seemed positively anticlimactic.

The successive entrants, Richards from Brazil, and Exotique from Russia, would have ordinarily been impressive, but the serious competition was between the two African potentates, with the house of Ebony edging out Ferragamo to claim the trophy. The scene stuck with me because it stood in such stark contrast to what balls are supposedly about: escape from reality. In these productions, however, I witnessed both a real grappling with specific historical reality, and a recovery of a form of racial pride in the face of the daily degradation black people face.
The Ebony production in particular struck me as something other than a parody. Within the field of contemporary black culture, with the Afrocentric insistence that homosexuality is a ‘white thing’ the representation of a ‘gay’ African chief is clearly subversive. It opens up history as a creative resource, to be freely accessed for the pursuit of contemporary pleasures and affirmations, in contrast to the narrow and restricted uses to which history is often put by nationalists.

If the ball floor is the space for a collective affirmation, an affirmation which draws upon the resistances produced by multiple subordinations, it is not the case that balls simply becomes safe havens for all who are rejected or marginalized in society. I would in fact posit that the heterogeneity of sexual and racial personae displayed in competition depends on an imagined homogeneity of the participants, which is to say, urban Blacks and Puerto Rican queers.

That just anyone is not welcome was made clear to me by two incidents at Hector Xtravaganza’s Transformation Ball. During a Butch Queen in drags competition, a middle-aged Asian drag queen in a black dress got up and attempted to walk the category. The crowd roared with mocking laughter at her audacity, and several Xs were up before she even got mid stage. Trying to take her dismissal in stride, she gave several poses and flourishes as she exited, forcing the commentator to yell out “Thank you! Thank you! See you later!”

When she finally sat back down, he could not resist getting in a couple more digs, saying: “It’s been nice, Suzy Wong... That was the ki-ki of the night!” He did thank her for providing entertainment for the crowd,
but from the context it was clear that everyone felt that the ball had been disrupted by someone who should have clearly known that she would not have been taken seriously. Her outsider status was manifested in her Asianness.

But if the Asian drag queen was merely a bad joke, a ‘diversion’ from the serious play of the ball competition, a more nasty reaction came to a contestant a little later in a Butch Queen Face competition. A member of the House of Latex was stopped while on the runway and sent away by the judge disqualified. The crowd, particularly his supporters, demanded an explanation, causing the commentator to yell out that “the child is straight, and this is for Butch Queens.” A scene ensued, in which people yelled out on both sides of the issue, with some asserting that a double standard was being imposed, since straight women were allowed to compete in women categories. Finally, the commentator turned angrily to the would-be-contestant, who had sat back in the crowd, and demanded of him, “Well, are you gay or not?” When he failed to get an affirmative answer, he announced that straight people have their own categories, and that Butch Queens have theirs.

This insularism can be traced back decades in ball culture (recall, for example, the difficulties experienced by Puerto Ricans who wanted to participate). It was most likely exacerbated by the negative experiences many on the ball scene had with the publicity I recounted in chapter two. And it contests the claim, made by Andrew Ross, that balls are “based” on
a lust after “social types quite removed from their own lives.” It seems rather that participants seek to protect themselves from those other “social types,” to clearly demarcate the balls as a space for themselves alone. Balls function as a liminal space within which participants can recreate scenes from everyday life and scenes drawn from mass media-powered imaginations. But this should not be extended to view ball goers as ‘living in a fantasy world’ anymore than avid sports fans who devote enormous time, energy and resources to their leisure activities are seen as similarly confusing the reality of their lives with the game.

Balls have over time, expanded to accommodate groups of people who wished to participate, when that wish was sustained and sincere, and could be made sense of to ball goers. First Butch Queens joined the Femme Queens, then Real Women and Butches were incorporated, and for a short and unstable period, attempts were made to make room for straight men. Where the Asian and white presence in the ball room is marginal and overcast with suspicion, Puerto Ricans and other Latinos have been able to carve out a place within the balls. On the racist scale of beauty which prefers white over black, Latinos have been viewed as more desirable than African Americans. Ball competition recognizes the existence of racist standards of beauty, but does not respond to them simply with the reverse-discourse of ‘black is beautiful.’ Rather, the range of skin tones is aestheticized, with ‘dark and lovely’ recognized as deserving a separate

---

155Ross, 191.
space from 'light and lovely.' In this way, race is not so much transcended as it is incorporated and made bearable.156

Balls standards multiply the ways in which a contestant can be seen as beautiful and desirable, but do not attempt to do away with the categorization of beauty and desire. Similarly with body image, competitions will often separate those with 'models' body (thin) from those with 'luscious; bodies (ample) and have them compete for separate trophies. Tall people, similarly, often compete separately from 'midgets.' In this way the balls make room for multiple constituencies to have an opportunity to shine on the ball room floor, where the emphasis is taking what you were given, and making it fabulous. Even in the face categories, grooming and attitude play as important a role in who walks away with the trophy as the contestant's conformity to dominant representations of physical beauty.

156D.A. Miller comments usefully in relation to this point, when he writes of the manner in which... the white Western liberal characteristically refrains from taking any notice of the racially other's body, under the assumption that no such notice can be taken without repeating or in some way reinforcing the abusive mythologization of this body. He goes on to argue: A would be prudent silence about the other's body, never means that differences between races... cease at any moment being thought, fantasized, eroticized, spoken: it merely deprives such differences of any tradition of articulation but the most ponderous (immobilizing, intractable) one engrossed by bigotry. Between that loud-mouthed discourse and frigid liberal silence, gay men of course know a kind of third term—by which I refer to that fascinated discourse on the male body informally but incessantly spoken in bars and bedrooms, between lovers or about them between friends, a discourse that with its meticulous observation and multiple fetishizing articulates the most casual cruise.

[D.A. Miller, Bringing Out Roland Barthes (Berkeley: University of California, 1992), 36, 42].
The implicit critique of oppressive norms is launched through strategic inhabitation of those norms, rather than through direct politicized action against them. As George Lipsitz has argued:

Revolutionary politics and oppositional art have traditionally been noted in a transcendent critique whereby activists and artists attempt to stand outside their society in order to change it... today's youth culture proceeds from a different premise. Instead of standing outside society, it tries to work through it, exploiting and exacerbating its contradictions to create unpredictable possibilities for the future... In their embrace of commercial culture, in their emphasis on exposing the contradictions of contemporary life and in their enunciation of indirect and ironic commentary, youth music and youth culture offer an immanent rather than a transcendent critique.157

If the salient quality of queer cultural production is the perversion of dominant systems of representation, the question of 'originality' can be recast. As Moe Meyer notes, the value of an 'original' production is never simply a given, but what constitutes 'originality' is defined within a dominant order which retains for itself the privilege of nomination.158 Marcel Christian addressed just this question in regards to the ball in one of his Idle Sheets. He writes:

... it has been commented that the whole set-up of the New York Ball House system consists of various forms of media entertainment. The Face categories are (already established) beauty pageants. The Body contests are old American standards. The Fashion categories are nothing more than cheap remakes of famous designers premier showings. And the Costume categories represent miniature versions of Hollywood, Broadway and Las Vegas extravaganzas... The Ball is an arena that is a combination of other established

158 Meyer, 11.

114
arnas... No other form of entertainment has miniaturized all the Exclusives and brought them together under the guise-name Ball.\textsuperscript{159}

The ball circuit's fascination with the world of high fashion must not be misunderstood cruelly as a fascination with 'white America.' If anything, balls mark their dismissal and scorn for middle-class American culture by its almost complete absence from the competitive categories. Images of suburbia, of the harried housewife, the insurance salesman, the 2.5 children and a dog, above all, images of 'respectability' are missing. In their place is, on the one hand, images drawn from the neighborhoods of New York City — the banjee girl, the school kid, the construction worker — and on the other, images drawn from the closely proximate high fashion industry.

One can see this complex relationship in the following category description, a Butch Queen grand prize competition

Come slay this runway in one sickening severe floor sweeping length coat, a coat so severe even Thierry Mugler wouldn't dare come against you. And underneath you have the shocker of all shockers a one of a kind scandalous bazaar shirt, a skirt so sickening it would make JPG cringe!!! And to top it off a one of a kind skyscraper hat. Remember imagination the key to winning. Good luck!!!\textsuperscript{160}

The language is descriptive of concrete bodily effects produced by the excellence of the performance (so good it's "sickening," it causes one to "cringe"). The desire is to out-do in creativity and imagination the best efforts of the designers most idolized in the ball scene: Thierry Mugler and

\textsuperscript{159} Idle Sheet X, 10-11.
\textsuperscript{160} Invitation to the Assassination Ball.
JPG (Jean-Paul Gaultier). The immediacy and corporeality of the body as a canvas for an art form is insisted upon. While drawing upon and to some extent recycling fragments from the mass media, balls emphasis on creativity and imagination open up a space for collective affirmation of a subjectivity grounded in a celebration of the spectacular possibilities of parody and liminal experience.

***

This chapter has aimed to work against the condescending notion that the ball children are somehow deluded, misguided, and ‘living in a fantasy world,’ innocent of any real awareness of racism, sexism, and class exploitation or worse, collusive in their own oppression. I have taken up the question of what makes balls worthwhile to their participants, what is at stake, and whether or not it can be usefully seen as cultural resistance. I have argued that this resistance can be seen, if intermittently, in ball performance, but that it resides not at the overt political level, but rather at the level of the social formation of subjectivities, offering up a meaningful shared experience that provides both the pleasures of individual accomplishment and skill as well as the pleasures of a collective solidarity.

\[16\] It is significant, in this vein, that both designers are openly gay, foreign, and known for their outrages against fashion convention.

116
Conclusion

Poverty and Performance

The ball world and its participants are positioned on the margins even within the marginalized communities of blacks, Puerto Ricans, gays, lesbians and transgendered people. The ‘children’ are located within a postindustrial landscape that is being reshaped by ongoing efforts to ‘disappear’ the poor from public spaces, and also within a consumer culture whose definition of the good life, broadcast from every billboard and television screen, is as seductive as it is unattainable for the vast majority. That culture’s need to revivify itself with cultural products ‘from the margins’ is complemented by a consistent disavowal of those borrowings and appropriations, particularly when the source of those cultural products are queer.

The borrowing, of course, goes in both directions, as I have sought to show. The ball children take up mainstream images, primarily from the fashion world, and rework them into dance and performance. Their postmodern sensibilities lead them to sidestep concerns with authenticity and originality, and to celebrate hybridity, pastiche, and parody. But at the same time, it is also clear that the balls go beyond parody at times, as we saw in the reconstruction of the inauguration of Kwame Nkrumah. In that moment, the quest for ‘realness’ went beyond the fashion world and the moneyed lifestyle to claim subaltern history as a source for contemporary creativity and cultural affirmation.

‘Realness’ on the ballroom floor can also be a survival strategy, preparing ball participants to project an image on the streets that will
prevent them from being ‘spooked’ for being gender- or sex-deviant. In related fashion, the support and solidarity of the houses further reinforces the protection the ball system affords to its members. Within the house, normative definitions of kinship are contested and refigured. The houses offer belonging and safety in numbers, but also a channel for immense creativity and cooperative effort in the production of a distinctive house style and reputation.

It is this creativity, I argue, that keeps drawing in new spectators and participants, leading me to conclude that rather than being a passing fad, the ball system will continue to exist well into the future. It is not the case, as has been supposed, that AIDS is “unraveling” the ball scene, although it is certainly a challenge to which the ball children have had to respond. Nor does it seem that the continuous pursuit of the next big thing has drained the ingenuity and excitement out of the balls. Balls are certainly oriented around being in fashion and knowing the latest styles, but these activities are conducted within a framework that provides continuity. That is to say, people grow out of the scene and older houses lose interest, but they are balanced by the entrance on the scene of new people and new houses eager to become legendary.

The cultural productions of the balls are themselves always in steady transformation: Pop, Dip and Spin evolves into Vogueing, which in turn evolves into Vogueing, the New Way. But the background of participants, in terms of their location in the American social system, has

---

remained fairly constant. The period of mass attention did not substantially alter conditions for most ball participants, nor did it commercialize the style in any permanent fashion. With the balls increasingly returning to locations in Harlem, after a period in the Village, it seems that the main lasting effect of the mass attention was a residue of bitterness and heightened suspicion towards outsiders.

At the outset of this thesis, I posed the question of cultural resistance, which leads me now to a final consideration of the function of ball culture as a ‘subcultural style’ whose transformations, in the words of Dick Hebdidge “go ‘against nature’, interrupting the process of normalization.”

As Hebdidge has argued:

... the challenge to hegemony which subcultures represent is not issued directly by them. Rather it is expressed obliquely, in style. The objections are lodged, the contradictions displayed (and, as we shall see, ‘magically resolved’) at the profoundly superficial level of appearances: that is, at the level of the sign.

For Hebdidge, this “challenge to hegemony” is constrained by the scripted reaction of the media and then the police to ‘spectacular subcultures.’ This constraint takes the form of a “continual process of recuperation” wherein (1) “subcultural signs” are converted into “mass-produced objects” and (2) dominant society redefines and labels the behavior of the ‘subculture’ as deviant through the mechanisms of “the police, the media, the


164 Hebdidge, 17.
judiciary.” I want, however, to query the usefulness of a view which fits the balls too simply into this script.

In Hebdidge’s view, the space for the cultural production of youth to be seen as oppositional is strictly limited by the processes of mainstream appropriation. Hebdidge insists that:

Youth cultural styles may begin by issuing symbolic challenges, but they must inevitably end by establishing new sets of conventions; by creating new commodities, new industries or rejuvenating old ones.

What is interesting about ball culture, however, is the way it has deviated from this pattern. In contrast to the confrontational public styles Hebdidge examined in his book, the balls’ stylistic resistance to hegemony seems rather to take the form of a claim upon certain cultural forms, such as high fashion, a claim that protests exclusion, but does not ask for simple assimilation. What could on the surface appear a mere aping of ‘mainstream’ culture is revealed, on a closer look, as a specific strategy of re-appropriation that celebrates the body as the site of the accumulation of social forces that must be struggled with from within, not without.

Unlike their straight counterparts in hip hop culture, the ball kids have not successfully produced “new commodities, new industries” that have fed in any reliable into the mainstream of America. Rather, they produced a brief, unstable moment of appropriation in which their specificities as gay and transvestite were partially hidden, consigned to what “everyone already knows,” a term which Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

165 ibid., 94.
166 ibid., 96.
and Michael Moon rightly identify as “the structuring strategy of a homophobic culture.”

Sedgwick and Moon go on to argue that our culture’s

... epistemological economy depends, not on a reserve force of labor, but on a reserve force of information always maintained in readiness to be presumed upon—through jokey allusion, through the semiotic paraphernalia of “sophistication”—and yet poised also in equal readiness to be disappeared at any moment, leaving a suppositionally virginal surface, unsullied by any admitted knowledge... This tendency to “disappeared at any moment” best characterizes the relationship between queer youth culture and the mass media. As I have argued, the visibility of the balls raised a set of questions about the inequities in our society that had to be contained through reliance on “sophistication” and a refusal to look to closely or carefully at what the balls were about.

The children, in turn, take up sophistication as their own defense against a world and an “epistemological economy” set up against them. They pour their energies into an irreducibly communal art, contesting boundaries between the self and others, between art and life, between audience and participant. The ball scene is a “Marathon Circuit” both because of the longevity implied in the first word, and because of the interconnectedness implied in the second. The balls are hard-wired into the contradictions of the advanced capitalist system, and the collective pleasures they provide, as well as the networks of empowered and

---

168 Ibid.
eroticized bodies they produce, speak eloquently to the continuance of possibility at the margins.
Sources Cited

Unpublished Documents


——. *The Idle Sheet II* (November 9, 1986).

——. *The Idle Sheet III* (Early 1987).

——. *The Idle Sheet IV* (June 21, 1987).

——. *The Idle Sheet V* (June 12, 1988).

——. *The Idle Sheet VII* (July 4, 1989).

——. *The Idle Sheet X* (June 27, 1990).


Invitations for:

The Alphabet Ball (July 3, 1993).

The Assasination Ball (August 7, 1994).

The Black Rose Ball (September 25th, 1994).

The Bounce Thru Ball (November 27, 1994).

The Collision Ball Part 1 (July 17, 1994).

The First Annual Grand Ball (September 19, 1993).

Haute Couture Madness (October 9, 1994).

Hector Xtravaganza's Transformation Ball (July 24, 1994).

The House of Aphrodite Greek Fantasy Ball (October 29, 1994).

The House of Ferre International Ball, Part 2 (November 5, 1994).

The House of LaBelle-Kobayashi Ball (July 23, 1994).

The House of Latex Ball (June 19, 1994).
The House of Valentino Upgrading the Image Ball (August 28, 1993).
The Winter Wonderland Ball (December 11, 1994).

Interviews
(All interviews were recorded and transcribed.)

Lantelme, Brian. (August 24, 1994).
Latex, Arbert. (June 9, 1994).
Latex, Torrance. (June 9, 1994).
Mendez, Juan. (June 17, 1994).
Xtravaganza, Hector. (June 24, 1994).

Books and Articles

Ash, Juliet and Liz Wilson, editors, Chic Thrills (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California, 1993).
Bersani, Leo, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” October (43) (Winter 1987), 197-222.
Bergman, David, editor, Camp Grounds (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1993)


Reed, J.D., “They’re Puting on the Vogue,” Time (May 22, 1989), 103.

Remafedi, Gary, Death by Denial: Studies of suicide in gay and lesbian teenagers (Boston: Alyson, 1994).


Rosenzweig, Roy, Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920 (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University, 1983).


