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GETTING LIFE IN TWO WORLDS: POWER AND PREVENTION IN THE NEW  
YORK CITY HOUSE BALL COMMUNITY

by

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And approved by

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Getting Life in Two Worlds: Power and Prevention in the New York City House Ball  
Community

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This dissertation project is an ethnographic study of the House Ballroom community in New York City. The House Ballroom community is a Black and Latino/a queer and transgender alternative kinship system and dance performance circuit. Specifically, it follows the lives of HIV prevention workers who are deeply embedded in House Ballroom social networks. Based on four years of anthropological fieldwork, I document the way that these community activists fashion meaningful lives in the meeting point between the Ballroom world and the HIV prevention not-for-profit organizations in New York City. It is also an ethnography of the productive failure of the gay and lesbian movement's inability to include working class Black and Latino/a queer communities in developing a political infrastructure to combat HIV/AIDS in New York City. My informants have helped to develop an alternative civil and political infrastructure by combining material and symbolic resources found in the HIV prevention not-for-profit

organizations and the House Ballroom community. This ethnography documents and analyzes the lives that these House Ballroom prevention activists have forged and the work of political love that animates their professional and Ballroom communities.



## Acknowledgements

The authorial conceit implicit in Western literary and social scientific canons individuates what are always already collective social products: texts. This ethnographic text is a relentlessly collective act of materialization. Therefore, I have many debts to my fellow co-workers in the vineyard of the word and the deed that I must recognize not only because ethical considerations compel me, but also for the sheer pleasure of recognizing the motley communities that have loved this dissertation into existence.

First and foremost, I must recognize my dissertation committee whose heroic patience and intellectual rigor challenged me to take myself as seriously as I took my research subjects. Louisa Schein, my committee chair, has been a mentor par excellence. Her brilliance, invariable faith in my project, and her willingness to see me as a fellow interlocutor in array of intellectual efforts opened up the space for me to undertake this project in my rather meandering and idiosyncratic mode of proceeding. Louisa saved this project from oblivion on many occasions --- even when I thought that oblivion might be a proper fate for this effort. I will never forget those moments: they are true gifts of the Spirit. For these multiple acts of generosity, she remains the “mother” of my academic house --- whether she wants to be or not.

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the right moment. I indebted to him for fulfilling this role in my research process and write up period. I am deeply gratified to call him the “father” of my academic house.

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Carlos U. Decena was the last person to join my committee, but his late arrival in no way attenuated his enormous contributions to this project as an interdisciplinary scholar, an ethnographer of queer Dominicans in the United States, and a fellow HIV/AIDS community researcher. Carlos is one of the sharpest minds I have encountered and his enthusiasm for really thinking through a problem is simply infectious in a very productive way. Carlos is one of my favorite persons to “think with” (to echo Levi-Strauss a bit) and he has quickly become a great friend and comrade as well. Quite simply, he has been a luminous presence in my thinking and writing. I have been lucky beyond reason to have had the good fortune to have assembled such a committee and look forward to repaying their efforts in lasting friendship, admiration, and a life of engaged scholarly and community research.

Throughout my years as a graduate student in New Brunswick, I had the privilege of being formed by a hosts of scholars whose thoughts and perspectives inform the better insights found in this dissertation. I can only list them briefly here, but they should know my true gratitude for their ideas and great affection for them as persons and intellectuals. In the Anthropology Department, besides the members in my committee who are anthropologists, I have the following two persons to thank: Dorothy Hodgson and Michael Moffat. Outside the department, I am deeply indebted to the following persons for their instruction and guidance: Cheryl Clarke, Ed Cohen, Bruce Robbins, Nancy Hartsock, Leela Fernandes, Ben Sifuentes-Jauregui, Neil Smith, Abena Busia, and David Eng. I have to make special note of Caridad Souza who opened up the world of feminist of color thinking and practice for me and has remained a true friend and fellow-traveler in the ways of discerning the world-making “agape” at the center of the logos. Ashé, my sister, ashé.

During my time in New Brunswick, I had the opportunity of teaching a number of years in the Department of Latino and Hispanic Caribbean Studies first as a lecturer and later as a full-time instructor. Latino Studies really became my second home and I am deeply indebted to the professional formation process that it afforded me. I must thank Aldo Lauria Santiago, the Chair, for his sage advice in negotiating the challenges of graduate school and his culturally appropriate and constant admonitions to me that getting the PhD was only a “union card” and that “I should get on with it already.” Aldo has transformed Latino Studies at Rutgers and many students and faculty will benefit in the years to come from his hard work and clear-sighted leadership capabilities. I was glad to be a witness to this process. My colleagues at Latino studies were a great interlocutors



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Anyone who knows me well knows that I am embedded deeply in kinship networks of various kinds. I have been nourished and sustained by all my kin throughout my course work, field research, and writing process. My parents, Luis. A. Rivera Caratini and Mercedes Rivera Morales have loved me despite not quite understanding why I had to spend so much time in school and what all that research I was doing had to do with making a living. My folks are factory people and those experiences have formed my own

personal and political commitments. They taught me early and well that no one lives or dies alone in this world and that we all best get to the business of being together before things really falls apart. Their ethical clarity, community orientation, and willingness to always add another one of my friends or lovers into “la familia” has allowed me to grow and be generous with my time, friendship, and love. I am very glad to be their son and to continue these traditions into the future.

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My brother Louis A. Rivera and his life-long companion, Carmen Rivera Colón, have given me two marvelous nieces and a wonderful nephew. I am grateful to them for this. Jasmine Rivera (who has made me a dotting great-uncle with the birth my beloved great-nephew Jacob Isaiah Miranda Rivera), Tiffany Rivera, and Keith Rivera are wonderful young people who tolerate their crazy uncle’s antics with humor and grace and do not seem to mind too much my lectures on the benefits of socialism and anarchism every so often. May you make your lives and worlds safe for love.

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helped us all out in times of crisis. I thank all of these folks for accompanying me along the way.

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during the seminar. These efforts became one of the chapters of this dissertation. I only hope that this dissertation is worthy of their practices of intellectual diligence and social engagement.

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that I would bring good things into the world through my research and activism. His gifts of love and faith will reverberate in my life all my days. How good it is when lovers become friends and then indispensable kin. Jason was and is one of the greatest blessings of my life.

This dissertation is dedicated to my best friend, the late Peter M. Cicchino (1960-2000). Peter was a working class Italian-Irish gay man who grew up in the same grey industrial cities in Northern New Jersey that saw me come into the world. We met when we were both young Jesuits in the thrall of Latin American liberation theology and its implications for North American Christians. Eventually, we both wisely abandoned the Jesuits, but not our respective commitments to social justice. Peter went on to the Harvard Law School and I went to do community work in the South Bronx. After Harvard, Peter devoted his life to founding the first LGBT youth legal clinic in New York City and to teaching law at American University. Peter's life was claimed by the other medical scourge of Post-World War II America, cancer. Peter possessed the best mind I have ever encountered and he had a generous heart that was as deep and as consequential as his genius. His death was his last act of pedagogy and care. In his dying, he taught me what the love of knowledge and the desire to will the good for the other can mean when placed at the service of an ethical closure to a life well-lived. I have lived in the wake of that final act of Peter's love all the days that have followed. This work is dedicated to his memory since it, too, is an act of knowledge and love and a small down payment on the type of revolutionary project that informed Peter's life: to make the world safe for human love. Sleep well, my comrade and friend, the struggle continues. *Ad maiorem Dei gloriam.*

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## Chapter One: Art, Love, and Spirit

### Getting to the Field

My first job as a qualitative research evaluator was at Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) and my assignment was to review a set of over fifty interviews that asked members of the New York City House Ballroom community about their sexual experiences. The protocol included questions on their first sexual encounter, their fantasy sexual experience, their most recent sexual activity, unprotected anal and vaginal sex, and any unwanted or forced sexual encounters. The interview schedule was designed to elicit a range of meaning sets about various types of sexual experiences that Ballroom community members would report. The guiding idea was that these narratives would lead to an understanding of rituals and concepts that might make a Ball member more likely to engage in unprotected sex. The qualitative nature of the research was an attempt to get beyond simply behaviors and reveal the cultural understandings that would allow the prevention staff at GMHC to fashion HIV interventions that would produce declining rates of infection and transmission for their target population. This focus on the House Ball community was prompted by the findings from a 1998 Centers for Disease Control's (CDC) tuberculosis outbreak investigation amongst a network of Black and Latino men who have sex with men (MSM)<sup>1</sup> and transgender women who were part of the Ballroom

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<sup>1</sup> Men who have sex with men or MSM is an epidemiological category which emerged to delink sexual practices from sexual identity categories like gay or bisexual. Public health researchers and community health practitioners have argued that accurate data collection and effective health interventions are hampered if target populations are asked to embrace identity categories that some may perceive as stigmatizing and/or comprising overriding ethnoracial identifications (Seidman 2002). The limits of the uses of MSM have been subject to extensive debate recently amongst both public health researchers and practitioners (Young and Meyer 2005).

scene (Sterling 2000:317-320). The rapidity of the outbreak and its geographical spread across urban population centers on the East Coast worried the CDC and created the conditions for the development of a study of the House Ballroom scene in New York City that would use both quantitative and qualitative research methods.

Although in the early 1990's, I worked as a phone counselor for a year at New York City's Department of Health AIDS Hotline, it was my coming out as a queer-identified Nuyorican man that facilitated my incorporation into working and middle class queer and transgender Black and Latino/a activist, social, and community based professional circles, in addition to, my status as an ethnographer-in-training created the conditions for my being hired at GMHC in the spring of 2000. My experiences working as a research evaluator for the House of Latex (HOL) project and their relevance for my ethnographic work are explored in greater depth in Chapter Three of this dissertation. Suffice it to say that the work I did during that time introduced me to the House Ball community and the preventionists that worked with New York City's houses.

I have described the role of serendipity in creating opportunities for my ethnographic research in Chapter Three. However, my next involvement in the world of HIV prevention organizations was much more than a case of felicitous serendipity. My prior involvement as a researcher with the House of Latex project and the eventual circulation of the information that I was doing my dissertation on the New York City Ballroom community as well as my reputation as someone interested in community organizing and activism through the social networks that I have described above made me the "ideal person" to become an ethnographer and community trainer for a project

that emerged in response to the CDC's desire to know more about the scene's risk behaviors and social networks. The project that eventually made this institutional desire into a reality was modeled partially on the methods used during two multi-city seroprevalence and behavioral studies of young MSM done in the late 1990's, which documented the rising rates of infection among young men of color as well as transgender women of color as well (Koblin, Torian, Guilin et al., 2000: 1793-1800). The methods of the Young Men's Survey (YMS) emphasized the need to use "subculturally specific" materials, language, and personnel in reaching young MSM of color and transgender women of color to achieve the kind of recruitment and retention rates for the study that would ensure an accurate epidemiological picture of the populations that were most at risk for infection and transmission of the HIV virus.

Apparently, I was the kind of "subculturally specific" ethnographer and trainer the team that was implementing the project wanted to hire. I was queer identified, familiar with the New York City Ball scene through my work at GMHC, Latino, had a known history of being involved in community organizing around affordable housing and environmental racism issues in the South Bronx, and someone who had been trained at the graduate level in ethnographic research methods. Unbeknownst to me, a number of GMHC staff members passed on my name and contact information to the New York City Department of Health employee in charge of the program and the two Columbia University public health researchers with whom he was collaborating. In April 2002, I received an e-mail and phone call from one of the researchers from the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University who was helping to hire staff asking about my availability for a meeting at GMHC during which we would discuss my joining the

project as an ethnographer and community activism and organizing teacher. I responded via e-mail that I thought that there were plenty of people on GMHC's staff that could fulfill this role and that it would make more sense to use someone like Arbert Latex, the mother of the House of Latex, than to hire someone from outside the organization.

Although I did believe that it would make sense to do what I suggested, I also had no desire to work at GMHC given the Byzantine racial and class politics that I had been witness to when I had worked there as a research evaluator for the HOL project. Quite simply, I was averse to taking on that set of intramural racial and class dynamics again as well as what seemed to me at the time a considerable undertaking of research and training. I also thought that it would take time away from a dissertation project that remained largely in abeyance. The Columbia researchers persisted with e-mails and phone calls to the point that I suggested another graduate student who was thinking of doing an ethnographic project amongst Black MSM in New York City as an alternate job candidate. This evasive tactic on my part did not work either. Finally, I agreed to meet with the team to discuss the project and see what role I could play in this process.

Our first meeting was a bit off-putting since the enormity of what was being proposed for the project did not seem at all feasible to me. In essence, the team proposed to do a large seroprevalence and behavioral study of the New York City Ballroom with over 500 research subjects, conduct an ethnographic study of two house families, and train over an 18 month time period 31 Black and Latino/a queer and transgender HIV/AIDS preventionists from eight different collaborating HIV/AIDS prevention and intervention agencies to create, implement, and evaluate "community level interventions"

that would help to decrease the rate of HIV infection and transmission amongst Black and Latino MSM and transgender women of color.<sup>2</sup> Throughout this first meeting, it was not clear to me the reasons why all these projects had to be undertaken concurrently. Nonetheless, as our discussion deepened, it became obvious that the goal of this effort was to train a whole new cadre of young HIV/AIDS preventionist from the communities most affected by the pandemic who would look to develop interventions that would be primarily structural and not behavioral in nature and would lead to political mobilizations that effect change on a societal level. During that meeting, I came to sense that the people who had developed the program felt that the present array of community based organizations that had access to New York City's young Black and Latino MSM and transgender women of color needed to break out of their routines of work and that this program would create a cadre of young preventionists who would be trained and willing to create new interventions that would change the institutional status quo both in the agencies and the society at large.

Once I understood the broader context in which this program had emerged, the need for these projects to run concurrently became more palpable and even wisely strategic. The CDC's interest in both young Black and Latino MSM as well as Black and Latina transgender women and its bureaucratic need to have accurate epidemiological data as a tool to request more economic resources from the federal government for its programs created an institutional and discursive space to make an argument for a

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<sup>2</sup> In the end, the program dropped the qualitative component of what came to be known as the New York City House Ball Study, but the seroprevalence and behavioral study as well as the training component were undertaken and completed.

seroprevalence study of the House Ballroom scene and to use that study as a rationale for creating a groundbreaking capacity building HIV/AIDS frontline worker training program that would effect programmatic and societal change in New York City.

There were a number of reasons why the CDC funded this effort. New York City was and remains the epicenter of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in the United States. The House Ball community in New York City was made up of the very populations that are of most concern for the CDC in terms of the epidemic's present and future profile. Finally, the transgender of color population remained a largely understudied group. The hope was that a CDC funded study of the House Ball community in New York City would eventually lead to a study of transgender communities in the United States as well.

The team thought that the House Ball Study (or HBS as they called it) would lead to large CDC sponsored transgender seroprevalence and behavioral study that would provide the evidence for expanding programs targeted at this community. The team's logic was that since local and state-wide initiatives around HIV/AIDS prevention and intervention were largely products of priorities set by the CDC, both their HBS study and what they imagined as a future transgender study would create opportunities for the interventions they thought necessary to confront and stem the pandemic. In essence, the team used the HBS study to fund what it thought was the most important part of their program, the worker-training component. As they laid out their rationales for structuring their program the way they ultimately did, it occurred to me that the CDC had another interest in funding this project: if the program did in fact train frontline workers to create, implement, and evaluate innovative community level interventions that led to lower HIV

infection and transmission rates, then the CDC would get the benefits of labor rationalization. The CDC would get fewer, but better trained and slightly better paid, frontline workers to do what was formerly done by a number of preventionists --- as productivity increased, the actual labor force could decrease.

After giving it some thought, I decided to take the position for a number of important reasons. First, I would be able to teach a population of students that were close to my own personal, communal, and political affiliations and have some influence on the next generation of frontline HIV preventionists of color in New York City. Second, I might be able to use some of the data collected during the ethnographic phase of the research of the House Ball community for my dissertation project. Third, I concurred with the team that without a large seroprevalence study of the transgender community of color in New York City, the CDC would not provide resources for programs that afford social and economic opportunities (e.g., hiring community members as staff for new intervention programs) for the community and that the HBS study was a precondition for the transgender study to come into being. Finally, I would be paid a very good salary either as a full-time employee or part-time consultant to the project since all the salaries that were allotted for the program were higher than usual. This was a conscious effort by the project's executive team to put pressure on the collaborating community organizations to raise standards and wages across the board for their frontline staff, not just those who were being trained by what would come to be known as the Technology

Exchange and Capacity-Building for Community Health program or, more simply, the TEACH program.<sup>3</sup>

The TEACH program and my participation in it during an 18 month period in 2002-2003 created the conditions that produced this dissertation project. This dissertation is an ethnographic study of Black and Latino/a HIV/AIDS preventionists in New York City at the beginning of the twenty-first century who are connected personally and/or professionally to the House Ball community and who must articulate personal and professional lives in the wake of a pandemic that is growing amongst the communities that they come from and have been trained to serve. In a sense, it is an ethnography of the failure of the gay and lesbian liberation movement to include working class people of color in its development of a civil and political infrastructure. Those infrastructures were built in New York City by queer Black and Latino/a activists and communities as resources from multiple private and public institutions were made available to fight

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<sup>3</sup> One of the interesting paradoxes of the TEACH program was that it aimed to create new interventions in the field of HIV/AIDS prevention amongst Black and Latino MSM and transgender women of color in New York City and was an intervention in its own right. The fact that the TEACH executive and management team hired many trainees who were either Ballroom community members or persons socially connected to these networks was, in a sense, already an expansion of resources available to the Ball scene. Further, the inclusion of Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health as one of the institutions that accredited the trainees or "interns" as a "Community Health Specialist" or "CHS" at the end of the program meant that many of the graduates would have a credential from an elite academic institution they could include in their resumes in future job searches or if they decided to pursue undergraduate degrees. Moreover, after their training period, the newly-minted "Community Health Specialists" would be sent to one of the agencies that initially chose them as candidates for training. In the long run, the fact that they would be paid well, relative to their level of formal education, and have excellent health benefits for at least three years may have been the most important TEACH intervention. A number of the TEACH interns were living with HIV and a few were transgender or gender flexible. These intern groups within TEACH would benefit enormously from the economic stability and healthcare that their jobs would provide. The TEACH program also hired staff that were almost all Latino/a or Black MSM or transgender women. Many of the staff were also either former Ballroom members or embedded socially in those networks.



HIV/AIDS. The people I came to know and do research amongst forged lives between the cultural and social spaces of the Ballroom and the community-based organizations. In the parlance of the House Ball scene, they learned to “get and give life” (i.e., to receive and to offer affirmation and love) between two worlds. This ethnography is about the productivity of the strategic failure of the gay and lesbian movement as it traversed its liberationist and mainstream phases and the subjectivities and lives that those who were excluded seized as funding opened up for intervention, activism, and organizing in working class Black and Latino/a queer and transgender communities.<sup>4</sup>

This is not an exhaustive anthropological study of the New York City House Ball community, but rather an accounting of lives that are embedded in Ballroom networks, but also enmeshed in the institutional and professional contexts that have emerged to address the HIV/AIDS epidemic amongst communities of color. This project is an ethnographically based effort to describe and analyze the subjectivities that are produced at the meeting places of Ballroom cultures and the ideological-institutional landscape created by the community-based organizations that are charged with combating the epidemic. Although both the Ballroom and the organizations are partially described in this project, my research interests are centered on how my subjects use and refashion the material and ideological resources that are produced through these conjunctures of the Ballroom and the community organizations to make their own lives meaningful and ethically accountable to broader networks than the Ballroom or the community organizations can encompass.

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<sup>4</sup> I am beholden to Carlos U. Decena for this formulation of my project that became clear to me at his insistent and insightful promptings.

Although a number of houses and organizations are discussed in the chapters that follow, no one community organization or Ball family is the focus of my research project here. Rather, what is an important focus here is the possibility for social individuality or personhood as an affective resource and ideological effect produced under the duress of not only the HIV/AIDS epidemic as it ravages Black and Latino/a communities, but the social subordination and spatial segregation that the racial project of gentrification enacts as a delimiting force subtending working class queer and transgender lives of color in New York City. Despite the fact that most of my informants are either second or third generation Puerto Ricans/Nuyoricans, Dominicans or both, this project is not easily described as a Latino/a ethnography since Ball cultures do crosscut both African-American and second and third generation Latino/a cultures in New York City and none of my informants are able to make their own lives intelligible without references to the strong African-American cultural currents that inhere in House Ball families and circuits. Moreover, many Latino/a ethnographies remain, at least to my mind, in a melancholic and agonistic relationship to the foreclosed historical possibilities for political economic and/or nationalist recuperation. I would argue that my Latino/a Ballroom informants remain outside this sphere of recuperative desire and have other melancholic and agonistic conundrums. Although all of my informants have direct and indirect personal and professional stakes in the fight against HIV/AIDS in their varying communities, the narratives and contexts described herein are not primarily designed to produce insights that, in all probability, would be useful in applied or policy-oriented ethnographies of HIV/AIDS in the United States.

This is a queer of color ethnography in a number of senses: 1) it presupposes racialized sexualities/genders as starting points for describing and analyzing the institutional and discursive matrixes that constitute social life under capitalist modes of accumulation and political governance in the contemporary United States; 2) it describes non-normative gender and sexual cultures within communities of color in tandem with other non-normative affective/social constellations like female-headed households and multi-generational rearing arrangements; and 3) it uses ethnographic writing methods as tools to rework the limited temporalities and epistemologies that narrow constructions of disciplinary legibility engender (Bailey 2005, Ferguson 2004, Manalansan 2004). Above all else, this project is a collection of personal stories or narratives constructed via the social scientific and literary craft of ethnography. These stories are a form of textual witnessing by this ethnographer to the complexities, limits, and transformations immanent to the subjectivities of my informants and the worlds that reproduce and determine their ways of being on a daily basis.

The theme of the production of subjectivities as they traverse multiple sites of the Ballroom social networks, community-based organizations, the spaces of Black and Latino/a neighborhoods, and the variegated psychic and social landscapes of kinship in its multiple and intersecting iterations really came to me, albeit in a rather inchoate form, during a pilot focus group of the TEACH trainees that the research team convoked. At the time, our idea was to test relevant domains and questions for the protocol that would eventually be used in the seroprevalence and behavioral study of New York City's House Ball community (Murrill, Liu, Guilin, Rivera Colón, Dean, Buckley, Sanchez, Finlayson, and Torian 2008: 1074-1080; hereafter, Murrill et al 2008). To that end, the research

team decided to have the trainees act as expert indigenous informants and allow them to tell us what might make sense both as questions and general domains of inquiry in our efforts to learn more about the Ball community. We justified the interns' participation in this pilot focus group as a pedagogical exercise that would help refine their formative research skills when they were developing ideas for innovative interventions in their future work as interventionists and as frontline community researchers.

During the first weeks of the "TEACH process", as the interns came to call the program, it became clear to the staff that the interns were not terribly impressed by some of the extensive trainings they were being offered. In fact, many outside trainers found the groups' self-assured style and rhetorical militancy quite intimidating. The TEACH interns had grown up with, around, and in the HIV/AIDS epidemic and felt largely that the intervention methods aimed at communities of color in general and queer and transgender networks within that broader milieu in particular were culturally incompetent and roundly ineffective. In light of these experiences, the research team decided to make the central question of the pilot focus group something the interns would be excited to answer: why are prevention and intervention efforts so ineffective when it comes to the people in the Ballroom community and Black and Latino/a people in general? They were indeed quite excited to make their opinions known on this question. After a long and, at times, dramatic conversation, the group came up with a fairly consistent answer to the question we had posed. The TEACH interns told us that prevention efforts were not working because they failed to address three central areas in the lives of Black and Latino/a people in New York City no matter how they might define their sexual orientations or gender expressions. Prevention messages and efforts always talked about

sex and never love. They never addressed creativity or art. Finally, they never focused on people's spirituality.

Art, love, and spirit<sup>5</sup>: I wondered after the pilot focus group whether Hegel had been somehow channeled by the interns during the course of our conversation. It struck me on further reflection that maybe Marx was the guardian ancestral spirit of this pilot focus group since all the realms the interns identified as those that HIV prevention messages and interventions ignored were those very ones that had the possibility, albeit in a rather beleaguered fashion, of contesting the alienation that he saw as one of the organizing principles of both economic and social life in capitalist societies (Ollman 1977). Love especially stuck in my mind in the weeks, months, and years that would follow the pilot focus group that proved seminal to this project. However, as I followed my informants through their personal and professional lives in the field doing participant observation, during formal and informal interviews many of which were recorded in my field notes or electronically, at community events, social events like parties, dinners, bar nights, and in endless phone conversations that usually coincided with the times of day and night that free minutes were available to them, I came to realize that whatever in their lives could align with such complicated and contradiction-laden notions such as art, love, and spirit was deeply embedded in their daily lives of work, friendship, family, and place. Moreover, the social materials that produced these networks and the notions that

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<sup>5</sup> I use the term "spirit" here quite deliberately since the religious traditions that my informants were raised in are replete with spirit possession traditions that span Latino/a Pentecostalism, Roman Catholic saint cults, New World African religious practices like Santeria, Vodoun, and Candomble, and New Age spiritual concepts and practices. The use of spirit is broader than terms like "God", "gods", or "religion" and more in synch with the variety of inflections of spirituality that were mentioned in the pilot focus group under discussion here and my own informants' cosmologies and vernacular theologies (Cruz 2005).

inhabited and, in a certain sense, haunted them were found in the nodal points where the institutional, personal, and social forces in their lives interarticulated. It was this process of collecting data and staying with my informants over years that led me to the organizing theme of this dissertation project: how my informants used the material and symbolic resources found at these nodal points or institutional-discursive conjunctures to make meaningful and accountable lives. It is this overlapping space between the Ballroom and the organizations where my informants' lives are reformatted for creative, loving, and even spiritual ends.

### The Empirical Context

Although there is a modest cultural studies focused scholarly literature on the House Ball community and more limited resources for developing a history of the scene, there are almost no empirical data on the Ballroom families and circuits. In 2004, Murrill and his colleagues undertook a seroprevalence and behavioral study of New York City's House Ball community and published their findings in the *American Journal of Public Health* in 2008 (Murrill et al. 2008).<sup>6</sup> This study is still the only published seroprevalence and behavioral study of the House Ball community in the United States. From June 1 2004 to December 31 2004 in New York City, Murrill and his colleagues conducted behavioral interviews and HIV testing for a final sample of 504 House Ball community

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<sup>6</sup> I am in the odd position of citing and using an article I co-authored as a resource for my own dissertation project. My criticisms of this article are an attempt at pointing toward what empirical research on the Ballroom community could be if both qualitative and descriptive methods were used in a more thorough manner. These criticisms are in no way to be construed as a critique of the professionalism, diligence, and/or good will of my colleagues who put this paper together. The very existence of this paper is proof of their concern that the community and its advocates have the necessary weapons available to them when making arguments for more resources from government and private funding entities.

members. Murrill and his colleagues defined the Ball community in the following manner:

“A “house” is a collective of people, frequently gay or transgender Black and Latino youth, who share a communal lifestyle. A “ball” is a social event in which houses and individuals engage in dance and performance competitions. The network of individuals who are members of houses or socially connected to house members is referred to in this study as the house ball community. The house ball community is rooted in Black traditions of communal social support in response to economic and social exclusion. It functions as a kinship system that is organized to meet the needs of its members for social solidarity and mentoring” (Murrill et al. 2008: 1074).<sup>7</sup>

Murrill and his colleagues found that their sample (N = 504) of the New York House Ball community was overwhelmingly male-identified (67%) and with the remainder more or less equally female-identified (14%) and transgender-identified (18%) with transgender-identified women having a larger numerical presence (MTF = 76, FTM = 16). These numbers confirm what has been observed ethnographically: the House Ball community is predominantly a gay-identified or bisexual-identified male scene and that transgender-identified women and “biological” women have a much weaker numerical and social weight in the scene (Bailey 2005, McCarthy Brown 2001). The sample was 55% Black-identified and 40% Latino/a-identified. The sample subjects who identified as

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<sup>7</sup> Clearly, this definition is overly economical from an ethnographic perspective. The New York House Ball community is rooted in both Puerto Rican/Nuyorican and second and third generation Dominican/Latino/a traditions as well as Black traditions. A better and more historically grounded iteration of this definition would locate the House Ball community within New World African diasporic traditions of kinship and community building. Further, although the New York City House Ball community has many young people in its kinship and social networks, it has many young adults and older adults as well. The fact that Murrill and his colleagues found the mean age of their subjects to be 24 years is indicative of this reality. Moreover, the Ball community is a Black and Latino/a lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community and, therefore, has a greater sexual and gender diversity than allowed for in the article’s definition. I think future quantitative and behavioral studies of the Ball scene will attend to these gaps in this first effort.

Latino/a overwhelmingly reported being Puerto Rican (58%) and Dominican (25%). Again, these numbers confirmed what I have observed in my own participant observation over the years I have been in the field doing research on the New York City Ball community. Nonetheless, I would argue based on my own field research that Murrill and his colleagues probably oversampled for Latinos/as when collecting their data and that the overall numerical presence of Latinos/as is probably closer to something on the order of 30% to 35% in New York City scene.<sup>8</sup> Whatever the case, the study confirms what has been known through other sources of information: along with the predominant African-American presence, the Ball community in New York City has a strong Puerto Rican and Dominican component and this is a result, I would contend, of shared living spaces as well as social and sexual networks amongst all these groups. It is these shared spaces that led to the development of New York City's contemporary House Ball community in the first place.

In terms of age, Murrill and his colleagues reported that 29% (n = 147) of their sample was between the ages of 15-19 years old and 53% (n = 266) of their sample was between the ages of 20-29 years old. Thus, over 80% of their sample was between the ages of 15-29 years old. Their sample reflected the preponderance of teenagers and young adults in New York City's House Ball community. Although only 5 % (n = 27) of their

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<sup>8</sup> There are some fairly complicated methodological issues around the venue or event sampling that were used for this study. Murrill and his colleagues used sampling methods that were developed for the CDC's YMS studies, but adapted these methods to the House Ball community in New York City (MacKellar, Valleroy, Karen et al. 1996: 139-144). It still is not clear what led to what I contend was an oversampling of Latinos/as in this study and my only hypothesis is that there were sampling events at atypical balls, like the House of Latex ball, where there would be a more variegated population than is usual in the Ball circuit.



sample reported being 40 years old or older, my own ethnographic research indicates that the presence of people 40 years old and older is much more significant both numerically and socially than Murrill and his colleagues reported. In terms of sexual identity, 53% (n = 265) of the sample reported being gay-identified, 17% (n = 89) of the sample reported being bisexual-identified, 13% (n = 64) reported being heterosexual or straight-identified, and 10% (n = 51) of the sample reported being lesbian-identified. Thus, the study confirmed my ethnographic observations that the New York City House Ball community is predominantly gay and bisexual-identified with a significant presence of lesbian and straight-identified members as well.

This seroprevalence and behavioral study of the New York City House Ballroom community also reported two very significant sets of demographic data. Murrill et al. indicate that 45% (n = 227) of their sample reported making less than \$10,000 per year and that 18% (n = 92) reported making between \$10,000 and \$19,999 per year. Thus, over 60% of their sample was living on less than \$20,000 per year in the New York City metropolitan area. Most study participants reported living in Manhattan, Brooklyn, or the Bronx. Thus, many of them would have to negotiate living in one of the most expensive cities in the country on very limited incomes. Moreover, Murrill and his colleagues reported that 47% (n = 282) of their sample were living with their parents or other relatives. These two pieces of information again confirm my own research findings that many House Ball community members live under significant economic duress and reside with relatives and, in a number of cases, multi-generational domestic situations. This set of data undermine the contention found in much of the cultural studies literature on Ball culture that Ball members in New York City are somehow not deeply embedded in

kinship networks of origin. My own research indicates that Ball members in the New York City scene are deeply embedded in both systems of kinship and, at times, those networks overlap socially. The first ethnography of queer kinship in United States had a largely White sample that was based in the San Francisco Bay Area and failed to adequately address the complementary or, at times, overlapping natures of queer kinship and kin of origin networks for working class people of color communities that make up my own sample (Weston 1997).

The study also gives evidence for the other kinds of stressors House Ball members in the sample have to contend with on a daily basis: “More than 60% of participants reported having experienced at least 1 stressful life event during the previous 12 months. The most commonly reported stressful events were a friend’s death (26%), an acquaintance’s AIDS-related death (20%), being the victim of a robbery (19%), a family member’s accident or illness (19%), being arrested (14%), and job loss (12%)” (Murrill et al. 2008:1077). Clearly, the New York City House Ball community has members who are dealing with very difficult economic, emotional, and social challenges. These empirical data provide a deeper contextualization for my argument in Chapter Three that the Ballroom members constitute a “surviving community” that lives under the “assumption of death” as a material and social force. 17% of the study sample tested positive for HIV and 73% of those who tested positive did not know that they were HIV positive. Obviously, Murrill and his colleagues have provided evidence for a community that is well-acquainted with physical and social problems as well as personal, interpersonal, and social trauma. New York City’s House Ballroom community’s ability not only to survive, but also to grow and thrive despite the problems it must negotiate in

the short and long run indicates the emotional and social resources that are generated within Ball kin and social networks as well as the immense reservoir of resilience that pushes the community forward.

Murrill and his colleagues write about the limitations of their study: “This study had several limitations. Our findings may not generalize to the house ball community outside New York City or to the larger MSM and transgender communities within the city” (Murrill et al. 2008:1079). Despite these problems of generalizing their findings to the Ball scene beyond the New York City area or to wider scales of sexual and gender minority communities, this first behavioral and epidemiological description of the New York City community provides an empirical baseline from which future qualitative and quantitative investigations can measure their own successes and failures in capturing a community very much on the move.

### Historical Context

Historian Craig Steven Wilder has argued in his study of Black male voluntary associations and mutual aid societies in New York City from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century until the first few decades after the Civil War that the “African-American community has its basis in collectivism: a behavioral and rhetorical tendency to privilege the group over the individual ... Africans entered the Americas equipped with intellectual traditions and sociological models that facilitated a communitarian response to oppression” (Wilder 2001:3). The House Ball community is best understood as one of the inheritors of this African-American tradition of responding to economic and social exclusion through

communal modes of building social support and enhancing chances for individual and collective opportunity (Stack 1974).

In New York City, the Ball community is also an inheritor of a Black gay world that is described in the writings of historians Eric Garber and George Chauncey (Garber in Duberman et al. 1989:318-331, Chauncey 1994). The Harlem of the 1920's and 30's, according to Chauncey and Garber, was a Mecca of Black queer culture and a site of popular "Faerie Balls" that towards the end of the 1930's registered attendance in the thousands. Although the Harlem Balls were historically related to the tradition of masquerade balls of nineteenth century New York City, Chauncey contends that the gay appropriation of the masquerade balls did not occur until the early decades of the twentieth century. Chauncey argues that the Harlem Balls were events where gender and sexual norms were challenged and reworked and that many were interracial in participation if not planning.

In what precise manner the contemporary Ball community is a continuation of this prior tradition is still a matter for serious historical investigation.<sup>9</sup> Cunningham

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<sup>9</sup> Dance ethnographer and House Ball researcher Jonathan David Jackson has been doing qualitative research on the scene since the late 1980's and has over 50 transcribed audio taped ethnographic interviews of key founders and early pioneers of the scene. Of the four persons who do research on the contemporary House Ball community (i.e., Marlon Bailey, Frank Leon Roberts, Jonathan David Jackson, and this present writer), Jackson has spent the longest time in the field and has the most command of the dance culture that the scene has generated (Jackson 2002: 26-42). He was close to key House Ball figures in the 1980's including Avis Pendavis, Crystal LaBeija, Pepper LaBeija (a key figure in Jennie Livingston's documentary on the House Ball scene in New York City in the late 1980's), and Eric Christian Bazaar (the most well-versed indigenous historian of Ballroom cultures according to one of my key informants) with whom he grew up in Washington DC. All these figures are now deceased. Consequently, Jackson is the best positioned Ball researcher to write the early history of the contemporary House Ball scene and is working on a project that will use his large collection of interviews as data. This work should be ready for publication by 2010 or 2011 (Jonathan David Jackson to the author. Personal communication: 13 July 2008).

argues that the contemporary Houses started in the 1960's when Black gay men organized their own balls in Harlem as an alternative to drag themed fashion shows that were controlled by White gay men in gay bars and clubs downtown (Cunningham 1998: 175-195). According to Cunningham, the founders of what would become the modern houses were responding to the racism they experienced at the hands of White gay male judges in the downtown fashion show competitions. He further states that the term Houses was coined by Crystal La Beija in 1977<sup>10</sup> as a marketing device to give the balls the aesthetic and cultural cache associated with the large fashion houses of Paris and Milan. The fact that the first House of the contemporary Ballroom community is the House of La Beija, an African-American rearticulation of the Spanish word for beautiful woman (i.e., "la bella"), points to the shared cultural, social, and spatial dynamics that typified neighborhood life in New York City Blacks and Puerto Ricans in the 1960's and 1970's. He also maintains that the House of Xtravaganza, the first predominantly Latino/a House, was founded by Angie Xtravaganza in the early 1980's. Cunningham seems to be relying on interviews he conducted for his essay as sources for his narrative. Although Cunningham's account offers a plausible origin story for the contemporary balls associated with the Houses, it does not offer any explanation for the development of these "Houses" into alternative families as such.

In his book on Juanito Xtravaganza, Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé writes about the history of the House of Xtravaganza and this particular connection between Blacks and Puerto Ricans/Nuyoricans/Latinos/as building the foundations for the contemporary

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<sup>10</sup> That Crystal LaBeija is the first founder of a house is a contention that was repeated consistently to me by many of my informants and all my informants told me that the Ball circuit and families were first developed in New York City.

families and circuit: “This development, one could say, might be seen as part of a long and creative cultural interaction (and competition) between Puerto Ricans/Latinos and blacks in mixed and contiguous neighborhoods such as Harlem, El Barrio, and the South Bronx, and in hang outs such as the Christopher Street piers, which had manifested itself in El Barrio, for instance, in the Black and Latino lesbian and gay dance parties held in the abandoned lofts along Second and Third Avenues between 116<sup>th</sup> and 125<sup>th</sup> streets throughout the 1960’s” (Cruz-Malavé 2007: 179-180). Cruz-Malavé also argues that the houses’ transition from mostly drag performance teams to kinship networks was propelled by the economic and social effects of deindustrialization in New York City that pushed many working class queer and transgender youth of color out of their families and into the streets.<sup>11</sup>

He also notes the differing elements of street culture that transformed Ball cultures from a drag-glamour cultural formation to a voguing-chic/street media configuration that would later add Hip Hop culture as one of its resources: “This new generation of kids would introduce into the balls’ competitive runway walk new survival

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<sup>11</sup> This contention by Cruz-Malavé runs counter to gay historian John D’Emilio’s assertion that the expansion of public spending in post World War II America was the one of the key material enabling conditions for the establishment and development of lesbian and gay social institutions and political movements that led to the explosion of community building and sexual and gender identities after the Stonewall Rebellion (D’Emilio 1983). In the case of the houses transforming into families, Cruz-Malavé is arguing that the shrinking of public spending in the form of deindustrialization and the concomitant redistribution of wealth upward created the material conditions for the caretaking and sharing of economic and social resources that typified New York City Ball families in the 1970’s and ever since then. My own life interview with Hector Xtravaganza (Hector’s, the founder of the House of Xtravaganza, son) affirms that the Xtravaganzas were first constituted by Mother Angi and Father Founder Hector as a “street family” or “a loving gay street gang.” Hector told me a number of times that he spent many months sleeping on the piers and it was his Xtravaganza family that made sure he was physically safe and had enough to eat.

arts that had been worked out and honed in correctional facilities, parks, dance clubs, and streets against those who would have them diminished or erased: the shady art of insult or “reading”, the stylish martial art of “voguing” and the apparently-simple-yet-dangerously-daring art of walking down the street cross-dressed without being detected or “spooked” without being bloodied” (Cruz-Malavé 2007: 180). Moreover, he proffers, using indigenous Ball historian Marcel Christian as his source, that the genesis of the modern Ball families can be found in working class Black and Puerto Rican/Latino/a solidarity and symbolic combat in the performance venues of the balls: “The contemporary organization of the ballroom scene, structured as it is around “houses”, associations, or “gangs”, as their members described them, that compete at balls for increasingly proliferating categories, seems to have emerged, as ballroom historian Marcel Christian has proposed in the recent documentary, *How Do I Look*, out of the intense competition between Puerto Rican/Latino and black drag queens at these balls on the late 1960’s (Busch 2005). Their intense gang-like “battles”, he suggests, would translate what would come to be known in the 1970’s, following the model of the then popularly available designer culture, as houses” (Cruz-Malavé 2007: 179). This is the most complete and complicated rendition of the historical narrative of the origins of the contemporary House Ball community in New York City, but it does not take into account the transformations that the Ball community has lived through with the advent of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, throughout my field research, I would occasionally hear from my own informants and Ballroom members with whom I had no defined research relationship that the balls, voguing, and/or the contemporary form of runway began at New York City’s Rikers Island, the largest extant penal colony in the United States, when Black and Latina transgender women were incarcerated and would give shows

In the last two decades, one of the most significant changes to occur in the contemporary Ballroom community is the development of House families that are creations of and have ongoing and deep relationships to the not-for-profit organizations combating the HIV/AIDS epidemic in New York City. As the epidemiological profile of HIV/AIDS in the urban centers of the United States changed to make Black and Latino/a communities objects of public health interventions and research, funding was made

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for the other inmates A number of community members also mentioned that this would occur at Christmas with the approval of the guards. I have never been able to corroborate this particular origin story. Jonathan David Jackson did write me the following response to my inquiry about the Rikers Island version of Ball culture genesis: "About performing runway at Rikers...The physical structure of the holding cells, work-rooms and other areas at Rikers prison complex over the years and the fact that the complex is mostly for short-term stays for presumed offenders who cannot always make bail makes it unlikely that drag queens would have the physical room, resources, or the means to hold regular full-on, extended runway competitions or drag shows while interned. Additionally, there are rules about cohabitation and partying in the prison complex and one could lose one's credits if one failed to follow rules (and prolong one's stay or add time to one's stay at another facility). Before he died, Marcel Christian Labeija took pains to correct some *apocryphal* (or misleading though well-intentioned) stories that he included in one of his Idle Sheets. The appearance of runway, drag, and voguing in Rikers and in other prisons across NYC is actually much more complicated. While full-on runway competitions and drag shows may not have always been possible at Rikers, extemporaneous, free-styling was. According to three of the community members that I consulted (Frankie Dakota, Jerome and Marcel) larger long-term-stay prison facilities in NY State did sometimes allow small-scale drag presentations at Christmas time in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Here is a detail about what may have happened at Rikers in terms of runway: Jerome noted that, while the term "runway" has been in use to describe the thrust stage of Harlem drag balls since the pre-WWII era of Bonnie Clark's balls, the use of the term runway was partially (underscore *partially*) inspired by the architecture of the hallways at Rikers (and Jerome was in and out of Rikers by his own admission). According to Jerome, some of the long hallways in Rikers ran either alongside, parallel to, or against-the-line of actual *runways* of the nearby LaGuardia Airport (meaning runways where planes take off and land). So the performer would literally "catch the beats" (Jerome's words) of the planes rhythmically landing and taking off when they performed their "off the cuff" (his words) improvisatory "model-esque" movements. Certainly, the use of the term "runway" did not originate in the community from this detail. The term comes from multiple sources and it refers to many things: choreographic actions as well as actual physical thrust stages. But such a detail of what might have happened at Rikers--and why and how it happened--helps us understand the complex ways that these traditions evolve both within and outside of prisons" (Jonathan David Jackson to the author. Personal communication: 20 July 2008).



available to make inroads into Black and Latino/a queer and transgender communities. The houses were seen by many HIV/AIDS preventionists as key venues for education, prevention and, later on, research efforts (Schaffzin, Kaplan, Whittier, & Massey 1996). To that end, the House of Latex, sponsored by Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), the largest HIV/AIDS prevention and care organization in New York City, was created in the early 1990's to do HIV prevention and education in the Ballroom community. The House of Latex was innovative in its approach to prevention in that it sought to function as a typical house family by competing in the Balls and adopting the language of kinship in referring to paid staff (e.g., "Mothers", "Fathers", "Uncles", "Aunts") and the young Black and Latino/a queer youth (e.g., "Brothers", "Sisters", "Cousins") who joined the house. The House of Latex's work helped to accelerate the process of importing public health models of sexuality and bodily health into the Ballroom scene in an unprecedented manner.

The interventions of GMHC and other community-based organizations in the Ballroom scene has resulted in many Ball members being trained in prevention techniques and some of them becoming employees of the various agencies that came into existence as both public and private sector monies were disbursed to organizations working directly with Black and Latino/a communities at risk for infection and transmission of HIV. This interaction between funding sources, not-for-profit organizations, and the Ballroom community has become so intense and widespread that the House of Latex now annually hosts the largest free Ball in New York City.<sup>13</sup> The

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<sup>13</sup> The House of Latex occupies an ambiguous and contradictory space in the wider Ballroom scene in New York City. Since it is an outreach and intervention mechanism of a HIV/AIDS prevention organization, any

Latex Ball is attended regularly by the House families as well as “outsiders” from the not-for-profit and public sector organizations working on HIV/AIDS in New York City. Thus, the Ballroom community has become partially embedded in the larger networks of private and public health and prevention bureaucracies in a way that contradicts its historical trajectory as a Black and then Black and Latino/a controlled social circuit and alternative kinship system.

### Ball Language, Rituals, and Meanings

At the present moment, the contemporary House Ball community can be described as an alternative queer kinship system that is organized to meet the needs of its members for social solidarity and mentoring in a racist society largely hostile to sexual and gender expression differences and that has as one of its ritual expressions the dance and performance competitions called the balls. Roughly speaking, the term “houses” refers to the actual kinship networks that are generally not localized in any one place or residence and the “ballroom” or “balls” are the common terms for the competitive dance and performance events that occur at regular intervals throughout the year and constitute an event circuit. The House Ball community is also referred to as the “The House Ballroom Community”, “The Ballroom Community”, “The Ball Community”, “The House Community”, “The House Ball Scene”, “The House Ballroom Scene”, “The

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young person can join the house as long as she agrees to attend meetings on a regular basis, walk balls for the house, and be trained as a peer HIV prevention specialist. This open door policy violates the rules of the rest of the Ballroom scene where criteria for house membership are very selective and specific to the categories the house might specialize in when competing. Thus, the House of Latex is seen by many community members as a resource for the Ball community, but not a totally authentic house since “anybody can be a Latex.” Some children see the House of Latex as a good place to learn about the balls and walking. But once a child becomes proficient in her category, she should join a “real” house to get her Ballroom “props” (i.e., bona fides or authenticating Ballroom credentials).

Ballroom Scene”, “The Ballroom World”, “The Ball World”, “The House Children”, “The Ball Children”, and “The Houses.” Members of the Ballroom community refer to each other as “child” or “children.” The term can signify a particular kinship relationship in a house family (e.g., The House of Manolo Blahnik) or general membership in the Ballroom community. New York City, along with Atlanta, Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Newark, NJ, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C., is one of the centers of the House community, which has spread to other urban areas with large concentrations of African-Americans and Latinos/as. The contemporary Ball scene in New York City is now composed of Blacks and second-generation Latinas/os of largely Spanish-speaking Caribbean descent.

Recruitment for the Ball families is both intense and very selective. Houses are not only queer kinship networks; they are also teams that must compete in a circuit that is emotionally, financially, and physically demanding and, at times, even dangerous. Each house has its own reputation in terms of which categories of performance it excels in and is expected to maintain that tradition. Each house member is required to “make a contribution” to all the efforts that the house undertakes within the circuit (e.g., hosting a ball in which other ball families compete) and internally. Also, each member is charged with keeping up the houses’ standards and the traditions of excellence and with recruiting new members who will do likewise. Thus, some houses are known for recruiting very beautiful transgender women who can walk femme queen categories and convince the judges they can pass as “real” women. Other houses recruit members who have astonishingly beautiful faces and can compete successfully in face categories. Recruiting strategies are various and houses often “steal” the “upcoming” stars of other families to

maintain their competitive edge in the ball circuit. Family loyalties, the hard and soft sell, friendship alliances, and erotic interests, amongst other factors, are all in the mix when these dynamics are at play in the Ball scene.

There are two primary rituals around which house families are organized: house activities and ball competitions. House activities include first and foremost regularly occurring family meetings where business is discussed and members are assigned tasks to undertake which may include ball preparation activities, teaching a less experienced member to perform better in his/her category, and membership recruitment. House meetings are also times to praise publicly members' accomplishments and excoriate those who have failed to live up to their family obligations. New house members are introduced and old members are sometimes thrown out of houses as well. These meetings occur oftentimes at the house mother's or father's home, but they can also occur in community spaces. Some houses will use conference calling as a way of meeting both with local members and/or with chapters from the various cities where ball families reside. Some of my informants told of me of house meetings dealing with a particular urgent house concern or issue occurring in cyber space with cell phone or computer-based instant messaging technology. Of course, not all houses activities are, in fact, business meetings or formal. Many ball families have planned or spur-of-the-moment gatherings that can include dinner at a member's apartment or house, a night at the movies, dinner at a restaurant, hanging out in the West Village, going to one of the many LGBT pride events that occur in New York City during the summer, going out to a club to dance and party, attending different types of artistic and cultural performances especially if a house

member is performing, going to the beach during the warm weather, and/or a trip to the Great Adventure Amusement park on its annual “Gay Night.”

Ball families both attend balls that other families host and usually once a year or so host their own ball that circuit members are invited to via the circulation of a ball flier, the internet, or word of mouth. Balls are the principle ritual of the House scene. All balls follow a fairly standard procedural format. The hosting family announces the ball at earlier balls they are competing in or Ballroom related events. Of course, the ball family is not allowed to compete in their own ball, but members from the house can and usually do act as judges during the event. The house rents the space and decorates the hall or club they have acquired for the night according to the theme or themes they have chosen as an organizing motif for their ball. For example, the 2007 House of Evisu ball at the National Black Theater had pictures of famous ball walkers from the past and present all over the walls of the auditorium where the runway was set up. The idea was to give the ball families a sense of their history and their future.

Before the ball, the house has to contract a DJ and his technical crew for the night to provide the musical soundscape for the evening’s proceedings. The house also has to plan for any outlay of cash that the concessions and decoration process will incur. Trophies will have to be purchased and cash will have to be allotted and set aside for the prize winners in the various categories. Also, MC’s or Commentators will also have to be hired. Customarily, there are two Commentators and sometimes there are more; consequently, they may rotate their shifts during the ball. They are an essential ingredient in any ball and their presence gives the ball legitimacy as a serious affair. The MC’s or

Commentators at a ball introduce the various competitive events and the requirements to enter competition. Commentators are expected to entertain the ball spectators and frequently act as mediators between the audience, the competitors, and the judges. Commentators are paid for their work and are masters of the cultural logic of the Ball scene as well as powerbrokers in their own right. One informant told me that a commentator can “make or break” a Ball walker by a sarcastic comment, praise, or a well crafted look. On occasion, an MC may disagree with the judges’ decision about a ball walker’s disqualification and dissolve the panel. Moreover, the politics of judging and friendships can undermine the meritocratic ethos of Ballroom competition. Many times when a ball walker is unfairly thrown out of the competition (i.e., “chopped”) before he/she can do battle with his/her other competitors, the charge of “politics” taking over performative merit is made. Also, when first place is given to someone audience members find unworthy of such a distinction, the notion of “girlfriend politics” is evoked. This can be source of real psychological and physical conflict during a ball. Although the MC is central to negotiating the judges’ power and can act when “girlfriend politics” intervene, ultimate authority over the ball proceedings rest in the hands of the house mother and father since they are the hosts and are paying for all the expenditures.

Along with this decoration process, the hard work of setting up chairs and the runway fall to the house members and whatever friends, lovers, and/or family of origin they can convince to help them. The physical set up may begin in the early or late afternoon before the doors open for the public at night and the take down may last until 9 am or 10 am the next morning depending on time limits placed on the house by the venue’s management or owners. The house also has to take responsibility for whatever

food and drinks will be available for purchase during the event. In the case of the 2007 House of Evisu ball, two different houses were given responsibility for drinks and food. The Evisus set up separate areas where food would be sold and soft drinks, juices, water, beer, liquor, and mixed drinks would be offered at a price to the ball participants. Prior to the ball, leaders of the houses involved agree on how the profits from the food and drink concessions will be divided. Beside the concessions, the Evisus also hired another house to do security at the door and throughout the venue to make sure that all ball participants are safe and that they could move the ball proceeds from the venue to the mother's home safely. All "regular" balls (i.e., those balls that are not free like the ones sponsored by HIV prevention organizations) charge an entrance fee that can go from twenty-five to thirty-five dollars and sometimes higher depending on the venue and the house's initial expenditures for the entire event. Thus, having a good and physically capable security team insures that no "funny business" occurs at the door with the money collected. Clearly, a hosting ball family can do all these things by itself, but delegating these responsibilities may allow them to focus in a more concentrated way on the smooth running of the actual competition.

From a bird's eye view, balls are organized spatially in a T formation. The vertical part of the T is a "forward thrust" runway where the competition occurs and the MC's spend most of the night "commentating", entertaining the audience, vetting the competitors, and communicating with the judges (Jackson 2002). The horizontal part of the T is where the judges' table is situated, if at all possible, usually high above the audience and replete with water, drinks, and snacks to keep their morale high during the long night. There are at least six and as many as a dozen well respected ball members

from different houses who judge the proceedings during the competition and the initial panel is dismissed usually during the ball's midpoint and a new group of judges is empanelled for the remaining balance of the night to insure that the judging is not marred by fatigue. The ball begins when the MC's introduce the "Legends, Statements, and Stars" who are present in the room and these highly regarded ball walkers come up and are recognized by the community for their expertise and long-standing commitment to the Ball scene.

After this homage to the Ballroom's living history, the house that is hosting the event participates in "The Grand March" which is a procession by all the house's members as they are called up to the runway by the MC's in groups according to the categories in which they compete. "The Grand March" is an opportunity for the house to show its talent and cohesion as a team and a family as well as a chance for the Ballroom members and non-ball spectators to show their appreciation for the enormous collective effort and monetary investment that hosting a ball demands. After "The Grand March", the MC's call up the judges using chants that identify the categories they walk and their houses. The judges, of course, play to the audience and vogue or demonstrate their beautiful faces or sexy bodies or walk runway depending on which categories they have come to dominate in their careers as ball walkers. Once the judges are empanelled, the MC's open the categories and invite audience members who wish to compete in the category to come up and show their skills to the judges and the spectators at large.

At times, the categories call up dozens of competitors and sometimes no one comes up to the runway to try her luck at winning. The MC's are responsible for



attempting to go through all the categories that have been listed in the ball flier or brochure, but few balls last long enough to actually open all the categories to competition. The MC's, therefore, are empowered, always in consultation with the host family, to move categories that are more popular up on the agenda and to remand categories for later in the program. Commentators open categories and wait for walkers to present themselves for competition, but they rarely wait long and begin the numerical countdown that signals the category's imminent closure " ... 5, 4, 3 ... Nobody for this category? OK! ... 2, 1 and a half, 1 ... The category is closed! On to the next one, children."

When a ball walker comes up to the runway to compete, he or she will have to go through possibly three vetting processes. First, the ball walker can be turned away by the MC's if they find that she is way out of line with the particular category's requirements. This usually happens to walkers who are just beginning their careers on the runway and this type of rejection is quite embarrassing and the ball child may have to endure the ridicule of the MC's as well as the audience's unsettling laughter. If the ball walker passes this test, then she must pass the judges' test to see if she is worthy of competing for the trophy. If any judge or group of judges thinks that the walker has not met the criteria called for by the category, then he or she signals her disapproval and the ball child is disqualified or "chopped" and sent packing back into the audience. If the child does qualify or is given ten points by each judge and the panel, the MC's tell her that she "has got her tens all around" and she steps aside to wait for the vetting of the next contestant.

Once all the contestants are qualified for first prize competition, the MC's organize the remaining ball walkers into dyads and an elimination or "battle round" is begun and the last walker standing is the winner. These battles can last quite a while and the audience is a full participant in cheering their house brothers and sisters on and showing their enthusiasm as amazing dance performances and flawless faces are presented before the judges. The crowd has its favorites and the MC's often pair together ball walkers that have reputations as being outstanding in their performance or having prior ball animosity to settle during the battle. The MC's will often ask the audience if they want to see two ball walkers "battle it out" --- much to the audience's delight and raucous approval.

Throughout the night, the MC's will remind the audience members of upcoming balls and ballroom related events by reading flyers that the host houses have made sure made it into the hands of the MC's. They also may encourage audience members to get tested for HIV and to take advantage of the services of community organizations connected to the Ballroom community. This is especially true when the ball is being sponsored by one of the local HIV/AIDS prevention and intervention agencies. During these agency-sponsored balls, the MC's will offer the crowd information on HIV testing and counseling, sometimes quote seroprevalence rates for Black and Latino MSM, and even offer an improvised speech on the importance of safer sex practice and the role that love has to play in the community's care for each other whether they are HIV positive or not. Also, categories will ask for the ball walkers to integrate safe sex messages into their individual and group performances. Of course, in New York City, given the deep connections on many levels that now exist between the House Ball community and the

HIV/AIDS prevention organizations, I have rarely attended a ball, whether agency-sponsored or a “regular” ball, during which prevention messages in some way were not communicated by those in charge of the event.

Along with the established houses that constitute the New York City branch of the community, there is a parallel universe of just for fun houses called the “kiki houses.” The terms “kiki” or “kiking” are used in much broader ambits than the New York City ball scene, but they are definitely part of the lingua franca of ball culture. “To kiki” or engage in “kiking” has various meanings that encompass gossiping, making fun of someone, or enjoying a funny, absurd, or embarrassing public episode or drama usually at the expense of those outside of one’s immediate friendship networks or set of interlocutors. Sometimes, a group of ball children might have a “kiki” when someone in the community or outside of it is said “to carry” or “to be carrying on” which means to make a display of yourself through behavior that can be read as disrespectful, hostile, and/or disruptive. Although “carrying on” is frowned upon in Ball circles, there are times when my informants found the behavior justified or, at the very least, good entertainment.

The “kiki houses” get their name from this concept of “kiking” since they are houses that compete just for fun and do not have the same status as the established houses. Kiki houses have grown out of the House Ballroom scene in the last ten years or so and were actually begun in Philadelphia by a Ballroom-connected preventionist who wanted to create venues for younger members to practice and demonstrate their ball skills without the competitive pressure of the regular balls. The kiki house circuit is largely embedded in community agencies that have programs that target Ballroom youth, but kiki

balls can occur in various locations including public gathering spaces. The houses are a somewhat parodic rendition of the “real” houses as well as expressions of the self-organization of the younger members of the various “real” house families. Kiki balls or functions can be held anywhere that younger members meet (e.g., the newly renovated Christopher Street piers). Further, these young kiki house members can take roles and statuses that are usually reserved for established Ball members (e.g., acting as a judge for a kiki function). The flexibility and satiric qualities (e.g., the House of Snapple reigns supreme in the kiki circuit these days) are consistent with the parodic elements found in the wider Ball scene.

The House Ball community has its own rather complicated, mobile, expansive and prolix argot or ingroup language. Most importantly, the Ball members have appropriated the language of kinship in organizing their networks. The difference with the Ballroom articulation of this language is that maternal and paternal nomenclatures do not align all or most of the time with the gendered embodiment of the person in question. Thus, many male-bodied gay men are house “mothers” and some “fathers” are female bodied. Balls are referred to as “functions”, but the term is also used in a wider sense to include any event where Ballroom social networks will be present. Ball walkers that give excellent performances are often referred to as “ovah” or “fierce.” A Ball member who is said to be “flawless” or to exhibit “flawlessness” refers to a perfect physical presentation that a particular category demands and/or a dance/performance that goes off without a hitch. Along these lines, when a Ball walker performs with grace and acumen in the category she is competing in, she is “given life” or the crowd is said to be “giving life” to

the person executing such a high caliber performance. All ball walkers want to “to get life” while they are on the runway.

The opposite of “getting life” is when someone or, at times, a whole audience “pays dust” to a person: ignores someone or treats her or him in a dismissive manner. Of course, the most widely circulated Ballroom argot terms are probably “shade” or “being shady” and “to read” or “reading someone”. In Ball parlance, to give someone shade is to treat him with contempt or something less than contempt since giving him contempt would be placing too much attention on him. “Reading someone” is engaging in a verbal and gestural performance always for an audience that delineates in excruciating and embarrassing detail the flaws, shortcomings, and lack of social graces that one’s interlocutor suffers from and makes a shameless display of on a daily basis and especially at this very moment of address. Shade is a form of verbal combat that relies on both subtlety of expression and acumen in detailed description for its social distancing and comedic valence to be effective.

One of the key linguistic and performance inventions of Ball culture is the notion of “the category” or “categories” around which Ballroom competition is organized. A category is a performative rubric that is usually, but not exclusively, based on gender as both a social norm and potential entry point to embodied critiques of the closure of material and symbolic resources. The category demands that she or he be embodied in a certain way and that she or he be able to skillfully enact the rubrics of that form of embodiment in the heat of competition. Categories are always in the process of development and modification and, at times, the object of collective scrutiny and intense

debate during ball performances. Some categories over time come to dominate Ballroom venues as in the case of those that are geared to butch queens. In the gender system that organizes the Ballroom scene, a butch queen is a man who has sex with men and whose gender expression can vary from very feminine to quite masculine. It marks those men in the scene who live as men even though they may be gender variant in certain ways. Some categories have their time on the runway and then fade away. Many of my informants both those who would identify as Latino/a and those who would identify as African-American and/or Black refer to Latinos/as as “Spanish” and houses that are predominantly Latino/a as “Spanish houses” or “Latin Houses.”

### Intersecting Literatures

This project is in conversation with a number of literatures within and outside the field of cultural anthropology. Building on and departing from David Schneider’s deconstruction of kinship as an ethnographic object of knowledge (Schneider 1984), Kath Weston provides the first ethnography of queer kinship in the United States (Weston 1997). She posits that the large economic and social changes in the Post-WWII United States have altered the perception that to be queer is to be outside the domain of kinship itself. Weston maintains that the creation of lesbian and gay urban communities as well as the extension of the eroticization of the consumer economy created the economic and institutional underpinnings for what she calls “families of choice” (Weston 1991:110).

For Weston, “lesbian and gay” families are a rearticulation of heterosexual arrangements and not necessarily a radical rupture from the racialized sex-gender matrix that produces familial networks in varying degrees of tension with normative social ideals about kinship. She argues that the traditional anthropological term “fictive” families

reproduces the logical and empirical fallacy that straight families are real because they are grounded in biological reproduction whereas other forms of kinship are less real because they are not tied to biogenetic processes.

Although the cover of the second edition of her ethnography features a portrait of members of the House of Revlon, Weston focuses her study on how gays and lesbians from working class families have different sets of expectations than her White middle class informants in terms of remaining connected with their families of origin. Nevertheless, she does not address how the House families could be construed as “families of choice.” Also, she does not attend to the overlaps that Black and Latino/a working class gays and lesbians need to negotiate in their families of origin and “families of choice” given that, in many cases, the kin network remains for racialized subjects in the United States the social support network of first and last instance (Stack 1974).

Carol Stack’s ethnographic study of African-American kin networks remains one of the few ethnographic investigations of kinship patterns among working class racialized minorities (Stack 1974). Stack’s study is an ethnographically-grounded refutation of the culture of poverty thesis (Glazer and Moynihan 1970, Lewis 1968, Whalen 2001). She demonstrates how inclusive notions of kinship help to organize the type of dense economic and social networks that poor Black people need in order to negotiate the exigencies of persistent forms of racial discrimination and economic marginality. Much of the data provided in Stack’s ethnography resonates with the types of economic and social solidarity that my ethnographic research on the House families demonstrates.

William G. Hawkeswood’s One of the Children is to date the only book length ethnographic study of Black gay men in New York City. Hawkeswood was familiar with

the Ballroom community and has a small section in his study on what he calls the “Drag Balls” of Harlem (Hawkeswood 1996:85-87). However, Hawkeswood’s ethnography focused on the dense networks that constitute the friendship and kinship practices of the social world of his Harlem informants. His data show that his informants understood their Black gay male networks as part of their broader Black affiliations which took priority in the construction of their social identities. Hawkeswood’s research also makes plain how deeply the ethos and language of kinship structures the social networks of his gay Black subjects: “People are connected to one other [sic] through series of interdependent social networks and through participation in gay social events or institutions. Close gay members of each individual’s social network become his “family” and are accorded familial titles. In this manner, everyone is related to everyone else by fictive kin relationships” (Hawkeswood 1996:1). This suggests that the Ball families emerged from these dense networks that have their roots in African (Wilder 2001) and Southern kinship traditions that were transformed in the new economic, racial, and sexual landscapes afforded by the mass migration of Blacks into the urban centers of the United States. Part of that transformation was the interaction with Puerto Ricans in particular and later arriving Latinos/as in New York City in the early decades of the twentieth century and even more intensely after World War II (Whalen 2001). Puerto Ricans also had their own inheritance of African kinship modes and popular religiosity (e.g., the spiritual families of Espiritismo and Santeria) as well as Catholic-derived ritual kinship in the compadrazgo system when they encountered Blacks in New York City (Fitzpatrick 1971, Mintz 1960, Steward 1957). It is this encounter of different migrating populations that provides the broader cultural and historical conditions for the emergence of the



contemporary Ball families and circuit. Hawkeswood's study does not explore how Black gay male identity in New York City is articulated in relationships of solidarity and tension with Latino gay men as well as Black and Latina female and transgender identities. He also does not explore the unique status that Ball families have in the Black and Latino/a queer worlds in New York City in contradistinction to the fictive families he describes amongst his Black gay male informants.

The scholarly literature on the Ballroom community is very limited and ethnographic approaches to the Ballroom community are few (Bailey 2005, Butler 1993, Cruz-Malavé 2007, Harper 1999, hooks 1992, Jackson 2002, McCarthy Brown 2001, Murrill et al 2008, Reddy 1998). In August 1991, the commercial release of Jennie Livingston's documentary, *Paris Is Burning*, brought the House Ballroom community to national attention. The film itself became a source for critical commentary in the emerging field of Cultural Studies. The Cultural Studies literature on the Ballroom community has been productive for framing important questions around gender, race, class, sexuality, and appropriate notions of home and domesticity in relation to forms of normative whiteness. The literature has used the Ball families and events as exemplary cases through which to think larger theoretical questions around social difference and regimes of normativity (Warner 1993). The particularity of the Ball families and the balls as cultural rituals and dance performances has largely been subservient to a theoretical agenda that seeks to think the types of transitions that the changes in the libidinal and political economy of a Post-Fordist regime of accumulation have afforded (Lancaster 2003). What is missing in the literature on the Ballroom community is a focus on the

particulars, the local meanings, the context, and history that rigorous ethnography demands.

Much of the criticism was centered on how gender was being reworked by ball participants and the asymmetries of power between the working class Black and Latino queer subjects of the documentary and the Yale-educated White lesbian filmmaker (hooks 1991, Butler 1993). hooks has argued that the film presents its subjects out of their Black communal contexts and renders them exemplars of “stellar individualism” and the balls largely spectacles of Black excess (hooks 1992). She argues that White femininity is worshipped by the drag queens in the Ballroom circuit and that Black men, whatever their sexual orientation and, presumably, their gender expression, share in White people’s reviling of Black womanhood. In short, the desires expressed by the House members in the film are a type of individualized social transubstantiation that results in a reactionary self-loathing and a spectacular and theatrical form of political conformity. hooks’ take on the Ball culture largely ignores its kinship, mentoring, and social support dimensions.

Butler responds to hooks’ claims by concurring that the way women are “idealized” in the balls through drag performance negates the social conditions that define the lives of Black women (Butler 1993). Nonetheless, she parts company with hooks largely because her understanding of interpellation (Althusser 1971, Delany 2001) is rooted in a material heterogeneity of the construction of social subjects and the discursive ambivalence of this self-same process. Thus, there are dominant manifestations of gendered racialized living as well as normative kinship structures, but these phenomena are by no means univocal nor are their social effects guaranteed over

time. That is to say, the discursive fix is not always in --- even though subversion is not necessarily the order of the day either. Butler argues that drag performance can “re-idealize” gender and/or it can expose the very “imitative structure” through which heterosexual gender norms feign a foundation that they are always in the process of constructing. Butler, therefore, views the drag in “Paris Is Burning” as both “insurrectionary” and “appropriative.” She thinks that the reformatting of kinship that the House families engage in is the most “queer” element of the scene itself. Butler maintains that kinship is a nexus of sex and race and that the House families expose these dynamics by their very existence. Her trenchant analysis of drag performance is limited through her lack of empirical, ethnographic, and historical context.

Chandan Reddy maintains that the family is the anchor of hegemonic notions of home and domesticity and argues that kinship is one of the linchpins of identity itself in the United States (Reddy 1998). He maintains that identity is a site of “ideological equivalence” and “material stratification” and that normative White kinship patterns are materialized precisely through subsidies provided by the labor and exploitation of marginalized social subjects. He further posits that “queers of color might be the subjective location from which to interact, remember, and practice the contradictory relations of people of color to home and housing in the US” (Reddy 1998:359). For Reddy, Livingston’s film hinges on how the category of the real functions in the balls and as an organizing trope of the film’s narrative line: “Realness functions in the film not as an alternative to social reality, but as the aesthetic basis by which to negate and contradict reality” (Reddy 1998:369).

Reddy's point is well taken, but "realness" is only one of the categories that shape the performative contours of the balls. The contemporary balls are typified by a proliferation of categories that have little to do with "realness" as such. What has yet to be done in the limited literature on the balls is to document and analyze the broad content of the categories that go beyond realness and include gender styles, body types, social stereotypes, HIV prevention messages, etc. (House of Latex Guide to the Reality Ball 2005:8). What the empirical content of the "aesthetic basis" of the categories is as collective and mobile tools to rethink the lives of the Black and Latino/a participants and spectators of the balls has yet to be fully described or put into a broader cultural and historical context. My ethnographic data is a contribution to this effort.

Phillip Brian Harper offers a trenchant analysis of the reception of "Paris Is Burning" through a deft reading of both Butler and Lacan (Harper 1999:33-59). Harper argues that the talk of "the queens'" subversion of gender norms during the ball dance and performance rituals in different media outlets that reviewed Livingston's film is largely a class-based racist dodge by what he deems to be "social liberals" and that the subsequent appropriation of Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity by scholars to bolster this claim is a misreading of her work. He argues that a voluntaristic imputing of a "subversive edge" to what the Ballroom members are doing is a refusal to admit to the work that the film actually accomplished: the materialization of Jenny Livingston's "agential role in her own subjective constitution" as a documentary filmmaker. Moreover, this refusal to understand how the film's production, release, and distribution benefitted Livingston most by launching her career as a filmmaker is also a

misrecognition and aestheticizing of the real structural limits on the Ballroom walkers’ “subjective agency.”

The fact that a number of the Ballroom community members featured in the film filed suit against Livingston in a demand to have her share the profits generated from the production and that these claims were thrown out of court because all those featured in the film had signed releases points to the juridical and private property mechanisms that constrained the Ball walkers’ agency and materialized Livingston’s ability to be an efficacious social actor. He argues that this fascination by media and scholarly critics on the putative “subversive edge” of Ballroom drag and gender practices is a failure to appreciate that Butler’s idea of gender performativity is not so much about pliability, but rather about the compulsory gestures and behaviors that the social matrix of heterosexuality instantiates as coherent and normative cores or “essences” of gender.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> One of the themes that emerge throughout Butler’s first widely circulated book, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, is the problem of interiority as an effect masquerading as an essence. In one sense, the whole of Western metaphysics is a long discourse on the epistemological conditions for what is interior or essential in human subjectivity and the types of gender ontologies that Butler is critiquing are part and parcel of that tradition. For Butler, one of the key critical moves for feminism is to explain this “interiority-effect” as a strategy of power and not an undisputed datum of social life. In this regard, Butler writes: “In other words, acts, gestures, and desire produce an effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means ... This also suggests that if that reality is fabricated as an interior essence, that very interiority is an effect and function of a decidedly public and social discourse ... In other words, acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality ... The displacement of a political and discursive origin of gender identity onto a psychological ‘core’ precludes an analysis of the political constitution of the gendered subject and its fabricated notions about the ineffable interiority of its sex or of its true identity” (emphases in the original, Butler 1990:136). It is the deconstruction of this “core” that functions as the truth of sex that Butler is aiming her critical focus upon in the very notion of the performative, but this performativity is always constrained within the normalizing context of the heterosexual matrix. Once Butler displaces the

Harper contends, rightly so I would add, that critics who read Butler's notion of gender performativity as primarily linguistic or, even more erroneously, theatrical, fail to understand the imbrication of the bodily gestures and behaviors that attach to this imaginary gender core with the social matrix, in this case heterosexism, and that this "citational practice" is both symbolic and carnal and the linchpin in materializing what is both a socially intelligible and "livable" life. Thus, the drag performance that occurs in the balls and in Livingston's film reveals the fundamentally mimetic nature of gender itself, but its mimesis is not of an original type, but of a "copy of a copy." For Butler, gender is a regulatory social fiction that enacts its own ontological status in its constant repetition, but it is not a willful act in any voluntarist sense. Gender is a forced repetition that claims its unity, but never achieves the seamlessness it purports to instantiate. Butler does not claim that drag is inherently or necessarily subversive. Rather, she argues that the description of what constitutes drag that subverts the gender system and drag that reconstitutes heterosexual hegemony should be on the agenda of critical feminist and, I would add, ethnographic research. On this very point, Butler writes: "Parody by itself is not subversive, and there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony" (Butler 1990:139).

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interior nature of sex and gender with the inevitably exterior focus of her notion of the performative, the lines of force and the analytic task it presumes point outward towards the realm of "public and social discourse". The key role that this particular intervention plays in the Butlerian project cannot be underestimated and, I would argue, that much of the momentum behind the critique of Butler's project as voluntarist is an attempt to reinscribe the interiority that the her notion of gender performativity denudes.

Finally, Harper refigures the runway and the balls as a Lacanian imaginary for the Ball walkers where they have full access to their complete selves and that outside that realm they encounter the sphere of the “social symbolic” where the self is never fully present and the social structure allows very little “subjective agency” to those subordinated by race, class, gender, and sexuality. “Paris Is Burning” is ultimately a film that provides the material basis for Livingston’s capacity to rework the “social symbolic” for her own purposes and a cinematic representation of the structurally restrained and largely inefficacious agency of her documentary subjects, the Ball walkers from the mid and late 1980’s.

Karen McCarthy Brown’s “Mimesis in the Face of Fear: Femme Queens, Butch Queens, and Gender Play in the Houses of Greater Newark” (McCarthy Brown 2001:208-27) is one of only two article length ethnographic essays in the literature on the Ballroom community. McCarthy Brown is concerned about two things in her essay: 1) the House families and their relationship to the “interactive assaults of homophobia and AIDS as currently experienced in Newark” (McCarthy Brown 2001:210) and 2) the “mimetic dimensions” of Ball cultural practices that instantiate for McCarthy Brown the Ball Children’s desires for “religious and familial belonging” (McCarthy Brown *ibid*). McCarthy Brown’s second research goal reproduces a common supposition that many House members have been “exiled” from their families of origin because of their sexual and/or gender non-conformity and that the realms of families of origins and “families of choice” (Weston 1991:110) are discrete entities for them. My research indicates that overlaps between families of origin and “families of choice” are more common and complicated than the existing literature would allow.

McCarthy Brown maintains that the function of the type of initiation that Ball Children go through when they join their house families is to acclimate them to being queer (and I would add transgender) people of color in a predominantly hostile society, “Mothers and fathers teach them how to live “The Life” and the Ballroom is a very effective classroom” (McCarthy Brown 2001: 211). McCarthy Brown maintains that social power in the Ballroom world reflects the outside world in that “butch queens” remain dominant in the scene subordinating “femme queens” and “women.” Her own thoughts on the realness category are also interesting in that she grounds the power of the category in its community building capacity: “The real value of Realness is that it makes community by provoking endless reiterations of the superiority of in-group knowledge. The ability to detect the game in the in-between spaces creates our own in-group and makes a community out of previously marginalized persons” (McCarthy Brown 2001:217). This quote reproduces the idea that House members are marginal social actors in their families and the broader community prior to their participation in a scene which queer and Transgender Black and Latinos/as have built and are, for the most part, in control of. This notion refuses to entertain the possibility that House participants are central to other networks in which they are embedded. The overlaps and tensions between marginality and a very local form of dominance and agency are insufficiently theorized in these overly narrow formulations.

McCarthy does deal with Whiteness as a “constitutive absence” that orders the logic of the balls: “The white gaze is not welcome in the Ballroom; this is a black scene, or at least for people of color. Yet the same gaze transformed into the invisible eye might be said to orchestrate everything that goes on at a Ball” (McCarthy Brown 2001:224). My



own field research confirms Whiteness as a constitutive, albeit spectral, presence both in the balls and in the social networks that constitute the house families. I explore this relationship to Whiteness both in Chapters Two and Three of this dissertation. McCarthy Brown acknowledges the multiple worlds that are contained in the Ballroom as well as its rather “contradictive” nature as one of her informants typifies the scene:

“The Ballroom is many things. The social map operative in the Newark Balls is Butch Queen normative. In its gay dimension, it is transgressive and liberatory. In its male-dominant mode, it is socially stagnant, even regressive” (McCarthy Brown 2001:224).

The impetus of her comments comes from her own reading of the literature on the balls: “Some contemporary theorists view parodic gender bending, of the sort that goes on in the Ballroom, as a form of social resistance, but the level of abstraction from which the Ballroom Scene is typically analyzed has tended to prevent a fuller picture from emerging. Actually, what goes on with the gender categories at the Newark Balls is genuinely liberating and simultaneously constricting to the point of enforcing gender essentialism”(McCarthy Brown 2001:215). It is this “fuller picture” that this dissertation describes in order to give deeper context to the antecedent literature as well as to think through existing theoretical problems via the lens of new data.

Dance ethnographer Jonathan David Jackson has done the most complete analysis of the development of voguing as the signal template to understand the values of the Ballroom community and the social world out of which those values emerge (Jackson 2002). Although he contends that all six “ritual traditions”<sup>15</sup> (“Voguing”, “Runway”,

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<sup>15</sup> It is interesting that Jackson describes these performances rubrics as “ritual traditions.” This articulation of what others have called “categories” has three important effects: 1) it reframes these practices as

“Labels”, “Body”, “Face”, and “Realness”) of Ballroom performance are all “adaptations of Runway” (Jackson 2002:31), he focuses his essay on voguing because it is “...the only ritual tradition in the community that emphasizes whole-body improvisatory action”(Jackson 2002:31). Jackson’s ethnographic essay is a critical genealogy of contemporary voguing as well as a contextualization of this indigenous dance form within the broader dynamics of the Ballroom’s alternative gender and sexual cultures as well as its kinship system. Jackson argues that voguing as a dance form developed from the bodily rubrics that were dominant in New York City’s 1960’s Drag Balls circuits. For example, using the late Willi Ninja as a source, he contends that contemporary vogue dance elements are further elaborations or rearticulations of the way performers at the old Drag Ball circuits used their fans (Jackson 2002: 32-33). He sees not only in vogue performance, but also in the mentoring and training that more experienced voguers impart to novice walkers “Entangled notions of affirmation and antagonism” that are “lenses through which the community imagines itself. Life for members is understood to be socioeconomically and interpersonally difficult, yet, creativity inside conflict facilitates transformative and even inspirational social change” (Jackson 2002:30).

Moreover, he critiques Harper and cultural critics like him who see only the social restraints that delimit the lives of House Ball members: “Yet, members *could and did sue* [i.e., *Paris is Burning*’s director, Jenny Livingston] and their socioeconomic disenfranchisement and stigmatization does not diminish or limit members’ creative power to act as cultural meaning-makers. A large part of this power involves members’

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bodily events and not strictly interpretative phenomena or hermeneutics, 2) emphasizes that these practices emerge out of prior sedimentations of Ball history, and 3) links these traditions to broader both temporally and geographically New World African diasporic practices and communities.

transformation of mainstream notions of beauty and their adoration of ritualized social conflict as a means toward character building” (emphasis in the original, Jackson 2002: 31). Thus, voguing reworks dominant notions of beauty and also prepares its members for the struggles that working class Black and Latino/a queer and transgender people have to confront. Jackson also sees the kinship networks that Ball community members create as agentic responses to various forms of economic and social subordination. He argues that the dance/performance practices on the runway and the kinship practices within the house families where community members’ subjectivities are reworked and empowered:

“Members are always aware of how much their identities embody notions of power and powerlessness. At the same time, being able to change one’s identity, to grow into different senses of one’s race, gender, class or any other facet of one’s subjectivity is highly valued. Rather than a cultural given that becomes hegemonic, the work of constructing subjectivity in the Ballroom scene is always rigorously debated. Ritual is the most important site for such negotiation. In other words, Balls and their traditions like voguing are the most important discursive manifestations of the system of kinship that binds different subjectivities together in community” (Jackson 2002:38).

Jackson’s work is grounded in the dance form and the culture that gave it birth. It seeks to recognize community members’ capacity to act and rework their social worlds. This dissertation expands Jackson’s analysis in that it is interested in describing and analyzing those community members who forge lives between the ballroom and the HIV prevention worlds. My work departs from Jackson’s analysis in that it embeds the ethnographic narratives I use as evidence in structural frames that make agentic claims difficult to substantiate.

As of this writing, Marlon Murtha Bailey’s unpublished doctoral dissertation, The Labor of Diaspora: Ballroom Culture and the Making of Black Queer Community, is the

most recent and extensive ethnographic study of the House Ball community (Bailey 2005). Bailey conducted an ethnographic investigation of the Ball community in his native city of Detroit, Michigan. Bailey is unique amongst all those scholars who have written about the House Ball community in that he is the only person that has actually been a member of a Ballroom family.<sup>16</sup> He was part of the Detroit-based House of Prestige. Bailey's work is an ethnographically based intervention in a number of disciplines and fields including African-American/African Diaspora Studies, Queer Theory/LGBT Studies, Queer of Color Critique, Performance Studies, Diaspora Studies, Queer Diaspora Studies, and Public Health. Bailey sees his various theoretical and disciplinary concerns as leading to a cross-cutting analysis that takes as central the lives, needs, hopes, and desires of Black people in the United States as an African Diasporic people in general and Black queer people in particular. He writes of his project:

“For Black people in the US, there is no easy separation between performance and the enactment of continuously evolving identity formation and lived epistemologies ... African Diaspora and queer studies do not by themselves, produce an adequate understanding of the material, social, and psychological, and spiritual realities in which Black queer people live. I conflate diaspora and queer theories to foreground the ways Black queer members of the Ballroom culture build alternative communities in the midst of social displacement. Therefore, I

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<sup>16</sup> Frank Leon Roberts (aka Frank Mizrahi), a PhD candidate in Performance Studies at New York University, is also a member of the House of Mizrahi in New York City and a ball walker in his own right in the “executive realness” category. As of this writing, he is working on having his field research written up in dissertation form by early fall 2009. Once this is done, he will be the second Ball child to have a completed thesis on the Ballroom scene in New York City. Roberts has on a number of occasions been recognized as a role model for the New York City branch of the community because of his considerable educational achievements as well as his service to the community through his work in People of Color in Crisis (see Chapter Three). Roberts also maintains, at least to my reckoning, one of the best websites on the House Ball community in terms of the level of analysis and its photo archive of Ballroom personalities and events in New York City and the broader national circuit. His website is an excellent resource for researchers in a number of disciplines: <http://www.canwebefrank.com>.

explore the labor involved in building such queer communities and an overall minoritarian sphere. Examining what I refer to as the cultural labor that Ballroom members undertake to create a minoritarian sphere. I argue that the queer minoritarian domain of the Ballroom culture offers a space in which Black queers work *through* marginalization to resist and contend with the oppressive constraints of dominant heteronormative sphere” (emphasis in the original, Bailey 2005: 56, 75).

Bailey juxtaposes the constant “non-market labor” that queer kinship and ball competition that his Detroit informants engage in and the desperate situation of structural unemployment and urban displacement that the Black community has had to endure and negotiate constantly. Further, he wants to bring both Diaspora Studies and Postcolonial Studies into conversation with those subordinated populations that live under a type of colonial regime in a White supremacist United States: working class and poor Black people in general and working class and poor Black queer people in particular. He sees his own project as a form of ethical ethnographic engagement on the ground not just at the level of concern, but of actually “helping out” his informants in very concrete ways to do the cultural labor that Ball kin work and performance require. Bailey both performs for his house in that he walks “executive realness” in competitions during his field research, but also helps the House of Prestige with the endless tasks that must be attended to in hosting their own ball. He sees this labor as the crux to creating a viable and protective social world for Detroit’s House Ball community.

My own research in New York City aligns with many of the themes that Bailey developed in his study. I think that his connecting of performance, cultural labor, and the production and sustaining of a Ball world or what he calls a “minoritarian sphere” (Muñoz 1999) is both descriptively and analytically true of the Ballroom community in

New York City. I would argue that his desire to move across fields and actually merge certain analytic technologies reflects the intersectional complexities (Crenshaw 1993) that Ball communities exhibit both in Detroit and New York City and, in all likelihood, beyond these two research sites as well. My own research focuses on a Ballroom community that has a large Latino/a presence, unlike the Detroit Ball community that Bailey researched, as well as those members of the scene that are directly and indirectly tied to the community organizations that have emerged to address the HIV/AIDS epidemic in New York City. Thus, Bailey's study has a much more traditional ethnographic focus while it utilizes a wide of range of disciplines as analytic frameworks that go beyond ethnography as a research method and anthropology as a disciplinary formation.

The literature on the Ballroom taken as a whole is abstract and largely devoid of reference to the social lives, cultural practices, and historical understandings of House culture that ground its various emic categories. With three notable exceptions (Bailey 2005, Jackson 2002, McCarthy Brown 2001), none of the literature is based on participant observation of the families and/or their events or engages any of the members of the House families in interviews about their lives inside and outside the Ballroom circuit. When the literature is detailed, it reads House culture primarily through the balls as events and fails to construe these competitive gatherings as family affairs or kinship rituals as well as performances: the on the ground politics of the balls (e.g., how judges are often accused of voting for their "girlfriends" instead of on the merits of each competitor's performance), with all their contentiousness and pleasures, get subsumed

into an insightful, but ultimately incomplete, reflection on the cultural politics of kinship and gender variation within a racialized context.

This research project speaks to a number of fields. At the most general level, it is a contribution to modes of materialist social inquiry that take gender and sexuality as key analytic frames (Delany 1999, Fernandes 1997, Foucault 1978, Hennessey 2000, Lancaster 1993, Lancaster 2003, Manalansan 2003). In Latino Studies, this project will add to the literature on Latino/a queer life (Aponte-Parés 2001, Decena 2008a, 2008b, Guzman 2006, LaFountain-Stokes 2009, Muñoz 2005, Vidal-Ortiz 2009). It will also break new ground by documenting the production of *latinidad* through the interactions between second generation Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and African-Americans in the context of queer kinship, friendship, and erotic networks. It will also embed Latino/a notions about Whiteness in a predominantly African-American ensemble of networks and institutions. In Queer Studies, this project will throw new light on racialized forms of working class kinship largely outside the purview of the marriage and family civil rights focus and of much of the organized lesbian and gay movement in the United States.

### Methods and Chapter Themes

One of the challenges of social inquiry is navigating the tensions created between the material heterogeneity that constitutes social processes and the need for analytic reductions that make the vividness and movement of that self-same heterogeneity available for collective scrutiny and explication. Ethnography is an attempt to remain within the productivity of these tensions while, at the same time, producing the kind of intersubjective meanings that widen the possibilities for material change at the level of

the political economy of sign as well as the broader field of social action. The anterior moment to these changes at the level of the sign and the social for any ethnographic project is the task of accounting for its very emergence within the field of social forces it seeks to describe and explain. Without this genealogy, an ethnographic project refuses the recognition of its own implication in the heterogeneous field of social forces out of which it emerges and weakens its analytic power by rendering its own materiality unreadable to its interlocutors both in the field and in the circuits of reception that will animate the life of the ethnographic text.

I conducted participant observation in New York City's House Ball community over a number of years beginning in 2005. I went to balls, community meetings, social events, and visited a number of informants' work sites. I did formal structured interviews with a dozen informants who were involved in the House Ballroom community and who were preventionists and/or community activists around HIV/AIDS in the scene. I did more than 40 informal interviews with individuals who were referred to me by the six core informants in my research sample. I conducted four informal group discussions and spent over 20 hours watching ball videos to develop better skills at analyzing House Ball performances. Through my participant observation and informal interviews, I generated over 400 pages of field notes which were the basis for the ethnographic descriptions and thematic analysis found in this dissertation. I had my two main informants read over the chapters that focused on them for factual corrections and to develop discussions about the ways they were represented in the text. These interactions led me to rewrite chapter sections, correct a number of factual details, and rework a number of the ways I framed



the data I generated from following these two key informants through their work, social, and personal lives.

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. Chapter One is an introduction that sets the empirical, ethnographic, historical and theoretical contexts for this project on the New York City House Ball community. In Chapter Two, I follow an informant through the labor process that staging a winning performance at the premier ball in New York City entails. Specifically, I show the economic and friendship resources that have to be mobilized to achieve and maintain a certain status in the Ballroom circuit and the way that community members have appropriated the ideologies and institutional resources of the HIV prevention not-for-profit agencies to fashion careers and lives inside and outside the Ball families and performance venues. In Chapter Three, I interlace a life interview I conducted with a key informant with an analysis of the constraints and possibilities for a professionalized form of HIV/AIDS activism that seeks to respect House Ball cultures and families while transforming them through HIV prevention ideologies. This chapter also delineates the persistence of upward mobility ideologies in reworking notions of racialized forms of solidarity and kinship in the Ballroom community. Chapter Four is an analysis of Jennie Livingston's documentary, *Paris Is Burning*, on the House Ball kinship system and performance circuit as an object of material culture that reproduces White supremacist visual and political economies (Livingston 1991). I read my analysis of Livingston's film and recently released outtakes up against data from an informal group discussion I conducted with a number of community members after viewing *Paris Is Burning*. In Chapter Five, I make some final comments about the next step for this project as well its contribution to the various fields with which it is in conversation.

Finally, I make some policy recommendations based on my research and delineate some of the political interventions that the project is making.



## Chapter Two: Vivienne's Victory

### Walking Down The Street of Dreams

Seventh Avenue South stretches out from 14<sup>th</sup> Street like the arm of a slumbering giant whose numbed fingers fit awkwardly in the yellow brick hole that is the Holland Tunnel Jersey bound. Between these two points, Christopher Street crosses over this imaginary arm a little north of midpoint --- the giant's slack elbow. In fact, the meeting of three streets forms a crossroads where Christopher, Seventh Avenue South, and West 4<sup>th</sup> intersect, overlap, and/or meander up against each other in such a motley pattern that pedestrians are often at a bit of a loss as to how best to cross the wide stretch of Seventh Avenue South without coming to a tragic, but very New York end.

Tonight is no exception as traffic barrels briskly down the avenue and I try to get myself over to Christopher Street down toward the piers. My informants tell me that the "gay part of Christopher" is the northern section of the street that flows west from Seventh Avenue. It is the place to see and be seen. Also, this is the side of the street that has a Dunkin Donuts, two relatively affordable pizza joints, two delis that pass for West Village equivalents of bodegas, a "Chinese food store" that does a brisk takeout business, and the only Black Gay bar in the neighborhood. The northern side of Christopher is where Black and Latino/a working class queers<sup>1</sup> feel most that a slice of their

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<sup>1</sup> Although many writers use the terms gay and queer interchangeably, both terms carry the weight of their being forged and circulated at distinct historical moments. Gay emerged immediately out of the particular dynamics of the Stonewall rebellion and its aftermaths and queer in the 1980's with the mobilizations initiated by the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the United States. Queer is potentially a more inclusive term than gay since it indexes all those who by their practices or presumed affiliations have antagonistic relationships to processes of normalization (Warner 1993).

neighborhoods has been transported to the Village's upscale post-bohemian gentrifying<sup>2</sup> precincts. The rest of Christopher Street consists of expensive eateries, specialty shops that sell jewelry, antiques, leather clothing products, porn, sex toys, and shoes. The majority of businesses on the street are small and cater to upscale consumption patterns. On any given night in the spring and summer, the street traffic is young, queer, working class and decidedly Black and Latino/a. The residents and the owners of homes and commercial interests in the West Village are, as a general rule, older, upper middle class, and decidedly White. The immense internal economic and social contradictions that animate post-Stonewall life in New York City are on display and palpable in the realized and forestalled interactions between these two demographic groups on what another informant calls "The Street of Dreams."<sup>3</sup>

In life interviews, many of my informants describe coming to hang out on Christopher Street and the piers as a key experience in the development of their sexual

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<sup>2</sup> Anthropologist Martin Manalansan IV has argued for the use of the term "neoliberal urban governance" in lieu of "gentrification." He argues that "gentrification" naturalizes these urban spatial and racial processes and locates the class and race actors outside the frame of New York City itself (Manalansan 2005:4).

<sup>3</sup> The attempts at social closure and surveillance that have been implemented in the West Village more generally and at the Christopher Street piers in particular can be compared fruitfully to Samuel Delany's analysis of the transformation of Manhattan's Times Square district in the last fifteen years (Delany 1999). Delany views the Times Square "redevelopment" plan enacted by the Giuliani administration as an attempt to make the types of "democratic and pleasurable" contacts afforded by the public sex venues in the neighborhood structurally unviable. He argues that the fundamental infrastructural imperatives for profit are secured, in the case of Times Square, via a mechanism of discursive realignment in which "safety" becomes the rubric to understand the types of displacement of the sex venues with more "family friendly" modes of generating profit. Delany does not call for a return of the Times Square of his young manhood and early maturity, but rather for a political movement to construct the type of institutional infrastructure in which men and women of various sexual orientations can have contacts. He sees these new institutions as of necessity being largely controlled by women and in which the profit mechanism has a more cooperative bent to it.

and gender identities as well as their eventual recruitment into the House Ballroom scene. After a decade and a half of visiting the Christopher Street piers as a researcher and just socially with friends, family, and lovers, the material, temporal, and discursive layers that constitute this particular space are still quite tangible. The piers that I came to know in the mid 1990's were largely concrete and asphalt remains of the civilian and military naval transportation centers that spotted the Hudson River in the days when both commerce and pleasure were linked much more directly to the waterways that connected New York City to other parts of the nation and, indeed, the broader world. When I first came to visit the piers, they were gritty and used twenty-four hours a day by a mostly working class community of Black and Latino/a queer and transgender youth to hang out, find potential sex partners both for noncommercial and/or commercial purposes, listen to music, practice developing better voguing techniques for the next ball, smoke weed, drink beer, and generally watch the flow of bodies and the occasional dramas and fights the dynamics of urban density offer up as a collective form of pleasurable and potentially dangerous street voyeurism.<sup>4</sup> To this day, for many Black and Latino/a men and women,

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<sup>4</sup> My informants often express a fear of being understood by others in their social networks as a "just another pier queen." Namely, someone who spends all of her/his time on the pier and "is not doing something with their lives." The piers are seen as a site of self-discovery as well as a potential source of damage and literally a place that will make a person more susceptible to HIV exposure and sero-conversion. There is a complicated moral economy that is constructed on the memory-site of the piers and part of the challenge for many of my informants is to be perceived by others in their networks as staying on the credit side of this moral accounting system that distributes shame and stigma asymmetrically. The writings and performance art of gay Latino poet Emmanuel Xavier can be read, at least in part, as an attempt at undoing the moralizing discourses that surround the piers, see (Xavier 1997, 1999, 2002).

these visits to the piers are rites of passage that produce collective spatial-erotics, memory, as well as a set of temporal and personal references.<sup>5</sup>

“Christopher”<sup>6</sup> is sparkling with energy as the breeze off the Hudson River lifts the blanket of humidity from the sweaty streets with merciful licks of dry air. As I walk down to the piers, I pass The Hangar Bar and look at the crowd of mostly Black and Latino men in their late twenties and thirties smoking in front of the bar in a roped-off square area --- a concession to the Bloomberg administration’s smoking cessation campaign. The al fresco smokers’ lounge is crowded as the inhabitants joke with each other and spy the men walking by with occasional grins and knowing nodding of heads.

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<sup>5</sup> Ethnographer and cultural critic Robert Sember has written about the significance of the West Side piers in the development of a gay male collective identity that imagines the piers as a place of memory, mourning, violence, loss, and public sex before and during the AIDS crisis (Sember 1999: 54-76). In developing his ethnography of the piers, he deploys anthropologist Alan Feldman’s notion of the “historiographic surface” that is constituted through the practices of interpenetrating bodies, places, and spaces: “The textured surfaces of the piers, to which the “transparent bricks” of past and present desires are anchored, constitute what Feldman refers to as an “historiographic surface”, found in “those sites, stages and templates upon which history is constructed as a cultural object” (Feldman 1991:2). A crucial component of the piers I write of --- not the piers as they were, but what they have become --- is the architecture of recollection and the performance of memories that gives historical dimensions to the gestures and emotions men share there. This is the dreamscape of the piers that is invisibly draped over the present structures and that performs a sexual recollection that, I suggest, is both compelled by and against the crises inherent within the AIDS epidemic” (Sember 1999: 55). The producers of Sember’s “architecture of recollection and the performance of memories” are not limited to the gay men who have used and continue to use the piers as points of social and sexual contact. Many of the young people of color on the pier this very night are in the instance of producing the embodied temporalities that later cohere into the “transparent bricks” of desire that lay the ground work for this self-same architecture, but under a very different set of economic and social conditions than my first sojourns to the piers or at the time that Sember writes about in his essay.

<sup>6</sup> My informants regularly referred to “Christopher Street” as “Christopher” for short and, at times, used “Christopher Street” as a way to referring to the West Village neighborhood in Manhattan.

I walk to the corner of Hudson and Christopher streets and pass what is the most popular pizza parlor in this section of the West Village. The pizza itself is standard fare for Manhattan, but there is fairly generous seating given the cramped conditions of most of the neighborhood's affordable restaurants. The other added advantage is that this pizza joint is encased in clear glass making it a cruising fishbowl as well as a frequent meeting place for friends planning a quick slice, a jaunt to the piers, or a sojourn to the bars in the vicinity and the dance clubs to the north and south. There is also a public phone at this intersection of Christopher and Hudson just opposite the entrance to the pizza joint that was frequently used in the era of beepers and now suffers neglect with the proliferation of cell phones and text messaging. As I cross Hudson, I pass groups of Black and Latino/a youth sitting on the four-step stoops that jet out of the side of the deli on the corner, a barbershop, the manicure and pedicure store, and Chi Chi's --- the only Black bar on the strip.

Chi Chi's also has a roped outdoor smoker's lounge. Chi Chi's is right next to the entrance of the Christopher Street station of the PATH trains to New Jersey. Commuters coming for a night out from the large cities and suburbs of New Jersey are usually greeted by a rotating crowd of gregarious smokers in front of Chi Chi's: this might be quite a jolt for those acclimated to the visual fare offered by shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. This night and every weekend night during the warm weather an NYPD patrol car is parked in front of the PATH station entrance a few feet shy of the smoker's lounge. The cops encourage pedestrians, especially those who are young and of color to, "Keep it moving folks! Don't block the entrance to the station please! No congregating! You're blocking the pedestrian traffic!" The clear racial and class edge of this hyper-



policing right next to the West Village's only Black bar is not lost on the working class queer and transgender Black and Latinos/as that make up the bulk of pedestrian traffic almost every evening on Christopher Street. I pass the cops fingering the rubberized antennae of their walkie talkies. One of them is slowly spinning his hat on a finger in a distracted manner as he talks to one of his White female co-workers.

I cross Washington Street and walk pass the slightly upscale bar and Italian restaurant that used to be the now defunct Two Potatoes bar a few years back. The Two Potatoes was known for a really obnoxious older White working class door queen as well as a variety of drag shows by mostly Black transgender women. The bar also had a reputation for being a good place to pick up Black and Latino male sex workers and/or score some cocaine before a night out clubbing. The bar has a small outdoor cafe and now serves a predominantly straight crowd. As I pass one of the café's tables, I see some friends from the Ball scene sitting laughing and sipping a few drinks. Hugs and kisses are exchanged all around. All of these folks work for community agencies that deal with HIV/ADS prevention or community focused research. The youngest of the group, Jennifer Blahnik, works at the Queer Community Health Center in Chelsea as an HIV testing counselor. She graduated from a prestigious college in upstate New York and is now a full-time graduate student in social work in Manhattan. She is also the mother of the House of Manolo Blahnik and has consistently told me that she tries to provide a positive role model of an upwardly mobile working class transgender Latina to her house children. Jennifer is a stunning beauty whose smoky voice is intertwined with a giddy laughter that disarms even her shadiest friends. Tonight, she is wearing extra-wide designer sunglasses that give her a J-Lo effect. She reminds me that we need to continue

to finish the life interview I am doing with her and I promise to call her during the work week to set up a mutually convenient time and place to meet.

The group invites me to join them for a drink and some chatter, but I beg off saying that I want to go down to the piers to check out what is happening and see if I run into Vivienne, one of my principal informants, who told me she might be hanging out at the piers with some friends. They all know her and tell me that they have yet to see her tonight. Vivienne knew Jennifer before her transition to living as a woman. In fact, they later came to know each other better in the Ball scene as well as through HIV/AIDS activism and community work. The group starts bantering with me when I tell them that I have to go do field research. I say farewell to the group and promise to come back and sit down if they are still around upon my return.

Before I get to the corner of Christopher and Weehawken streets, I pass The Dugout bar that is packed judging from the overflow crowd in the street. The air is filled with the tempting smell of broiling chicken, hamburgers, and hot dogs coming from the barbecue that the bar's managers have set up on the Weehawken Street side of the building. Almost immediately across from The Dugout is Bailey House that provides studio apartments and supportive services for people living with AIDS. On the top of Bailey House, there is a solarium type recreation room where residents can go to get sun and chat with their friends and visitors. I wonder how long it will take for the choice real estate that Bailey House occupies to succumb to the pressures of Manhattan's relentlessly acquisitive real estate market. Of course, real estate is not the only market sector that is active in the West Village. Although there is not much action going down on "Vaseline

Alley”, as some of my informants call Weehawken Street, it is a prime site for mostly young Black and Latino male sex workers to connect with mostly older White male customers who pick them up in well-appointed cars for a ride and whatever the agreed upon sexual exchange might be on any given night.

I cross over Weehawken Street and now have a much clearer view of the piers. I follow a crowd of young people as they cross the six lane highway that runs up and down Manhattan’s West Side. The trick is to get to the tree lined meridian that separates north and south traffic from each other in enough time to arrive at the other side without the light changing and not having to wait to get to the piers. As I walk over, I watch and smile as a very skinny, femme Black youth dressed in black tight fitting jeans and a very light, short-sleeve black shirt with a hood vogues, in a triumphant example of pedestrian militancy, at one of the cars waiting for the light to change. The driver, an older man, remains oblivious to this particular youthful rite of late summer ecstasy and keeps his eyes on the traffic light throughout the duration of the young man’s performance. The last hurdle before I get to the piers is to negotiate the inline skaters and bicyclists that speed along its outer walkway.

### On the Piers

In the last five years, the material and social makeup of the piers have changed dramatically. What used to be a largely rough and ready faded postindustrial urban waterfront landscape has been transformed into a very clean, constantly patrolled, river side recreation area that urban planners would call a high end “urban amenity.” The potholed pedestrian byway that runs along the water has been repaved, benches have

been put along the entrance that swoops down and circles around to the newly-built very clean and frequently inspected public restrooms, and a mound-like working fountain made out of shiny gray bricks acts as “a wet and welcoming”, as one informant put it, front piece to the piers.

The actual piers have been entirely reconstructed. The first southern pier as one enters from the Christopher Street entrance has an elevated stage-like area where gray steel chairs are assembled around permanently fixed white tables for visitors to chat and play card games. There are wooden benches that line either side of the pier. Interspersed between the benches are huge black iron --- manifestly anachronistic --- cleats that ostensibly wait to tether and secure the mighty girths of never-to-arrive spectral luxury steam ships on their return from European holidays. The piers’ multiple temporalities materialize even in what passes for chic and nostalgic forms of urban waterfront renewal.

The southern pier consists of a boardwalk that winds around in an elongated U-shaped pattern and a large deep green lawn in its middle where people lounge, play, and have impromptu picnics during times of clement weather. At the end of the pier, there is a huge white tightly stretched tent-like structure under which are situated oversized wooden benches. Just beyond this tent is the end of the pier where steel gray chairs are available for anyone quick enough to commandeer one to look at the passing river traffic, listen to the loud thumping music of the passing booze cruises, watch the skylines of Jersey City and Hoboken immediately across the way, or look up at the moon as its light bounces off the steel and glass structures that make up the real firmament of the cities that have grown up and around the Hudson River.

The second pier is just north of the first pier and can be accessed from a bridge that goes over the Hudson and reverberates with the sounds of water rushing against the piers' underbelly. Alternatively, one can take the pedestrian walkway that stretches up north beyond 14<sup>th</sup> Street and the now completely gentrified and media-hyped meat packing district. All along this route, the private conservancy that administers and controls this riverfront park has placed green spaces and benches. FIERCE!, a local queer and transgender youth of color activist organization, has made sure that the conservancy has placed portable toilets between the first and second piers to accommodate the needs of those young people who spend time at the pier after the permanent bathrooms close.<sup>7</sup> The whole length of the pier is patrolled by park police on foot, motorcycle, and via modified green golf carts. The line of sight from both piers is almost totally uncluttered and renders the possibility of surveillance-free<sup>8</sup> public sex almost nil during daylight hours.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Throughout the community struggle that has developed around the piers as a space for queer and transgender youth of color to recreate socially and organize politically, the image of the publicly urinating and defecating transgender sex worker of color has been deployed during the West Village's Community Board 2 meetings and in popular media accounts. Some West Village residents see the presence of these youth as a source of crime and a public health problem. The placing of portable toilets near the piers was a compromise that alleviated some of this hysteria as well as provided facilities for the piers' youth some of whom are, in fact, homeless. For the moment, I will remand for another venue a discussion of the obvious psychoanalytic/racial implications of some of the residents conflating fecal matter and urine with the bodily presence of these transgender and queer youth of color.

<sup>8</sup> Here I am making a distinction between surveillance and voyeurism --- one a policing function the other a potential shared site of collective eroticism.

<sup>9</sup> The kind of sexual and social communities enabled by public sex discussed in Robert Sember's (1999) ethnographic analysis as well as Black gay cultural critic and science fiction writer Samuel Delany's (1988) in his ground breaking memoir, *The Motion of Light in Water*, are severely constrained by the racialized logic of neoliberal consumption of public space that undergirds the renovation of the Christopher Street piers. The work that has been done to reconfigure the piers has curtailed the use of the piers by setting a

My informants call the second pier, “the little pier.” Although it is not clear to me that the pier is actually smaller than its southern neighbor, it does have a more intimate, familial feel to it. Actually, the little pier is fairly similar to the first pier in most regards with the exception that it has a larger lawn and it hosts a tree covered picnic area at the end of the pier that provides quiet shelter for small groups of individuals to converse and smoke weed in an undisturbed manner. Perhaps, these relatively small differences account for the relaxed ethos that inhabits the place. While making the rounds on the first pier, I keep hearing music and group laughter wafting over the river from the little pier. I decide to check out the noise in the hopes that a kiki ball might be going on that I can watch. I cross over the small bridge that links the piers and make my way over to where the sound is. Before I get there, I notice college-aged White men and women in green short-sleeve shirts hustling back and forth from the pier. As I pass by one young woman, I see that her green shirt has the emblem of New York City’s Department of Parks and Recreation.

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curfew and positioning fixed and moveable outdoor furniture in such a way as to encourage small group activities and potentially forestall the policing problems that large group or mass activities might entail for the piers’ administrators. In short, the new piers reflect and reproduce the now dominant spatial and libidinal economies that make increasingly larger segments of Manhattan safe zones for the normative familial, professional, and recreational practices of a politically contained multiethnic, albeit structurally White, upper middle class. Nonetheless, those who fall outside the demographic purview of the new piers’ intended constituency manage to use the space fruitfully and even create affinities that circulate into the not-so-safe zones beyond the hand-scrubbed clean venues of Manhattan’s Whole Foods and Starbucks.

### Screen Memories/Real Families

As I walk onto the pier, a totally different scene than I expected commands my attention. The lawn is occupied by families with babies and older children, couples of various kinds, and groups of friends sitting or stretched out on picnic towels looking at a makeshift movie screen that has been hung from the top of a van. The crowd is predominantly, but not exclusively, White and is probably made up of residents of the West Village and nearby Chelsea to the north. On the southern side of the little pier's boardwalk, the young people from Parks and Recreation have set up a generator that buzzes loudly, a popcorn machine, and a table that has literature announcing the few remaining free movie nights throughout New York City's parks. At the back of the crowd, there is a table with a laptop computer and projector that are being monitored by two young workers with flashlights. The speaker system is set up near the van and in the middle of the lawn.

I am amazed at the clarity of the projected images and now understand the abundant presence of children on the lawn: the original version of "Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory" is making its premier at the little pier this balmy late summer night. Much like in the image-world being projected via a shiny silvery laptop on the temporary screen, there is more than just one type of child on the little pier tonight. I go around to the back of the pier behind the van and walk past the trees and picnic tables where a small group of Black and Latino/a young people are sitting and talking. One of the girls I recognize from a mini-ball I attended at the Queer Youth Center in the East Village a

couple of weeks ago. She is a formidable voguer and appeared at the function<sup>10</sup> to have a leadership role amongst the transgender Black and Latina girls who were cheering her on as she competed with an older girl who ultimately beat her out for first prize. The group's members are alternatively talking to each other, sipping drinks, and looking at the film as it appears undistorted on the other side of the screen --- no optic reversals in the age of digital visibility. Nonetheless, it is a starkly different view from this side of the pier. On this side of the cloth membrane, there are families that the state will never recognize and confer its economic and social benefits.

As I look up to the presumed back of the screen, two young people are standing opposite each other and voguing to the deep resonances of the "Oompa Loompas" singing. Their hands are lined up in front of their faces as they move between taut and limber body positions with every percussive sound. Their motion is intensified and given its own field of depth by their shadows partially framing the movie's images. The van blocks the transfer of their images to the audience on the lawn, but their companions are laughing up a storm and yelling for them to continue. They are, in the vernacular of the balls, "carrying." As they end their performance, the applause and laughter from their friends mix in with the laughter and comments from the other side for just a moment. I get to the other side of the pier and watch the last few minutes with the audience and watch their dispersal after the film ends. The crowd is jovial and parents make small talk with each other as they try to rein in their kids for the walk, train or car ride home. The young folks in the green shirts go around with plastic garbage bags collecting debris from

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<sup>10</sup> A function is another term for ball although my informants have used it in a wider sense to include any event where part of their Ballroom social network will be present



the lawn that includes quite a few empty wine glasses: a clear breach of park rules that will be looked over, at least for tonight, judging from the safe and friendly distance that the mostly Black and Latino/a park police keep from this particular crowd of visitors. The pier's lawn is cleaned and the equipment for tonight's movie is disassembled quickly and put into the van that hosted the movie screen. Everything is done in little over a half an hour and relative quiet returns to the little pier as I see the small group from the picnic area take up a spot on a now almost empty lawn.

I sit a few feet opposite the little pier's entrance on a semi-circular stone platform and wonder about the split social screen that I witnessed briefly tonight. Clearly, people on both sides of the screen enjoyed the pier as a public amenity for varying and, perhaps, opposite reasons this evening. Although there was little contact between the crowds from the opposite sides of the screen, neither was there any observable hostility between them. Perhaps, the power of the split social screen is that it requires no overt hostility to separate people out asymmetrically at the different points of access to both public and private resources and to create the multiple and variegated subjectivities that align with this material and psychic inequality. Was the pier tonight a model of urban co-existence or more like the hysteric who is perfectly repressed because he exhibits no symptoms?<sup>11</sup>

What of the ethnographer, native, quasi-native, or otherwise, in this mix of observation, analysis, and narrativization? In one sense, given the class socialization that

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<sup>11</sup> Lacanian psychoanalyst Stuart Schneiderman reports that this is the way Lacan described himself on various occasions (Schneiderman 1983: 15-16). One has to wonder whether the focus on "diversity", whether in hostile or celebratory registers, in contemporary US institutional-discursive sites is racism and White supremacy perfected or without symptoms.

academic training and professionalization inevitably entail, all ethnographic work is a split screen endeavor even for those who claim native ethnographer status in the chancy roulette game of the multicultural university's authenticity politics. The ethnographer collects data on both sides and at the tense and conflictive merger points of the social screen. In fact, the ethnographer is part of the data and images at all these dense nodal transfer points of exchange, circulation, and production that materialize the social screen(s) of the various local versions of a hyper-media saturated form of capitalism. Part of the danger of ethnographic practice is what I like to call "the ruse of autopoiesis": the sense that a research project emerges from the interior and individuated desires, whether scientific, recuperative, political and/or careerist, of the ethnographic practitioner herself.<sup>12</sup>

### Vivienne's Dance Lesson

As I get up from my post-observation ruminations to go back to Christopher Street, I see Vivienne just coming towards me with a female friend. I call out Vivienne's name and they both stop and look around in response. We exchange greetings and I get introduced to Maria who has been Vivienne's close friend since her<sup>13</sup> days in high

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<sup>12</sup> Greenwood and Levin have deftly explored the tensions between autopoiesis and forms of politically engaged investigation such as action research as well as the institutional reforms that would have to occur for action research to become a primary research model in university setting (Greenwood and Levin 2000: 85-106).

<sup>13</sup> Vivienne describes herself as someone who lives within a "dual gender reality." In conversations about gender identity, she has told me that she finds the idea of a "two-spirited" person as applying to her. Nonetheless, she finds any label reductive of her own complicated experience of presenting as a male most of the time, but feeling her feminine gender identity almost all the time. Through conversations and interviews, Vivienne has expressed the unbreakable link between her gender identities and her sexual identity. She has never used the term "gay" to describe her sexual identity to me. I have never referred to

school. Maria is a pretty, petite light-skinned Ecuadorian-Puerto Rican woman in her mid-twenties whose jet black hair is in a ponytail that bounces a bit as she walks. She is wearing khaki pants and a dark shirt that accentuates her trim and fit body --- a result of her constant training as a dancer I would learn later. Vivienne is very cute, tallish and has doe-like eyes that are set back and light up when she makes a caustic remark or gets news worthy of celebration. She is wearing a white and baby blue shirt, blue jeans, and a baby blue baseball cap that gives her a boyish allure. The light blues and whites in her crisp street gear work nicely against the wheat-at-harvest color of her late summer tan. “What are you doing down here?” Vivienne queries me. “I was actually hoping to run into you and I got that right now plus I got to see “Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory” as well” I respond.

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her using male pronouns in the four years we have known each other. Much of what Vivienne has related to me about her gender/sexual identities confirms what David Valentine has argued in a recent essay questioning the validity of the rigid analytic distinction between gender and sex systems inaugurated by Gayle Rubin’s essay “Thinking Sex” (Rubin 1984). Rubin’s essay, in many ways, marked a turning point in the rearticulation of forms of sex positive radical feminisms as well as the later development of Queer Theory. Valentine contends that this analytic binary, even when finessed in very subtle ways, may reproduce forms of marginality especially for transgender people of color. Valentine writes: “While the separation of gender and sexuality has been a theoretically productive tool, I ... argue ... that --- ironically --- this separation implicitly underpins the identity labels that feminist and queers scholars are at pains to deconstruct ... My argument is that a progressive political and theoretical move to make a space for ‘sexuality’ has unwittingly produced a system whereby those who are already disenfranchised --- through poverty and racism --- cannot be fully accounted for in contemporary theorizations of gender and sexuality” (Valentine 2006:410). Valentine’s research prescription for investigators doing work amongst gender variant working class people of color is to listen to how erotic desires are articulated and framed by these subjects as opposed to asking for identity categories as exhaustive descriptors of erotic desires and practices. Of course, this research mandatum collates with Foucault’s assertion that his project on the development of sexuality as form of modern social intelligibility is fundamentally a nominalist one and resist the kind of foundational fallacies that other materialist inquiries about sex reproduce (Foucault 1978).

As we are talking, I notice out of the corner of my eye Nalo coming from the first pier. Nalo, one of my informants, is a Ball child who is being trained by an older member of the Ball scene to become a commentator. We all greet Nalo and Vivienne and Maria go off to sit on the lawn and practice their dance routine for the Latex Ball next weekend. I stay with Nalo talking for a moment. I promise Vivienne and Maria that I will catch up with them on the grass in a few minutes to watch them practice. Nalo is a classic young Ballroom butch queen --- a gay or bisexual man who presents in a feminine or masculine gender style, but lives as his assigned sex at birth. He is also an incontrovertible cutie. Nalo is 20 years old, tall with a thin but tight body frame, has dark brown hair, thick sensual lips, and a voice that has a deep, but youthful timbre to it. He is both Puerto Rican and Dominican, but has told me that he dates dark-skinned Black men almost exclusively.

We begin to talk about setting up a time to do some interviews about the kiki house he is a leader in and are interrupted in mid-conversation by a short Ag<sup>14</sup> Latina who is handing out flyers for a party she is hosting at her house in the Bronx next weekend. Nalo tells her that he probably will not be able to go next weekend since he is going to the Latex Ball, but he borrows a pen from me and takes the young woman's number anyway in case one of his friends may want to go check out her party instead of the Latex Ball. She tells him that the party is "gonna to be thumping" and that she will be performing that night since she is a rapper as well. They shake hands before the young

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<sup>14</sup> "Ag" or "Aggressive" signifies a woman who has sex with women who is masculine presenting in gender presentation. Some "Aggressives" identify as transgender men. For a documentary about "Aggressives" see Daniel Peddle's 2005 film "The Aggressives."

woman leaves and Nalo heads off to talk to some of his kiki brothers and sisters that have gathered in the middle of the little pier's lawn. I go off to watch Vivienne and Maria practice and I tell Nalo that I will see him later and hang out with some of his kiki house friends.

When I catch up to Vivienne and Maria, they are in full dance rehearsal mode. I watch and try to capture the gist of their movements. Vivienne is instructing Maria on the choreography of her piece for next week's Latex Ball. Vivienne is using technical dance language in describing her steps and Maria is following right along asking specific questions about each movement that Vivienne is making. At different moments, Maria follows right behind Vivienne seemingly forcing her body to remember the steps through physical motion itself. After a few tries, she is getting it and asking about the meaning of different moves in the narrative of the choreographed piece. Vivienne tells me that she is competing for the grand prize and that her production requires some sort of HIV prevention message that is not clear to me from just watching Vivienne and Maria go through the dance steps.

They are obviously old dance partners: they have developed a private language of motion, laughter, pauses, and mutual touch that infuses the very public place of the little pier's lawn with a kinetic intimacy. I watch them during their practice writing notes and trying to imagine what the production will look like when all the dancers are in place and in proper costume and makeup. Soon Vivienne calls an end to the practice and tells me that she thinks they will be ready for next weekend's ball once they get a full week of rehearsals in, but it is clear that Maria is her second-in-command as far as the dancing

part of the production is concerned. Maria needs to leave and I go along with Vivienne and her up Christopher Street until Seventh Avenue South where we say farewell to Maria who has to go home to East Harlem.

As we walk back to the piers, we run into Joshua who Vivienne introduces to me as one of her makeup artists. Joshua is a tall light-skinned Dominican who tells me that he comes from an island off the coast of the Dominican Republic, but has grown up mostly in New York City. Right now Joshua lives in Woodside Queens and works for a large cosmetics corporation in Manhattan. Joshua is rather shy with me and Vivienne takes over at various points during our conversation when I ask questions about their relationship as makeup artist and client. I ask her whether Joshua always does her makeup. “It is not as simple as that” Vivienne responds. “Joshua is very busy and has to find time in his schedule to squeeze me in. Before all that though, I have to put up some collateral before Joshua can do my makeup for a ball or a show. After the issue of the collateral is settled, I talk to Joshua about what is inspiring me in the particular production I am preparing for a production<sup>15</sup> or show that I am going to perform at or whatever I’m doing at the time. Then, Joshua tells me about the colors he is working with at the moment. We sort of come up with a compromise between our different creative palettes and the makeup job proceeds.” Vivienne goes on to tell me that Joshua has a different approach to makeup than the other artists she has worked with in the past. He avoids a theatrical flair to his makeup work and knows how to use shadow to bring out feminine qualities in Vivienne’s face. Our conversation is interrupted by a number of

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<sup>15</sup> In Ballroom parlance, a “production” means a group performance that normally requires elaborate choreography.

young people who know Vivienne from the ball scene and I notice that Joshua has given us the slip in the midst of weaving in and out of body traffic on Christopher Street.

As we get closer to the piers, Vivienne tells me that Joshua disappeared because he did not feel comfortable smoking weed in front of “the White guy.” I laugh as she tells me this and confess that this is not the first time I am viewed as White and I wonder aloud if the children on the pier might see me as an undercover cop. “I doubt it” Vivienne retorts. “They’ll probably think you’re my Sugar Daddy which means more power for you and me honey” Vivienne adds. When we return to the lawn at the second pier, there is a group of Ball children sitting on the concrete wall that frames the grass. They are voguing, chatting, speculating about the contours of the competition at the upcoming House of Latex Ball, and smoking some rather pungent weed. They all know Vivienne from the Ball scene or her work at the Bronx Queer Pride Center (BQCP). I get introduced to the ones who come to greet Vivienne as “my friend who is writing a book on the Ball scene” or occasionally as “the anthropologist.” The most reaction that I get from Vivienne’s introductory descriptions of me is a “That’s cool” or “Is Vivienne going to be in the book?” I answer in the affirmative to the last question and hope that a conversation about the Ball scene emerges.

However, Nalo comes to greet Vivienne and me and inadvertently derails my opportunity. He is voguing about with some acumen and stretching out his thin dark-blue sweater above his chest to create faux fabric breast. He spins around and comes to where a group of us are sitting and asks, “Do you like my tatas gentlemen?” We all laugh and Nalo sits down and starts talking to his friend Jamal that he introduces to me as someone

who grew up “around my way in Brooklyn.” I ask Nalo whether he has begun to read the copy of The Autobiography of Malcolm X that I gave him a few weeks ago. He says that he is going to soon and Jamal tells him that he should definitely read that book since Nalo is “All into Black men and shit.”

I learn that the neighborhood they both grew up in Brooklyn is predominantly African-American and that Jamal did not know that Nalo was “into guys” until they bumped into each other at a “gay party” in Manhattan. “That was so embarrassing”, Nalo tells me. “I was at this gay party and all of a sudden I see Jamal and I tell my girlfriend who was with me, “Oh my God, that boy lives right on my block.” I started trying to hide behind my girlfriend, but Jamal saw me and I just gave up.” “Yeah, that was so stupid Nalo”, Jamal replies laughing as he remembers the incident. “You see, I couldn’t pass as straight like Nalo could. So, I was just the gay kid on the block since I couldn’t cover it up anyway.”

I begin to worry that the thick cloud of weed I am surrounded by might give me a contact high and struggling with a contact hangover when I have an early morning interview with one of my informants does not sound like an appealing way to greet the day tomorrow. So, I take out a small box of cigars and light up one of my Partagas minis. The field research equivalent of fighting smoke with more smoke. Nalo grabs the box out of my hand and starts looking at it. “How do you pronounce this?” he asks. I tell him the proper pronunciation and tell him that these small cigars come from “Santiago De Los Caballeros” in the Dominican Republic. We start talking about how cigars are used in



Santeria rituals to “despojar”<sup>16</sup> people from the effects of evil or negative spiritual forces. “You know I got a couple of my relatives that are into Santeria. I should give them one of these cigars so that they could despojar my friend because that niggah has mad negative energy” Nalo tells us. We also discuss how there are many Santeria practitioners in the scene and the West African roots of this religion. “You see that’s what I don’t understand about my Spanish<sup>17</sup> people. Why are they so racists? They are doing all this Santeria shit and yet they say racist things against Black people. My family would always tell me that not to hang out with “those monkeys.” And you know that they’re not light-skinned either. That’s why I like to hang out here at this pier with my Spanish and Black people and my kiki house sisters.” Jamal nods his head in ascent as Nalo speaks and I wonder exactly why I thought that Nalo needed to read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* in the first place.

Vivienne, who had gone off to talk to someone on her cell phone, is back where we are sitting and places her hands on both of my shoulders and shifts her weight onto them. I have a sense that it is time to go. Vivienne is going to meet a bunch of friends at Krash tonight and I have an early morning meeting. We say our goodbyes and head up Christopher to Seventh Avenue South and the trains beyond. As we walk, Joshua reappears and I smile at him and tell him, “You know you didn’t have to disappear to smoke weed. It’s better than smoking cigarettes.” “Yeah, I know, but I still didn’t feel

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<sup>16</sup> A “despojo” in the Afro-Cuban religion of Santeria is a purification ritual that restores the spiritual balance of a practitioner who has been subject to negative spiritual energy (Murphy 1993).

<sup>17</sup> Many of my informants both those who identified as Latino/a and those who identified as African-American and/or Black referred to Latinos/as as “Spanish” and houses that are predominantly Latino/a as “Spanish houses” or “Latin Houses.”

comfortable. I don't know you like that even if you're Vivienne's friend." "I understand that. Well, you guys have a good time at Krash."<sup>18</sup> Behave both of you." I tell them with a wink of an eye.<sup>19</sup> "Me and Joshua always do Edgar darling." Vivienne retorts in her best Marlene Dietrich. I walk away up north and to 14<sup>th</sup> street and the east side trains. After all, Joshua is not the only one who knows how to disappear.

### South Bronx Bus to Atlantis: Nuyorican Memory Lane

It's a cool breeze that blows down Southern Boulevard this late date in August. The last couple of days have been scorchers and the asphalt and cement no longer act as ovens making the simple back and forth of work and home an exercise in endurance. I await the bus on the corner of Southern Boulevard and Longwood Avenue and notice the pleasurable mania that accompanies the first evening of the weekend in this Latino/a and Black working class neighborhood in the eastern most sections of the South Bronx. Opposite the bus stop, El Valle restaurant is making a brisk business as its various delivery men come to pick up the famous combo # 4 that promises to feed a family of four --- a whole roast chicken, huge helpings of rice and beans, an order of sweet plantains, a salad that is layered with sugary slices of canned beets, and the 2 liter Pepsi lest there be a rebellion in the ranks of the children. "Para una familia, es lo mas economico mi amor", one of the veteran waitresses told me one day when I inquired

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<sup>18</sup> For a time in the mid-1990's, Krash was the hottest queer Latino/a party in New York City and a site where elements of the old style glamour drag performance tradition was preserved. Krash was located originally in Astoria, Queens and later moved to Manhattan to a larger venue with a more racially and economically mixed crowd.

<sup>19</sup> This, of course, is a reference to Clifford Geertz's notion that good ethnography is so detailed and nuanced that the ethnographer knows the difference when her subjects are blinking rather than winking and vice versa (Geertz 1985).

about the takeout menu displayed on the window. A family of five is crossing the street to have a sit down meal at El Valle. Perhaps, the respite from the heat has freed them this evening from the air conditioned cloisters that apartments become during parts of the summer for many folks in this neighborhood and throughout New York City.

Police from the somewhat new 41<sup>st</sup> Precinct, a half a block distance from El Valle, walk in at regular intervals as I watch out for the # 19 bus. The cops are a much more multi-cultural lot than when I first started working and later living in this neighborhood in 1987. At that time, the 41<sup>st</sup> was located near the Simpson Street stop on the elevated section of the # 2 train and was referred to by cops as “Fort Apache”: this particular moniker revealing the rank and file police officers’ vision of the neighborhood’s residents as uncivilized “Indians” and, consequently, the cops as armed White settlers doing the law’s bidding. The new generation of 21<sup>st</sup> century Bronx boosters assures the public and, more importantly, potential business investors and real estate speculators that the South Bronx of “Fort Apache” days is long gone and that even the old 41<sup>st</sup> has been moved and replaced by a facility on Southern Boulevard instantiating the putatively better set of social relations that typify the New South Bronx. Well, the cops have changed enough to take advantage of the combo meals at El Valle and their darker skin hues and Latino and African-American surnames on their badges do indicate a demographic shift in the New York City Police Department’s personnel. The other changes are not so obvious from the vantage point of the # 19 bus stop this evening.

I can now see the bus winding down from the corner of 163<sup>rd</sup> Street and Southern Boulevard where the Hunts Point stop of the # 6 subway helps to create a shopping and

transportation hub. Its blue and white exterior shines in the glowing orange-blue evening sky; the other cars are dwarfed by its stolid sojourn down the thoroughfare. The bus stops and I get on. The bus is one of the largest in the Metropolitan Transit Authority's (MTA) fleet. It is an accordion bus and is able to accommodate more people than the standard-size buses. After paying my fare, I sit down toward the back of the bus and watch the world go by from my window. Young people are gathering on stoops, corners, and the benches that dot Southern Boulevard to talk, listen to music, and enjoy the cooling breezes that they have been deprived of during the last couple of days of heat and humidity. Families are also outside watching over young children who are scurrying about chasing one another, throwing around balls, and sharing portable video games.

The vivid activity on the street contrasts sharply with the quiet on the bus. I notice one Latina in her late 30's or early 40's talking about how rude people have become, but I fail to notice who her interlocutor might be until I realize she is talking to herself and being roundly ignored by most of the other passengers who are variously listening to iPods, looking out the windows, engaging in quiet conversations, and talking or sending text messages on cell phones. The bus passes by the 24-hour Laundromat that I go to once in a while to get wash and fold service. We pass by the Casanova Public School and the Avenue of St. John Apartments that have a permanent play street set up in front of the entrances to its 4 buildings all summer long. The usual mix of bodegas, 5 and 6 storey walkup apartment buildings, liquor stores, storefront churches, and C-Town super

markets are broken up by a new pharmacy here and a new restaurant like Lupita's Comida Mejicana there.<sup>20</sup>

As the bus gets to the corner of Southern Boulevard and 149<sup>th</sup> Street, it makes a brief stop to unload passengers transferring to the # 6 subway line. This is an odd intersection even by South Bronx standards of oddness: it features a White Castle burger restaurant nestled up against a huge Ortiz Funeral Home building. The unlikely proximity of fast food and long grieving mark the jumbled quality of quick dirty commerce and the exigencies of life and death that envelope the poorer ambits of one of the richest cities on the planet. The bus takes a right unto 149<sup>th</sup> Street and will stay on this street until it leaves the Bronx and crosses over the river into Central Harlem ending its route at the Riverbank State Park overlooking the Hudson River. Riverbank is the only New York State run park in Manhattan that is built on top of a garbage processing plant: a true monument to what community concessions mean in one of the most densely populated sections of New York City. The bus turns and quickens its pace as it goes along 149<sup>th</sup> Street passing the Popeye's Fried Chicken, the Pitusa Bakery, El Atoradero ("Productos de Mejico Lindo"), the Bilingual and Bicultural Community Middle School, the Maria Isabella Senior Housing complex, and the famed Venice Italian Restaurant that has been on the same corner since 1951 echoing the White ethnic past of this section of the Bronx.

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<sup>20</sup> The Mexican community is a growing presence throughout the South Bronx reflecting its status as the largest growing Latino/a population in New York City. Based on fifteen years of fieldwork in New York City and Puebla, Mexico, Robert C. Smith's "Mexican New York: Transnational Lives of New Immigrants" is the most thorough and analytically sharp ethnographic study of the Mexican community in New York City to date (Smith 2005).

149<sup>th</sup> Street has another name along this east-west drag that funnels into Manhattan, Eugenio Maria de Hostos Avenue. Hostos was a nineteenth-century Puerto Rican educator, separatist, and abolitionist whose name adorns the buildings of the City University of New York's Community College occupying the southern corners of 149<sup>th</sup> Street and the Grand Concourse. Along this stretch up to and including Hostos Community College at its most western point, one can see the Lola Rodriguez de Tió Intermediate School and a few blocks south from Hostos Avenue is the Segundo Ruiz Belvis Diagnostic and Treatment Center and before arriving at Hostos Community College the fire orange-red bricks of Lincoln Hospital tower over the smaller residential and commercial spaces that surround it.

Rodriguez de Tió, Ruiz Belvis, and Hostos are all figures from Puerto Rico's nineteenth and early twentieth-century abolitionist, separatist, and nationalist past. During the late 1960's and 1970's, struggles for more resources to meet the social needs of poor and working class communities in the South Bronx culminated in the creation of new institutions that would ostensibly address those needs and the naming of these institutions were part of these self-same economic and racial struggles. That the historical figures chosen as "role-models-in-brick-face" are largely upper class White elites may point to the class and race limits and/or pretensions of the leadership of these mobilizations. The struggles for quality medical care for community members at the old Lincoln Hospital and the eventual successful demand for construction of the present day hospital on a different physical site are still invoked in academic and popular discussions of the political successes of the Young Lords Party (Melendez and Torres 2005, Torres 1998).

Clearly, the built environment of any urban neighborhood is part and parcel of the infrastructure that allows for the reproduction of the conditions that facilitate capital accumulation. Any given physical structure is a temporary consolidation point for both use and exchange values and how long any structure or groups of physical structures stand and in what form is predicated partially on when and under what conditions these parts of the built environment become hindrances to the increased circulation and accumulation of capital. In one sense, the expansion of gentrifying processes throughout historically Latino/a and Black working class neighborhoods in New York City is a function of the constant recalibrations by elite class/race actors and their institutional networks of the nature of these use and exchange values embedded in the housing stock and its attendant transportation infrastructure as well as “public amenities” such as green spaces. The apparent spatial fixity of the built environment is subtended both by the constant recalculations of the realization of greater quantities of value by investors and speculators as well as the incongruity of particular physical sites that stand as the remains of popular victories in an environment that is the very incarnation of the ongoing deterioration of those same past social gains (Harvey 1982, Harvey 1985, Harvey 1996, Lefebvre 1991, Smith 1996).

This strip of patriotically named buildings along 149<sup>th</sup> Street resonates with the many years of diverse and rarely coordinated community struggles. Yet, it also reveals the insistent materiality that anchors the historical sedimentation of years of reversals, tactical retreats, and unadorned defeats. As I ring the bell for my stop, I am amazed at how the very buildings on this South Bronx thoroughfare offer up a rather dark political economy of the sign that would test the faith of the most sanguine social reformer. The

very slowness of bus travel in New York City lends itself to ruminations of how these buildings, people, and ideas came together and why in this exact configuration given the real possibility of other outcomes.

### Friday Night Practice Before the Latex Ball

I get off at 149<sup>th</sup> and St. Anne's Avenue. I have a 2 block walk before I get to the rehearsal I am going to observe. Vivienne told me that rehearsals would begin after 7pm and that I could drop by any time thereafter. My cell tells me it is about to be 8:30pm. So, I quicken my pace in the hopes that I can catch Vivienne and her dancers before they begin and thereby soften the disruptive<sup>21</sup> quality of my arrival. Vivienne works for the Bronx Queer Pride Center (BQPC) doing a myriad of things for the organization around HIV prevention, queer and transgender youth services, and Bronx-based queer and transgender youth of color organizing. Her executive director, Lorna Summers, a White working class Bronx lesbian attorney turned community activist, has taken Vivienne under her wing and seems to be doing all she can to prepare Vivienne for her next steps as a professional and community leader. Since Vivienne has taken this job, I have noticed that she is much happier and busier both in her work and artistic life than I have ever remembered her being in the 4 years since we first met. The BQPC is a four-story walk

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<sup>21</sup> The long tradition of the arrival trope in ethnographic writing is a textual and ideological smoothing over of the disruptive nature of ethnographic practice. My own experience in doing ethnographic research within the social networks of New York City's House Ball scene is indicative of this. Ball informants are masters of self-fashioning and handling experts of all kinds. House members are sophisticated consumers of popular culture and understand the advertising and marketing strategies that animate most of U.S. culture. The idea that an ethnographer of the scene is getting at an uninterrupted reality in engaging in ethnographic practice amongst Ball members is diagnostic of the types of performative blocks that university training inculcates in knowledge production.



up on the southern side of 149<sup>th</sup> Street just west of St. Anne's Avenue. The building stands out because all its upper floors have floor to ceiling windows in front and the sign that announces the Center has a rainbow flag that contrasts sharply with the blue and White signs of the Assemblies of God Church right next door.

As I walk up the stairs to the second floor rehearsal space, I can hear different tracks of music being played and the back and forth of hurried and excited conversations. As I walk in, I immediately see Vivienne talking to a number of people near a small stage area in the front of the room. She recognizes me and yells out my name and motions me to the stage area. I go over to the stage and get introduced to the group of young people that will be her dancers for the dance and performance production that Vivienne has thought up for the grand prize category for the House of Latex Ball tomorrow night. Vivienne introduces me to the group as a friend and "the anthropologist I was telling you about." I smile and shake hands with everyone. The group includes Asia, John, Maria, Claudia, Chris, and Fernando. Actually, Vivienne tells me that not all the members of the production will be here tonight and that I will meet "the rest of the crew" tomorrow at the Latex Ball. I ask Vivienne whether the team has been rehearsing most of the week. She confirms my suspicion and adds that the 3 to 4 hour rehearsals were in addition to putting in time at all their regular jobs. "Everybody works at least one full time gig here honey", Vivienne reminds me rather emphatically.

From the Center's second floor where the rehearsal is being held, one can see the latest buildings to be constructed on the this little section of 149<sup>th</sup> Street: a huge free-standing Burger King that includes a plastic domed play area for children as well as its

own parking lot and the New Horizons Youth Detention Center. Amidst the rambling and weather-worn commercial and residential spaces in this strip of a 149<sup>th</sup> Street, both the Burger King and New Horizons still stand out as newly-minted facilities. In fact, the youth prison is the first building one notices as the # 2 train comes out of the 149<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue station going uptown on the elevated section of the line. In the summer time, I would occasionally see the young men playing basketball or talking to each other in the yard while officers and civilian staff interact and watch over the kids. Under a different set of economic and social parameters, the facility could be any yard, gym, or classroom building at a well-funded suburban public high school. Both of these additions are products of the deindustrialization that urban centers like New York City have been undergoing since the 1960's. Both the youth prison and the fast food restaurant are different institutional nodal points in the broader service-carceral economy that poor and working class Latinos/as and Blacks have to negotiate to assemble the necessary social goods for something like daily survival (Gilmore 2007).

Getting ready for a Ball is a money and time-consuming enterprise and there is never any certainty that a win is in the bag. Even if the production is flawless, an individual or a group of individuals can be outclassed by their competitors or “girlfriend politics” can intervene in the judging process at any moment. Although the Latex Ball is organized and sponsored by the largest not for profit HIV/AIDS organization in New York City, the Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC), the House of Latex follows the rules of all of the regular ball circuit and gives cash rewards and trophies for winners of the different categories. Vivienne and her team will be competing in the Grand Prize category that is worth \$1,000. Part of the challenge of doing a group production, instead

of an individual performance, is coordinating multiple schedules for rehearsals and getting team members fitted for costumes and on time at the site for makeup and last minute preparations. Vivienne has been involved in the Ball scene since 1995 and is no stranger to the demands of managing conflicting time schedules and the sometimes fickle talent both within and outside of the Ball context.

Vivienne is a very accomplished young person. She is a trained classical and modern dancer and a formidable choreographer in her own right. Earlier in the summer, I was interviewing her after a Sunday brunch meet up, we walked over to the Columbia University's Morningside Heights campus to sit and continue our conversation and she demonstrated what the difference was between European and American runway<sup>22</sup> in terms of the movement of the torso and the face of the person walking in the different categories. As she walked the imaginary runway on the white concrete and marble thoroughfare of the campus, I asked her about the dance categories and she began to show me the different dances using the language of what I construed to be classical ballet --- "first position", "second position", etc. "But, do you use classical terms when you are training someone for a production for a ball?", I asked. "No", she laughed. "I just demonstrate it with my own body and if the child doesn't get it, I move her feet or body

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<sup>22</sup> At the most basic level, runway categories can be defined as the technique of walking back and forth on an elevated platform. In an interview on the categories that make up Ball competition, Vivienne explained to me that "runway depends greatly on individual style and although the movement is minimal compared to a vogue category, attitude is what makes a good runway performance. I think that runway technique is walking a straight line and understanding key positions like the T stance or what in ballet you call the third position. Girls have to know how to spot their heads when turning so the body moves first and then the head. Female Figure Runway concentrates more on hip movement and Male Figure Runway focuses on the torso ... In American Runway, you expect the child to keep his movements simple. European Runway has more hand movements and the Female Figure is more extravagant in movement and attitude."

to the right position with my hands. Once they feel it in their bodies, they generally get it.”

Ball culture regularly produces people like Vivienne: high and popular culture polyglots who are skilled at manipulating images and bodies in such a way as to both mimic, critique, and/or rearticulate themes in the dominant cultural mainstream. Vivienne is known in the Ball scene in New York City as very creative and cutting edge --- someone who is not afraid of experimenting with the forms that she has inherited. One of my other informants who considers himself one of the “Older Girls” of the Houses told me that Vivienne is different: “Mama is not just another pretty face. She knows how to think. That’s why the girls give her life<sup>23</sup> when she gets up on that runway.”

But getting life from the girls is a result of labor and time. This evening will be a testament to that Ballroom axiom. I ask Vivienne whether she has eaten. She tells me that she simply has not had the time. She spent part of her day looking for accessories for the production which included a stop at a downtown magic shop to get a theatrical smoke machine and consulting with her fashion designer about her and the team’s costumes. I ask if she would like me to pick up a pizza pie from down the block for the crew. The usual pleadings to not put myself out for them follow which I respond to with how much of a pleasure it would be for me to get them something before they rehearse all night. Eventually, Vivienne and her team relent and I am off to the pizza joint. A pizza and some sodas for a night of participant observation and friendly banter strikes me as more

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<sup>23</sup> “Giving someone life” or “getting life” are emic Ball terms. One “gives life” when a Ball walker performs with grace and acumen the category she is competing in. “To get life” is to be on the receiving end of this adulation.

than a fair trade --- “research up in drags” as reciprocity must be the category I am competing in tonight. The ethnographic enterprise is an odd craft that has a magical element to it: fast food and sodas later materialize as field notes and ethnographic narratives --- from flesh to words and back again to fleshier words (Lévi-Strauss 1983).

### Pizza Becomes Fieldnotes

When we settle down to eat pizza and drink sodas, I finally get a chance to talk to Vivienne’s team. Almost all of them are involved in the programs at the Center as peer leaders or frontline staff. Asia, a Belizean national and a “woman of transgender experience”, works at the Center with the transgender youth providing social services and group support. Claudia, John, and Fernando are part of the youth group and participate in the dance troupe that is housed at the Center and led by one of the staff members. Claudia was born in the Dominican Republic, but has spent most of her life in the Bronx; she is studying dance at one of CUNY’s four-year colleges. John is an African-American young man who volunteers as a peer educator at the Center when he is not in school or working his “straight job.” Maria is familiar to me from our first introduction at the piers a week ago. She is a trained dancer who works at a law office downtown and regularly does dance performances at community venues. Chris is a friend of Vivienne’s from Christopher Street. Chris was scheduled to attend the three prior rehearsals this week, but could not get time off from his job at a children’s toy store in Manhattan. The group has a very easy style with each other and in between bites of pizza and swigs of soda they are beginning to stretch in preparation for a long rehearsal.

The rehearsal space is rather large; it takes up the whole second floor of the Center. It looks like it has not been utilized in a while or it is being prepared for some other uses by the Center's staff. Along with the small stage that takes up about a third of the front, there is a DJ booth to the right of the entrance and to the left a rather long bar that has a faux thatched semi-roof constructed out of bamboo that runs the entire length of the bar like a latter day bohio drinking hole. The actual bar is made out of a gray marble like material. There is a mural behind the bar that depicts a bucolic scene of three stoic Taino<sup>24</sup> Indians positioned in a savannah-like landscape standing in front of their huts and a campfire. A dark blue river runs through the Taino village. I look at Vivienne with a bit of a puzzled grimace. "Before the Center took this building over, this floor was El Yunque<sup>25</sup> Bar & Social Club." Nuyorican fashionings of identity traverse the spectrum of sentimentality, nostalgia, militant political assertion, and a defiant, but pleasurable vulgarity. Judging from the mural, the proprietors of the now defunct social club had a talent for full spectrum Nuyorican representation. Tonight, however, some of the erstwhile descendents of the mural bound stone-faced Tainos will rehearse a different set of rituals, work regimes, and family making in the hopes of a big win and a little Ballroom fame.

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<sup>24</sup> Taino Indians, as historical figures and empty ideological signifiers, serve both as a foundation of the racial triad (European, Taino, and African heritages) that ostensibly constitutes Puerto Rican nationality and as cultural linchpins for a Taino revival movement that romanticizes and avoids the historical complexity of Afro-Caribbean identity in Puerto Rico in the context of successive Euro-American colonialisms (Duany 2001).

<sup>25</sup> El Yunque is a rainforest located in Puerto Rico and it is part of the US government's national park system. Images of El Yunque rebound with Taino religious practices and articulations of Puerto Rico as a metonymy for nature prior to industrialization and the timelessness of an indigenous cultural patrimony.

As the group assembles for the task at hand, I see Vivienne carrying around a stunning pair of shoes. I have seen these shoes before, but I cannot remember when or under what circumstances. As I start scribbling in my pad, Vivienne detects my interests in the shoes and tells me that the shoes were designed by Italian designer Carlo Ventura. The shoes are silver with sequins and albino python trimmings. They have a half-inch black heel and jet black shoestrings.<sup>26</sup> Vivienne informs me that the girlfriend she borrowed them from had to spend a whole two weeks pay to purchase these shoes. I know who she is talking about and remember that I saw her girlfriend wear the shoes at a ball sponsored by a local queer youth organization. Vivienne's girlfriend is a House of Mizrahi child and he did look good in these shoes that night. Vivienne has spared herself a rather large expense by borrowing something used, but elegant from one of her best girlfriends.<sup>27</sup>

I ask Vivienne about her own expenses so far for the Latex Ball: "Well, I am spending \$375 on my costume which my fashion person made for me. It's white satin pants with a white waist jacket and a large white and silver hooded cloak with silver

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<sup>26</sup> The description of these exquisitely designed shoes is a product of Vivienne "schooling" me in both recognizing design patterns in shoes and clothing as well as correcting me during read backs of my field notes to her about my color designations for various items.

<sup>27</sup> Part of preparation for any ball is the child's assessment of how much he or she will have to spend to have the performance come off in the manner desired and what types of items and services are available for free or significantly reduced costs from a fellow house member or a close girlfriend from another house or from someone who has little or nothing to do with the balls. The balls demand that the participants cast a very wide net of reciprocity and obligations if a given child or a house is to succeed in this hyper-competitive space and doing inventory is just one moment in this elaborate labor-performance process (Mauss 2000).

trimmings. Then, I will have my hair done as well as sprayed with white paint. That might cost \$20 to \$25. I will be wearing white cosmetic eye contacts that will cost me about \$75. Okay, that's me more or less. Then there's the volcano." "A volcano?" I inquire. "Yeah, girl, it's one of the elements of the production. You know the whole lost city of Atlantis theme that the Latex Ball Planning Committee decided on this year ... The volcano is made out of fabric that costs me \$23 and I had to buy a smoke machine to put inside the fabric that was thirty bucks. Then, I think I told you this already, that I went to the magic shop and bought this flash smoke pot for when the volcano erupts and that was \$54.99 and I had to get the powder that you combine with these chemical, red chemical A & B, and that gives a special smoke effect to the eruption and that costs \$18.99. And the flash paper and that's \$5 and then there is paying the dancers for their performances that night as well as the material for the banner that some of my friends are going to hang off the balcony at the end of my production." According to my calculations in my notebook, Vivienne has already spent close to \$600 for a production that may or may not win the \$1,000 Grand Prize. This figure does not take into account the small fee she will pay her dancers for their work that evening and the necessary<sup>28</sup> taxi cab rides home after the ball is over at 4 or 5 in the morning.

Vivienne's production has to fit the thematic and performative guidelines found in the Latex Ball's program if it is to have a chance of winning the approval of the

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<sup>28</sup> The cab ride is necessary for Vivienne because she will be wearing makeup and women's clothing at the end of the Latex Ball and taking public transportation in the wee hours of the morning might make her susceptible to sexual harassment, transphobic and/or homophobic verbal and/or physical abuse and assault. Since Vivienne has been my informant, she has been mugged twice: both times her assailant threatened her with a gun or a knife. It may be the case that her non-normative gender expression has had something to do with her perpetrators choosing her as a victim.



judges. The 2006 Fifteenth Annual House of Latex Ball in which Vivienne will compete tomorrow evening has its own theme as every other Latex function has had before it. This year the ball is organized around the myth of the lost continent of Atlantis. The introductory section of the Latex Ball program reads:

“It is said that throughout the ages the people of Atlantis took for granted the bountiful gifts of health, love and happiness and eventually corrupted themselves in the pursuit of greater material gain, carnal pleasures and power. They misused their superior knowledge to build destructive devices and engage in gregarious and careless behavior. It is said that Atlantis was not destroyed overnight but that the Atlanteans had been forewarned before the city was demolished. Although mythical, the concept of Atlantis tackles a basic issue we have within the ballroom scene: the fact that some participants in the ballroom community ignore the impact that HIV has on individuals and on our community at large. In actuality HIV is still a real threat to all of us as a whole. People are still becoming infected at alarming rates within the ballroom community ... By being leaders and mentors we must continue to fight through constant education, encourage the use of condoms, promote testing, have individuals seek treatment, work to reduce stigma for those living with HIV while taking responsibility for our health and sexuality. We, as a community, possess a great wealth of creativity, much like the mythical city of Atlantis; however, our community must learn to value and respect one another so that we do not become lost to the world due to the impact of HIV and AIDS” (Atlantis- House of Latex Ball Program: 2006).

While extolling the incredible talent and creativity found in the Ball scene, the program exhorts its members to engage in safer sex practices, reduce HIV/AIDS stigma, and frequent HIV testing. What does it mean to make responsibility and a certain type of psycho-social sensitivity the primary prescriptions for a socio-historical phenomenon like the AIDS epidemic especially when the target audience for this message is largely poor

and working class queers and transgender people of color? Why not bring up, in an admittedly shorthand way appropriate to an event program, the role of the structural inequalities that produce the health disparities that fuel the AIDS crisis in the Ballroom scene?<sup>29</sup>

As the rehearsal begins, I get recruited to control the music and to judge whether Asia, the production's narrator, is projecting her voice loudly enough. As the performance unfolds, I begin to get a sense of what Vivienne has planned for tomorrow night. This particular category calls for a team from a house to do a dance production in which the Emperor of Atlantis returns to save his people from the scourge of HIV/AIDS. Vivienne is playing the role of the Emperor and Asia is the High Priestess, Mufalia Furtado<sup>30</sup>, who is one of the last surviving descendants of the Atlantean race. Before the dancers begin, Asia does a prologue introducing her character and describing the procession and sacrifice of evil that is in the offing as a way of enticing the Emperor to return to reclaim his throne and dispel the effects of the HIV/AIDS crisis that has the Atlantean people in a death dealing thrall. Asia expresses her hope to the audience that the return of the Emperor will inaugurate a new golden age for Atlantis. Asia rehearses

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<sup>29</sup> Part of the answer to this question is that the service-policy industry that has grown up around the HIV/AIDS crisis in the United States is one of the privileged institutional sites for the regulation of social subjects whose excesses are potential threats to the moral economy of commodified gay respectability. In one sense, the AIDS industry produces, inter alia, a crypto-religious technology of the self embedded in the putatively secular discourses of public health and moral-psychic integration.

<sup>30</sup> In a later interview, I would learn that Asia's character's last name is in homage to Nelly Furtado, an experimental folk singer, who is from the Azores off the coast of Portugal. Vivienne would also tell me that while she was doing research for her performance, she discovered that Atlantis enthusiasts imagine the Azores to be the remaining mountains of the mythical sunken continent.

the prologue a number of times before she gets her sound levels and diction to Vivienne's standards of excellence. Once that is done, the music is played and the dancers begin their part of the production. Vivienne uses an instrumental piece called "Sanctuary" by Umtata, a Japanese composer. She chooses that piece because it will give the audience a sound atmosphere that "will definitely sound foreign." Vivienne wants the audience to see and feel the Atlantis theme in her team's performance as having a "mysticism or surrealness" to it.

The piece itself is a fairly straight forward, if physically demanding, modern dance. At the end of Asia's monologue, the four dancers (i.e., Claudia, Maria, John, and Chris) that are playing the Emperor's subjects begin their movement up and down the imaginary practice runway. Fernando, in the guise of a dark figure, follows the four dancers lurking after them in a threatening manner. In the actual production, Fernando is dressed in black and has "sexism", "homophobia", "ignorance", "poverty", and "transphobia" written on his body. Mufalia Furtado and the subjects go and grab this malevolent figure. Vivienne tells me later that Fernando's character is a vampire cum grim reaper cum evildoer amalgam. He represents "the injustice in the world and this is what's keeping humans in crisis in Atlantis."

At the practice, Asia and Vivienne's dancer-subjects grab Fernando and offer him as a sacrifice to the cloth volcano that Asia has identified for the audience as Mt. Picu --- the name of an Azorean volcano. As Fernando waits to be sacrificed, Vivienne comes out of the volcano waving a plastic white trident precipitating her royal subjects' bows. She grabs Fernando violently and gives him a dramatic kiss --- the proverbial "kiss of death"

that signals the defeat of HIV/AIDS in Atlantis and the return of the Emperor to his rightful throne. Vivienne would tell me later that the Emperor's kiss is a taking in of all the negative influences that have produced the HIV/AIDS crisis and transforming it into an energy that animates the rest of her performance.

Fernando's death begins Vivienne's runway walk and the real start of the competition. The grand prize category demands not just a team production, but that the person who is organizing the performance be willing to walk European or American Runway and "battle" the other people who are competing as well. Vivienne explains it in this way: "In order to win, you have to battle no matter if I thought the production alright or not. If I do not do satisfactory during those battles, then I do not win ... The production is just to solidify your spot within the battle zone. So, everybody comes out and they show their production which puts them in the preliminary place to then get your tens."<sup>31</sup>

At the end of her runway performance, Vivienne and her dancers move to the end of the imaginary practice runway and strike a pose. Vivienne lifts her trident and points it up to what will be on the night of the actual performance a balcony. Once she gives this cue, a group of Vivienne's friends will unfurl four long vertical black banners that have written in White paint: "Vivienne Mugler Fights Homophobia." Throughout the rehearsal, various elements of the production are debated and discussed. The dancers repeatedly ask questions of both Vivienne and Maria about where they need to be

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<sup>31</sup> "Getting your tens" means that a Ball walker has qualified for the next step in the competition which entails a battle or elimination round.

throughout various moments in the unfolding of the production. Most of these queries focus on transitions from one dramatic point in the narrative to another. Vivienne and Maria function quite well as co-teachers in this ad hoc seminar in motion. They both grab and reposition dancers' shoulders, hips, legs, and torsos allowing these young people to feel their way into the mobile logic of the piece.

As the night goes on, I can see Vivienne and her friends wearying of the repetition that is necessary for the piece to achieve what Ballroom community members call "flawlessness."<sup>32</sup> At the end of the rehearsal, the group sits around stretching, yawning, and bemoaning the fact that they have spent "a perfectly fuckable Friday night" practicing rather than partying. I say my goodbyes to the group, but before I leave Vivienne asks me whether or not I will be available to "do security" tomorrow for the group in the cavernous basement at the venue where the Latex Ball will be held. She tells me that the dancers will be putting on their costumes, makeup, and rehearsing until the last minutes before they go onto the runway to compete. "So, if you don't mind, you're the best person to do security, Edgar, since the dancers will have to be busy doing all that mess. We need somebody to watch our shit. You know how things tend to disappear in big crowds like that", Vivienne says. I tell her that I do know and I do not mind being in charge of security for the night. Of course, this will mean that I will not get to witness the actual performance at the main venue above, but sometimes the best and most interesting performances at a ball are the ones that never materialize on the runway.

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<sup>32</sup> In the Ballroom scene, "flawlessness" can refer to a perfect physical presentation that a particular category demands and/or a dance/performance that goes off without a hitch.

### Bringing It Like A White Woman

Fieldwork never ceases to alter the dreamscapes of the ethnographer.<sup>33</sup> Last night is no exception to this rule. After the rehearsal, conversations and movements of bodies whirl in my mind throughout the night and the next day as I prepare for the Latex Ball. Fragments of conversations come back to me spurred on by the quotidian details of the Saturday shift of domestic errands that need tending: a bright red piece of clothing in a store window or a few seconds of music emanating from a slick black sports car speeding down Southern Boulevard are enough to stir the jug before I go off to Manhattan and another round of participant observation. What to make of this concatenation of scraps of conversations, images, corporealities, and sounds? When does it become ethnographic data? At the instance of perception? During the ruminations prior to their inscription into field notes? At the moment that it is narrativized in a book chapter or journal article or enunciated during a talk? Like so many times in the field, I feel that the data inhabit me today --- a secular possession ritual anterior to the textual embodiment of field notes and the well-crafted ethnographic vignette.

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<sup>33</sup> Ethnography, like most forms of writing or oral storytelling, is an encounter with the limits of authorial intention via the unconscious. That is to say, the ethnographer's textual choices, omissions, linguistic gaffes, sarcastic asides, jokes, and foregrounding and/or remanding of desires are the material basis for excavating the social unconscious that partially forms her/his "waking subjectivity." The writing up of field experiences is also an engagement with the ethnographer's "oneiric subjectivity" that nurtures itself from the images, bodies, and desires that she/he travails in the field. The day work of "writing up" is contingent on the rarely accounted for anterior night work. The challenge for materialist critics is to deindividuate the dreamscape materials and relocate them in the shared fantasies that multiple social closures produce. Fantasies that would inform a social dispensation that, for example, assumes class homogeneity as a fetish object, in the psychoanalytic sense, and that emerges from economic and material stratifications co-existing with multiple formal and socio-ideological equivalences.

As I walk around Southern Boulevard in search of the best 99 Cents Store hand soap money can buy, two particular moments from last night reverberate in me. After the rehearsal was over, most of the dancers left and Vivienne and two of her dancers stayed to do some last minute planning about the banner. I went upstairs with them to the third floor of the Bronx Queer Pride Center (BQPC). The third floor is a rambling collection of small offices and common spaces carpeted and painted in such a way as to give it a very homey feel. In the back, there is a bank of computers and a few couches that many of the youth use as a gathering space to talk, gossip, and check their various online email and social networking accounts. I put my notebook into my shoulder bag and our little group settles on the couches in the back “living room” space and we aimlessly talk about the coming ball, sex, and past Ballroom wins and defeats.

At one point, Asia and Chris begin to talk about the meaning of a phrase that I have often heard circulate in Ballroom venues: “Bringing it like a White woman.” “Yeah, I’ve heard that. “Miss Thing, that’s very White woman of you” or “Bring it like a White woman, honey.” The children say that when they are talking about being fabulous. You know, getting what you want. Having coins. For me, that’s what the average butch queen means when he says that.” Chris, a handsome, light-skinned Panamanian-Puerto Rican 20 year old who is a good dancer as well as a formidable painter, as I would later learn from his mother at the Latex Ball, demurs from Asia’s assessment of this Ballroom notion. “No, I have a different perspective on that. For me, “Bringing it like a White woman” is doing things the right way. Having your shit in check. I think it’s coming to things in the correct way. None of this half-stepping bullshit. Knowing what’s good and just doing it. Do you know what I mean?”

Vivienne looks on at our conversation as she compares some materials for the banner that will be thrown off the balcony during her performance tomorrow night. She laughs and smirks at various points of the dialogue between Asia and Chris. Vivienne has told me on a few occasions that she felt that part of her being successful professionally in the HIV prevention not-for-profit world depended on knowing how and when “to bring it like a White woman.” Another key informant when I questioned him on this very term also had a different slant: “Bringing it like a White woman? That means to read somebody, especially White people, in such a sophisticated way that they don’t even know they’ve been read. You know, getting your way without them knowing it. This is very high class bitch stuff. Couture bitchiness, sweetie (laughter).”

Vivienne joins our discussion by telling us a story from an experience she had at a ball. “I was down south at a ball. It was in North Carolina somewhere around Raleigh or Durham. Honey, I was the lightest one there and I’m not light like Chris and Edgar are. Well, the girls did not see me. I did my runway and the girls paid me dust.”<sup>34</sup> Since I was the lightest child there, they did not give me the time of day and nobody in my house really came out to support me on that. That’s the way it is sometimes for the light-skinned Latina girls even when you are part of a mostly Black house.” Both of these moments are what I call “reenactments of racial lessons”: conversations/performances that occur regularly throughout Black and Latino/a communities in the United States that surmise through exemplary tales what are the social and ethical parameters that subordinated racial subjects should expect and learn to negotiate. But, these two lessons

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<sup>34</sup> “To pay dust” is to ignore someone or to treat them in a dismissive manner.



that permeate my thoughts while I shuffle through the mechanics of weekend afternoon errands are indeed very different in their respective scopes and meanings. Why do the Ball children I do research amongst use the image of a White woman as a basis for calibrating differentials in social power? What about their daily lives lead them to tell this particular racial tale with its obvious misogynist and sexist inflections? In short, why not “bringing it like a White man” as the narrative anchor for this particular racial lesson?

In New York City, Ball members are exposed to and interact with what they perceive to be powerful White women in their travails in the retail and service sectors of the labor market, the public education system, the welfare bureaucracies, HIV prevention community organizations, the criminal justice system, and the public medical clinics and hospitals. They consume a media landscape of New York City that includes “Sex in the City” and “Will and Grace” as paradigmatic image-narratives of what it means to be sexually free and sophisticated consumers of all that life has to offer for those who have the class and social privilege to access it. One of the paradoxes of the Post-Civil Rights racial dispensation is that, *inter alia*, many White women have attained some modicum of mobility and institutional power that simply was not afforded to most of them prior to the introduction of anti-discrimination laws and affirmative action programs and that for many Ball members the face of power often is embodied in female bodies and White skin.

All three valences of “Bringing it like a White woman” discussed by Asia, Chris, and my informant index modes of power that Ball members enact to navigate the various institutional sites that distribute material and symbolic resources upon which their day to

day survival depends: ethical, instrumental, and mimetic-subversive. Chris claimed “Bringing it like a White woman” as a standard of ethical behavior and implicitly aligned success and moral respectability that, at least in his mind, mitigates economic and social stratification by “doing things right.” Asia, speaking for the average butch queen, saw the term as an instrument for acquiring resources (“Getting what you want”) as well as a way of marking economic status (“Having coins”). My informant who is older than either Chris or Asia and has spent years climbing the career ladder in a large HIV prevention not-for-profit agency “brought it like a White woman” when he needed to reverse the tables on those who had more social power than he did “by beating them at their own game” without courting the risk of an openly frontal confrontation. My own participant observation indicates that all three of these modes of power (i.e., ethical, instrumental, and mimetic-subversive) are used in a rather flexible manner by Ballroom members both to acquire resources for themselves as well as for their kin, friends, and lovers within and outside of Ball social networks. The enactment of racial lessons many times plays with the themes of money, morality and the “tactical hustle” that is invisible to one’s putative social betters.

Vivienne’s racial lesson is of a different order and scale than the one that “Bringing it like a White woman” occupies. Vivienne’s story points to the internal racial conflicts that at times animate Ballroom competition and, unlike the “Bringing it like a White woman” term, her experience in North Carolina engages a more local and infinitely less secure and structurally significant form of racial subordination.

Historically, the House Ballroom scene was and is a predominantly African-American event circuit and social network not only in New York City, but also in all the urban areas

where houses and Ballroom circuits exist. There is some evidence that in the case of the Ballroom scene in New York City, Puerto Ricans were there at the creation of the contemporary houses and balls. Nonetheless, Puerto Ricans, albeit playing significant roles in cultural innovation and leadership in the scene, have never had the same numerical presence that African-Americans have had in the Ball world in New York City.

The fact that the first House of the contemporary Ballroom community was named the House of La Beija, an African-American rearticulation of the Spanish word for beautiful woman (i.e., “la bella”), points to the shared cultural, social, and spatial dynamics that typified neighborhood life in New York City amongst Blacks and Puerto Ricans in the 1960’s and 1970’s. But, this sharing and interchange between Blacks and Puerto Ricans in New York City was and still is also an experience of tension, competition, and mostly hidden and sometimes quite open antagonisms. Vivienne’s racial lesson exemplifies the types of skin color tensions that can dominate the judging of Ballroom competition not only between Blacks and Latinos/as in the scene, but also between light-skinned and darker-skinned Blacks as well. One of the stories that many of my informants told me when I would ask them about Latino/a participation in the Ballroom community was that the first Latino/a house, the House of Xtravaganza, was founded, partially at least, as a way of combating the anti-Latino/a bias that was prevalent in Ball circles in the early 1980’s. In an interview with Arbert Evisu, the founder of the House of Evisu and the Mother of the House of Latex prior to that for ten years, articulates some of the content and context for these racial tensions:

ERC: So, tell me about this Puerto Rican, Black thing. Obviously, there are houses that are Black and houses that are Latino, Houses that are mixed and if you

go to a ball, it's Black and Latino together. What's going on there? What are the connections? What are the contradictions?

AE: Well, the connections are there, I think, you know. For me, I own my oppression. I understand my own oppression and I totally relate more to the African-American community than I would to the White community so I think that's the common ground. We're there [the Ball scene] for competition. That's a common denominator too. The other thing is, I did not want to be, my thing is --- I always wanted to flaunt the stereotype. I never wanted to be a stereotype. I've never once been in a Spanish house. I never wanted [the House of] Latex to be a Spanish house. It's interesting because when I talk about Spanish houses, Latex was at one point considered a Spanish house. Yet, 80% the kids were Black. They only reason they were considered a Spanish house was because I ran it. And they [other Ball community members] give the power to the people who are in power. So, the Infinitis [the House of Infiniti] even though it was founded by a Spanish guy and Black guy, was considered a Spanish house for the most part. The Xtravaganzas always were Spanish and Puerto Rican, but they held their own identity. And they make sure that they will stick together by their own identity. And they were racist against Blacks. And they were strong enough to call them Black monkeys and things like that. They were racist against Blacks. And the tensions were there, and they were real. But when they came together to compete or when they stepped out and somebody tried somebody<sup>35</sup> in the Ballroom community, then the Ballroom community came together and fought together. But, yeah, racist tensions are there in the community.

The ambivalences and contradictions that permeate Arbert's remarks are symptomatic of the broader racial fissures and ruptures that weaken potential racial solidarity between Blacks and Puerto Ricans and, in the last two decades, increasingly other Latino/a groups in the wider Ball world in New York City. Arbert understands his own experience of oppression as a bridge for deep and abiding cultural and personal connections with African-Americans in the scene. Nevertheless, the idea that the Ball scene is a social network that mobilizes itself partly through a competitive events circuit is never far from his mind and provides, at least in these remarks, the frame for his own understanding of the origins of racial tensions within a community he has worked in for

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<sup>35</sup> "Trying someone" means challenging a person verbally or physically both within and outside Ballroom venues.

over a decade and a half as a HIV preventionist, a community activist, and a mother of two houses and founder of one. Despite this competitive element, he sees his life in the scene as a deliberate attempt to disturb Ballroom racial expectations by not being in a “Spanish house” and being the founder of an overwhelmingly Black house, the Evisus.

Further, although he does not condone what he sees as the racist attitudes toward Black members of the scene that he ascribes to the members of the House of Xtravaganza, he understands it to be a reaction to a prior history of Latino/a exclusion that is really the reason the house was founded in the first place. A source of Arbert’s ambivalence is his recognition that the on the ground “street unity” that members of the Ball community must exhibit in a largely hostile world outside the scene trumps many of the racial tensions that he alludes to in his comments. Oddly enough, he cites the competition that he had earlier described as an engine of racial tension and as a source of solidarity when viewed through the lens of people outside the Ball scene being abusive or “trying” community members. In one sense, the Ball community is a place where young queer and transgender people of color come to experience and to learn or relearn not only “racial lessons” and reenact their consequences, but also lessons about gender, sexuality, age, and culture that will hopefully provide an arsenal for a life that will inevitably be filled with very unique, but recurring struggles.

### Doing Basement Security in Atlantis

The furnace quality of the New York City subways in the summer would give Dante himself pause to wonder whether or not his cantos had really plumbed the depths of heat in hell. My skin glistens with sweat and relaxes and breathes as I walk out of the

West 50<sup>th</sup> Street station and start to walk to the Roseland Ballroom where the House of Latex ball (HOL) is being held. The Roseland has a movie set quality to it with its art deco designs and pastel colored walls. “House of Latex Ball 2006: The Atlantis Ball” is splashed across the marquee and the crowd that is congregated before the front entrance gives the whole scene a movie premiere feel. Since I used to work for the House of Latex a number of years ago and am a familiar face to the Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC) staff that is doing front door security for the night, I negotiate the crowd in short order. They wave me past the crowd and exchange hellos and pleasantries with me as I get frisked and my body is outlined gingerly in the air by a staff member with a hand-held metal detector. As soon as I am cleared, I walk into the great expanse of Roseland’s main hall. The place has the usual busy and distracted air of a ball where old friends are greeting each other, some house members are discussing recent triumphs and defeats in the Ballroom circuit, others are in pre-costume mode and negotiating with their house brothers and sisters the preparatory details of their performances tonight, and, of course, a plethora of glancing looks and gentle and sexy smiles that always make up the cruising landscape of any ball.

Of course, the Latex Ball is different since there are many people from outside the Ball community here tonight. For over a decade, the HOL ball has been the largest and best funded free ball in New York City and a showcase for GMHC’s outreach and prevention efforts aimed at young queer and transgender Black and Latinos/as. Many municipal, state, and federal HIV/AIDS funders as well as university-based researchers and frontline and administrative preventionists from other not-for-profits are invited to the ball by GMHC staff and given VIP bracelets which allow them to see the HOL ball

from the balcony/VIP lounge area that straddles Roseland's second floor. The stairwell that leads to the VIP section is monitored closely all night by Roseland's own security staff to make sure only "A-list" people have access to the view from above.<sup>36</sup> Along with these funders, GMHC staff invite their lovers, friends, family, and colleagues in the field to attend as well and some of them manage to hustle up VIP bracelets. Thus, the crowd at the HOL ball is much more economically and racially heterogeneous than almost all of the other balls held in New York City at any given time. So, in one sense, the HOL ball is not typical of the ball scene in New York City, but it is typical of the institutions that have come to have an influence on how balls are organized, how ball members think of themselves, and how some ball members, including many of my informants, make a living or even become somewhat upwardly mobile.

As I walk down into the Roseland's basement where I am supposed to meet Vivienne and her crew tonight, I wonder more about winning a prize than making a living or, more to the point, how winning a trophy and some cash could be a way of Vivienne making her life more livable. Roseland's basement is painted in purple and gold and contains a huge coat check that will function as a dressing room for Vivienne's crew, an open space dotted with stout columns that will be used as an ad hoc rehearsal space by a number of house members, and a set of enormous bathrooms that people will also use as a dressing room, hang out spot, and cigarette and marijuana smoking lounge throughout the night. As I walk towards the back of the basement where the unused coat check room

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<sup>36</sup> The Latex Ball's racialized class politics was described by one of my informants as the "only ball where you have a bunch of White people looking down on us Black and Latinos perform for them." His comment lays bare one of many contradictions of the insertion of HIV/AIDS organizations into the ball scene. In this case, the attenuation of the Ball community's history of Black and Latino/a racial self-affirmation, political autonomy, and economic self-sufficiency.

is, I notice Vivienne and most of her dancers talking to each other. We greet each other with hugs and kisses. I notice that none of them are in costume yet and that Chris, one of the dancers, is missing. Vivienne is in a bit of a panic since the banner for her production has yet to be cut up and she is waiting for her costume designer and makeup person to show up. “What time are you guys supposed to walk?” I ask. “I really don’t know. It depends on how fast Jack and Selvin<sup>37</sup> get through the categories”, Vivienne tells me.

Balls are very long affairs that start late and usually end late as well. The precise timing of when a given category will come up is as much guess work for the audience as it is for the performers that will compete in the category. Also, there is always a fear by those who have prepared so diligently for their time on the runway that they will either miss the category while fussing with their costumes or rehearsing their walk or dance routine and/or that delays in calling the categories up on the runway will mean that their category will not be called before the ball ends. In fact, in over a decade of attending balls in New York City, I have been to only a handful of balls that finished all the categories listed in their programs. Most ball walkers know that their category not being called at all is something largely out of their control. What they can control is missing their category being called and usually a fellow house member or a close friend will keep the walker(s) posted as to the progress of the categories and the likely time the category will be called up or opened. Vivienne has structured her early warning device into her production by having her friends who are in charge of unfurling a banner at the end of her

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<sup>37</sup> Jack Mizrahi and Selvin Mizrahi are probably the most well know Commentators in the New York City Ballroom circuit. Selvin plays the role of bad ass or truth teller to Jack’s more laid back approach. Together, they are as much part of the entertainment of the balls as the actual performances and competition are.



production keep her abreast as to which categories are being called and any deviations in the night's program.

Vivienne disappears upstairs to talk to her banner team and, I imagine, make contact with her Miyake-Mugler house brothers and sisters as well as other friends from the scene. There is a ton of work that has to be done before the performance. The banner has to be cut in equal measures, wardrobe needs to be put on and checked for any defects or problems, makeup has to be put on, hair needs to be attended to and Vivienne's wig needs to be combed and prepped for the performance as well. Also, the dancers' bodies have to be painted with Atlantean symbols that Vivienne has devised for this evening. I am amazed by the long list of details and last minute preparations that a roughly ten to fifteen minute performance requires.

As the dancers talk to each other and begin to tackle the tasks before them, Vivienne comes back from upstairs. "Well, let's cut up the material to make the banners and make sure you measure them out to come out equal." Vivienne is assuming the role of task master. I have already been assigned to do security since I do not really have to be upstairs for the performance. I accepted the assignment without complaint knowing that I can watch the performance if I order it on DVD from Andre Chanel who videos almost every New York City ball and runs a website that sells DVD copies of the competitions.<sup>38</sup> I spend the next hour or so being a factotum given that I will not really have to function as a security person until Vivienne, the dancers, and the support crew have to go upstairs when their category is called.

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<sup>38</sup> See the following website: <http://balldvd.com/>.

I help with cutting the banner material and getting people to put all their stuff in the coat check which we have taken over as a dressing room and storage place. Maria begins to rehearse the dancers and Vivienne's designer and makeup person start working on her. It is quite an undertaking since her face has to be made up, her hair has to be spray-painted white, her long white extension has to be combed and put on, and her costume properly fitted. Her team works quickly and Vivienne exhibits a patience that must be born of experience since the coloring of her hair is an inexact business at best given the white paint cloud that surrounds her throughout the process. Chris finally arrives and explains that he had to work until 11pm and joins the other dancers rehearsing with Maria. Throughout this carnival of kinetic activity, groups of dancers from other houses variously rehearse, adjust their costumes, and put on makeup.

Along with these semi-permanent residents of the basement, there is a constant stream of people going to the bathroom. The bathroom has become a social scene in its own right with people talking, preparing for their performances as they look into the wall of mirrors, smoking, and just greeting friends they have not seen in some time with hugs, kisses, and the occasional mutual jumping hugs intoned with loud squeals of delighted recognition. Of course, none of the bathroom binary gender rules apply neatly at Roseland tonight as in all the ball venues I have been to over the last ten years. This can sometimes cause grief with the venue's security staff who are used to what they understand as "males" and "females" going to the appropriate restroom, but the Roseland's staff are old hands at this and do not bat an eye as "women" go to the "men's" room and vice versa.

One of the dilemmas of doing field research at a ball is figuring out the different places where the ball is occurring in any given venue. I have often told non-Ball photographers who are new to shooting the scene that the ball occurs simultaneously on the runway, at the judges' table, in the audience, outside the venue where people congregate and socialize, and especially in the dressing rooms and the bathrooms that function as dressing rooms as well. At times, one can find out much more about the tensions and internal politics prevalent in a given ball by spending time in the bathroom chatting with people than actually watching the runway. In one sense, balls force an ethnographer to rethink her notions of ritual and temporality by challenging her to complicate her own line of sight such that the possible meanings of "the main event" on the runway have to be refracted via the multiple registers of time such that the rituals of the ball are reformatted as polycentric and mobile. It is this simultaneity of temporalities as well as their spatial dispersal that configures many balls as an experience of data overload or excess for an ethnographer. Time is not the essence of a ball it is, in fact, its existence: the question for the field researcher is to attach herself to a number of these temporal hooks and follow them through to the sweet and/or bitter and always already provisional end.

I can feel the tension building as the time for the runway approaches. The dancers are putting on their costumes in the dressing room. Chris is painting Vivienne's Atlantean symbols on John who is already in costume. The other dancers are waiting to get painted in their respective turns. There is a flurry of street wear being taken off: jeans, sneakers, and T-shirts lay in crumpled piles waiting for their owners to bring them back to life at the end of the night. The costumes for the dancers are simple, but stunning. The four

main dancers (i.e., Maria, Claudia, John, and Johnnie) are dressed in form-fitting blue and silver shorts and sleeves that go up to their shoulders. Both the shorts and sleeves are made out of a sparkling lacey material. John and Johnnie are bare-chested while Maria and Claudia wear shiny bone white bras. Chris is wearing an outfit that is similar to his fellow dancers, but his costume is made out of a glittering, gray material. All the dancers, save Fernando and Vivienne, have painted light blue Atlantean symbols on their bodies. Fernando who represents HIV/AIDS in this production is dressed very differently than the other performers: he is wearing a piece of black material as a makeshift throw around skirt, a long black cape, his face has a black painted mask and his head has a thick green line painted on top. He also has the words “homophobia”, “stigma”, and “ignorance” painted in black on his taut chest. Asia who is a tall, elegant transgender woman is wearing a two-piece light blue and white dress that covers her big girl frame and flows as she walks. She also has a thin piece of the same material that her dress is made up of as a bow on top of her head. Her hair is painted green, blue, and yellow. All the dancers have a wide swath of gray paint on their heads. This ensemble of painted on figures, faux spray paint gray Mohawks, and form fitting costumes have a sexy and other-worldly effect.

Vivienne’s costume is of a different order entirely. She is wearing long white and silver pants, a white and silver waist jacket that has four buttons on both sides, a thick steel bracelet on her right wrist, long aluminum foil finger nails on both hands, white eye contacts, and a long flowing hooded white robe with a silver glittering trim. All her clothes have a fluorescent quality to them and her waist jacket has glitter embedded in it as well. She also has a silver plastic trident and her forehead has been painted white and

her eyes have been darkened with black makeup. Clearly, Vivienne is the Emperor of Atlantis both in her attire and attitude.

Despite some technical mishaps like the smoke machine for the fabric volcano that Vivienne will step out of not functioning, everything is in place now. I see Gerard Gaskin, one of New York City's best House Ball community photographers, wandering around the basement stopping people intermittently and asking them to pose for a shot. Gerard's request is considered an honor by many in the New York City scene and his subjects look happy to comply with his requests. Gerard and I have seen each other at numerous balls over the years and we usually talk about what we are seeing, local and national politics, and the history of US foreign policy in Latin America and the Caribbean. Gerard is from Trinidad and Tobago and I would describe him as very much a "race man", but with a twist when it comes to gender and sexual politics amongst Blacks and Latinos/as. I wait for Gerard to finish shooting his latest subjects and I grab him by the arm and press him into service, "Can you take a picture of Vivienne's production crew for me?" I ask. "No problem brother", he tells me in his lilting "Queens-via- Port-of-Spain" accent. I gather the folks together and in an instant they are beautifully striking a pose and Gerard takes a picture that he promises to send to me and that I will distribute to Vivienne and the other folks in the shot.

Now the wait for the signal to go upstairs begins. The costumes and makeup jobs are all done. The production has been rehearsed to the point of distraction. All the props are accounted for and ready to go at the drop of a hat. All the crew's personal items have been stowed away for safe keeping in the coat check room. People stream in and out of our improvised dressing room to check in with Vivienne and her dancers to see if they

can be of immediate help or just to wish them well with the production. Some of the elders of the House of Miyake-Mugler also make an appearance to lend their support and just spend time engaged in ball gossip and joking around with each other. Vivienne's production would have been impossible without the approval of these elders. Officially, the New York City chapter of the House of Miyake-Mugler is on sabbatical from competing in balls and Vivienne had to ask special permission to perform at this Latex Ball tonight.

Sometimes houses will take a break from the cycle of competition to focus on preparing for their own ball or to build up their own houses by getting rid of members who do not "contribute" to the house and/or recruit new members who might bring new energies, talents, and resources to the house. Throughout various conversations, Vivienne never makes clear to me the reasons for the Miyake-Muglers' sabbatical; she does tell me that none of her dancers involved in this production are members of her house and only one, Chris, has real experience with the ball world since he was once a Revlon child. Further, she tells me that this fact may have been influential in the house elders allowing her to walk this ball. Of course, another reason for taking a house out of competition is to wait for a strategic ball to introduce or reintroduce a house to competition and part of the thinking may be waiting it out while a house rebuilds its talent pool until it is ready to come out onto the scene with a bang.

The time has come to go upstairs. I wish them good luck and watch Vivienne and her crew disappear up into the main floor and the frantic energy of the Latex Ball. Doing security for the group tonight means that I spend most of my time sitting in front of the door to our dressing room making sure there are no unwanted visitors. The long waiting

has now begun for me. I look over my notes for the night, greet people I know as they pass by on their way to the bathrooms, and generally watch the chaotic flow of bodies as the time passes. One of the stranger aspects of ethnographic field research is the unsettling nature of the down time that participant observation entails. Is ethnographic research being done when nothing in particular is happening? Is this the best time for the ethnographer to settle down for a moment and disentangle all the interactions she has seen, the conversations she has overheard and the ones she has been party to, and the activities that she has been involved in that constitute the unique methodological tool of ethnography itself (i.e., participant observation)?

#### Victorious Aftermath

All in all, I make for a very distracted security guard this evening, but not so distracted that almost two long hours later I do not notice Maria coming my way. She is sweaty, but has a beaming smile that, to my mind at least, bodes very well indeed. “She won”, Maria says to me the moment she is close enough for me to hear. “She won!!” I repeat in a bit of astonishment. “She won the grand prize for the whole fucking ball?” I query her in a rushed tone. “Are you serious? Good fucking job Vivienne! You guys must have been magnificent!” “We were good and Vivienne ate it when came to the battle between the European and American runway girls. The productions were incredible. One team actually had a birth thing where this big girl dressed up in a long leather jacket like in *The Matrix* comes out and he<sup>39</sup> is all painted in blue and his head was shaved. It was

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<sup>39</sup> This switch in gender from noun (i.e., “big girl”) to pronoun and possessive form (i.e., “he”, “his”) is a regular pattern in ball conversations and indexes the social fact that masculinity, androgyny, and femininity transverse what within a fairly poor and inadequate phenomenology of sexed difference are called “male” and “female” bodies.

off the hook. I thought to myself, “Girl, this is going to be hard”, but we won. We won lovely.” Maria’s face becomes more ecstatic as she gives me her take on the performance.

The rest of the dancers come downstairs. They are ecstatic: screaming and hugging each other and joking around. I look at them and let their joy be mine for a moment since I, too, did my bit for Vivienne’s victory tonight even if it means that the only time I will get to see the actual performance will be on DVD since my security responsibilities have relegated me to the basement this evening. Vivienne is the last one to return to the dressing room. I watch her kiss friends as they congratulate her for winning the grand prize on her way to us. She looks both radiant and relaxed as she enters the room with her trophy in hand. Once she enters, her dancers and friends applaud and there are rounds of kisses and hugs for all. The trophy is a stunning silver plate that has an inscription about the category it was awarded for and the Latex Atlantis ball itself. Mitchell, the father of the House of Miyake-Mugler walks into the dressing room and congratulates her and looks at the trophy: “This is going to look good in my apartment or maybe I’ll put it in my office.” He makes this pronouncement with a bit of a wry smirk. Vivienne looks at Mitchell with a death-dealing stare and grins a bit, “Sure. As soon as you give me the trophy you have from my win at that ball in Philadelphia”, she retorts. Mitchell smiles and despite an honest effort all night long, he fails to take home this particular memento of Vivienne’s formidable talent.

I laugh out loud at various points throughout this exchange. I know Mitchell well from his long history of activism and not-for-profit work on issues that deal with HIV/AIDS and Black and Latino/a men who have sex with men (MSM) and savor this moment when he gets dressed down by one of his house children. It is a bit of a switch



for Mitchell since he is usually the one administering richly deserved dressing downs to public health bureaucrats and politicians at community forums and professional meetings where the ever-increasing rates of HIV infection amongst young Black and Latino MSM are on the agenda for discussion. At times, despite the implicit hierarchical power relationships that kinship affiliations engender, the family dynamics in houses can experience a leveling effect especially in the wake of the social status boost that a grand prize win can leverage even for members who do not have parental roles in the house.

Vivienne signals to me that she would like me to go outside with her. When we get outside, she takes a roll of bills out of her jacket and hands it over to me. “Could you hold this for me for a moment until I can count it out? I just need to go inside the dressing room for a minute and then we can count it.” Vivienne goes inside the dressing room and comes back in a few moments. When she returns, she has taken off the long white wig and is beginning to look like the everyday Vivienne that I am accustomed to seeing. “Let’s go to the bathroom”, she tells me. I follow her into the bathroom which is not as full as it was earlier in the night. I look around to make sure there are no potential security problems in the offing before I take out the wad of bills. Nothing out of the usual is happening in the bathroom: folks “doing their business”, some people working on adjusting their costumes or putting on some finishing touches on their makeup and hair, and a couple in the stalls either smoking weed or having sex or, perhaps, doing both. Anyway, no alarms go off either for me or Vivienne from what we can tell.

First, we count out the whole amount to make sure that Vivienne got the thousand dollars she was entitled to as the grand prize winner. After we are both convinced of this fact through separate counts of the wad, Vivienne begins to dole out the

money: a very modest amount for each of her seven dancers for their work during rehearsals and the performance itself, a good chunk for the clothing designer, a certain amount for one of her friends who loaned her some money to buy her white eye contacts, and a larger amount to make sure that all her team has taxi money to get home tonight. As we create separate piles for each debt to be resolved, I begin to joke around with Vivienne about what we must look like to an uninformed outsider counting out cash in the basement of a club. “I hope nobody is dealing in here. If the cops come up in here, you and me are getting locked up and this money is going to the evidence room if the cops don’t swipe it for themselves”, I tell Vivienne as I do my most dramatic paranoid visual sweep of our surroundings. “Honey, that would be my fucking luck. Getting locked up for something I didn’t do the night I win the grand prize at the Latex Ball”, she retorts as we both laugh at the absurdity of the situation.

We return to the dressing room and Vivienne pays her dancers and gives out kisses and her thanks with the separate collections of bills. As Vivienne makes her rounds, Chris, one of the dancers, introduces me to his mother, Ana, who has come to see the performance and cheer her son on. Ana is a good looking Latina in her early to mid-thirties with long brown hair who is quite pleased that Vivienne and her crew have won tonight. She tells me how she tries to support her son in all his artistic endeavors, but she does have a few concerns about him focusing so much on dancing since she feels that he is a gifted painter and really should concentrate on that part of his many talents. As I listen to Ana, I wonder if there is something about the supposed private and individuating nature of painting and the public and explicitly erotic/collective quality of dance that draws her to push her son to be a painter. My thoughts are interrupted by the rush of

changing of clothes, stuffing of bags, and taking off of makeup that makes for a bright and glittery whirlwind in the dressing room. I help out by packing away costumes and props into large backpacks and shopping bags. I also hand out bottles of water to the dancers to cool them off from the heat of the runway and their performances.

Everyone is packed and ready to go in about twenty minutes. I walk with Vivienne and the crew upstairs and out the backstage exit of Roseland and we begin to break up for our respective journeys home. I hail cabs for Vivienne, Maria, Claudia, Asia and Chris who are all going up to Harlem or the Bronx tonight. Both yellow and livery cab drivers of all colors in New York City have a tendency to avoid taking fares from young people of color especially at night and my lighter and older presentation has made me an ersatz facilitator of taxi rides both for informants in the field and friends after a night of partying and occasionally complete strangers as well. I say my farewells in a tired exchange of kisses and hugs and watch the yellow cabs disappear into the traffic that is still heavy at this time of night.

As I walk to the subway, the weight and the motion of what has happened tonight remains at the edges of my limbs and at the center of my consciousness. As I slip my Metro card through the silvery turnstile, my body presses against and rotates the silver counter. I look for the signs for the Bronx bound trains and I have that strange feeling that I am still not done with this bit of research: there is more to be noted, more to be detailed, more meaning sets to be constructed and rummaged through, longer conversations to be undertaken with Vivienne and my other informants. It never feels like field research ends for me and I am never sure when it exactly begins either. Something tugs at the margins of my knowing mind: this is not finished. My cell flashes 5:15am before my heavy eyes.

As I sit down on a subway seat, it strikes me that this field research will not be over or, even perhaps, begun until I sleep through the night. I begin this work by napping a bit against the cool silver subway walls as I feel the tug of the train pulling and mechanically squeaking out of Times Square station.

### Winning Grand Prize and Barely Breaking Even

For an ethnographer who is no longer in his second youth, recovering from a long night at a ball can be like recovering from a hangover: the best approach is simply to rest the body, drink plenty of water, and calm the mind. Luckily, the Latex Ball is officially alcohol-free and I get spared from the usual buying of drinks and getting drinks bought for me of the regular balls and the inevitable “dry mouth” of the morning after. Nonetheless, the field is in possession of me a number of days after I have “left” it. I have often heard my informants talk about their first forays into ball competition as being certainly a test of their nerves, but also a very pleasurable experience as well as one that constituted a new “high” for them. They talk about winning a category in a ball as a “good high” and the feelings that accompany the victory as an addiction in its own way or, at the very least, something that can become a habit. For the ball ethnographer, it strikes me that the sensory and data surplus that balls produce may be a form of addiction as well if not checked by the reality of the other competitions for material and symbolic resources that frame and delimit the lives of Ball community members and in which the judges are definitely not their “girlfriends” or even people they are likely to meet in their daily interactions.

After two weeks of being out of circulation from my usual ball networks, I call Vivienne up and we make a date for a meeting at her work site, the Bronx Queer Pride Center (BQPC). When I get to the BQPC, I go up to the third floor which is relatively quiet since it is early afternoon and the youth programs have yet to begin. Vivienne and I sit in her office and I record an interview with her about the Latex Ball and her win. As I start recording, I ask Vivienne how much money she made by winning the grand prize:

V: Well, after I paid for all my costumes, supplies, and dancers, I think I was left with about 175 or 180 dollars (laughter).

ERC: Damn, that's not much of a return on your investment.

V: Yeah, that's very true, but it's not about the money Edgar. You know that it's about the competition, the house. It's about getting your respect and status in the scene and sitting those other bitches down so they don't try to come for you. I don't know ... I guess it's not about the money. I hope it's not about the money because then we're a bunch of really stupid bitches if it's about the money (laughter).

ERC: So, what was your production about? What was the scenario you were laying out during the Latex Ball?

V: The scenario is that you are the last emperor of Atlantis. Atlantis is going through turbulent times because of HIV and AIDS and you have to help your people survive this crisis and bring the golden age. My interpretation was to get to the root of the crisis which to my mind is ignorance and homophobia within the LGBT community--- bigotry around that. I felt bringing a message from that standpoint would really create awareness to the community and to the people to some of the deep rooted reasons why unprotected sex happens and why HIV keeps spreading and the prevalence rate goes up and stuff and people's view of themselves and others and what they have to deal within society. So, knowing that I wanted that to be the message, I thought about the elements I wanted in the production... I put together what I thought I felt was a good production with a beginning, a middle, and an end, an entrance, the plot, the climax and the exit ... I did my research on Atlantis, the cartoon, the Azorean islands, the Atlantis cartoon ... I watched the movie. I examined some of the theories on Atlantis. I studied the culture on the Azores islands. One of the most prevalent theories of Atlantis was

that it was destroyed by a big volcano, a big enormous eruption created the sinkage of it and that this was believed to be a very advanced race that had a lot of technology and knowledge that was really lost in this apparent demolition or whatever. I really wanted to portray that. It has a sort of mystical sense to it ... you know since this is something that is still up in the air ... there is still stuff that remains in theory so you know it creates a mysticism or a kind of surrealness about it that I kept throughout the production using certain types of ambient music and definitely picking stuff that was foreign and fusing the elements together to create an atmosphere for the production that the audience would be pulled into and enjoy. And I've been dying to come out of a volcano (laughter) and I got to do it not exactly how I wanted it, but it happened and it happened the way it had to happen and fine. And I got to deliver the message.

ERC: How did you think the production was from a technical standpoint?

V: My dancers were great. My stylist was awesome. With the style, I really got to mimic the cartoon with all the Atlanteans having white hair and myself having white hair and stuff. I was able to use the balcony of Roseland to really project the message that I'm about fighting homophobia. It was banners coming down from the top of the balcony saying "Vivienne Mugler Fights Homophobia" ... Basically, in a nutshell, for the people who were sitting in the audience what they got to experience was a big volcano made out of brown and grey cloth at the end of the runway. And a good friend of mine [i.e., Asia] ... she's a big girl, she's very, very pretty with very long, long hair her hair was colored to be green, blue, and yellow and she came out in blue and white garb. She was the narrator and she identified herself as the high priestess of the Azorean islands and one of the last surviving descendents of the Atlantean people and her name was Mufalia Furtado after Nelly Furtado who's Azorean. And basically she narrated to the people: what's going to happen is a procession that will sacrifice a great evil to the volcano on Mt. Picu which is an Azorean volcano. And that once this sacrifice happens, hopefully, the last emperor of Atlantis will reclaim his throne and bring forth justice. So, as she says this, my dancers come out, and it was a really cool song I used called "Sanctuary" from this Japanese artist called Utata. Basically, all the dancers came out from different sectors of the crowd. They had on these wonderful outfits made by my designer who's worked with me for some time. They came out with glitter covering their bodies and sparkling blue and silver outfits and went into this whole modern jazzy dance that I choreographed. And, in the midst of them dancing, this dark figure [i.e., Fernando] comes out from behind and on him is written homophobia, bigotry, sexism and all these negative things ... He is a grim reaper slash vampire slash evildoer because his hair was green

and his face had a black mask. You can definitely tell that he was the antagonist of the group. So, Mufalia Furtado and my subjects go and grab this dark figure. This is the injustice in the world and this is what's keeping humans in crisis in Atlantis ... And so, basically, they grab him and Asia got her hands on his forehead like being very Pentecostal about the situation (laughter). And they bring him to the volcano and sacrifice him. Upon his sacrifice, the volcano reveals from the top my trident and then out I come from the top of the volcano and all my subjects bow to me and then I make out with the dark figure ... Basically, I gave him the kiss of death you know and I absorb all the negative things ... I kissed him and he went kaput (laughter).

ERC: Were there any unexpected glitches or misfires?

V: Yep (laughter). For example, the reason why the trident came out instead of smoke was because my pyrotechnics did not work (laughter) ... Basically, what happened was that mysteriously the fuse to the smoke mechanism that I had disappeared ... that remains to be solved ... but basically that's what happened. I didn't get to do that. So, unfortunately, I had to improvise. In place of the smoke, I just stuck the trident in the air and waved it around and moved it to the music to create the suspense that I was coming out next. And it worked out okay and I came out of the volcano and I gave him the kiss of death and absorbed all the negative energy and transferred it into my runway. So I came out. I was white cloaked and all in white and sliver with my fabulous black contacts and I came out and did my runway and I came back and I basically pointed my trident to the balcony which revealed the message ... So, they [my dancers] were still like doing type of dancing while I was doing my runway. The category is runway so I had to show that I did come there to walk. I did my runway and I came back to the mouth of the volcano. We struck a pose and showed them the meaning of my production which was what was on the banner ... that I fight homophobia ... These long cloth banners came shooting out from the balcony and down into the audience saying "Vivienne Mugler Fights Homophobia."

ERC: What houses were the banner people from?

V: Two members from the House of Latex and two members from the House of Ninja who were all like just my good friends unfurled the banner. So, yeah, there were like five houses in my production which is typical for me because I'm sort of like a peacekeeper you know. I really, really have made friends. I've come to believe in the whole the way to be powerful is to empower others. So, I include other people in the stuff that I do whether they are in my house or not, you know, as long as there is a true grounding in the love for the work and positivity. So,

these are people who I knew before they came into the ballroom scene or who I taught runway to and became part of other houses. So, these are people that I share an aspect of love with and respect. I'm just cool with. They were like: "I'm available. So, I'll drop the banner."

ERC: What was the competition itself like?

V: Oh my God there were a lot of people competing. That category took an hour and a half by itself. There were some serious people they came out for it. People from Chicago, Atlanta, and Philly. One person came out walking above the crowd. Another person came out his mother's womb (laughter). Hmm ... Yeah, well sort of (laughter).

ERC: So, why do you think you won?

V: I won because ... hmmm ... I don't know ... the only way you can say you won is because you gave it your all you know? And, at that time, that was good enough to win. In order to win, you have to battle no matter if I thought the production out or not if I did not do satisfactory during those battles, then I would have not won. The production is just to solidify your spot within the battle zone. So, everybody comes out and they show their production which puts them in the preliminary to then get your tens.

ERC: How did you feel when you won?

V: It was fun. I felt relieved when I won. You get to make a statement. You get to be part of a nice bit of history at the moment. You know it feels good. A lot of people contributed to that production. So, it really felt good especially with my house. We were on a sabbatical at the time and I was the only one allowed to walk because of my history with the Latex Ball. And, you know, that being the fifth year that I walk it was sort of like to set a standard. I was going for the record. So, accomplishing it was awesome because my house invested its reputation in me and also its time.

Both the recorded and unrecorded parts of Vivienne's post-mortem interview about the Latex Ball are replete with a very interesting set of contradictory themes that are in search of coherent narrative elaboration(s). One of the epistemological conceits at the heart of the ethnographic interview is that moments of corporeal and enunciatory



entanglement can be disentangled into a narrative that proffers cultural insight. This epistemological conceit comes undone when the material incommensurability between the body in its fleshy motion and the language bearing sounds that emerge from it is taken as, perhaps, the end of ethnographic understanding as opposed to its starting point.<sup>40</sup> Nonetheless, Vivienne's comments merit some disentangling no matter the limits that this task might produce.

In her interview, Vivienne notes that the financial outlay that is required to pull off a group production like the one she and her team performed at the Latex Ball is considerable and can be almost as much as the monetary value of the grand prize itself. In fact, if Vivienne had lost, she would have been out by at least 700 dollars using a fairly conservative estimate. Further, there were a number of groups that did productions that night and all of them lost to Vivienne's team. What were their expenditures like? How about the groups that came from Atlanta or Chicago? What kind of debts did they incur simply through their travel expenses whether by air or land transportation? The balls are, in fact, potential money making propositions for the house that organizes the event. One of my informants told me that his own ball cleared anywhere between 10,000 and 12,000

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<sup>40</sup> Obviously, this formulation of the problem is too facile and neat. What I would consider the aftermath of the crisis of representation that bedeviled ethnographic practice and writing throughout the mid-80's and 90's is an attempt to come to grips with problems that were adumbrated, amongst other places, in the philosophical writings of Western European philosophers immediately after World War II. The broad outline of this debate can be seen in the contention between the existential ontology found in Sartre's Being and Nothingness and the phenomenological holism found in Merleau-Ponty's The Visible and the Invisible. At the heart of this dispute is the status of human subjectivity vis-a-vis the material world around it. Is the body the meeting place of world and self (Merleau-Ponty 1968)? Or is the world wholly other to that which is both thing and consciousness i.e., human subjectivity (Sartre 1993)? The desire for a holistic form of ethnographic knowledge, even with appropriate theoretical nods to the problems of the crisis of representation, informs much of the debate in the humanities and social sciences about "foundations", "material reality", "political economy and culture", "affect", "a return to the body", etc.

dollars after all the expenses were taken care of. A usual ball makes its income through charging anywhere from 20 to 30 dollars as an entrance fee and selling tables for a few hundred dollars to houses as well as charging for liquor and plates of soul food with an occasional Puerto Rican/Dominican twist especially in cities like New York where there is a significant Latino/a population amongst the Ballroom community members.

The profits made at the ball are usually distributed back into the house as a common fund out of which to pay for, amongst other things, ball entrance fees, costumes, food at house meetings or away balls, travel to out of town balls, as well as to pay out house members who have taken on upfront costs to reserve the venue where the ball will be held or other costs like advertising for the ball or paying for the event's DJ. Further, the commentators for the ball will have to be paid their fees as well. In short, a successful ball requires house members to be small business people, wily negotiators, and excellent event planners: the balls require the very skills that service sector businesses and not-for-profits value in their employees. Clearly, the insertion of the HIV prevention organizations in New York City have built upon those indigenous skills sets or capacities as well as cultivated and exploited them to their institutional advantage.

Vivienne's assertion that her victory was not about the money has to be embedded in the broader material and symbolic economies of the balls. For Vivienne, the main incentive for taking on such an immensely labor-intensive project was not strictly economic, but the material benefits that accrue to her as a result of the win are real when one considers her status in her immediate house, the wider ball community, the art and performance communities she is part of in New York City's drag performance scene, and

the way that her colleagues in the HIV prevention world see her as an indigenous expert on the Ballroom community. Vivienne did get some real tangible rewards from her victory, but those benefits are reducible to cash only in the most jejune reckonings.

In her interview, she also describes how her production was an attempt to educate the community about HIV/AIDS and what it might take to develop prevention strategies that would be effective and enduring across time and generations. Of course, all the teams were required to include these messages in their performances if not in their one-on-one battle in front of the judges. Vivienne argues that internalized homophobia and ignorance within the LGBT community are one of the causes of people taking the types of sexual risks that lead to infection and further transmissions of the virus. In effect, she is suggesting that the internalization of homophobia as a powerful social ideology damages the self-esteem of Black and Latino/a LGBT community members and leads to risk behaviors that make infection more likely. She also states that ignorance is a reason for the high rates of infection amongst the Black and Latino/a queer and transgender people that make up the Ballroom community.

There are a number of reasons to call into question this rendering of the causes for the persistently high rates of HIV infection amongst Ballroom community members inasmuch as there is a large subsector of Black and Latino MSM within it, but my interest in Vivienne's response is actually about the way that individual interiority on both a cognitive and psychological level is hailed into existence by her formulation of her prevention message in her production. She invites her audience to purge itself of both ignorance and the effects of internalized homophobia and provides a hyper-kinetic

performance ritual space as a model for this purging. There are a variety of technologies of the self at work in Vivienne's production. She describes her message and dance performance in both the socio-clinical language of HIV prevention and different mythic-mystical registers that include ecstatic Pentecostal hand gestures (i.e., Asia's laying on of hands moment with Fernando), "exotic" Japanese ambient music, the dancers' "procession", human sacrifice, "evil", and the crux of the performance which is her giving "the kiss of death" to Fernando who is embodying in his character what public health researchers would call the socio-cultural co-factors (e.g., internalized homophobia, sexism, racism) for HIV infection and transmission.

Her production reflects and reproduces some of the dense contradictions that typify HIV prevention in the New York City Ballroom scene. One of these contradictions is that one form of secular religiosity (i.e., the moralizing<sup>41</sup> integrative socio-clinical holism of the HIV prevention institutions), despite its formidable institutional and ideological weight, has never really supplanted the Ballroom's pre-existing modes of figuring the self and calibrating social healing and wellness. In her everyday life, Vivienne is a ground-level interlocutor with HIV prevention discourses, Ballroom aesthetics and cultural rubrics, diasporic African and Pentecostal understandings of spirit possession and cosmologies and New Age ideas of personal transformation. From her

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<sup>41</sup> One of the more interesting paradoxes of what I call HIV prevention ideology is that it is both sex positive and moralizing at the same time. Part of this can be explained by the alignment of safe sex ideologies with middle class notions of appropriate and/or instrumentally rational consumption: unsafe sex is just bad use of resources in a sexual market that demands long-term consumption and investment patterns for erotic sustainability. The power of HIV ideology is that it appears to be libertarian while, at the same time, appealing implicitly to prior traditions of consumer discipline and regulation that are tied to fairly conservative US-based traditions of moralistic repression.

ground-level perspective, she picks and chooses amongst these modalities according to their salience for the task at hand in her professional work and her performances for balls. Her performance at the Latex Ball is reflective of her propensity for practical and theoretical bricolage.

Her own role in this intellectual-performance work is indicated by her comments about the research she had to undertake to give her production the kind of coherence and effect that she desired. After her win, the comments that I heard consistently from my ball networks was that Vivienne were “creative”, “a thinker”, or “she puts time into her productions.” Various comments throughout the interview demonstrate that Vivienne knows that she has a very special role in the Ball scene despite the fact that she has been neither a mother nor a father in any of the houses she has been a member of since she began going to balls when she was 16 years old. Vivienne sees herself as a “peacemaker” or someone who is willing to incorporate different houses in a common effort. In the competitive and, at times, brutal atmosphere of the balls, Vivienne has another take on how to negotiate these tensions: collaborative incorporation of potential competitors into a common project.

There are many familial and extra-familial sources for her impulse toward this approach in her life in the ball scene. I want to point out only one of them: Vivienne stated in her interview that she recruited members of other houses as long as they had “a true grounding in love of the work and positivity.” The “work” that she is referring to is HIV prevention and she understands this as potentially at its most efficacious if it is grounded in love and positivity. In one sense, she is conflating religious notions from her

own upbringing with the secular religiosity of HIV prevention ideology, but she is also pointing out something that goes beyond both or, more precisely, cannot be properly contained by either of these sources: for almost all of my informants, including Vivienne, see the ball scene as a space that allows for the reformatting of a hyper-stigmatized “gay” identity through forms of aesthetic praxis that are embedded in the discursive materiality of kinship, love, and creativity. “The work” that Vivienne underlines in her interview is something that may begin in the institutional ambits of HIV prevention, but goes beyond it in ways that are more consistent with the ethos of the ballroom as a place to be “somebody else for a moment” and to see what is possible to carry through of this “other self” when one is not on the runway.

Finally, Vivienne notes that she enjoyed her victory because she “got to be part of a bit of history” that night at the Latex Ball and that she was able to be in a position to “set standards” as well as “holding up the reputation of the house.” These comments reflect the rigorousness of ball criteria for excellence. Moreover, they emphasize that such rigor is a product of collective labor that is pushed forward by individuals in tension with their houses and the broader scene. However, Vivienne’s comments are also a view of the temporality that informs the balls: that time on the runway is never strictly individual because new parameters of history can be produced depending on the excellence and kinetic rigor of the performance in question. That is to say, Vivienne created a new sense of time for her house when she stepped off the runway triumphant that night at the Latex Ball because new “standards”, “reputations”, and histories and, therefore, new modes of embodiment were a little more possible in the wake of her victory.

### Chapter Three: Arbert's Long Walk on the Runway and Other Venues

“Whether I’m here or not, the ball community will continue to grow, to be, and be a hidden wonder. You know, it’s a massive wonder ... a big thing in a very small community.” Arbert Latex Evisu<sup>1</sup> 2005.

#### Hospital Room Reveries

The hospital room is cool and a small hum pervades it as the machines rattle and monitor Arbert’s vitals. The late summer evening sun has enveloped the wall outside his window in a trembling sheet of deep orange that mimics the color of the medical bracelets around his wrists. As I look at him from my standing position against the wall across the foot of his bed, I am surprised by how pale and weak he looks despite his reassuring combative tone with the nurses and doctors. Arbert’s thick black hair is a bit of a jumble and his big girl frame is not suited to the clinical austerity of his standard-issue hospital bed. Rafi, his lover, sits right next to him in a large brown lounge chair and attends to his needs and tries to calm him down when the medical staff comes by and asks Arbert the same questions repeatedly. Miriam, Arbert’s mother, is seated in her wheelchair closer to the foot of the bed. She has recently had a stroke, but remains quite coherent, verbal, and engaged. Her face nestles the memories of her many battles, both won and lost, raising two children as a single working mother throughout the 1960’s, 70’s

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<sup>1</sup> In naming my informant this way, I am replicating the way that ball members recited their full house names when I asked them to give me all the names of the houses they have been part of during their time in the scene. Their given or chosen first name is followed by their house names in chronological sequences that reflect their sojourns through different families. I have met very few community members that have only been in one house. Frequently, when talking about another ball child, my informants would recite for me the person’s various affiliations and usually note whether the person played an important role in the house such as being a founder or a mother or father.

and 80's in the housing projects of New York City's Lower East Side.<sup>2</sup> Miriam is very slight in build and quite skittish when it comes to eating these days. Her once long black hair is now mostly grey and her plastic glasses shimmer against the weaving black-grey of her thinning strands. She tells me that she is not happy with the care that her son is receiving and tells me that she must be here for her son, "Este es el lugar de una madre mi'jo. No hay mas nada." ["This is where a mother belongs my son. I have no other alternative."]. Rafi is his usual quiet self as he negotiates working on his computer as well as talking to Arbert.

### Listening to Mami

I think of the way that the structures of love, work, and obligation are mediated through ever changing constellations of dyads, triads, and larger numbers of people until whole communities are implicated in what should apparently remain in the interpersonal

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<sup>2</sup> This particular neighborhood is replete with associations of immigrant and migrant life in New York City. In the earlier parts of the twentieth century, the Lower East Side was a working class Jewish neighborhood. These Jews, mostly of Eastern European extraction, would supply partially the rank and file and some of the leadership of the enormous struggle for labor rights throughout the first decades of the twentieth century. Irving Howe's *World of Our Fathers* describes this Jewish world that remains a memory-frame for many New Yorkers to this very day (Howe 2000). Puerto Ricans would become a large presence in the Lower East Side after World War II as they searched for affordable, if substandard, housing and work in light industries that would include Manhattan's garment district. At the end of the 1960's and 1970's, Puerto Rican cultural and political activists (e.g., Bimbo Rivas, Miguel Algarín, Tato Laviera, Chino Garcia, et al.) would reclaim the ghetto space of the Lower East Side by renaming the neighborhood "Loisaida" using Nuyoricano argot and founding both cultural and social action organizations that would use cultural production and activism as revitalizing agents for community reconstruction (Ševčenko 2001). Paradoxically, the work of these persons and organizations would create part of the conditions that would mark the Lower East Side as a place of arts and politics and provide a marketing tool for the neighborhood's eventual gentrification. Many Puerto Ricans were able to secure public housing prior to the initiation of this gentrification process and have remained a presence in the neighborhood largely through this form of social housing as well as the creation of low equity housing cooperatives from buildings that had been abandoned by landlords.



and intimate realms. Miriam's sentiments and presence in the hospital room are entirely understandable and her absence might be read as a form of rejection and bad mothering by Arbert and other family members and friends. In one sense, her presence is a continuation of the practices and beliefs upon which her life as a single mother, factory worker, cultural and community activist has had its anchor:

ERC: Tell me something about your first experiences in school and how your mother handled all that.

Arbert Latex Evisu (ALE): When I started going to school, my Mom was kind of militant about holding culture and that was in the middle of the whole struggle around education in the public schools. And there was a big kind of controversy during that time when I was starting ... I actually started kindergarten when the idea for a bilingual education was being fought over. And I remember being very small and my Mom picketing the school when at PS 4 the one time principal or assistant principal, which was Mr. Rivera, just got fired because he was advocating for bilingual education. And they were fighting for him to come back, but they also had the community fighting for bilingual education. So, I remember my Mom saying to me that I should sit down [with her] in front of PS 188 on Houston Street and we sat there and my Mom said "We're going to sleep here tonight." And it was like, I wasn't too sure what she wanted, but she taught me the protest chant for bilingual education (laughter) ... And I remember always when we were living there [the Lower East Side] that kind of politics and remembering that my Mom actually fought for some level of equality in terms of culture and education. That really stood out for me. And then, you know, there was an axis for mobilization too because my Mom was part of a housing organization that provided affordable housing to disadvantaged individuals. And my Mom always said "Well, if it's available to them, then it's available to us" because my Mom was a factory worker and struggled herself. You know?

Miriam's story of marriage at 17 and early divorce, migration to New York City in the early 60's, living in public housing, battling the public education system for a modicum of cultural dignity and educational quality, the endless hours of factory work, and the durable travails and fleeting pleasures of a hobbled together autonomy within the parameters of single motherhood is a narrative that has been embodied by thousands of Puerto Rican women in the last half of the twentieth century. It is a story that determines

the contours and crevices of a variously conjugated Nuyorican version of the daily bread of the present tense. Arbert's narrative of his early memories of his mother's involvement in the fight for quality bilingual education in the Lower East Side is instructive especially when one looks at his configuration of certain phrases. He talks about his mother "holding culture" in her participation in struggles for bilingual education. In this figuring, culture is something that is cusped by two hands and can easily be knocked out of those hands lack strength and/or the person or community is not vigilant. Nonetheless, culture is also held up as a sign of worth and source of identity as well.

It is interesting to note that throughout an earlier period in my life when I was doing community research on HIV/AIDS amongst communities of color, veteran preventionists of color constantly told me that they found it difficult to "hold" all the things they learned about community members in their work. This was especially true when it came to maintaining a professional and ethical form of confidentiality about people's HIV status in friendship and sexual networks that inevitably included their own clients. I was told repeatedly<sup>3</sup> by colleagues and informants who were in the field of HIV prevention that it was simply "too much to hold" or "too much to take hold of." Arbert's

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<sup>3</sup> It is the repetitive quality of these utterances that make them suitable for psychoanalytic scrutiny. Repetition both in enunciatory and behavioral registers are, according to some renderings of psychoanalysis, traces of trauma that remain outside of conscious narrative incorporation. The repetitive thought, behavior, and/ or statement point towards a trauma that needs to be worked through discursively. When historical traumas, like the HIV/AIDS pandemic amongst people of color in the United States, are the source of these traces, then the "talking cure" must be enacted in both ethical and political contexts that go beyond the couch and the seminar room. My own research on the New York City Ballroom community indicates that part of what motivates the creative energies of ball performance is precisely the working out of this trauma that cannot be contained to clinical settings of any kind and must be performed to be dispelled as well as to be taken up for community scrutiny, mourning, and, perhaps, even healing (Crimp 2002, Eng 2001, Roman 1998).

own recollection of his mother uses the language of “holding”, but not as a burden that defies endurance; rather, as a resource for identity and self-affirmation that his mother “held” for him as a way of battling the petty and gross gnawings at the self that injustice and inequality facilitate.

Through her taking him to pickets and sit-ins, Miriam inculcated in Arbert an orientation towards the community and social mothering that would typify the life that he has constructed as an HIV/AIDS activist and preventionist as well as the mother of the House of Latex (HOL) and the founding mother of the House of Evisu. Arbert was engaged in an explicit fight for community resources before he understood what this struggle really meant and called for in a given individual or group. He was “not sure what she wanted”, but he followed his mother’s instructions and he picketed, protested, chanted, and eventually did the same type of trouble-making mother work in the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the House Ballroom scene. In this selection from his life narrative, Arbert describes how his mother’s housing group had an “axis of mobilization.” This is the language that Arbert was initiated in during his first forays with the ACT-UP’s Latino Caucus and later in his work in mobilizing “peer” or “opinion” leaders in the House Ball community. The construction of his own memories of growing up with a “militant” mother is retroactively seeded with turns of phrase that belong to his own phase of militant activism, but around another set of issues and concerns.

In one sense, his life narrative is a provisional sublation of many moments of a wide range of lives past and present. Throughout this selection, Arbert notes the density of relatedness that typifies many working class lives in citing his mother’s contention that

if people poorer than her get access to housing that can help her as well. The material basis for Arbert's speaking many lives in one is precisely this deeply knotted and dense "living on top of one another" that Nuyorican ghetto life implies. It is quite ironic that the struggles of working class single mothers of color like Miriam remain largely outside the purview of intellectual projects like Queer Theory given that the core of this effort is to maximize the political benefits that could come if all those who are outside and/or resist sexual and gender normalization forged a coalition for redressing the unequal distribution of material and symbolic resources in the United States (Cohen 1999). Miriam's comment to a young Arbert that greater access to public resources benefits all those who struggle no matter how the needs and desires that animate those struggles are framed or identified confirms the contention of gay and lesbian historians that the expansion of the public sphere is one of the enabling conditions for the production of queer institutions and communities in the United States (D'Emilio 1983).

### Odd Couple/Long Haul

I feel the swirls of antiseptically cool air caress the back of my neck as I lean against the wall in Arbert's hospital room. This false, clinical cool coaxes me to close my eyes for a moment as I rest my head back for a bit and imagine Arbert and his mother sitting in and protesting all those years ago in front of a public school in the Lower East Side.<sup>4</sup> I imagine that Miriam was a different looking woman back then: fiery and in full

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<sup>4</sup> One of the collateral pleasures of doing an ethnographic interview with informants is the opportunity for the ethnographer to imagine his interviewees in different moments of their lives that traverse both the past and likely futures. It is this mostly unaccounted for dynamic that makes for the temporal density at the heart of the much criticized ethnographic present. Perhaps, the key to making this method more efficacious is to account for the multiple pasts and futures in the ethnographic present.

control of her legs. Her mischievous smile, as she makes a snide comment about one of the nurses, indicates to me that she was quick with her tongue in those days of mobilization and small local victories. Now she sits of necessity in a wheel chair and in a place she would rather not be confronting a challenge that cannot be picketed or protested away. Arbert suffered renal failure two days ago and is now on dialysis and the doctors are unsure whether this will be a temporary or permanent state of affairs. Rafi called me on my cell last night to apprise me of the situation and I immediately promised to visit this afternoon.

Hospital visits are always strange affairs even for people who have no real fears or phobias about the sick or hospitals. There are inevitably encounters with relatives or friends one might have never met save for the fact that a friend or, in this case, an informant falls ill. Oddly, few of the Evisus have actually visited Arbert in the hospital although a few have called. I ask Arbert why he thinks the Evisus have not shown up to visit. He tells me that many of the Ball children have “issues with going to visit someone in the hospital.” Arbert feels that the whole community is so paranoid about “the kitty”<sup>5</sup> that all hospital visits are loaded emotionally with shame, stigma, and anxiety. The fact that Arbert is HIV negative does not mitigate the anxieties and fears that the

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<sup>5</sup> I first encountered this term for the HIV virus in the Ballroom scene, but I have heard it used in other social networks that are made up of predominantly queer and transgender people of color. To my mind, the association of the HIV virus with a small cat lessens the emotional impact of talking about someone who has sero-converted. I never heard any of my informants refer to their own HIV positive status in this way; the term “the kitty” was reserved for talking about other people who were believed to be HIV positive. I also suspect that this term domesticates the HIV virus by making it another object that can be found in any home.

hospitalization of someone so well-known in the community produces in members of his own house as well as broader Ball networks.

I can see that Rafi is feeling a little tired. Without a doubt, it has been a long and rather trying couple of days for him. He tells me that if he had not insisted that Arbert go to the emergency room, we might be planning a funeral today instead of just negotiating the ins and outs of an over stressed and underfunded New York City hospital system. Rafi is what some would call a stand up kind of guy. In short, in season and out of season, he shows up fully to his commitments and to his life and the lives of those whom he loves. Rafi and Arbert are constantly together. I have often run into both of them at balls to find Arbert looking at the competition or “kiking” with some of his Ball girlfriends and Rafi sitting next to him usually taking a nap since the balls run into the wee hours of the night or early morning. I often joke with Rafi that he has slept through more balls than anyone else I know. I think that Rafi sees his accompanying Arbert to the balls as one of his duties as a “good husband.” I suspect that part of his duties is also dealing with Arbert’s various children both from the house scene as well the “gay children” that he has adopted along the way. Most of these “gay children” have nothing to do with the house scene and, as Arbert has reminded me on a few occasions in informal conversations, are relationships of a totally different order.

At first glance, Arbert and Rafi are a bit of an odd couple. Arbert is a Nuyorican, light- skinned big girl whose face still has a child-like quality and who is quick with his tongue when he needs to be much to the dismay of those who imagine themselves to be his social betters. He has made his reputation in the Ball scene by walking the labels

category and by competing in the best dressed spectator category as well. Even when he is dressed down, Arbert always wears something that might be considered fashionable or an expensive accessory. Arbert is compulsively gregarious and his large network of friends, Ball children, and gay children attests to his prodigious ability to connect with people. In many ways, Rafi is quite opposite to Arbert's haute couture tastes and Olympic sociality. Rafi is quite reserved and his self-presentation is much more conservative than Arbert's. He is a recent immigrant from Argentina and his medium build, bushy brown hair, and his ever present shirt and tie gives him an "executive realness" feel or effect when he is in ball circles. Rafi is an Argentine of Russian Jewish descent who considers himself "a Latin American of European ancestry."

I have often sat in the back of their car listening to them engage in a sort of comparative debate about race relations in the US and Argentina. Arbert usually emphasizes his experiences during his long march through White-controlled HIV/AIDS prevention and intervention institutions and the way that "Black and Latino people" remain very visible, but largely powerless within them. Rafi would usually retort with a fairly astute class analysis based on his life in Argentina where he says "class is the real problem since the indigenous people got wiped out so early in the Spanish period." Of course, Arbert does not lack class analysis nor does Rafi deny the reality of racial exclusion and oppression in the United States, but it is interesting how they always seem to start at very different points when they debate in front of me.

Arbert and Rafi are indeed an odd couple and their love is a good example of how ordinary the improbable has become in their lives. They met on the internet a couple of

months prior to the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> and fell in love in the interstices of cyber space and cell phones and the amorous ether that constructs bridges between the middle class precincts of Buenos Aires and the brown-red bricked projects in Manhattan's Lower East Side that have the whirling mechanical noise drifting from the FDR Drive as their simultaneous lullaby and elegy. They decided that Rafi would come to New York to visit and they would try their hand at a more close up relation and see what would happen. Rafi arrived immediately after September 11<sup>th</sup> to a city unhinged with violence, mourning, and fear. While the pile of wreckage downtown that once was the World Trade Center produced smoke with no end in sight and the unnerving smell of thousands of unexpected deaths, Arbert and Rafi became lovers. The diminution of the geographic space between them would produce the conditions for them becoming "long haul lovers" --- one of those couples that one finds it hard to imagine that there was a time when they were not together.

### Falling into Latex

Of course, I met Arbert long before he was "coupled" with Rafi. One of the constant admonitions that more seasoned anthropologists give to less experienced ones who are still in the process of becoming skilled researchers is that they should remain open to the unexpected possibilities that simply emerge from the tug and tussle of the field. At times, even very cautious ethnographers try their luck in the gambling houses of serendipity. I met Arbert through the serendipity that sometimes opens doors that, at first inspection, seemed to be walls. In the winter of 1998, I was invited to give a talk at Yale University to a gathering of queer students of color. My talk consisted largely of



exploring the contradictions and possibilities inherent in the category “queer people of color” and was heavily indebted to the efforts made two decades earlier by US-based feminists of color in thinking through the political and theoretical meanings of the category “woman of color.”<sup>6</sup> In exploring the limits of male privilege within a category like queer people of color that purports to create political alliances across genders, classes, and national groupings, I proffered a story that illuminated how resistant gay men of color were to engage in political struggles around racist representations even when it explicitly involved them.

In short, I recounted something that a queer Latino activist friend of mine who was close to a number of members of the House of Latex (HOL) had related to me a few months earlier. An argument had developed during a house meeting when some of the women insisted that the group co-sponsor and join a protest that was scheduled later that week at a very well known gay club. The club had placed an advertisement in a gay entertainment weekly that invited presumably male club goers to “come and suck off a Puerto Rican crack dealer in the bathroom.” One of the first groups to organize the protest against the club was the Lesbian Avengers, a largely White lesbian activist organization. According to my friend, the men in the House of Latex were resistant to the idea of picketing a place that they also frequented. I noted in my talk how the women both in HOL and the Lesbian Avengers were much more willing to make an explicit race and class critique and act on it than the men in HOL were and that this reluctance might

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Edgar Rivera Colón. “Dispatches from the Race War: Some Theoretical Implications in Light of Our Positioning as Queers of Color”, Unpublished Panel Presentation at Yale University Conference Sponsored by Prism, Gay Students of Color Organization at Yale, 21 February 1998.

be a result of the male privilege that even working class gay men of color share, albeit in an asymmetric way, with middle and upper middle class gay White men who mostly own and run the gay male club circuit in New York City.

At the end of my talk, the other presenters and I fielded questions individually that had not been addressed during the question and answer period and generally mingled with audience members. While I was talking with one of the student organizers of the conference, a thirty-something Black man dressed all in white<sup>7</sup> came up to me and introduced himself as Barry Miley, the acting director of HIV prevention services at Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) in New York City. Barry told me that he was the person that supervised the people running the House of Latex Project. He said to me that he really liked my talk and that he hoped we would get a chance to talk further as the conference went on. I thanked him for his kind words and asked whether my activist friend had gotten the story right. He told me, "Oh, honey, he got it right alright." We both laughed at his emphatic and playful tone and I knew that although my friend "got it right" that there was more to the story than what I had surmised in my talk and would have to follow up on this line of inquiry when I got a chance. We exchanged polite farewells and, unfortunately, we did not really get a chance to talk during the remaining time of the conference.

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<sup>7</sup> At the moment of our meeting, I assumed that Barry was going through the initiation process that priesthood in the Afro-Cuban religion of Santeria requires. His all white attire that included a white parka was a sure fire sign of his status as an initiate. My later professional associations with Barry would confirm all these assumptions on my part as true.

In the late spring of 2000, I was taking the subway uptown to the Bronx and reading a book when I heard someone trying to get my attention. As I turned to look, there was Barry Miley from the Yale conference sitting down slightly across from where I was standing. We exchanged greetings and we asked about each other's jobs and well being. Toward the end of our conversation, Barry asked me "Aren't you an ethnographer?" I replied, "Yes, that's one way to put it." "Good. Look, we got all these narratives from a survey we did with all the kids who were participating in the House of Latex the last two years and we need someone to come in and do an analysis of all that data. Can you do that?" he queried. "Yes, I think I can, but I would have to look at the data", I responded. "Great. Here's my card. Call me and you can come down to GMHC and look at what we got. If you want it, you got a job", he punctuated this last phrase with a smile and I again noted his all white attire. I laughed and thanked him for the possible job opportunity and immediately got off the train to transfer to the local line.

About a week after my chance meeting with Barry, I called and made an appointment to see him and a few days later made a trip downtown to GMHC. It was during this meeting that I would be introduced to Arbert who was the director of the House of the Latex Project and the house mother as well. Although I had seen Arbert functioning as a house mother, judge, and ball host a number of times since the summer of 1995 when I began attending the House of Latex balls, I had not really been properly introduced to him until that spring day. I took the job on a consultant basis and became the research evaluator for the set of surveys that the HOL Project staff had conducted during the last two years. Although I reported to Barry and not to Arbert, I decided to spend at least half of my time at GMHC shadowing the HOL staff through their various

internal meetings, community events, and prevention activities with the ball youth that were their “target population.” I decided to do this largely because I wanted to get a better sense of how the HOL Project functioned, but I also wanted to learn more about Ball culture as well as the problems and challenges that the youth that were part of the project and the broader Ball community were struggling with and bringing to the attention of the staff. I imagined that if I could do this shadowing I would be able to put the interview data that I was reviewing into an appropriate context.

Of course, Arbert became my first real guide both in understanding not only the work that the HOL Project was undertaking, but the behaviors, meanings, and contexts that, according to his lights, made Ballroom culture what it was. In the end, I do not think my shadowing really helped me to understand the interviews that I analyzed and wrote about any better than I would had I not done it, but it did, rather inadvertently, teach me the basics of participant observation. Long discussions with Arbert about the HOL Project, the Ball scene, the complicated and tense race, class, and gender politics at GMHC, and our own connections as college-educated Nuyoricans who grew up in the 1970’s, but came to political and personal maturity in the 1980’s and 90’s would, long after I no longer worked for GMHC as a research consultant, lead to him becoming an important informant for my own ethnographic research on the Ball community.

One of the first long conversations I had with Arbert remains in my mind as, in one sense, typical of his combative relationship to what he perceived as injustice as well as a template for his method of engaging the world about him. There were tensions throughout the HIV Prevention section at GMHC because Barry had been given all the

responsibilities of being the director of HIV Prevention, but the higher ups at GMHC would not give him the title of “Director.” He remained the “Acting Director.” This was a source of discussion amongst the prevention staff of color and there was speculation as to the reasons for this state of affairs. Although Barry had an undergraduate degree from Yale and some graduate school training in clinical psychology, “the people upstairs” at GMHC still seemed unsure as to his capacities to do the job. This situation generated a number of scenarios in which staff imagined that their superiors would give him the title and then “set him up to fail” as a way of proving their progressive intentions while replacing Barry with a gay White man or they would refuse to give him the title and Barry would choose to leave to keep his sense of dignity. As I listened to all these scenarios and speculations, I was struck by both the intensity of feeling that accompanied the staff’s frustration about Barry’s predicament, but also how the Blacks and Latinos on the staff maintained an almost clandestine subculture of discursive resistance to what they perceived as the power that White people still had at GMHC.

### My People in the Projects

This whole situation was really the precipitating factor in my initiating a conversation with Arbert about his attitude about this kind of race and class privilege at GMHC. What remains with me of that conversation was Arbert’s approach to confrontation, “Child, I keep it professional. But, I will tell those people off when I need to. And if they fire me, then I’ll just go home to the projects where my mother and family live. I have a home to go back to. I wasn’t born at GMHC. This is not my home.” On reflection, I understood this statement to be both about working class Nuyorican kinship

ethics, but also an articulation of a strategy of how to deal with White class and race power within institutions where one has to learn to make a living, but can never “give you life.” Arbert was saying to me that day that he could go back to the Lower East Side and his people that included all kinds of queer and kin of origin who were with him when the sun shone splendidly and when storms ran riot. They would always be there waiting to give him support. The projects in the Lower East Side were not only home for him, but also a last line of defense:

ERC: Ok. Growing up in the Lower East Side, in the projects, can you tell me a little bit about that?

ALE: I’m going to try to recall as much as I can. Growing up in the projects on the Lower East Side, let me see what I remember most, my earliest recollections. Well, I think there’s always been a diverse mixture of African-Americans and Latinos together. But I would say that the dynamic for the race line was a bit different, too, because we had the mixture of Jewish individuals that were still there, not yet leaving. So, Avenue D, at one point, had a couple of stores that were still Jewish-run, selling their, you know, lingerie, stockings outdoors, and stuff like that. And also, like, the Asian community was a little further down in the Lower East Side, Avenue B, but had actually disbanded. And we kind of dominated by essence, the Latinos dominated Avenue D by a high percentage. African-Americans have always been part of that neighborhood, but I would have to say that the Lower East Side is similar to Spanish Harlem, like the mixture of Latinos there. So it did feel like a lot of, actually, to be specific, my growing up in that neighborhood was very Puerto Rican.

ERC: A very Puerto Rican neighborhood?

ALE: Yep. So in ’65, 1965, and the 70’s, you know it was very clear that that was the connection people had to each other, by culture and language.

ERC: How did that work out for you? What was that for you? How did you become conscious of being Puerto Rican, and being part of Puerto Rican culture?

ALE: Well. Well, you know, when I actually understood being Puerto Rican, I was going to school, and I think that’s the kind of first realization, because being Puerto Rican, it was just a culture that I lived in until I went to something different. You know? And I think that, you know, I started school, the struggle, fighting for me to speak a language, and then I realized that I wasn’t in a common kind of culture. I lived as a common person in a particular culture.

ERC: Were you Spanish dominant growing up?

ALE: Yes, you know, you read Spanish, the television. It was Spanish television all the way. There was nothing in English. Mom hated the English television. I remember I used to sneak in just to watch certain things like Happy Days or Abbot and Costello on Sunday afternoons. There was clearly an understanding that what's done outside is necessary because you have to do it to survive, but this house is Puerto Rican.

ERC: Tell me a little bit more. Along with the language, what are the other things that you thought, "Well, that's why I'm Puerto Rican"?

ALE: Yeah, it's the culture of the food. I think music. I grew up in the arts. My uncle, my uncle ... I'm also very familiar with my Mom's side of the family. I know nothing about my Dad's side of the family. So when I talk about my family structure, I always speak about my Mom. My family structure is maternal, not paternal. My Mom's family structure, mostly my Mom's brothers and sisters were theater individuals. And they were musicians or in the theater. And I grew up with that. Everyone had an ability to do something, performing. Either theatrical performing or singing. And all of them loved to be in the showcase. Loved the showcase. So, there was a theater company called Caras Nuevas [New Faces] which was actually based in the Lower East Side. And basically, this company was a dance company, theater company that took anyone who wanted to do anything and could do these productions in Spanish.

ERC: Did you participate in the theater group?

ALE: Of course I did. I was part of the dance company. I found there was great joy in dance. The head of Caras Nuevas was this gay guy named David who actually didn't know he was gay. He didn't know anything about gayness. He was clueless, out of his mind. You know running around this theater group with my straight uncles and aunts that were supporting this whole process (laughter) and doing whatever theater things Caras Nuevas was doing.

ERC: So, you had a very rich cultural life on the Lower East Side?

ALE: Yeah, I think so. I also have to tell you that holidays was all my cousins and aunts, we got together music wise. Culturally, my uncles, all my uncles were traditional guitarists. So, they did the trio music. It would be Christmas. Spanish caroling, if that happened, but that was the tradition. It was a lot of songs that, you know, most of us, the kids were going to the grownups to play, and the family would get drunk and sing bolero music and spend all night singing bolero music. And, of course, when I got bored, I would come over and me and my cousin Judy would sing and my family would enjoy our singing. They were amazed to see that we knew some of the songs, and stuff like that.

ERC: Did that change as you got older?

ALE: Yeah, it did. So, as an adolescent, I kind of rebelled against all that. There was an awakening for something else for me. Like I wanted to be part of something else, but this wasn't it. You know, if I jump up, when I jump up a couple of years, I kind of said "Okay, my friends are listening to Donna Summer. I really wanted to listen to Donna Summer (laughter). I wanted to listen to the divas (laughter).

In these comments, Arbert talks about a number of issues that recurred throughout his life narrative. He understands his own neighborhood through what racial groups make up the population and gives a nod to the history of the Lower East Side as a place where Jewish people once predominated. Now, Arbert only understands that presence as represented primarily through the last Jewish retailers who have managed to remain, but would mostly likely be displaced by the increase in business rents as gentrification spurs on both land value and tax assessments. The Lower East Side's physicality is intertwined with memories of immigrant and/or working class succession that is almost always read up against ideologies of upward mobility and poor neighborhoods as temporary way stations on the road to middle class legitimacy and social legibility.

### This House is Puerto Rican

Arbert framed Puerto Rican culture as something that he was within and not terribly conscious of until he had to go to public school and negotiate both horizontal and vertical forms of difference with his fellow students, teachers, and administrators. He identified his own Puerto Rican identity with culture and language and variously defines culture as food, music, certain artistic practices, holiday family gatherings where standards of cultural competence were both performed and evaluated, and media consumption practices. One of the more startling moments in this part of his life narrative is when he relates how his mother made a stark contrast between what family members



had to do outside the domestic space to survive and what was to be done inside the home: “... but this house is Puerto Rican.” Arbert mobilizes notions of home as a place of specific forms of material and symbolic labor, but also as a place where outside non-Puerto Rican frames and practices are neither relevant nor terribly welcomed.

In these comments, he also begins to talk about his first encounters with what he refers to as “gayness” which occur in the context of a collective artistic project that his family was deeply involved in and he refers to one of the leaders of this theater group as “clueless” and “not knowing anything about gayness.” Both the centrality of cultural production as a marker of “gayness” or sexual minority status and the linking of sexuality with forms of knowledge are themes that consistently emerge from interviews with not only Arbert, but with many of my informants. In one sense, Arbert’s life narrative anticipates a robust finding from many of the formal and informal interviews with my informants: that their participation in Ball culture and practices was an attempt, at least initially, to use dance/gender performance and Ballroom knowledge as ways to separate the stigma and shame associated with their received understandings of gay identity.

At the end of this excerpt, Arbert discusses his dissatisfaction with what his family and neighborhood had inculcated in him and the cultural practices and beliefs that were seen as constitutive of Puerto Rican identity. As an adolescent, he began to rebel against all this and sought another way of being in the world that at that moment of his life remained beyond him or, perhaps, inside of him, but in an inchoate or unrealized form. He latched on to popular culture in the mode of Donna Summer’s music and implicitly the disco and house music scenes that were emerging during his adolescence

and young adulthood. For Arbert, popular culture became a grounding point for projecting possible future versions of his identity. His own desire “to listen to the divas” indexed aspirations to embody an emergent social identity that was feminine, theatrical, and encoded in a pathos of the narratives of spectacular, but failed loves that divas represent. Perhaps, Arbert’s younger self aspired to a success story of a different order of magnitude.

ERC: Where did you go to primary school?

ALE: St. Brigid’s. St. Brigid’s School in the Lower East Side

ERC: Right in front of that little park?

ALE: Right in front of the, yeah, Tompkins Square Park. It was kind of a progressive Catholic School because I think at that point the nuns took their habits down and started wearing their sweaters and regular clothes. You know, the Sisters of Charity. And I remember, you know, graduating from eighth grade, teaching Sister Frances how to hustle. And I remember she wanted to learn because I was really good at it and, again, dance was everything to me.

ERC: Were you a popular kid in your class?

ALE: I’m always popular (laughter). I’m a jokester. I’ve always been a jokester. I laugh to stop a lot of people from crying. So, I know people that have said that I would make a joke about everything. I just want to see humor in people’s lives. And I think that was the kind of thing that made me a jokester. I was also a very good student. I hate the fact that people say that Latinos or African-Americans are overachievers because it means that you [as a group] have underachieved at some level. So I can’t deal with that, the simple fact that at one point in my life, you know, they would say “Oh, he’s an overachiever.” And you kind of resent that, but it was something that you’d aspire to, you know. They were kind of saying “Oh, he’s going somewhere.” And clearly, I found a parallel in eighth grade reading an essay called “The Long Sheet.” And “The Long Sheet” was a story about people being put in a box, and trying to figure out how to get out of a particular box. And I don’t know, there were two individual boxes or something, but in essence you know, there were so many people stuck in this particular box that they didn’t know how to get out. And they realized that they could help themselves by helping each other out. But no one would help to do so. Everyone thought independently, “I need to personally get myself out.” And I realized that I was living in a box and the box was the Lower East Side. I didn’t want to be identified any longer as this Latino male because the perception I think that it had

was negative ... crime, drugs, alcohol, dysfunction, abuse. Everything that was in my life and neighborhood. And I think that was the thing that killed me. That's the time I kind of realized that I needed to do something about figuring that out ... figuring out what was going to be. That was very interesting because I remember my sister turned sixteen and there were going to have a Sweet Sixteen party for her. Now, we weren't poor ... We weren't a poor family, but we weren't a rich family either.

ERC: How would you describe your family's economic situation?

ALE: We were a very working class family. But to spend the amounts of money [they did] doing the Sweet Sixteen that was ridiculously expensive. You know? And to plan it for a year so it could look like a wedding. I couldn't rationalize it ... They went all out to celebrate my sister's birthday. Here's my sister at sixteen having the most luxurious type of party celebrating herself and a man can't do that in Latino culture. And I'm like, I'm saying "Jewish men have bar mitzvahs. I want to be a Jew!" And you know, I think I also have to tell you that, you know, going to Catholic Church on Sunday was torture for me too. My Mom and my grandmother and my sister every Sunday combing their hair, trying to get dressed, doing their Sunday best kind of thing. And that was frustrating because I hated to go to church on Sundays just to look a particular way and have to prove to somebody that you were in that community. So I was resenting being in this particular box, all these negativities that I was seeing. Everything so negative. And parallel to that, my sister was growing up and getting boyfriends and I remember at one point my Mom couldn't stop it, couldn't prevent her from dating. So I used to be the chaperone. My sister used to pay me to go away (laughter).

ERC: To get lost (laughter)?

ALE: Yep (laughter). So, of course, that allowed me to venture other places and stuff. And I realized that there was a like a sexual being in me too ... exploring sexuality at that point. I went to the public bathrooms for the first time around that age, and it was amazing because then I realized that men were jerking off in the bathrooms. I didn't understand why. I thought the bathrooms were for peeing. And, you know, looking and learning and me being young or whatever, I didn't understand why. But inside, there was this internal excitement to look at a penis. But at the same time, it felt dirty. And there was the dirtiness behind it. So, [I was] very ambivalent about it. I was curious to go to these public bathrooms to look at penises, but at the same time, that was totally gross, and they were trying to approach me. So there was no sexual contact there, but it was like a point of interest that kind of lured me into the phenomenon of the tearooms. I also didn't look my age being 14 and 15 during that time.

ERC: Did you look older?

ALE: Yeah, I looked much older. No one questioned my age at a club at 15. I looked like I was 18.

### Which Way is Out of the Box?

Arbert describes his primary education in a way that delineates the antinomies that emerge when a society, as Roger Lancaster has argued, lives in the wake of an “incomplete sexual revolution”(Lancaster 2003). Of course, this forestalled sexual revolution is part and parcel of larger attempts at social and cultural changes that remain, in many ways, still unsettled and in contention to this very day. Arbert both teaches Sister Frances to hustle and resents the social repression and desire for a type of moralizing normativity that his family’s Catholicism represents for him. He bemoans the condescension implicit in being labeled as an overachiever by his mostly White teachers and understands this to be a back handed form of praise since middle class Whiteness is used to calibrate, albeit tacitly, measures of academic or intellectual excellence in the first instance. Nonetheless, he also admits to aspiring to this very same label of overachiever as a way of being different than his other Black and Latino/a school mates. The essay “The Long Sheet” provides a social map for his own situation as a working class Nuyorican growing up in the Lower East Side. He discusses how this essay opened his eyes to the boxes that people were contained within both in the text, but also in his own social surroundings and that he too was a denizen of the box that he equates with the Lower East Side. One way of reading this part of Arbert’s narrative is to think of it as a very uneven description of a very unlikely overlap of two very different approaches to social subjectivity itself: Althusser’s notion of interpellation wherein the subject is called into being via a compulsory and compulsive inhabitation of social individuality and Foucault’s concept that subjectivity is a nodal point of social forces in which both

subjugating and pleasurable investments cohere (Althusser 1971, Foucault 1978). Arbert both does and does not want to heed the call of being named an overachiever by those that control the institutions that at that point in his life are in charge of his primary school education and socialization into the American version of capitalist modernity.

The thematic arc of this excerpt from Arbert's life narrative begins with schooling as a site of both control and expression, traverses his family's economic life and gender rituals (i.e., his sister's Sweet Sixteen), explores the limits that his mother tries to place on his sister's burgeoning sexual interest in boys, and concludes with his own preliminary forays into being a spectator of public sex between men which he finds both alluring and repulsive. I want to argue that much of his retelling of this part of his growing up is an uneasy search for a different mode of gendered bodily living. A life that would allow him a Sweet Sixteen of his own without expelling him from his family's care. Another way of being the only boy in a working class matriarchal Nuyorican family that will not force him to mind his sister's sexual life on behalf of his own mother's idea of what is appropriate dating behavior for her teenage daughter.

Obviously, he skirts around his assigned sexual/gender policing tasks and instead creates opportunities for his awakening same-sex erotic desires. His adventures in the public bathrooms in his neighborhood at a very young age place him in the role of the voyeur. A very powerful role for a young man of his age: to watch older adult men engage in sex with each other and decide the limits of his own participation in this scene has its own erotic return. In this visual economy of desire, he is playing the role of the top and his elders are his ocular bottoms. Arbert's "looking" is part and parcel of the strong

visual element that typifies many male erotic practices, but also marks his sexual coming of age in New York City at a time where public sex had a more viable field of play in both public spaces (e.g., bathrooms, parks, cruising strips, etc.) and commercial institutions (e.g., dance clubs, backrooms in bars, movie theaters, peep shows, live sex acts venues, etc.). Arbert's sexual auto-genesis is very much a pre-AIDS story. In many ways, his life mimics the unraveling of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in New York City from its virtual invisibility to its association with the gay male community and its social institutions to political mobilizations that redefined the axis of activism in queer communities to its current phase of containment within the institutional nexus of medical and not-for-profit organizations. Increasingly, these community-based organizations have targeted communities of color and their institutions, like the Ballroom community, for prevention and intervention services. In this excerpt, Arbert's story begins in the public bathrooms, but it also includes other sites of experimentation like the club scene where he first encounters member of the Ball scene.

ALE: At that point, my aunt was going to this place called Paradise Garage, and she told me that one day she was going to take me there. She said that "I really think you're going to like this place." I'm like "Really?" She's like "I think so. It's really good music, lots of hustle dancing." ... And she took me to Paradise Garage. She told me before I went in "You're home" (laughter). I said, "I'm home?" I went into Paradise Garage in 1979, and I kind of looked at the place, and I said, "This is the most amazing place I've ever seen." And, mind you, the cultural understanding of gay men dancing with other gay men, it was normal for me at the age of 14. That was, I wasn't fixated or disturbed by it. But I'd noticed it was a lot more than just the norm. And my aunt was the biggest fag hag up through there, and I was amazed. And I remembered, she went onto the dance floor and said "Lead me." "Lead you?" I said to her. In the hustle culture, it was straight men, it was straight men that hustled and led, but at the Garage, the men actually had the opportunity to convert themselves to followers or leaders in hustle.

ERC: With women dancers?

ALE: With women dancers or all men to men. And men to men could be straight hustling together. And I'd already gotten used to that culture. So to lead a gay man was natural. I only thought it was a man that twirled and spun like a woman. And I thought the amazement of that. I always thought that the straight man when he'd turn and spin like that ... that it was fine. But when a gay man does it, it was an amazing thing that he transformed himself into the same straight woman hustling, although his size was a bit different and the structure.

ERC: So, that Paradise Garage world, you then became part of that world?

ALE: Yeah. Automatically. It felt like it was important to do that. It was downhill after that (laughter).

ERC: But Paradise Garage, what was it like racially and gender wise, what was the male/female ratio?

ALE: Mostly male. Mostly African-Americans and Latinos. 84 King Street was the place to be. I remember connecting to other places, like Bond's International or Club Elite or The Circus or, at that time Studio 54. By the time I hit studio 54, I already was part of the gay culture sexually. You know? I already got introduced to what it was to be gay sexually, and that was kind of like, at that point, I knew who I was and how I was going to be used because that's basically, as a young kid, you feel like that. I felt like that, as an object.

ERC: You were being used by older gay men as an object?

ALE: Yeah.

ERC: Were you their trophy or what have you?

ALE: Well, yeah, for the most part. And actually that's when the drugs come, and that's when the drugs came in. I think that, you know, there was this issue of acid and drugs that came into the picture quite easily. And I think that was a good healing point. You know, that was the medicine that I needed at one point to survive. You know coming home from a club at that age my Mom used to get so angry at me. And if I was stoned, I wouldn't hear her screaming. So that was my medicine. And I healed from something that I found pleasure in. And this functioned on many levels. So, I finally found my way out of the box.

ERC: Hold on. You found your way out of the box through the club scene?

ALE: Through the club scene.

ERC: What did the club scene do for you?

ALE: It was magical. I think there was a magic behind it. It was a fantasy, a fantasy of, you know, of slipping away to the music. And the sound system at the Paradise Garage was immensely intense. It was like I knew I could slip away. I knew it was the drugs, but I was tripping to the point that I didn't care what I'd

lost or who I was with or anything. And I think that connection I had was more internal for me than enjoying who I was, then to go back to a place where they were telling me I can't do that ... And I liked the Garage because I'd hustle and carried on, but it was more about the connection of being in a fabulous place ... But, you know, we were the entertainment. We didn't feel like we were. We weren't the reason the club opened up. We were just part of the entertainment ... to entertain the moneymakers. To get the uptown people to spend money in the clubs.

ERC: So, the club kids were just part of the ...

ALE: The scenery. That's why they would let them in.

ERC: OK. Let's go back to Paradise Garage. You were there when?

ALE: I was a cardholding member of the Garage from '79 to '81. I think we were involved with a movement of music that actually, you know, up to this day it's been hard to not listen to its influence.

ERC: Can you tell me about that?

ALE: Well, first of all, I think that the music ... I think the artists that were being portrayed in these clubs were artists that were not being portrayed in the music industry that was making the Billboard charts. These were artists that had talent, but weren't making it that far.

ERC: OK. Tell me some more.

ALE: So, these artists actually became famous not on radio. They became famous at the clubs. So, you know, here is, what's her name, Tina Marie, you know, who sings to you "Do you want me? Do you love me?" and that was the first time you heard a mellow song go into a bridge of a disco song, you know? And it was the first time you would ever hear that, the second time you would hear it is in "Love Hangover" by Diana Ross. But it was innovative artists that decided to bring some melody and chorus to disco dance music. So that itself was what created the Paradise Garage.

ERC: Was it at this time in the Garage that you started meeting the Ball children?

ALE: Yeah the girls from the House scene were actually at the Paradise Garage. They weren't the actual focal point of the Garage scene. I think the Ball girls were highlighted just a bit more because of their dancing. Voguing was becoming very popular in the club scene. And this is prior to Madonna, prior to Malcolm McLaren coming into the voguing scene and making songs about it. It was just that style of posing, dancing, was becoming more popular. Touch dancing was not the thing. You know from hustle to break dancing, and the break dancing was not happening at the Paradise Garage. So, the girls were doing self-expression kind of dancing and ... one form of it was the vogue.



### Coming Home to the Paradise Garage

Arbert was introduced to the club scene by his aunt who was into the predominantly Latino/a hustle dance club circuit and who also was a member of the dance and theater company that he had been part of when he was younger. Arbert describes his aunt as a “fag hag”: a straight woman who is deeply embedded in gay male friendship networks. On occasion, while I was in the field, a male informant who identified as feminine would tell me that he had just had a falling out with his closest female friend and was in search of a “new hag” to go clubbing, shopping, and hanging out with in his free time. After these conversations, I often wondered whether my informant’s need for a “fag hag” was a tacit recognition that the condition of possibility for the construction of femininity in male and female identified bodies was, at least in part, the productive tensions that inform gay male and “fag hag” relationships. I suspect that part of the productivity of these tensions is explained by the symbolic presumption, with all its sexist and homophobic overlay, that “fags” and “fag hags” are “bottoms” whose shared corporeal subordination in either anal and/or vaginal penetration is the basis for a gestural and aesthetic repertoire that is common to both partners in this dyad. Whatever the case may be, Arbert is ushered into the gay club scene by a woman in his family who occupies a very particular social relationship in the gay male world as he understood it at that time in his life.

Arbert describes his incorporation into the social world of the Paradise Garage as a kind of homecoming and a place where gay men could switch over to the role of “straight women” in choosing not to be the lead when dancing the hustle. Arbert’s

language has an element of the ecstatic in describing the Garage as a place of freedom and escape. The Paradise Garage, like the Stonewall Rebellion, has taken on a mythic quality in the stories of men who came out into a sector of the gay scene in the late 1970's and early 1980's. My own informal conversations with older informants about that time period in the New York City gay scene are usually replete with reports of the awe, wonder, and freedom that the Paradise Garage represented for these men as well as the sense of community that was derived from frequenting not only the Garage, but also the bath houses, the cruising venues, and the bars in the West Village amongst other places. Thus, the Paradise Garage was part of a large network of social institutions and events that lay the material basis for queer life that decades later crystallizes into the memory-scapes that are filled with assertions of freedom and connectedness as well as an ambivalent sense of loss in wake of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in New York City.

Arbert sees his participation in the club scene as circumscribed by his being very young in a largely adult scene and his own status as a working class club kid who is part of the exotic scenery designed to get the "uptown people" with more economic resources to spend their money in the club. His recollections of his drug use during this period in his life are devoid of retrospective ethical judgments that can render some life narratives into morality tales. He describes his drug use as "healing" and as providing the "medicine" he needed at the time to overcome the blocks and challenges that growing up as a young gay Nuyorican man presented to him on a daily basis. Arbert sees his sojourn into the club scene as a way out of the box he felt trapped within. In a sense, the Paradise Garage's music was the medium that allowed him to be outside his present self: an Arbert who could slip away from the gendered demands of his home and the broader society.

He describes the Garage as magic: a transformative symbolic practice that defies the causal rationality at the heart of modern notions of time and the self. A mode of ordering the world, however provisionally, that allows for other alignments of time, space, place, and self. A thoroughly symbolic practice that is initiated in the rhythmic movements of a body that follows the music and is immersed in it at the same time: it follows the very medium that subtends the meanings it has for itself. Merleau-Ponty writes about "... carnal being, as a being of depths, of several leaves or several faces, a being in latency, and a presentation of a certain absence" (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 136). The Paradise Garage's self-shattering music allowed Arbert to experience these depths and multiple faces that emerge as his young body in motion merged with not only the pulsating rhythm of the sound all around him, but also the motion of all the bodies, in their various gender presentations, that surrounded him within the tight confines of the dance floor. Perhaps, other possible selves became thinkable to him precisely as other "depths" of his body emerged in his nightly journeys and destinations that his "slipping away" afforded him. Arbert's "slipping away" is a description of a shift in position that goes beyond the anchors that give everyday life its apparent coherence and stability and into a space that is beyond the hard iterations of individuation that univocal Nuyorican masculinities may call forth at times.

He also narrates the development of the underground music that fed the vitality of the Paradise Garage. He talks about the musical innovations that eventually led to the singers like Tina Marie breaking into mainstream radio venues. Paradise Garage's ethos was one of creating not only other ways of inhabiting one's own "carnal being", but also technical innovations in what constituted dance music and what relations could obtain

between the lyrical content and sonic dimensions of disco and the newly burgeoning House music scene. He also talks about innovations in dance at Paradise Garage where “touch dancing” was no longer dominant and what Arbert calls “self-expression kind of dancing” like vogue were beginning to make their presence known beyond simply Ball circles. Arbert recalls his first encounters with the Ball children at the Paradise Garage who were given some recognition because of their voguing skills despite not being the main focus of the type of dance practices that were being developed there. In a later moment in his life narrative, Arbert recalls how the Ball children were “looked down upon” because they were not club kids and how when he had a job monitoring who was allowed to enter different clubs he worked for as a “door queen”, he made it a point to exclude Ball children since they were not really that attractive as “scenery” for the rich White patrons that frequented the downtown club scene.

### Moving On Up to East Orange: Prelude

East Orange is just outside the city limits of Newark, New Jersey and, at points, in the winding road we are taking the housing stock reflects the ambiguity of being on the outskirts of the largest city in the state. The way people walk in the streets has the manic tempo of inner city Newark while the houses are small or just renovated large apartments in search of high end buyers. East Orange is a suburb that has not quite managed to shake off the buzz and buoyancy that Newark in its day light life exudes. I have never been to this part of East Orange and I am struck by the amount of renovated buildings and the signs announcing “unique experiences in luxury living.”

It has been a dramatic couple of months for Arbert and Rafi. Arbert left his job at GMHC and, consequently, lost his health insurance and his ability to get prescription medicines to manage his high blood pressure. During numerous phone conversations, we talked about the situation and I spent weeks fruitlessly trying to get doctors I know to write a prescription, but the stakes are too high for practitioners to prescribe medications without establishing some kind of relationship with a patient first. Unfortunately, Arbert having to deal with his mother's worsening medical condition provided little time for him to attend to his own needs. A friend who works at a queer-friendly community health center offered to see Arbert, but could not promise to have an appointment available for another four weeks. Before Arbert could get to the appointment, he would suffer renal failure that has now made dialysis a part of his weekly schedule for the foreseeable future, if not the rest of his life.

This medical crisis has changed many things in Arbert's life. He has decided to refocus his life so that there is room for his own needs and concerns amidst all the caretaking obligations that his role in his various families require. Arbert and Rafi have left the Lower East Side and have bought, with one of Arbert's best friends, a three-bedroom duplex apartment in a condo development in East Orange. This move has been a difficult one for Arbert since it is a very belated recognition that his mother will continue to become incapacitated as her medical condition worsens and that he has to construct the basis for a new life with Rafi in light of the real possibility that he will have to put his mother in a nursing home before long.<sup>8</sup> He, like so many of my informants in the New

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<sup>8</sup> One of the interesting themes that came up during telephone conversations with Arbert about the almost certain eventuality of placing his mother in a nursing home was the idea that "Puerto Ricans" or

York City ballroom, is the “go to” person in his family. Since he has spent close to two decades in the social services field and has received numerous opportunities to receive clinical training to enhance his ability to work with the Ballroom community on all kinds of “presenting issues”, Arbert has very well honed bureaucratic maneuvering, counseling, and clinical skills and both wings of his family, his kin of origin and queer kin, ask for his help in facing all kinds of personal and economic crises. This story of being the “responsible one” or the “go to” person is repeated consistently in the lives of my other informants.

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“Latinos” or “Folks of Color” are opposed to putting their elderly relatives in nursing homes on cultural grounds. Arbert communicated to me that putting one’s mother in a nursing home is a thing that “White people do” and that he would not only feel guilty if he did this, but he would also feel ashamed at betraying his cultural ideals. Throughout my research on the Ball community, White people were constantly framed by informants as simply not being as affectively sophisticated and deep as Black and Latinos/as and to be dealt with in politically tactful ways when possible, but never to be taken into an inner circle of trust. Although there were White men and women who were, in a sense, trusted by Ball members, “White people” as a metonymic shorthand for institutional and social power were never to be trusted entirely. Part of these assessments by Ball members are based on actual experiences of conflict with White people. Nonetheless, I suspect the idea of keeping White people outside the circle of trust is a preventive form of defense in a White supremacist society that is not strictly based on personal interactions given the intense and increasingly policed residential and social segregation along racial and class lines in New York City. The emotional paucity that White people are ascribed, I would argue, is a compensatory racial fantasy that both affirms, albeit in a counter-identificatory manner, the emotional complexity and sophistication of, in this case, Blacks and Latinos/as and refuses to concede Whiteness any type of superior or even interesting social and/or aesthetic intelligibility. In this sense, following some of the insights of Fanon, this notion creates space for affirmation, community building and subject reconstruction that takes Whiteness on and bends it into to a “for-itself-now for-we” abject/foundation. See Jose Muñoz’s “Feeling Brown: Ethnicity and Affect in Ricardo Bracho’s *The Sweetest Hangover and Other STDs*” for a different take on this same problematic using the field of artistic production as a site of analysis (Muñoz 2000).

### Too Much Kin: Go To Queers

The cruel irony at the heart of the Christian Right-driven culture wars in the United States is that the people who are depicted as threats to the survival of the family as an institution and outside the realm of kinship are deeply committed to kin-work of all kinds and contend on a daily and very practical basis with a surplus, not a void, of familial relationships. The material basis for conservative critics' ability to make popular their "family values" campaign is the nature of the phenomenology of social decomposition itself at least at the level of the individual. During the last twenty years, the changes in the process of capital accumulation and labor discipline in the United States, in terms of aligning the state more closely with market imperatives and needs and rolling back benefits won by mass social redress movements of various kinds, have resulted in a massive redistribution of wealth upward and in an asymmetric pattern that conforms to pre-existing race and gender hierarchies. This realignment has shifted even more of the costs of social reproduction onto the middle and working classes and has reinvigorated the discourse of individual responsibility for manifestly socially shared problems. At the level of the individual or the family, the strain that these added costs mean for daily life is palpable. The prospects for addressing these strains are bleak in a labor market that has seen rising productivity and hours at work while real wages have stagnated or actually declined relative to buying power in historical terms. The average worker in the United States today works longer for fewer wages and benefits than his or her counterpart did twenty years ago. It is in this context that working people of quite varying income levels experience both family turmoil and almost inescapable pressures towards downward economic mobility. Almost all of my informants are employed in the

social service sector, retail, or the lower administrative sectors of the service economy directly attached to finance or real estate. None of my informants has a job that has a defined-benefits pension as part of their compensation packet. Some of them have no health insurance benefits although they are employed in full-time positions. Obviously, my informants are part of the working class that faces downward economic pressures and a deteriorating benefits package both in their particular employment situations and the public sphere in general.

With dogged persistence and ideological acumen, conservative intellectuals, media commentators, and activists have been able to reconstitute these experiences of personal and economic distress into a narrative of moral decay of the family at the hands of libertine gay, feminist, immigrant, people of color, and even liberal elite constituencies that are spoiling “American” traditions of stable families and/or social order. This narrative has become the ideological common sense against which all calls for progressive social change need to be measured. Within this hostile political terrain, massive and multi-pronged campaigns have been waged by gay and lesbian civil rights organizations and their constituencies for state recognition of both same sex couples and their families. The mixed results of these campaigns, at the present moment, reflect partially the uneven nature of gay and lesbian civil rights organizing and political lobbying across all fifty states given that marriage and family law are largely affairs contested and adjudicated in state court systems and legislatures. Lancaster has argued that the contention at play here can be broadly viewed as a form of capitalist economic



and social dispensation that is predominantly libertarian and cosmopolitan or a dispensation that is mostly authoritarian and corporatist (Lancaster 2003).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The parallels between the present day gay and lesbian Civil Rights and the Black Civil Rights movements are instructive. An almost purely Marxist reading of these movements might be helpful in understanding how resistance is both contained and reconstituted in an advanced capitalist country like the United States. For example, African-American political scientist Adolph Reed has framed the dynamics of the Black Civil Rights/Power movements within the larger economic logic of late capitalism. Reed writes about the irrationality of segregation in the American South from the standpoint of capitalism's inherent drive to standardize all individual units of labor power into a homogenous mass of what Marx called abstract labor: "The dual labor system was irreconcilable with the principle of reducing all labor to 'abstract labor'. Scientific management has sought to reduce work processes to homogenous and interchangeable hand-and-eye motions, hoping eventually to eliminate specialized labor. A workforce stratified on the basis of an economically irrational criterion such as race constitutes a serious impediment to [the] realization of the ideal of a labor pool made up of equivalent units" (Reed 1999:60). One could take Reed's comments and replace "race" with "sexual identity" and begin to understand one of the driving, but largely unrecognized logics behind the debates of the contemporary lesbian/gay movement of the 1990's. The huge focus on the acquisition of state enforced and monitored civil rights articulated via the struggle for "gay or same-sex marriage" is part of this standardization or homogenization of all units of labor both to increase efficiencies in labor productivity itself and to reduce costs to the realization of surplus value (i.e., valorization) by reducing long term social strife in the organs of civil society. In one sense, Reed's insight allows us to look at the gay/lesbian movements of the 1960's and 1970's as the anterior moment to the standardization of differential units of labor. Namely, the moments in which "minoritarian subjects" (Muñoz 1999:7) come to reclaim their right to exist within the public sphere is the historical conjuncture in which these subjects live the modality of their difference. Of course, it would be too neat to argue that this process of the conversion of all labor into its abstract form is accomplished in a univocal manner. Moreover, it would be inaccurate to say that capital's drive to convert all units of labor into abstract labor is the same either empirically (etic) or phenomenologically (emic) as the demand by queer subjects for equality in American society. Abstract labor increases the rate of profit for monopoly capital. The demand for social equality is a claim for further distribution of surplus value in a multi-cultural capitalist state. There is a homology between these two differing social processes, but not a direct equivalence. Further, the temporality of the emergence of new subjectivities is never articulated in an unproblematic linear fashion. Nonetheless, it remains empirically and theoretically enabling to think about the emergence of the gay/lesbian movement within the broader parameters of the structural demands of capital accumulation and the management of social crises by the broad array of institutions that typify late capitalism. Of course, the countervailing tendency in this process of homogenization is the emergence of consumption patterns associated with queer subjects (Warner in Robbins 1993:241). Therefore, capital both presses the process of colonizing all available units of labor into the sphere of abstract labor while, at the same time, organizing a commodity life that renders the particularity of each unit of labor transparent as a mode of self-affirmation. Thus, there are three distinct, but interrelated social processes being described here. First, the macro-economic rationalization of individual units of labor into abstract labor by monopoly capital now in its fiancé capital phase in the United States. Secondly, the development of a movement for social reclamation based on the unjust differential access to material and symbolic resources in a White, heterosexist social order. This social demand is ultimately for equality or the commensurate value of all subjects, minoritarian and otherwise, within the American polity. This demand is a product of differential treatment and not equivalent to the economic process of making all units of labor equal. Nonetheless, this demand can be used in making the process of the rationalization of labor less prone to conflict. Thus, on an ideological level (which has its own register of

The ultimate result of these contestations remains unclear. However, one of the interesting paradoxes of even the modest victories of the gay and lesbian civil rights movements and the slow incorporation of the putative “enemies of the family” into the legal and economic structures that confer social status on families and regulates a whole host of rights and obligations referring to childcare, income, and property rights is that gay and lesbian families are in a position to bolster the ideologies of middle class family life at the moment that heterosexual families are being transformed by large changes in the economy.<sup>10</sup> Queer cultural critics have begun to delineate the consequences, intended

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materiality), the demand for equality can be grist to the mill for the further abstraction of labor despite the countervailing logic that any demand for social equality makes on the process of valorization in the form of the egalitarian redistribution of symbolic and material wealth. Thirdly, there is a sphere of consumption that is created and constantly expanded by the affirmation of any differential cultural identity in the type of advanced late capitalism which typifies American society. Thus, a stigmatized cultural identity is affirmed and reproduced through certain patterns of consumption. In one sense, the disruptive potential of differential subjectivity is partially contained and managed through the further diversification (ethnic, racial, sexual, etc.) of commodity production. Further, since U.S.-based notions of appropriate citizenship or social viability are closely articulated via commodity consumption, minoritarian subjects are allowed social space that does not bring into question the underlying social structures which produce their stigmatized difference in the first instance. Obviously, each of the social processes described above have their particular temporal logics that must be viewed as distinct but cohering in the same social structure. Finally, the mutual imbrication of all these processes indicates that their development is always conditioned by each other in an uneven manner at different historical conjunctures.

<sup>10</sup> Part of this dynamic can be observed in the popular cable television reality show “Queer Eye for the Straight Guy” where four gay men spend the show trying to rehabilitate a straight-identified man into “dateable” and ultimately “marriageable” material by redesigning his home, updating his wardrobe, and refining his eating and buying habits. The ideological kernel of this show, besides its obvious comedic value, is that a failing heterosexuality can only be renovated through an alignment with the high-end consumption patterns of upper middle class urban gay men whose presumed childlessness and, therefore, larger reserves of disposable income, has positioned them as cultural brokers and interpreters of the emerging trends in commodity culture. This commodity rehabilitation’s purpose is to deliver the straight man into the hands of a straight woman that is always already imagined as a sophisticated consumer. The deep racial, class, and misogynistic registers at play are fairly straight forward. What is remarkable is the heterosexual gatekeeper roles that the gay men depicted in the show play. They are, in effect, the commodity cavalry called to rescue a certain classed and raced heterosexuality from the vicissitudes of under or inappropriate consumption.

or otherwise, of these struggles for economic and legal incorporation that the gay and lesbian civil rights has waged for the last decade or so. Lisa Duggan has argued that these attempts at the normalization of same-sex relationships and gay and lesbian families are part of what she calls homonormativity: "...It is a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (Duggan 2004:50). Although a number of my informants have expressed an interest in getting married and having children as long-term life goals, very few of them have any sustained connection with the gay and lesbian civil rights organizations that are at the forefront of changing marriage and family laws to be inclusive of same-sex couples. Their relationship to the homonormative neoliberal project that Duggan describes is largely at the receiving end of a shrinking welfare state and a hostile labor market that marginalizes them because of their racial and/or gender expression differences. I suspect that the civil rights movement that would address the complex of intersectional forms of subordination that my informants must negotiate in their daily forms of struggle has yet to be imagined as a political strategy let alone prosecuted. Nonetheless, they and Arbert largely remain the "go to" people in their families and mostly watch from the outside as social worlds that are animated by the imperatives of a homonormative project in a neoliberal racialized political economy continues to develop and consolidate itself.

### House Warming Party: Vistas of Upward Mobility

Once we park in the visitors' parking lot outside, we notice the long shadow cast by what is a spanking brand new hospital that is being built right next to the condo development where Arbert and Rafi live now. "Wow, that's convenient." I tell Maribel and Lorna as we walk into the entrance. "Yeah, they have a lot of things being built here already. It's a good thing they bought when they did" Maribel retorts. The hallway is small, but finely appointed with lush gold-brown carpets and mirrors framed in gold colored metal and beige-blond wood panels that give the place an even smaller feel. We go up to the desk and tell the security guard, an older Black man probably in his late 50's, that we are here to see Arbert and Rafi in the penthouse apartments. "Ah, okay, the penthouse apartments. Let me see. Are you parked outside Miss?" Maribel and Lorna nod simultaneously in response to his question. "Well, I'll need you to give me your license plate number, your driver's license, and you'll have to sign your name here", he hands Maribel, our driver for the evening, a clip board. She signs with a surprised look on her face that signals to me her minor distress at having to leave her license with a blue-jacketed stranger for the duration of her visit. After she signs, she hands over her license. "You can get this back once you're done with your visit Miss. Just come to the desk and the guard will give it back to you."

We smile at the guard and head for the elevators. I'm a bit taken aback by the fact that Arbert and Rafi now live in such a security-conscious building. This is the first time I have witnessed anyone hand over a driver's license to someone who was not a police officer or a state official of some kind, but this may be an artifact of my non-driver

naïveté. Of course, I surmise that the array of computer-based visual surveillance technology alongside the wall inside the front desk area must be standard fare for condominium developments like these in gentrifying neighborhoods all over the New York City metropolitan area. We step into the elevator that reeks with the smell of residential newness. Lorna presses the button for the twelfth floor. “Shit, I thought that old man was going to ask for a blood sample sweetie”, she says to Maribel. We all burst out into a fit of raucous laughter which feels to me a little inappropriate given the well appointed elevator we are traveling in.

“Damn, these girls are living lovely honey. I knew Rafi was in real estate, but this is off the hook.” Lorna has always been the loud mouth of the two since I met them through Arbert a few years ago at a ball. “Well, it’s not the projects in the Lower East Side. That’s for sure”, I chime in and the laughter continues when the doors open at floor twelve. The hallway gives me a hotel feel and the air conditioning and ventilation systems in tandem produce a pressurized air dint that reminds me of the walk space in large commercial jets. I cannot help hearing the tune from the 1970’s situation comedy “The Jeffersons” start playing in my head and I start humming it to the delighted giggles of Lorna and Maribel. Arbert answers the door and greets us with kisses and hugs. “Did everything go okay at the front door?” he asks. “Yeah, honey, they even took my driver’s license”, Lorna responds. “Well, child, the people who run this condo complex are very security conscious. There are cameras everywhere and the guard is there 24-7”, Arbert says.

As we clear the entrance way, all three of us are consumed with looking at the apartment. It is just stunning and that description is a bit of an injustice. “Well, let’s give you the tour”, Arbert tells us and begins to walk us through his new home. We walk from the entrance into the living room which is huge and sparsely, but elegantly furnished so that clutter does not get in the way of the grand dimension of the space. To the immediate left is a very nice dining set that can seat six people comfortably and there is a space separating the “dining area” (since it is not a separate room) and the living room. Arbert and Rafi have brought a large, dark brown couch set which has three sections that form a U-shape and there are very comfortable chairs opposite the middle section of the couch that help frame the glass table in the middle of the living room. Also, there is a huge flat screen television which is part of an entertainment system in the far right hand corner of the room. In between where the couch ends on the far wall as you enter and the individual seats is a pair of sliding glass doors that lead to what, at the moment, I assume is a small patio.

“Now, let me show you the wrap around patio. We are going to have a great 4<sup>th</sup> of July barbecue out here”, Arbert predicts as he leads us out into the patio. The patio wraps around the complete outer wall of the apartment’s first floor. It wraps all along the left side as well as most of the right side of the apartment and has a doorway that leads to the kitchen which we go into as our tour continues. “Here is the kitchen.” Arbert stretches out his hand in the middle of what is a fairly small kitchen that has bone white counter tops and jet black cabinets. There is a dishwasher and a modern looking silver refrigerator that does everything but mix drinks from what I can gather looking at its digital command screen. Next to the kitchen is a rather large closet that Arbert tells us he

will use as a pantry space and next to that a bathroom for visitors that has everything, but a shower. He leads us up a flight of stairs to the sleeping quarters. There are three bedrooms: one for Arbert's best friend, Jovan, and another one that will serve as a work space for Rafi to do his real estate related business and for Arbert to finally get his Ballroom Cultural Center project off the ground. We go into the "Master/Mistress" bedroom, as Arbert puts it, and see the bricolage of styles that Rafi and Arbert must have negotiated to arrive at the décor. On the right wall as one walks in Arbert shows us a set of notebooks that have been hung up along with what appear to be school photos. "These are Rafi's notebooks from when he was in his grammar school in Argentina" Arbert tells us. I look at the notebooks and although they carry the marks of their age and travels across continents, they are in good shape and I look at one page that has a Spanish word marked out in pencil in what I surmise to be a teacher's script and Rafi's childhood lettering repeating the word. The letters become a little better and less wavy as they move down the paper.

Rafi has joined us on the tour at this point. He is always happy to see us and gracious as he asks us whether we want something to drink or nibble on. I have noticed the various goodies assembled on the dinner table downstairs and a bunch of bottles of Argentinean wine that had yet to be uncorked. As we go downstairs to sit on the couches in the living room, Lorna and Maribel begin to talk about looking into buying a place like this and start asking Rafi about prices in the neighborhood. They say that they are sick and tired of paying outrageous rents in New York City when they can buy "out here in Jersey" and still commute to their jobs in Manhattan. The price that Rafi and Arbert paid for the apartments is quite reasonable in light of the price they would have paid for even

half the space they have now in almost any gentrifying neighborhood in New York City. “You girls should buy in this building.” Rafi urges Lorna and Maribel. “Especially since both of you work good jobs and are thinking of having kids. No vale la pena rentar hijas. Equity! Equity! Equity!” Rafi intones to them with a mantra-like insistence.

“He’s right. You two need to stop making some fucking landlord rich and make an investment in your future that over time does pay off”, Arbert argues as we all sit on the couch. “Don’t get me wrong. It is a sacrifice to make an investment like this. You have to go through a lot of scrutiny. Credit history, what assets do you have on hand, the whole nine yards. But, I think it was worth it for me, Rafi, and Jovan to do this. And we bought the apartment with Jovan because I know that girl from back in the day and there’s a trust there between us. If it wasn’t the three of us doing this, we couldn’t pull it off. Who’s going to be there for us when we get old? Huh? Here we are taking care of my mother, running around with Rafi, managing the other nonsense that’s going on in my family and who’s doing for us? You know what I mean?” Arbert asks to the head nodding of Lorna and Maribel. “And who the fuck is going to be there for us child? Maybe you girls will have kids to take care of you, but Rafi and me won’t have kids like that and Jovan doesn’t either. So, if we don’t have that financial part to back us up, God knows what will happen.” Arbert’s words obviously strike a cord with Lorna and Maribel as they listen to him connect his future life to whether he will have any assets to mitigate the ordinary needs and difficulties of growing old in a country that does not have the kind of social welfare infrastructure that makes the disabilities and medical conditions normally associated with old age more humane and tolerable.



As I sit on one of the individual chairs opposite Arbert and the girls, my mind keeps on returning to a number of weeks ago when Arbert was in a hospital bed and his immediate future was hard to decipher given the dialysis regimen that would have to become part of his weekly routine and the new stresses on his mother and his entire family as the “go to” person was no longer able to do the kind of caretaking that had been his lot up until his medical crisis. Arbert’s condition was stabilized by dialysis in fairly short order after he was released from the hospital. Throughout those intervening weeks, I remember having conversations with Rafi about his concern that Arbert being out of work and having to stay home a lot was even putting more physical and psychological pressure on him to be the “go to” person. Rafi was insistent that Arbert get out of the house and that he really take on the Ballroom Culture Center (BCC) idea he had been banding about with other members of the Ball community for quite some time.

The BCC would be a space where Ball children could go to rehearse for balls as well as look at different forms of material cultures from the ballroom’s past like costumes, fliers, ball videos and DVDs, and music used during balls. Arbert also envisioned that the BCC would also house a Ballroom oral history archive. This would be produced by undertaking a grassroots effort to record and/or videotape older members of the community talking about Ballroom history and the way the balls and the houses have changed in the course of their own careers as ball walkers, leaders, spectators, and parents. Rafi encouraged me to undertake these interviews with Arbert as part of my own research for my dissertation and an eventual manuscript about the Ballroom community. All of these efforts culminated in Arbert and I facilitating a discussion group of Ball “elders” about what they had seen throughout the years in the scene. The discussion

group was part of a day-long conference designed to honor Ballroom legends and icons past and present; the event was sponsored by People of Color in Crisis (POCC)<sup>11</sup>, a Black gay male-led activist oriented HIV/AIDS community organization and held at Brooklyn's very elegant downtown Marriott Hotel. Both the tenor of the conference and the elegance of the venue really gave the event both a serious and celebratory quality that, to my mind, most programs organized by community-based organizations in New York City find it hard to achieve. Arbert and I were surprised at the many legends that came to our discussion group and the quality of the information shared about the ballroom during that session. We both saw that session at the conference as a first step in developing community "buy in" or support for what we imagined the BCC could become.

Since Arbert's move, the BCC project had to be put on the back burner and he has returned to work to deal with the moving expenses as well as the need to meet the monthly mortgage and maintenance payments that his new living situation demand.

Arbert began to work as a consultant at the Bronx Queer Pride Center (BQPC) and was

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<sup>11</sup> People of Color in Crisis, Inc. (POCC) is a Brooklyn-based HIV/AIDS prevention and intervention organization that is focused largely on reaching Black gay men and Black MSM. The organization is led by Black gay identified men and up until quite recently the director of the project was a Black gay man who had been involved as a youth in a Marxist-Leninist political organization that had a long history of being open to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) issues. In fact, it was the first Marxist organization in the United States to respond as an organization to the 1969 Stonewall Rebellion, the putative signal event that launched the modern LGBT civil and human rights movements. One of the organization's long-time members, Leslie Feinberg, is a pioneer in developing both political and theoretical thinking about transgender issues. The influence of this style of political work influenced the approach of POCC's approach to dealing with issues that are of most concern to their base. POCC is known for its forward thinking politics, its talent at organizing large conferences and community events as well as protest. Michael Roberson, the present executive director, is a father of a house and has been instrumental in incorporating the issues of Ballroom members as well as transgender people into the organizations service and advocacy/activism agenda. Of all the HIV/AIDS prevention organizations in New York City, at least to my mind, POCC is the most race-conscious and activist oriented.

later convinced by the executive director to take a full-time position that would be flexible enough to accommodate his three times a week dialysis treatment. Arbert is a sought after professional resource in the world of HIV/AIDS organization in New York City. He spent years as a frontline worker then manager in New York City's oldest and largest HIV/AIDS prevention and intervention agency, Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC). Whatever legitimate criticisms can be made of GMHC as an organization that has slowly abandoned its roots in grassroots activism, direct action, and political mobilization, the organization is today known for training its employees thoroughly in the latest forms of HIV interventions and teaching them how to negotiate the bureaucratic requirements and political niceties that municipal, state, and federal funding always entail.

Executive directors of other HIV/AIDS community based organizations are well aware of the useful skill sets they are getting when they hire long term managers from GMHC. In one sense, the smaller HIV/AIDS prevention agencies avail themselves of GMHC's professional development programs through hiring staff that have been employees there. Given the high turnover rates, especially of frontline staff, in most HIV/AIDS organizations in New York City, there is a constant bidirectional flow of personnel back and forth from the bigger and more resourced organizations to the smaller organizations that are usually more flexible and cutting edge in their approaches. Arbert also offers any potential employer a long trajectory of work experience amongst Ballroom community members and brings with him all those contacts that were initially professional in nature, but now are both professional and social. A preventionist of Arbert's long history of activism and community work brings a rich range of talents and

social networks to call upon that can be a tremendous resource for a relatively new organization like the Bronx Queer Pride Center which is in need of seasoned staff members and the type of strategic and programmatic thinking that such a wealth of experience can bring to the table.

“Yeah, so I had to take the job at BQPC because I couldn’t expect Rafi to take the financial obligation of taking on all the bills in the house alone. I worked something out with the director and I can work there full or part-time depending on how things are going for me medically”, Arbert tells us with a bit of resignation in his voice. “Well, I’m just glad you’re back to your old self. I was worried about you when I saw you in that hospital the first time I came to visit after you had the renal failure. Actually, everybody was worried about you. I went down to that ball they had at that venue in Chinatown and everybody was asking for you and telling me to send you their love and prayers”, I respond. “Yeah, a lot of the older folks in the scene did call and a few came to see me, but a lot of the ones that are supposed to be close to me were not to be seen or heard. What can you do? Sometimes the children have issues with the whole sickness and hospital thing.”

As we are speaking, Rafi comes in and asks about the kind of steaks we want to eat and regales us with the fine details of Argentine meat haute couture grilling culture. He insists upon the best cuts when eating meat and is consistently amazed at the junk that people in the United States try to pass off as good red meat. I kid him once in a while about his meat aficionado idiosyncrasies, but, in truth, I have yet to eat a bad cut of meat that he has grilled or one that he has suggested when a group of us go out to one of his

favorite Argentine or Brazilian restaurants in Manhattan or Queens. The bell door rings and Rafi goes to answer it. A large group of people that I recognize as Ball members come in as hugs, kisses, and laughter are interchanged. They have the same reaction to the apartment as we did when we first came in. I see a number of people I know, mostly members of Arbert's House of Evisu, taking long and probing looks at the living room and nodding or expressing their approval. They are a young group of mostly Black and Latino men. A number of them work for HIV/AIDS prevention and intervention community-based organizations, one is a primary school teacher, and another works in retail selling cosmetics and doing makeup as well. Arbert gathers the group up and brings them to the patio and begins the tour. I stay at my seat and look through the glass doors.

As the tour group goes into the kitchen and up the stairs to see the bedrooms and the office space, I go out onto the patio leaving Lorna and Maribel talking to each other. The sunset is brilliant: its fiery arms stretch across the horizon and give Newark's silvery ramparts that adorn its downtown business district an amber-orange tinge. The wrap around nature of the patio gives me a view of the green and vinyl-sided rush of the suburbs further to the east and the urban mirage that is the metallic stillness of Newark faraway and magically silent in the evening glow. It's quiet for a moment on the patio and I can have a few minutes of recollection before the touring party returns to the living room and to the give and take of conversations that linger in the air heavily on Sunday nights that herald the unwanted return to work and the exigencies of ordinary time.

### Fragile Success in the Shadow of AIDS

Arbert and Rafi have worked tirelessly and endured some fairly miserable hardships to get to where they are economically and as a couple. Their penthouse condominium enables more than just captivating vistas of the interlocking, yet socially discrete, landscapes of the suburbs and post-industrial cities of Northern New Jersey. It offers a vista on the vicissitudes of a kind of upward or, perhaps, more accurately, lateral economic mobility that is positioned on a knife edge that precludes much of the room for error available to a number of generations of people in the United States during the Post World War II period. Paradoxically, this very economic precariousness has strengthened not mitigated the weight of the aspirations that constitute the desire for upward mobility. Resignation or the acceptance of downward mobility is the unthinkable ideological outside, an erstwhile socio-economic analog to the Lacanian Real, that propels the manic work patterns and assumption of consumer debts that typifies the lives of many working and middle class people today in the United States.

Arbert's ability to buy his new home has been made materially possible by the jobs that the social service sector generated to respond to the enormous social suffering caused by the HIV/AIDS epidemic amongst communities of color in New York City. Moreover, Rafi has acquired income and insider know how via his job in real estate; an economic sector that, until recently, has grown by leaps and bounds during one of the longest speculative housing frenzies in U.S. history. It is these two macro socio-economic processes, the speculative bubble in housing and the HIV/AIDS epidemic, that have provided the basis for Arbert and Rafi to materialize their pressing aspirations into a

penthouse condominium --- the effervescence of variegated desire transforms into the apparent fixity of space and place. Nonetheless, the acquisition of the apartment has extended both of their work regimes, their commutes, and the potential social and psychic costs that, in the long run, not being able to hold on to their dream apartment would incur.

This mobility is articulated through dense and ever expanding networks of kin, queer and otherwise, that make demands on them as individuals and as a couple both materially and ideologically. Tonight's house warming party is both an exchange of gifts between the visiting friends and queer kin and the newly domiciled couple, and it is also an interchange and bolstering up of aspirations for upward mobility that are mutual, complicated, and economically fragile. Since Arbert is becoming an elder in the Ballroom community, his good fortune in choice of mate and the ability to acquire such a living space is both a local victory for those closest to him in the community as well as an example of what "having your shit together" can mean for improving anyone's life prospects. Arbert's relationship to the scene has evolved in ways that his first forays into it as a preventionist never foretold.

ERC: So, your first contact as a prevention worker with the Ball scene was at the condom table at a ball?

ALE: Right. It was totally, totally that.

ERC: On a volunteer basis?

ALE: Yep, on a volunteer basis from '89 to '91.

ERC: Why did you do that?

ALE: Why? I think I mentioned earlier that I actually met Willie C. Barnes on the Lower East Side when I was doing my first HIV community work and he kind of intrigued me. He was a great character, and he kind of said to me "You know if you're interested in volunteering. I am looking for volunteers." GMHC was very

well known for their volunteer recruitment teams. And I had volunteered before for the Danceathon and actually some volunteer work prior to that as well. But that was massive and big, and I felt like the only thing I could really connect to which was more minority-based was the house and ball stuff, and that's basically how he lured me into it. You know, it was an African-American and Latino world. And Willie had a kind of rich personality. "Come, join me" kind of thing. His personality was the most welcoming piece to it. And, you know, the chance to meet other people as well.

ERC: So, when was your first ball?

ALE: So, I guess one of my first balls that I went to was in the Omni, the Magnifique Ball, and there were a couple of other balls I went to. I was amazed by the competition. I was also amazed by the hours. How long it was (laughter). But I wasn't connected in a sense. I was tabling. So I was behind a table, feeling very ...

ERC: What were you feeling?

ALE: Service provider.

ERC: OK.

ALE: Very disconnected. Actually, well, trying to connect as much as possible. Of course, you know like a retail salesperson with a big smile. "Hi!" You know. "How are you?" It felt good. I don't know how much a connection I was really making. I know that there was a value to distributing condoms during that time ... but, I felt that, you know, as I was learning about it, I wasn't really showing the connection behind it. I guess that's why, you know, actually, around 1992, we began to kind of have a conversation about that we needed to be doing a little bit more than just distributing condoms. And the other thing was that the trust value with this community was diminishing and there was very little faith being put out there. People felt that you couldn't trust anybody.

ERC: Hmm. Tell me more about that.

ALE: Well, I feel I have to highlight that, back in the days in the ball community, as kids were dying of HIV/AIDS, they were using that as tools to break people down even more. And I'll give you a concrete example. As categories were happening and someone would win ... someone would feel it wasn't right that the person won and they would say "Oh, it's because you have AIDS and you're dying. And ...

ERC: Really? People would say things like that?

ALE: Yes. People would say things like that without actually knowing the impact of what they were saying to each other or how much they were hurting each other. There were also times that in category fliers, they would say that you will be



automatically disqualified if you say anything about AIDS in that derogatory way. I think I still have some of those fliers.

### First Time Walking at a Ball

Arbert's introduction to the scene was embedded in the community mobilizations that centered on both political action and a type of ethics of care that was much broader than one's own family, however construed, or even one's immediate social network. He was immersed in varying and overlapping communities that valued the personalism at the core of volunteering on behalf of institutions that were addressing the HIV/AIDS crisis as well as for those concrete individuals who were living the immediate and tangible effects of stigma, sickness, and the likelihood of a premature death. Arbert's attraction to the scene is predicated on his desire to work with Blacks and Latinos/as and the Ballroom community was really the only outreach program that he thought would lead to those people he probably considered his own. He expresses his wonder at the scene's beauty, mania (e.g., the enormous time commitment that putting on or participating in a ball requires), and his horror at the reproduction of stigma that some Ball members engaged in via a distorted zeal for fostering the meritocratic values that inform Ball competition. Arbert also reports the programmatic response that house members enacted in trying to ban AIDS-phobic comments during balls. His first forays gave him a sense of what was possible within the community and his own sense of being disconnected pushes him to advocate for a different approach to engaging the Ball community that would not replicate the paternalistic dynamics of being in the "service provider" mode.

ERC: There were fliers that basically banned ...

ALE: Yep. Anti-gay statements, sentiments and actually those were common. The other thing the community had to deal with, if you disappeared for a while, you were actually assumed dead. And the other thing is that since the late 80's and early 90's a lot of people came to objectify the community. The Malcolm McLaren's, Madonna, and other people doing other types of documentaries, and the fashion world, the club world making this a very popular thing. They felt that these people were gaining from the community but not giving back to the community. So, a very big concern was, you know, an NYU student by the name of Jennie Livingston making a film documentary that she turns in to the Lesbian Film Festival and it becomes one of the most famous documentaries. A documentary that is often mentioned. So I think that when everyone talks about this community they make references to *Paris is Burning*<sup>12</sup>, but yet nothing is coming back to this community. Malcolm McLaren makes a song about the ballroom and it hits the top of the Billboard charts, and the record industry doesn't give back anything to the community. Madonna gets # 1 with *Vogue*, and the kids [members of the Houses of Xtravaganza and Ninja], you know, are showcased all over the world, but get minimal in terms of money and nothing back to the community. Fashionistas and other designers want to showcase this dance [i.e., vogue] in their shows. Take a couple of kids from the community and showcase them. And nothing's given back to the community. So it felt like, at one point, that many individuals had to be cautious of what the intent was so that the trust value, who was coming into the community, was really on a high scale. And I think that that was very protective because a lot of people felt that there should have some justifications made back to them since kids were feeling that they were being exploited. Is that something typical to their culture? Who they are? Don't know. But, in a way, it feels that that tends to happen in this community quite often. These are very talented kids by standards of dance, performance, and design. And it feels to me like it can become connected so that you can make the comparison to the sweatshops, and people actually allowing people to do things in these difficult conditions and giving them little in return. So when the 1990's came

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<sup>12</sup> Livingston's *Paris Is Burning* remains the best and still very problematic feature-length documentary film on the Ballroom community. During informal conversational moments, Arbert has critiqued the film for its silence around the devastation that HIV/AIDS was visiting upon the Ballroom community at the precise time of its production and later circulation. He has on a number of occasions pointed out to me that the image of Hector Xtravaganza, the founder of the House of Xtravaganza, is shown very briefly during the film in a still photo without any reference to the fact that he had recently died of AIDS. Arbert finds it ironic that the House of Xtravaganza, Hector's remaining material legacy, plays such an important role in the narrative arc in the film via the persons of house Mother Angi Xtravaganza and her soon to be murdered daughter Venus while its founder's full life story is admissible only in the realm of the visual, but not discursively. That Livingston mobilizes the trope of the absent Latino/a father as a visual reference for a family made up of queer and transgender working class Latinos/as without exploring the impact of HIV/AIDS sickness and death on this family is indicative of a persistent failure in the film to engage its own visual and discursive politics of representation.

creeping along, and they're dealing with the epidemic not only would they be concerned with exploitation, but to be part of the community, you really had to prove yourself. Because I think that was something that, in the 80's, they kind of went through and said "Well, a lot of people promised us a lot of things and in return didn't give us as much as we wanted" ... So, I believe that when we were reassessing House of Latex, and just to get historical, House of Latex wasn't getting named by us, it was named by the community. They gave us that because we had given out latex condoms. So, they were saying, "Go call yourself House of Latex." Maybe that would make the connection.

ERC: That name came from the ball children then.

ALE: Yeah. So when we tried to reassess some of the stuff, we kind of realized that in order to do the work we would have to be in the community.

ERC: What did that mean for you, to be in the community? Because you were there, but don't you feel, didn't you guys feel that you were in the community? What did that mean to be in the community?

ALE: It needed to be participatory. To be a participant, how much can you participate and do the work in this? And I felt like it was necessary only because the relationships needed to be built. I think there were a lot of barricades that HIV prevention was facing. There were a lot of things that we weren't able to communicate. And whatever those fences, or barricades, or walls that were being built on a mental basis by the community, we had to find ways to do this. Sitting behind a table wasn't the most effective and had its limitations. So, what can we do to go beyond that? How do we develop a relationship with this community? Were we given the level of trust that we need in order for them to get to a new level to create [interventions]? One of the things I now see is that I know this community has been a surviving community for so long, but, at the same time, they didn't have the tools to access what they really needed or advocate for themselves. And I felt like that really that was the goal that GMHC can do with the House of Latex to create some advocates that would have been ideal and that would have been it. I don't think the House of Latex should have been or could have been or is, should be in existence this long. And I think that my intention was when we first started was to legitimize ourselves through the community by becoming members of the community. Ideally, what I wanted was, as I was coming into the community, I wanted to make sure that the community itself was being incorporated around education on HIV/AIDS. They weren't doing it in their separate houses, but I definitely wanted to make sure that there was a house out there that was able to do it. We were given the name, we needed to stick by that name, we needed to do something for it.

This is a discursively and thematically rich section of Arbert's life narrative. One of the underlying themes in this part of his narrative and, I would argue, throughout the

entirety of the text is the “assumption of death”: that death’s material and social effects constitute an unstable, but always salient referent point that marks out possibilities for subaltern forms of communal visibility and intelligibility. “Surviving communities”, as Arbert describes the Ballroom community, are the reservoirs of unmet collective needs that perpetually underwrite the realm of realized desires of the privileged not only in communities of color in New York City, but also on a global basis as well (Hennessy 2000). Surviving communities have to negotiate death every day as an empirical fact, material limit, and social imaginary that forewarns what the stakes are at any moment. The fact that Ballroom members equated death with visibility is reflective of the collective, visual, and performative elements of Ballroom cultures, but also underscores that members live within this logic of the assumption of death.

Arbert also talks about the context of exploitation that framed the very successful attempts by mostly White outsiders to make the most of Ballroom innovations without really taking any ethical responsibility for essentially raiding and mainstreaming a set of practices and aesthetics that were most closely associated with New York City’s Black and Latino/a queer and transgender working class communities. He compares these appropriative efforts to what happens to sweatshop workers who make commodities at such low wages that they essentially subsidize the consumption habits of those above them on the wage scale and social hierarchy. The mainstream popular culture entrepreneurs that took advantage of the structural and social vulnerabilities of Ballroom members and cultures are a small part of a context of exploitation that frames the lives of working class people of color in New York City. Madonna’s opportunistic use of vogue dancing techniques in her music and video products is simply a special case of a general a

pattern of subordination; she availed herself of the “aesthetic sweat” of certain members of the Ball community and justified it as a well intentioned attempt to bring to a unique and much derided “subculture” the opportunities afforded by mainstream entertainment venues.

### The Condom People

It was in light of this history of cultural appropriation and economic exploitation that Arbert and his colleagues at GMHC had to reassess their own relationship to the New York City Ballroom community. At the heart of these reflections, Arbert adumbrates a shared fear that GMHC itself would become just another group of people or institution reproducing the cultural marginalization and structural subordination of the Ballroom community. Yet, there was a desperate need to connect given the palpable socio-medical exigencies of the HIV/AIDS epidemic within the context of the Ball community. Arbert and his colleagues decided to become part of the scene by suffering the travails and triumphs of Ballroom competition as well as the possibilities for intimacy, solidarity, and heartache that house family life can provide. In his life narrative, he enacts an ambivalence in his own understanding of the community’s sense of agency: he understands both its history of survival as well as a sublime and culturally generative form of resilience as positive proof of the community’s agentive capacities, but, at the same time, he stills feels it lacks the necessary “tools” to advocate for the resources needed to confront the epidemic. He also relates how it was community members that named GMHC’s intervention in the Ball community the “House of Latex” which was a

rearticulation and, perhaps, a bit of an improvement over their former Ballroom moniker: “The Condom People.”

What the significance of this double naming ritual was remains up for debate. It is interesting that an HIV/AIDS prevention and intervention project was twice named for a simple latex barrier. That is to say, the material instance of a barrier, a latex condom, signifies the effort to lift the types of “barricades”, “blocks”, or “barriers” that would lead to greater rates of exposure and infection to HIV. Yet, the lack of this very barrier is the absence that materializes the intimacy and pleasure associated with unprotected anal or vaginal intercourse; its presence can stand in, variously, for care as well as for a fearful need to protect the self from stigma, shame, sickness and death. It is this never resolved absence-presence dialectic that attaches itself to the materiality of the latex condom and makes the complex and shifting alignments between safety, pleasure, fear, intimacy, and love so utterly fraught with tension and contradiction. The House of Latex was the first prevention organization in the United States to host balls where prevention and specifically the use of latex condoms were key elements in the design of categories as well as productive of ball dance and performances that integrated condoms into their performative repertoire. Undoubtedly, these balls brought prevention issues of safe sex to the center of communal attention, but they also imported all the ambiguities, fears, and contradictions that the latex condom, as a metonymy for safe sex practices, necessarily implies at the level of the social sign.

This communal naming carried a great ethical weight for Arbert. In one sense, it was a challenge to be worthy of the name itself as well as to earn it by becoming a “real

house” through the labor, stress, and anxiety of actually having to get up on the runway and risk disqualification and even ridicule at the hands of the competition, the audience, the judges, and/or the commentators. Arbert notes his own surprise that the House of Latex (HOL) was still in existence even at the time of his interview. Part of that surprise can be explained by Arbert’s and some of his colleagues’ expectations that once HOL got off the ground and was able to establish itself as a legitimate house and deepen its contacts and trust with the larger New York City ballroom community, then it would simply be a matter of time before enough community members would be trained in HIV/AIDS education and prevention that HOL itself would cease to exist as a competing house. In short, some early HOL members saw their goal as developing an intergenerational, self-reproducing cadre of indigenous HIV/AIDS educators and preventionists that would provide the community with an autonomous group that could mobilize people and resources to address the epidemic’s effects.

There are a number of factors that excluded this scenario from coming to pass not the least of which were HOL’s competitive effectiveness and that the annual House of Latex Ball became and remains the largest and best resourced ball in the New York City circuit. Along with these factors, the fact that the HOL project worked with queer and transgender Black and Latino/a youth aligned with the funding priorities of municipal, state, and federal agencies that were redirecting their efforts towards young men who have sex with men (YMSM) gave it institutional stamina. This reality made HOL economically viable as well as a good political resource for GMHC to argue both to funders and the broader community that their programs were responding to the newly recognized younger and darker faces of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Additionally, part of

Arbert's surprise is also a bit of discomfort that HOL continued to compete against the people it is, at the same time, supposed to be educating and developing into HIV/AIDS preventionists as well as the desire, not directly expressed in this interview, for HOL to transform into a resource for the Ballroom community instead of continuing to be another, albeit well resourced and very different, house in the circuit.

ALE: Yeah, 1992 to 1993, I walked my first ball. The category was runway and you had to be in Daisy Dukes shorts and in sneakers and a full blouse. And actually, I wasn't supposed to walk the ball, someone else was supposed to walk that ball, and he backed out at the last minute. And I said no I didn't want to replace him. But they forced me to do it, and I did. And it was actually because I think that was kind of the first affirmation from the balls. People say you get the ball ego or you get the ball itch. Actually you do, you really do.

ERC: What does it mean to get the ball itch?

ALE: Oh, you just want to continue. It's like an addiction, it's like crack, once you have the first trophy, you know, you're addicted, then you want to continue to do it. Oh, honey, it was, I hated the runway. I was so nervous. I remember my sneakers didn't fit, and I squeezed somehow into them and my feet were becoming numb, and I was shaking and nervous, never learned that there were two other big boys that walked. One got chopped, the other one got his tens. And I was next and they said "OK. OK. Who are you honey? And I said "My name is Arbert Latex". "Albert?" Of course I couldn't have tried to correct them to save my life. "No, it's Arbert." And they were like Albert. And I'm like "OK". "Latex". They were like "Latex?" And they were making fun of it and I said "No, latex, like the condom. And then it was like "Ohhhh!" And I remember, at that point, he says "Walk!" And again, I had this runway production in mind. So it's walk, walk, turn. Walk, walk, turn and I had this whole thing in my mind. I didn't see anything, and you kind of get tunnel vision. I didn't see people getting up and cheering. I was just in my mind doing what I had to do. And as I was walking, I qualified and he said "Stand to the side, darling, stand to the side." And I said "No, I'm not finished" because in my mind I had this routine that I wanted to finish. And because I said no, the crowd just went up on their feet because I was defying the commentator. And they went off because I wasn't finished. And I remember the other big boy that qualified was upset. Then, "Darlings! Latex wins the category!" And I remember the trophy was given to me, and I was like, "Oh, OK."



ERC: Let me ask you some anthropological questions. I'm going to ask you about the categories. But, first, what is, in your mind, based on your experience, what is the House Ballroom scene?

ALE: The House Ballroom scene is a group of mixed genders and sexualities, a way of people coming together in a social network to do a competition, and to compete against each other. They compete in clusters called houses that assimilate a family structure. There's mothers and fathers that come together, and these houses or teams compete against other houses and teams. They also are broken down into women, whether they're gay or lesbian, but look like women, and biological women. Women who look like men, which we call butches. Butch queens who can be an array of gay men whether straight looking or very feminine. And then there's butch queen up in drags, which is basically men who dress up like women, but don't live their lives like women. And there are femme queens which are basically transsexuals, men who live their lives as women. And based on these categories, these segments and breakdowns, there are various categories. Categories about beauty, categories about style and fashion, categories about dance. And I think those are kind of the gist of the breakdown. And of course they become very specific, very elaborate, very detailed. And the dance itself is very specific to a style of dance. Normally, the style of dance is called vogue. The vogue comes in many different formats from vogue femme to new wave to runway performance to old way to arms control and dramatics. And I think those are it.

ERC: OK. So, tell me about the categories.

ALE: Well, the categories are written by the people who are giving the events. They are usually members of the house, could be a single member of the house, or it could be the entire house or a team that does it together. The categories are usually categories that people compete in. For women, there are actually standard categories like women's face or women's runway or women's body. And there are categories like that for men too. There could be categories for women, like women's labels, which basically means buying designer, buying very expensive designer clothes and by essence, that's it. Or actually, did I say women's body?

ERC: You did.

ALE: OK. That's it then. And butch [masculine women] is the same thing. There's butch face, and what's different for women now is the incorporation of a category called real miss which basically is, we know you are a woman, let me see how real you look as a boy. And I think that those categories can be broken down into little miss pretty boy masculine, but again, you have to look like a boy. But you are biologically a woman. There could be dancing, voguing categories for both women and butches too. Sometimes they're not as common, but they tend to happen. There's also labels categories which are designers' categories. For butch queens, there's an array of categories. There's face, there's body, there's sex siren, there's realness with a twist which basically means that a boy has to show

themselves as straight looking as possible, and then all of a sudden convert themselves into the most flamboyant gay man they could be and probably with a vogue dance now.

ERC: Let me ask you to put your social scientist hat on. How are the categories, eh, how do you make sense of the categories?

ALE: Well, thank you. I actually like this. Because I think what or how to make sense of it is that the ballroom categories reflect what the society and the community's going through. I think it's a good reflection. If you ever wanted to do anthropology or work in the field, just stay at a ball and the ball can tell you the crisis that came, the isms that this community is going through just by its categories itself. And that interpretation is, you know, just by witnessing these you could actually see that. You could look at how it is a reflection for their eyes of how society views them, views them in an image or their perceived idea of what society looks for in terms of survival or whatever they want to be in society. A lot of these kids talk about fantasy, that this is a fantasy that they're trying to make real in the community and in the competition. But, in reality, it's a desire to be something other than themselves. Or, the struggle that they're dealing with to be somewhat different or an internal conflict that they're dealing with in terms of themselves. For example, I think that a wonderful example of how they deal with it is the realness with a twist category. And I'll show you that example because as we're talking about young Black and Latino men who have to in their own Black and Latino communities walk a particular way and be a particular way so their families could accept them, or not be criticized by their communities. They have to look like straight men. You have to be a particular style in order not to be gay. This community has adapted realness in this particular way and they've normalized it, but deep down inside is a feminine side that wants to come out. And this community has allowed that space to happen. So, you know, that you have to be real. Now give me the twists. To come out to deal with your internalized homophobia, come out and deal with that feeling of being gay or coming out process. And celebrate that. So the category says, show me how real you are, and now, celebrate your gayness. So the more feminine you are, the higher chances you have of winning. So as you celebrate your femininity, you're then appraised, and you win a trophy. So it's kind of a way of actually celebrating so much of the depressing feelings that some of these people are having or dealing with. Which, most likely, in the real world, they can't celebrate and deal with. And that's one of the best examples for me where we actually see that as a mechanism for supporting the coming out process of celebrating themselves within.

The first moment in the preceding excerpt from Arbert's life narrative is a retelling of his own baptism of fire or initiation into becoming a legitimate ball walker. He relates his own nervousness and uncertainty in going up on the runway as well as his

unfamiliarity with the protocols of ballroom competition (e.g., not knowing enough to step to the side when he qualified for the trophy competition or defying the commentator's authority to manage the timing of each performance). Yet, he admits to the intoxicating and obsessive qualities that the competition itself can produce. This "ball itch" was reported to me by many of my informants as they retold the stories of their first attempts to compete and win on the runway. Almost all of them used the language of addiction to make sense of these first thrilling moments of their careers as ball walkers. But, as I was informed on various occasions, the "ball itch" is a positive addiction that was generally described as part and parcel of connecting their own creative talents to their identities as queer people of color and reformatting the stigma associated with those identities with a performative challenge and a form of sexual and/or gender self-affirmation. For a big girl like Arbert, the Ballroom community's traditions of creating categories for large framed men and women was also a medium for infusing erotic value in both his physical and social self-presentation. As Arbert's neophyte strutting around on the runway with tight, little Daisy Dukes blue jean shorts in all his voluptuousness indicates that balls are carnal affairs and excess, in whatever incarnation, is neither a vice nor pathology.

This excerpt is also an interesting rhetorical turning point in the life narrative itself since I ask Arbert to accept my interpellation as an ethnographer as his own. In some sense, the tensions that are subtlety at the surface of his answers can be framed as his own interpellation as a preventionist in the community rubbing up against our momentarily shared position as social scientists reflecting on an object of inquiry and knowledge (i.e., the Ballroom community). The irony in Arbert's voice as he begins to

talk about reporting his experiences in the community in the voice of the ethnographer/preventionist is lost in the textual rendition of his life narrative as is his obvious pleasure in assuming that role, albeit provisionally, in other moments of the interview.<sup>13</sup>

There was no irony in Arbert's voice when he defined the Ballroom community as consisting of "mixed genders and sexualities." This definition of the Ball community is anchored not in racial or class heterogeneity (nor does it propose these realities in any univocal or monolithic fashion either), but in the diversity of sexual and gender expressions that are lived within the context of racial and class subordination. Arbert's definition collates with some of the insights that David Valentine has developed from his ethnographic research on transgender activism and categorization in New York City: "I want to suggest that the contours of racial or class experiences can shape and reshape what gender or sexuality can themselves mean. That is, I argue that, rather than assuming categories of social analysis (gender, race, class, etc.) to be self-evidently descriptive of (intersecting) experiences, we could more profitably see them as tools for actively extracting certain aspects of daily lived experience but not others. To see analytic categories as merely descriptive draws our attention away from the work of activists and scholars in identifying what is "gendered" about a particular life or moment, and what might be "sexual" (or "racial" or "cultural")" (Valentine 2007:18). Arbert's definition of

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<sup>13</sup> These brief comments do minimal justice to the richness of the interview encounter as an emotional experience as well as a place where irony and laughter are present at every moment. Part of the ironic pleasures of Arbert assuming the role of the social scientist, albeit deeply overdetermined by the rhetorical universe of the interview and the structural limits of his role in a prevention agency, is that I occupied both roles of researcher and preventionist at different points in our work and friendship and that a reversal of positions is never entirely possible.

the Ballroom is anchored in the daily experience of sexual/gender difference and when the desire for a same sex erotic object ends and when a gendered self that does align with heterosexist presumptions begins is not clear as an analytic exercise and much less so as a phenomenological reality amongst the Ball scene's denizens.

Moreover, he speaks of the houses as both families and teams or competitive entities that have incorporated a "family structure" as part of their internal life. Interestingly, Arbert's comments recapitulate what is known of the historical development of the New York City Ballroom scene: the contemporary Ball families emerged from the competitive venues that grew out of the decline of the Drag Balls of the 1950's and that the term "house" itself was largely a marketing ploy invented by Crystal LaBeija to attract participants and spectators to the early balls hosted by his house. House families are different from other forms of queer kinship, especially those based on same-sex pair bonding. Ballroom kinship networks' viability is partially constructed and maintained by the dynamics and discipline of circuit competition. Thus, being a good child in a house not only demands a certain emotional labor and social networking, but also requires a disciplined effort to maintain the performative and organizational skills necessary to stay on a winning course. When a house child loses through lack of preparatory work and/or a skilled presentation, he/she also puts into question the status of the house in the circuit and that can influence the way ball judges see not only that particular individual, but other members of the house as well. To ball outsiders, house families' team quality and competitive ethos may seem to undermine or even subvert the unconditional love that the reigning ideology of the nuclear family is suffused with in almost all popular representations. This attitude renders non-house families in an

ahistorical, conflict-free light that does not accord with the empirical realities of domestic abuse and economic exploitation that many forms of family life are subject to in the contemporary United States. The ball families that I have done research on for the last several years strike me as simply more aware and, in some ways, more upfront of the insistent intergenerational expectations and brittle affective realities that kinship in a deeply marketized society brings to the social fore.

Although much of what Arbert says about the categories is largely descriptive at first, when I ask him to look to the meanings of the categories with the mind of a social scientist, he begins to link the categories both to what he perceives to be the internal contradictions of the community as well as the types of a marginalization that the broader society has imposed on the Ballroom families. He argues that the categories are attempts by the community to engage in a type of aesthetic-performative reworking of the images that they feel society has of them as working class Blacks and Latinos/as whose sexual/gender expressions and family lives confound a whole set of dominant assumptions. Furthermore, he feels that the categories are a form of transcendence within the immediacy of the runway of those very images and a fleshy stepping into other possible ways of being embodied and communicating with the social world that have to negotiate on a daily basis. He sees the categories as “fantasy” that has immediate consequences not only for the moment of runway competition, but the messy and

contradictory process of continual and limited self-making that the community members must work through to have meaningful and productive lives.<sup>14</sup>

In light of Arbert's comments about the categories that ball performances are organized around being both a performative response and, at times, a critical hermeneutic of hostile interpellations of the lives of Ball members by the dominant institutions cultures outside the ball world, I want to argue that the categories are best understood as narratively dense fleshy fictions of the social Real. That is to say, the categories incite embodied narratives and, at times, critique the limits that Ball members push up against daily in a market and state milieu aligned militantly against the material prospects for their lives and communities. Some ball performances incited by these categories can anticipate the new fleshy modes of being that another articulation of the social real as limit could inaugurate. To take a fairly modest transformative social goal as an example, a world where a big girl's fleshy sexiness is both normative and rewarded. In short,

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<sup>14</sup> Arbert's language in this excerpt from his life interview can be read as deeply psychological and, therefore, immersed in the very normativity that part of his work as a political activist and preventionist seeks to challenge and dismantle. My own reading is that Arbert's take on the scene and its fantastic investment in the transformative and recuperative possibilities contained in the balls is best read in light of Arbert's own understanding, drawn largely from his training in psychoanalytic approaches to group process that emerged from Wilfred Bion and the Tavistock School, of the fundamental psychic irrationality at play in the social representation of images of the self-in-community (Bion 1991). I do think that this section of the narrative does afford a very productive moment of pause for analysts, like myself, who rely heavily on Marxist and poststructuralist approaches towards subject formation and ideology. One of the recurring problems of ethnographically engaged social theory is that "false consciousness" plays an incredibly important role in the way that ethnographic subjects report moments of political and self transformation. Of course, the conundrum for materialist social theory is how to argue for a strictly immanent understanding of social epistemology and ontology in light of a robust finding that subjects materialize their own accounting of their rather disparate and contradictory subjectivities with constant references to socially transcendent notions like "false consciousness." To wit: Is Arbert seeing through the fantasy that animates the categories and performances of the ball scene or his analysis itself part of the fantastical reconstruction of the subject that is at the heart of ball cultures?

where the interpellating word of the social Real is undone by the fleshy triumph of those who no longer have to subsidize the desires of dominant subjectivities with their collective unmet social needs (Hennessy 2000).

The last section of this excerpts deals with Arbert's analysis of the category "realness with a twist." There are three important ideas that come out of this section of Arbert's narrative. First, "the realness with a twist category" is a repetition and restaging of the type of gender/sexual passing that is a protective strategy for many members of the Ballroom community. Although Arbert is using the case of feminine butch queens in his analysis of the social genesis of ball categories, many of his insights are applicable in cases outside the Ball context as well. Arbert's understanding of the "realness with a twist" category largely speaks to how feminine butch queens manage the vicissitudes of normative gender/sexual expectations within Black and Latino/a communities. Nonetheless, I would argue that the "realness" aspect of the category is also a desire for a type of racial coherence that is predicated on an exclusion of the multiplicities of genders and sexualities that make up the various forms of Black and Latino/a embodiments in the United States. Finally, the celebration of Black and Latino/a male embodied femininity that "the twist calls" for is not only a celebration of the feminine inside the butch queen or a form of coming out, as Arbert argues, but also a recognition and positive affirmation of a feminine male embodied racialization that is a source of erotic self-positioning and a communal erotic world-building --- the sort of community making that Gayle Rubin has called "sexual ethno-genesis" or is documented in the visual work of Marlon Riggs (Riggs 1989).



Finally, I would argue that Arbert is using a gendered/sexual language in these comments that reinforces Judith Butler's notion that gendered living is a matter of being assumed into a style that is read intersubjectively as within or outside certain heterosexist normative injunctions:

"If the body is not a 'being' but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality, then what language is left for understanding this corporeal enactment, gender, that constitutes its 'interior' signification on its surface ... I suggest that gendered bodies are so many 'styles of the flesh'. These styles are never fully self-styled, for styles have a history, and those histories condition and limit the possibilities. Consider gender, for instance, as a *corporeal style*, an 'act', as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where '*performative*' suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning"(emphasis in the original, Butler 1990:139).

What Butler cannot fully articulate is the deeply embedded racial matrix and attending histories of colonialism and slavery that inform Arbert's "styles of the flesh" and that are linchpins in understanding the racialized "sexual ethno-genesis" of communities like the Ballroom community and the staging of those aforementioned histories in the multiple stylistics that animate categories like "realness with a twist". The other category that Arbert talks about as weighted with these histories is "face":

ERC: Tell me about face. Continue in your social scientist analysis mode (laughter).

ALE: Well, face is actually interesting because everyone in life has face. I always say that to everybody. Can I be a face child? Of course, you can be a face child. You have a face in front of you. But I think that when Ball folks talk about face they're not looking for the Afrocentric or Latino or an indigenous Latino look. And I think that's the kind of problem I see in this particular category. I think that face becomes a category that the more European you look, the more structure you have with the modifications you do to look European or exotic in the sense that you don't look Black or you don't look Latino, it makes you win. So, for a lot of young kids who are actually walking that category, the skin structure has to be close to impeccable. Your nose cannot be White enough to be criticized. If you

look any way ethnic, you probably will get disqualified for face, regardless of how beautiful you really are. So that is a very tough category because it really depicts how the community sees beauty. And beauty is a pencil nose, high cheekbone structure, the lighter skinned kids are more attractive than the darker skinned kids and the issue of race becomes quite, quite real and obvious in this particular category. And that's a good example of something that is a constant thing that this community is dealing with in terms of racism.

ERC: So, if it's a celebration of femininity in male bodies in the realness with a twist category, it sounds like it's not so celebratory in face. It sounds very standardizing. How do you explain that? It's a Black and Latino scene.

ALE: How do I explain that?

ERC: Yeah, how do you explain that reality to yourself?

ALE: Oh, it's fantasy. I think, again, these kids are dealing with their own self-hatred, their own personal issues with their race, including Latino individuals. I think we all have dealt with that. I remember, and it's always been the most painful memory for me to just think about it ... the young Black girl who was transgender. And I asked her "If there was something you could change outward about yourself, what would you change? She said "My skin. You know, I would love to be White." At that point, I was hoping to hear, you know, about plastic surgery, a nose job perhaps. But, she was completely unhappy about her skin color. And yet, I remember, she kept saying "That is so White cunt of you." And I always said to the kids "What does White cunt mean?" They would tell me that "White cunt means only a White person could actually be able to do that, but you can't. OK." I wondered at that time what do these kids feel they can't accomplish. A lot of these kids go through that kind of internal struggle.

There are a number of themes here that intersect with Arbert's previous discussion of the fantastic investments present in the "realness with a twist" category. One thing that Arbert notes is that everyone has face, but not necessarily the kind of face that will let one qualify or win in Ballroom competition. The "face" category attends to that part of our body that is always upfront and naked within the social realm (Agamben 2000). Perhaps, it is this very condition of being naked and immersed in the field of the other that makes "face", as a category, so weighted with the politics of beauty that Arbert talks about in this excerpt. Or, more precisely, Ballroom cultures have never admitted a depoliticized form of beauty in a national context where the slave auction block, the

minstrel show or the runway are not as separate in the social imaginary as they are in temporal registers of historical chronology. In this excerpt, Arbert returns to the idea that categories are fantastic rearticulations of the social subordinations Ball members endure both individually and collectively. He contends that the valorization of White and what he deems “exotic” beauty, but not Black and Latino forms of beauty, is both a sign of the presence of racial self-hatred and an attempt to get hold of it through its restaging in runway competition.

Arbert argues that everybody has to contend with racial self-hatred and that the self-evident democratic nature of face is always in lamentable tension with the matter of fact internal struggle of living with a shared racial self-hatred. His comments about the young Black transgender girl both confirm and undermine his thesis that an internalized racial hatred is at the core of the face category as he has witnessed it in the Ballroom scene as a participant and a spectator. In contradistinction to Arbert’s understanding, I would argue that there is a racial pragmatism in the young woman’s desire to be a White woman: an alternative materialization of her body into female bodied White femininity would mean a rearrangement of her access to social power and a concomitant ability to act in the world without the limits that bar her from the privileges that “White cunt” signifies for her and other Ball children. This insight does not render moot Arbert’s analysis of the “face” category as evidence for racial self-hatred, but it does allow for other possibilities within the restraints of an aesthetic regime of bodily production that aligns with White supremacy as an important element within the social dominant.

## Ball and Gay Families

In the last sections of his life narrative Arbert departs from a focus on the politics, investments, and imaginaries in contention on the runway and returns to the themes of family life, Ballroom history, and the lessons he has learned as a preventionist, mother, and founder of a house in his close to two decades working with and living amongst the Ballroom children:

ERC: Let's talk a little bit about the house families.

ALE: Well, there's mothers and fathers and children. They're gay families too. The mothers and fathers tend to be the ones that run the houses. I'd say lately that there's two types of parents. There's the trophy parents which basically means that they've dominated in their particular category and that's it. And there's the parents who become parents who are basically the substance parents who take on the role of running the house and being parental with their children, making sure that the kids are ready, the kids are done [perfectly attired and made up], and getting the support that they need. Trophy mothers or fathers basically don't care about their kids. They just care about making it in their category and the kids only care about them, mother and father, winning in their categories.

ERC: So, this is strictly based on the competition?

ALE: Right, they're strictly based on the competition and the status that they have in the community. The substance parents are basically the ones who take care of the house. Someone could actually be doing that and then not be a mother or father in a particular house.

ERC: So, they wouldn't have the title of mother or father of the house?

ALE: Yes. But, they take on the mother or father responsibility. For example, the overall father of my house [The House of Evisu] was a St. Clair and he took on a parental role within the House of St. Clair for about ten years of his life, and he was one behind the scenes making sure the kids were alright, got money, got an education, got food and stuff, and he took on that parental role while the father was making sure that the kids were walking the categories or doing something like that. So, I have in my house now a substance father, not a trophy father.

ERC: OK. So, what goes on in the houses?

ALE: A lot of arguing, a lot of fighting. A lot of eating.[Laughter] Well, what went on in the House of Latex was basically, you know, trying to develop a house

like that, trying to develop a family structure. And in some part we did actually. We developed a family structure like that. And we continue to do that. And they continue to do that as Latexes. What happens in the house? Kids meet on a regular basis. A lot of kids have relationships with a lot of the members in their houses hopefully because that's the only way to stay in the house. You have to have a level of connection with it with the house structure. There are very few members of a house that can say "I'm in this particular house, but I don't speak to any member of my house. I just do what I have to do for the house." There are members that grow to that, grow to that level, but if you're going to enter a house, usually, when you enter, there's more a connectiveness to a particular house and the members behind that. Of course, they are gay children as well. Gay children and house children are very different.

ERC: Tell me about that difference.

ALE: Gay children are your family. I mean house children are always your family too. There's a close connection and that connection is about the house. But, the gay children have a closer connection, the essence of real family for me. Usually my gay kids, when someone tells me, I want you to be me my gay mother. And I'm sorry, but I'm not a gay father to nobody. [Laughter] I have always been a gay mother. So, they say "I want you to be my gay mother" and I say "I really need to talk to you and explain to you what that means to me because this is what family means to me, and I want to know what family means to you." Because I want, if I take them in as a child, I want them to understand that a family member would always be family to me, regardless of how we feel about each other. That's how I feel. My biological family is like that, and that's how I feel I have to be in my gay family.

ERC: OK. Let me ask a different, but related question. Why wouldn't you be anybody's gay father?

ALE: I'm a mother. And it's also coming to terms with my feminine side, that I was comfortable being a feminine gay man. And I was feminine and the idea of being a mother was always in the background.

Arbert's understanding of the two types of parents, the trophy and the substance parent, is grounded in notions of parenting that emerge out of the tensions between competition and affiliation that are central to Ballroom families. He is being descriptive in his comments since he would affirm that older members in most families may play these roles simultaneously and that the co-presence of these two types of parents may actually help in making a given house an effective support system for all its members as

well as a force to be reckoned with in runway competition. What would be seen as a source of emotional conflict and structural instability in non-Ball kinship systems can easily be construed as a winning formula for affective bonding and institutional growth and viability in Ballroom reckonings of family. My years of participant observation of the balls confirms that this assignment of different tasks to responsible adults in the houses can and often does lead to victories on the runway as well as emotional cohesion and support for house families.

The two types of children, gay or house sons or daughters, that Arbert discusses in this excerpt from his life narrative, are indicative of what he perceives to be the psychic and social distance that these relationships have from what he calls his “biological” family. He experiences his relationships with his gay children as being closer and that this deeper connection is the “essence of family” for him. What is interesting is that this relative disparity of emotional connection between gay children and ball children may be partially explained by how these relations are constituted at the moment of their inception. Ball parents recruit their children based on qualities they see in the child that may be good for ball competition and characteristics that might enrich the houses’ inner life. Many of my informants have described for me how their first runway competitions were as “free agents” or unaffiliated walkers and that their successful performance on the runway led a parent or a child of a particular house to ask them to consider joining their ball family. Thus, ball children are chosen by the house members: the houses are not open to anyone who is interested in becoming a member. There is a very clear and tested vetting process that one must submit to and it is not normally initiated simply at the insistence of the potential house member.

My own field research indicates that the opposite is largely the case when it comes to the inception of a gay parent and child relationships. More often than not it is the young person who asks the older person to take on the role of his/her gay mother or father; the psychic investment is from child to parent at its inception and being asked to be someone's gay parent is usually received as a compliment and a recognition that the potential parent is a worthy role model for the gay child to emulate. My own sense is that the closeness that Arbert feels toward his gay children, in contradistinction to the obvious connection he has with his many house children, has to do with the largely positive symbolic, social, and psychic weight that being chosen by a young person must entail.<sup>15</sup>

Arbert reports that house families engage in the type of material and social sharing that most US-based kinship systems regularly engage in as well. The life of the house is not only regulated by the schedule of balls in the circuit and the shared forms of labor that must be enacted for success, but also the meeting schedule that the house family sets up to deal with the regular items of business that competition demands as well as the care of family members. I would argue that one of the things that sets apart house families from other forms of queer kinship (e.g., two gay men who have adopted children

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<sup>15</sup> A more ethnographically-grounded psychoanalytic approach to this particular queer kinship phenomenon would argue that the deeper connection that Arbert feels is a remembering of his own being chosen by the mother that both produced and chose him by her acts of erotic and affective investments through her process of conceiving and rearing him. Perhaps, Arbert's assertion that gay children are in some sense closer to the dynamics of his biological family may have to do with the restaging of this childhood psychic economy, but in the light of a fully matured same-sex erotic cultural and social context. The child that chooses Arbert is also affirming the viability and generative quality of his sexual/gender identity as feminine gay man who will always be a mother. Obviously, the rethinking of Freud's Oedipal origin narrative has yet to be fully worked through and reformatted theoretically by working class queer people of color and the racially overdetermined psychic economies that they construct for their erotic subjectivities and collective social forms that inevitably include kinship structures (Eng 2003).

or a lesbian couple that have produced a child through alternative insemination) is that brothers and sisters are, at times, erotically and romantically involved as well. The incest taboo is not a viable analytic tool for understanding the affective-erotic economies at play in house families. One informant told me that he felt that “the kids” always dated each other and sometimes encouraged parents to recruit new members into the house that they found physically attractive and wanted to have sex with or date.

Both this informant and Arbert reported this reality in a matter fact way. Arbert saw it as one of the things that keeps children in a house in the first instance. I would argue that the houses are kinship systems that include sexual networks within and between house families. Manolo Guzman has argued that families are racial factories and the corollary to this insight is that sexual networks are central in reproducing these racial production units (Guzman 2006). Again, the ball families are simply more upfront about the erotic and romantic investments that animate both their inner kinship lives and their collective social lives. During my time doing field research in New York City, I was asked on occasion to present my preliminary impressions on the Ball community before non-ball audiences. I was almost inevitably asked whether house members had sex with or dated each other. I never answered the question directly. I usually asked the questioner: What would be the consequences if they did in fact have sex with or dated each other? Is it possible to have a family without reference to a regulative social fiction like the incest taboo? Is family life possible if sex and eroticism are horizontally shared experiences and not just reserved for the parent figures? These questions usually put an end to the singular empirical inquiry that initiated my response, but the audience never



seemed satisfied and the question would come up in the next non-ball venue at which I presented my preliminary ethnographic observations.

Arbert's last comment in this section reflects his own understanding that his male-bodied form of femininity aligns with his sense of himself as a mother with his ball and gay children. Again, it is not helpful analytically or empirically to separate Arbert's embodied experience of being a gay mother into the separate categories of sexual and gender difference. He experiences them as the truth of his self as a feminine gay man who is and always will be a mother to his children. Arbert's mothering is not unrelated to his status as a big girl. In doing participant observation in Ballroom contexts, I was often struck by how many community leaders in the Ball community were big girls or big boys. One of my informants who is a big girl felt that large sized butch queens and women took on the roles of "Big Mama" from the association in Black and Latino/a communities of "excess" weight with domesticity and nurturance and that the non-big girls in the community understood that female role implicitly. Whatever the case, Arbert sees his particular contribution to the scene as that of a mother since, as he told me many times in both professional and social contexts, "It's always the mothers that keep shit together. They do the work."

The category of work in the Ballroom community is not only a matter of labor, but also a reference to the history of the emergence and continuance of the families, the circuit, and the community as a whole. The history of the House Ballroom community has yet to be written, but Arbert's own understanding offers some of the contours that a

history of the scene would have to fill in as well as the oral understandings that have been handed down intergenerationally to the present moment.

### Ball Histories

ERC: So, let's talk about the history of the ball scene. Tell me about the ball scene as you understand it.

ALE: Well, actually, from what I understand the ballroom history could go as far back as the twenties. And from what I understand, girls talk about, you know, drag that was happening when it was illegal. It was underground and kids would get arrested for impersonating the opposite sex and they were actually still having events and those outstanding histories which happened in Harlem are actually connected to the Ballroom scene. I also know that there was a clear connection closer to my era around the 60's even though I was a baby then. I know my gay mother talks about those events because she was a product of the sixties and she talks about those competitions of the 60's where those competitions were venues for drag queen performers. Back then there were only categories for drag queens and escorts.

ERC: What are escorts?

ALE: Escorts were, at that point, just gay men or men who actually escorted the transsexuals to the events.

ERC: So, would they perform? Were they just there to act as the male in the couple?

ALE: They weren't in the center. It was mostly the women who were. And the competitions were mostly about transsexual women walking or female impersonators walking and competing against each other. It was basically a male-female thing: transgender women and gay men.

ERC: That's interesting. I never knew about the escorts. Go ahead.

ALE: I also know that there was this era in the twenties when people impersonated, you know, the opposite sex. So, men dressed like women, and women dressed like men. And that was very common, and there were competitions among each other on who did that best, and it was the era of the Roaring Twenties. I think about one of my favorite films that does that for me and reminds me of a ball. It's Auntie Mame with Rosalind Russell. And, in the opening scene, Rosalind Russell, and, actually, this is an MGM film, Rosalind Russell opens up and the Asian boy [the butler role] opens up the door and says "Madam is busy. She's having an affair." And as the scene opens up, there are women dressed like men, and men dressed like women, and they're all done up,

and this major event is happening, and to me it's like a small versions of a mini-function that she was having in her Sutton Place apartment in Manhattan. So, to me, that was very common to the old ball events where people were having those kind of things underground.

ERC: OK. So, tell me what you understand to be the history of the modern Ball scene?

ALE: Actually, I think that once the European influence came into play. I'm thinking of the Sergio Valentés, the Twiggys, and the late sixties and early seventies. There was a fad for that in the ghettos in our community as we and the communities were getting more influenced by Europe. The Sergio Valente jeans, the Gloria Vanderbilt jeans, this was as people were getting to know more about glamour, about what it was to be your fantasy, to be a Vanderbilt. There were commercials coming into play. We wanted to have those types of clothing, expensive clothing for us, and to have a Sergio Valente for going out. That was a hot commodity. I think it was same thing to have Gloria Vanderbilt on, to have something from McFadden. Those things became more popular. And actually men were becoming models, so there was more of a play for men to come out in fashion, it was being open to the male world.

ERC: OK. So that was the context, but how did the families, how did the modern families come into being?

ALE: The family structures came out of the strong cluster of girls in the shows that made up a particular network, and they were versus other girls from other networks. So, one drag queen Follies versus another Follies and they came together in competition. Or the Philadelphia Follies versus the Follies from somewhere else. And the clusters were always made up of the drag queens or the femme queens or the transsexuals, and they helped other young girls do this kind of thing. They brought them up to be beautiful ladies, and that's how the family structure developed. There's always an elder trying to help a young kid up in the gay scene. And I think that's how things were. I am pretty sure that many of us had a gay mother who taught you how to be a proper woman. And I think the names came about in the seventies when all the balls were happening in Harlem. And, finally, the first official name was taken out by a group that was called beautiful ... by LaBeija.

ERC: So, the House of LaBeija was the first house that you know of?

ALE: Well, yeah, by ball standards, yeah, that's the first name that came out, and it's actually a Spanish name.

ERC: LaBeija?

ALE: Yeah.

ERC: So, it's actually La Bella, the roots of LaBeija are sort of a mispronunciation of La Bella.

ALE: Yeah, it's the mispronunciation of La Bella.

ERC: I don't understand. Why do you think that they used La Bella?

ALE: Because of the connection, I think, they have with Spanish Harlem, Harlem, and stuff like that. They definitely wanted to look and sound different, and the connection they had with the Latino community was strong. That's a good example of a house that connected to, that like synchronized what the communities were at that point. Even though it's a Black House and a Black Ballroom scene, LaBeija communicated clearly that they lived in Harlem and that Spanish Harlem was becoming a melting pot of Black Americans and Latinos. Interesting enough, to mispronounce or to misspell or to call out LaBeija, and they actually would say it "LaBeija is beautiful in Spanish." And I know it's mispronounced, but it's interesting that behind this Black house was a Spanish word.

ERC: What about carta?

ALE: Carta.

ERC: It is carta?

ALE: Yeah, Carta, C-A-R-T-A, is face. You know? Which is another mispronounced word, cara, C-A-R-A. They put the T there just to emphasize it. I think that they always have to, we have to misemphasize things to be a little extra gay with things. So for us to say cara is not as interesting as saying "Car-ta" honey. [Laughter].

Arbert's understanding of the history of the Ballroom community reproduces many of the themes that are central to the oral tradition and empirically underdeveloped written history that is available today. He locates the origins of the community in the demimonde that was the gay world in the earlier part of the twentieth century. He makes note of the incredible gender and sexual diversities that were present in the Harlem of the 1920's. Historians George Chauncey and Eric Garber have documented the existence of these communities in their work. Arbert also locates the development of the present day Ball families in two dynamics: the dense social networks created by drag queens or transgender women in the drag performance circuits that existed in the gay clubs in New

York City in the immediate post World War II period and the need for a type of racialized gender/sexual mentoring that older drag queens took on to socialize younger transgender women to the challenges of living and performing in the demimonde of the drag world.<sup>16</sup> One of the ironies of Ballroom history that has been pointed out to me by older members of the community on various occasions is that the present day community

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<sup>16</sup> Of course, a variation of this world is documented in Esther Newton's seminal ethnography of the White drag performance circuit in the Midwest and New York City in the late 1960's. Newton's *Mother Camp* is the foundational text of the anthropology of drag culture in the United States. Newton looked at the personal and professional lives of her drag performer subjects. Her research argues that the gay male world is organized around a set of oppositions articulated through the social ideas of outside-inside and masculine-feminine. She uses these oppositions to explore the cultural import of drag culture. She proffers that the drag performer in particular and the drag queen in general (what Newton's informants call the "street fairies" who are largely performers in the making, but considered of a lower status than the drag performers) is the site in which all homosexual stigma is invested. Newton is deeply influenced by the work of Irving Goffman in *Mother Camp* and, in a sense, one can think of this study as an anthropologically grounded phenomenology of drag culture using the idea of a damaged or spoiled identity as an organizing motif. Newton argues that drag performance works on two symbolic levels: 1) reinforcing the notion that the sex-role system is natural and, consequently, that homosexuals in general are outside a natural system of sex-role assignment, and 2) questioning the very sex-role system as a whole since the wrong sex can appear to be the right sex in the drag performance ritual. Newton argues that the drag queen lives in this ambivalence: "The drag queen symbolizes all that homosexuals say they fear most in themselves, all they say that they feel guilty about; he symbolizes, in fact, the stigma. In this way, the term "drag queen" is comparable to "nigger". And like that word, it may be all right in an ingroup context but not in an outgroup one" (Newton 1972:103). Obviously, the weight of that social stigma and guilt that Newton reports has changed considerably since she did her fieldwork, but the symbolic labor that drag culture performs in both affirming and undermining the sex-gender system in the United States is probably still a relevant feature of her seminal research. The other term that Newton deploys to organize her research is the notion of camp. Newton is clearly responding to the generalization of that term after the positive critical reception of the late Susan Sontag's essay "Notes on Camp" (Sontag 2001). Newton reports in her field research of actually giving the essay to some of her informants and eliciting responses to Sontag's ideas. Her informants note that the essay makes invisible the origins of camp in the homosexual subculture. In one sense, Newton's use of camp is an attempt to restore camp to its cultural locus after its use and abuse by high theory. She argues that camp is a "strategy for a situation" in which an identity has been spoiled and needs to be managed to make that identity socially viable. Newton states that camp has three aspects to it: "incongruity, theatricality, and humor." She writes: "All three are intimately related to the homosexual strategy and situation. Incongruity is the subject matter of camp, theatricality its style, and humor its strategy" (Newton 1972:106). All these elements rework the stigma of homosexuality by marking the contradictions inherent in a rigid sex-role system that dehumanizes the diversity at the heart of human sexuality. Amazingly, *Mother Camp*, after three intervening decades of ethnographic sex research, still remains the best study of drag performance and culture in the United States.

was founded and developed by Black and Latina transgender women, but the real social power in the scene resides with the butch queens. In New York City, evidence of this transition is the predominance of butch queens in the role of parents and the predominance of categories designed specifically for butch queens in ball competition. Oddly enough, the predominance of male-bodied privilege instantiated in the Ballroom's butch queens has trumped the social power of transgender women and drag queens that produced the institutional infrastructure of the contemporary Ball families and circuit.

Arbert recognizes the historical usurpation of the drag queens and transgender women by the butch queens in the modern Ballroom. He also locates the development of the modern community in two other dynamics: the proliferation of European high fashion culture via popular modes of communication like television and magazine as well as the commodity market in clothing that expanded during the 1970's as expectations for a more democratic mode of consumption materialized in light of the real, but limited victories of the Black Civil Rights movement as well as the new social movements. One of the paradoxes of the US's consumption regime is that spatial marginalization has never meant ideological separation from commodity practices and desires. In many ways, it has meant an intensification of these practices and desires. The modern House community emerges out of this matrix of spatial displacement and/or containment as well as incitement to greater scales of commodity-based economies of desire and social status.

Arbert's comments on the House of LaBeija and the ball term "carta" explore the mutual cultural and linguistic sharing which Blacks and Puerto Ricans engaged in and continue to practice in their shared residential and educational spaces in New York City.

What is mispronounced in “LaBeija” is a proper enunciation of the state of cultural imbrication that Puerto Ricans Blacks have lived in for over four decades. In one sense, Crystal LaBeija’s choice of the Spanish word for beautiful woman is an attempt to evoke both a feminine eroticism and a form of cultural otherness, but an otherness that would be familiar to her targeted audience --- the sounds and sexual dynamism of Harlem’s spatial other within: El Barrio or Spanish Harlem.

### Lessons Learned in Latex

ERC: And just a last word on the House of Latex. What did you learn? What are the things you learned doing that work over a ten year period?

ALE: I learned that there’s not one fixed message for anybody on protecting them from HIV/AIDS. I’ve learned that things have to change with time, and that change is learned. I have learned that the community is able to deal with ... I’ve learned not to look at a community as a deficit, but actually as a community that could actually take care of themselves and be a long term survivor even before we’ve come back to do some work to help it. And to look at their strengths rather than their weaknesses. And help them to trade up for themselves. They have to create their consciousness, for them to understand that. And I’ve learned that the community is a surviving community, and whether I’m here or not, it will continue to grow, to be, to be a hidden wonder ... It’s a massive wonder, it’s a big thing in a very small community. I don’t know if that explains it. To me, it’s big. To me, it’s bigger than the world, but it’s yet so small for anyone else.

ERC: And people refer to the ballroom scene as another world, right?

ALE: Yeah.

ERC: Why do you think that’s so?

ALE: Because it is. It is a world within itself. It is really, you know. That reminds me of how I introduced my partner. I didn’t tell him that I was part of the Ballroom scene. And he actually got into the Ballroom scene. I remember him telling me he was overwhelmed. And I said “What do you mean you’re overwhelmed? It’s just one day in the life of the balls.” And he said “I can’t believe you.” It was manic for the eight or nine hours we were at the ball. It was great. He told me “I have a headache and I’m overwhelmed.” I didn’t understand how it could be overwhelming to somebody. Maybe from the outside it could be an other-worldly, manic world. But I guess if we’re running, we’re all running at

high speed when we're actually at a ball. I'm able to jump in with it quickly. So I guess it must be overwhelming for outsiders looking in without even knowing where you turn to go into that, to that whirl of things. I sit at a ball, and I don't look at a ball and still I'll tell you what I've missed. Like the Latex Ball that just happened this week, I asked you recently who won this particular category because I was getting ready for another category. 90% of the people are paying attention to themselves, and not the ball.

ERC: So, a ball is a place where there are a lot of worlds?

ALE: Yeah, I think that's kind of what it is. I think it's a wonderful community. I think it's the only community that allows you to be in a free space. A little community that allows you to be very fluid. It's a community that lets you explore sexuality. It's a community that lets you explore gender. So, you know, I'd give it to anyone, straight or gay, just to have an experience there. It's wonderful.

Arbert's final comments in his life narrative are both about his particular experiences and work in the House of Latex project as well as global comments about the Ballroom community in New York City and beyond. He begins his comments in the mode of a preventionist and activist who is taking the measure of many years of efforts and relationships in a community that he has grown to love and admire. Arbert sees change as a time-consuming process that comes with the type of learning that HIV/AIDS interventions, at their best, are designed to initiate and sustain. Yet, he goes beyond the framework of traditional preventionists. He echoes the ideas of Samuel Friedman whose ground-breaking work on the effects of HIV/AIDS amongst injecting drug users and their sexual partners has concluded that members of these social networks were acting in preventive and protective manners long before interventions were targeted at them by community-based organizations and government agencies (Friedman and Touze 2006). They engaged in "intravention" long before the official interventions were conceived of and implanted by stakeholders from both outside and within the community. Arbert confirms this notion of "intravention" as a reality in the New York City Ballroom



community long before GMHC decided to develop programs that would incorporate the community into its HIV/AIDS education and intervention work agenda. In Arbert's eyes, the Ball families are part of a surviving community that was generated autonomously from the lives and relationships of working class Black and Puerto Rican queer and transgender men and women and had an established dynamic of care, concern, and community building decades before the "Condom People" were asked to come and provide safer sex information and materials at the balls in the New York City circuit. Through his work, he has learned to look at the community's strengths in order to encourage and advocate that Ball members trade up for themselves.

It is interesting that Arbert uses the language of the market in describing what the community needs. The Ballroom scene is deeply embedded in an eroticized commodity culture that understands the need for a pragmatic approach to accessing resources in an ever more increasingly marketized society and the social skills required to grasp those resources from the spaces that capitalism's contradictory logic produces. Part of Ballroom training is to teach a child how to "snatch the coins" when the opportunity appears and how to share those very coins with family. I would argue that Arbert understands this pragmatism as part of the skills that any surviving community must inculcate in its members if it is to be a viable entity and have an institutional future.

Toward the end of his comments, Arbert speaks in what is almost an ecstatic or quasi-mystical register that recalls some of his earlier comments on his life in the Paradise Garage. He uses paradoxes of scale to invoke the wonder of the Ballroom for him. The Ballroom community is hidden, but out in the open for those who know how to

look for it and are willing to enter the circuit. The Ballroom is massive, but small and tiny. It is as if Arbert is making the case that the smallness of the scene makes it a space of freedom; its intimacy is not suffocating, but expansive and jumps to the level of another world or even a larger scale than that. He talks about the mania of the balls and how they are “other-worldly”; Arbert deploys the language of transcendence in his attempt to capture the significance of the emotional and social openings the scene has afforded him. I would argue that the “mania” of the scene is the energy that gender/sexual multiplicities generate when they are let loose and, at the same time, scrutinized by a variegated community of interpreters. The balls are spinning with kinesis and, consequently, create a focus that is hard to reproduce outside the Ballroom milieu. I concur with Arbert that there are many worlds to be found on the runways, in house meetings, and in the social networks and communities that Ball families inhabit and it is this process of making multiple worlds that show up invited and sometimes uninvited at the balls that make the community a surviving small wonder.

#### Coda: Writing Up the Time Lived Before Him

Writing ethnographic narrative or vignettes is a very complicated and long process of remembering textually persons, contexts, and events that stand out in the flux of field research which itself is framed in the larger structure of daily life especially for ethnographers, like myself, whose informants are not separated from him/her by thousands of miles of land and oceans. There are, of course, narrative rituals associated with this intersubjectively grounded form of anamnesis that anthropologists over time have fashioned into an intellectually productive and, at different historical moments,

politically challenging social scientific literary craft and one of them is the closure of the narrative arc of the particular persons, events, and circumstances being communicated by the ethnographic writer. My own challenge in writing about Arbert and his world(s) is that there are eight years now of memories and events to retrace into something like a coherent narrative that marks out what I have learned from our conversations and shared experiences at balls or the late night post-mortems after balls or the ins and outs of dealing with whatever professional context that Arbert might be negotiating at the moment.

Throughout my process of writing up the various types of data I have on Arbert, I have often wondered how this story might end given the profound and continuing health challenges that Arbert has had to confront on a daily basis. I have no doubt in my mind that Arbert and Rafi are up to the challenges of their shared life. The mere fact that I have been to balls with both of them after Arbert has spent most of the day in dialysis is evidence of a formidable physical and psychic resilience which typifies their approach to the various economic, social, and now medical barriers that have arisen for them over time. Part of the reason for my desire to know how all this will come to a resolution is my own investment in understanding a life in a linear fashion despite the ample evidence in my field notes, pictures, and recordings that a rich and layered life is as much a temporal metaphor as it is a spatial one. That is to say, my recollections of Arbert come to me in ideational and visual streams that are never strictly chronological and that are laden with meaning precisely because my act of textual recovery is anchored in the epistemological high ground of retrospection. Yet, I know and anyone who knows Arbert could affirm that his life has traveled in a fairly consistent trajectory from Nuyorican working class

beginnings to the fragile stability of middle class professional life and domestic partnership. This, of course, is not the whole story, but it is an important aspect of it and to exclude this element as one of the material foundations for writing about Arbert's life and worlds would produce a text that Arbert himself would not recognize as being about him.

I have tried in this chapter to communicate both of these important elements: the linear narrative arc as well the multiple temporal registers that allowed for my act of ethnographically-grounded remembering. Part of this impulse is an effort to be true to the actual process of gathering up the data that has led to this chapter itself. Part of this is also, in truth, my own deep resistance to setting a linear closure on the story of an informant who has become a dear friend and, in that very act of narrative finality, have to face in a more direct fashion than I certainly wish to contemplate the anxiety about the possibility of his untimely death. This death anxiety has also partially animated my own need to represent him textually. I report this as a research finding in its own right as well as an accounting of the subjective conditions for the production of this chapter.

Nonetheless, there is a performative element to my approach as well: one of the key things to understand about Ballroom culture and the performances is that it can generate conditions for its performers to rework time itself when they are walking up on that runway. They rework not only the time of collective history as when Vivienne restores Atlantis to a condition of healing and wholeness without HIV/AIDS during her winning performance at the House of Latex Ball in my earlier chapter, but also the personal time of sexual and gender socialization in such a way as to redo the work of the self in both an affirming and empowering way. Very few Ball children were socialized consciously into

sexual and gender differences in their families of origins: it is their ball families that rework this socialization and it is the runway that allows for collective evaluations of this temporal switch in the mechanisms of dominant socializing agents and institutions.

I would argue that part of the theoretical lessons that Ball cultures can teach ethnographers is this reworking of time and its effects on how community members understand not only their sexual/gender differences, but also their racialization in contemporary US capitalism. Part of the production of the racial subjectivity of Blacks and Latinos/as in the United States is this sense of not only being robbed of time in the form of history, but also in terms of the efforts that material and social reproduction entails in a place like New York City where it literally takes time to figure out how to survive in a low-wage economy. It also takes time to learn the social skills to “bring it like a White woman” to use one of the phrases from the Ball scene. Arbert’s life narrative has afforded me a frame out of which to think the multiple effects, not just temporally, that lived differences can conjure not only for the families of the Ballroom scene, but especially for those who like Arbert set about to make an intervention in a time of desperate crisis in the community and ended up finding resources for his own efforts to make a meaningful and loving way in the lived time he has at hand.

#### Chapter Four: This Is *Paris Is Burning*. Right?

*Paris Is Burning* by Jenny Livingston remains to this day one of the most referenced mainstream visual texts about the House Ball community not only by those outside the Ball families and circuits, but also by those who are embedded to varying degrees in these social networks (Livingston 1991). I saw *Paris Is Burning* when it was released twice in the early 1990's in one of New York City's premier art film venues, Film Forum in Manhattan's West Village neighborhood. I find it difficult, if not impossible, to recall what my initial reactions to the film were given that my relationship to this visual text is by now overlaid and mediated by fragmented memories of dozens of viewings both as a graduate student and university instructor as well as hundreds of conversations about Livingston's documentary with Ball and non Ball friends, colleagues, and informants. My scattered recollections of that initial exposure to the film have a grainy feel that echoes the first shots of *Paris Is Burning*. It is that feeling of a familiar, but faded history that permeated my various showings of the film to Ball family members as well as those who are involved with the scene through their professional work as HIV/AIDS preventionists and/or community activists.

This chapter will unpack *Paris Is Burning* as a cultural artifact that is constantly circulated and reimagined by the New York City Ball networks where my ethnographic research has been conducted over the last number of years. This unpacking will be accomplished through an ethnotextual approach or ethnographically entangled reading strategy that Louisa Schein has developed in her research on Hmong indigenous video networks of production and consumption in the United States and various Hmong

population centers in Asia. Schein sees her approach as a close reading practice that eschews “mechanical” attempts to describe and analyze the “viewing subjectivity” of her Hmong informants:

“How can I get a sense of what a Hmong movie means to its Hmong audiences, of the kinds of imaginings, yearnings, or practices it inspires or stifles? I can surmise these things not because I could, through a mechanical interview methodology, elicit from these informants a narration of their viewing subjectivity, but rather because I am familiar with the shape of their worlds, the images and structures that constrain and incite their fantasies. In some ways these things have come to matter to me too, but not because of a kind of naive identification with my interlocutors, a “going native,” but rather because of the circumstances that have made our worlds proximate over decades. In other words, I watch and read the videos from a site of perduring ethnographic entanglement with those whose subject positions allow a more seamless identification with the texts, their characters and narratives” (Schein work in progress: 29-30).

The analysis in this chapter mobilizes the empirical and theoretical resources that have become available to me during my own years of “perduring ethnographic entanglement” amongst my informants in and out of New York City’s Ballroom families and circuits. Unlike for Schein, the object of my ethnotextual approach is in no way an indigenous product of the House Ball community. Rather, the shooting, editing, and commercial distribution of *Paris Is Burning* was controlled from start to finish by people who were not members of Ball kin networks or competition circuits. Nonetheless, I would argue that Ball community members have appropriated this film over the last two decades in such a way that it has become a repository of Ball meaning-making as well as history. It is on these indigenous Ballroom meanings as well as the visual text of *Paris Is Burning* that I wish to focus my own ethnographic analytic lens here. To that end, I analyze the narrative and visual structure of both the film’s commercial release cut as well as the outtakes that were included in the 2005 DVD release. This analysis is by no

means exhaustive of the images, spoken text, and sonic content found in both parts of *Paris Is Burning*. Rather, this analysis is designed to serve a set of broader claims that emerge not only from my ethnotextual reading of the filmic data, but also to explore themes that were culled from an informal focus group that I conducted with a number of Ballroom members and preventionists during the course of my research.

The first of these claims is that despite its reception in university viewings, its scrutiny by feminist theorists, its inclusion in many women's and gender studies curricula, the cinematic release version of *Paris Is Burning* is structured fundamentally as a race film. In short, I view *Paris Is Burning* as a cinematic exploration of the limits to the materialization of gendered/sexed bodies within a White supremacist visual and political economy. Secondly, I argue that the outtakes found in *Paris Is Burning's* 2005 DVD release version contain the repressed themes of AIDS and the travails of Ball family life that come up during community viewings of the film. Finally, I will show that my own informants when talking about the film are in their own way culturally "entangled" by a confusing and contradictory discourse that is anchored in a moral economy of stigma that names Whiteness as a social limit, but ultimately ascribes the putative failures of their Ballroom ancestors depicted in *Paris Is Burning* to individual gaps in ambition and motivation.

In many ways, film is one of the most technically complicated forms of cultural production for an artist to undertake. Moreover, documentary films, such as *Paris Is Burning*, occupy a very similar problematic epistemological terrain between fictional and journalistic representation with which much of ethnographic writing must also contend.



The temporal alignments and narrative frames of both documentary filmmaking and ethnographic writing simply do not correspond to the quotidian messiness and incoherence of the lives of the film documentarian's subjects or the ethnographic writer's informants. Ordinary people construct narratives of their own lives that have little to do with the temporal and narrative coherence found in cultural products like *Paris Is Burning* or most ethnographic texts --- no matter how experimental the writing style may try to be. It is precisely this coherence that is the best starting point to unravel the inchoate politics of desire that inform editing choices in the construction of the narrative and temporal frames that constitute a film.

Literary theorist Jacques Derrida has argued that "coherence in contradiction expresses the force of a desire" (Derrida 1980:278). I want to attend to this calling up of desire by Livingston and her editor in their process of suturing a coherent narrative frame for the commercial release version of their film as well as their choices of what visual materials should be considered outtakes for their DVD release version. In brief, Livingston and her editor decided to structure their film in a certain way and those choices reflect their own implication in what I have called a White supremacist visual and political economy. To be clear: I am not interested at all in Livingston's or her film editor's individual psychological or political desires vis-à-vis their Ballroom documentary subjects. These desires remain radically opaque to analytic inspection.

Rather, I am interested in their *filmic desires* as these manifest themselves in their editorial choices in the commercial release version of *Paris Is Burning* and their exclusions in their DVD version outtakes. I want to situate this analysis in the broader

context of the role that cinema plays in American cultural life: in the image and media saturated form of capitalism that dominates economic and social life in the United States, films and their public viewing in dark, comfortable, semi-erotic spaces where all eyes face the screen and not each other, are a form of collective dream life. In a sense, I am asking the following key questions in this chapter: what collective dreams are being proffered by Livingston in *Paris Is Burning*? What structural elements of our collective waking life explain these dreams in what one Ballroom walker in the film calls “White America”?

### The “*Paris*” We Always See and Hear

I begin this analysis of *Paris Is Burning* by noting a number of framing moments at the start and the end of the film. During the film’s opening scenes, Livingston informs her viewers that they are looking at footage shot in “NEW YORK 1987”; the next script the viewer sees is a Times Square electronic news scroll consisting of bold white letters that read out: “WHITE SUPREMACIST CHURCH BEGINS NATIONAL CONFERENCE.” The viewer is also introduced visually to two Latino teenage boys hanging out on what appears to be a street near Manhattan’s Times Square area. At various moments throughout the film, they are called on to define what the “gay community” and “gay family” mean to them. The more feminine presenting of this young dyad functions as a cultural interpreter for the person behind the camera who is asking him questions about gay culture. During the course of the documentary’s unfolding, this Latino teenager tells an older Black man who is having a conversation with him and his friend that he is 15 years old and that both his mother and family are “gone” and that he

lives with a friend. Although this 15 year old ostensibly gay teen is never seen in the context of Paris Dupree's ball or any other of the balls that are shown throughout the film, he is positioned at various moments as an expert on gay life presumably within the Ballroom's cultural context.

In fact, it is this 15 year old boy, wearing a blue and white striped railroad engineer's hat and with his arm around his friend's shoulder and neck, who literally has the last word as *Paris Is Burning* comes to a close when he looks into the camera and says: "So, this is New York City and this is what the gay life is about. Right?" (Livingston 1991). Although this unnamed youngster has the last word, he does not have the last performance. This privilege Livingston and her editor, Jonathan Oppenheim, reserve for an unidentified Black drag queen. She is wearing a brilliant shimmering pink dress with a lavender sash around her ample waist and fake ermine-like purple furs dangling from it. With her dragon lady nails all aflutter, she struts around a Ball performance space lip synching Black singing diva Patti LaBelle's version of "Over the Rainbow."

I wish to think through the implications of these framing moments together. The effect of Livingston's choice of making a news flash about a White supremacist national church conference appear so early in her film is to place race as a central thematic element in *Paris Is Burning's* narrative logic. The news scroll places the viewer within the urban and presumably Black and Latino/a demimonde of Times Square, but it also associates White supremacy with the nation and religion. The words across the screen act as a visual chain of signifiers: "White supremacy", "religion", and "national." This

editorial choice frames the national religion as Whiteness itself and, in a sense, what follows by way of a documentary exhibition of the Ball walkers, their families, and their performance cultures are the rituals and beliefs of a subaltern religion: White supremacy's others.

The film's racial framing is complemented by the two Latino teens that function as metonymic devices for the ball families that are associated with homeless street youth throughout its narrative arc. These two teen boys are the future-as-present in *Paris Is Burning* and serve as reminders of where many of the main characters in the film come from and what they have had to negotiate as members of a "surviving community" as one of my informants describes it. The boys' imbrication in the Ballroom's future is communicated in the ambivalence of intonation of the last comment by the 15 year old Latino youth: "So this is New York City and this is what the gay life is about? Right?" (Livingston 1991). That last word, "Right?" is filled with enough ambivalence that it calls the viewer to somehow offer a retort to the inquiry. Clearly, since the ability to materialize a future is not just a temporal project, but always already a racial one that differentiates life outcomes asymmetrically, the gay teen's muffled question is an acceptance of what is a tenuous recognition of the limits the future, as a predicate of a White racial project, holds for him and his community (Omi and Winant 1994).

The impossibility of a radically different future, despite many aspirations to the contrary as instantiated by the interviews with the film's key characters, is reinforced by Livingston's choice of a Black drag performer lip synching Patti LaBelle's rendition of "Over the Rainbow." This last performance is deeply mediated by the song's association

with Judy Garland's prior and historic signature performance of it in the film "The Wizard of Oz" as well as Patti LaBelle's status as one of the premier Black divas in contemporary music. "Over the Rainbow" narrates the desire for another world in which one can fly like a bird to a place beyond pain and struggle. The song has become a favorite in gay male drag performance venues because it evokes a realm where dreams come into reality: a reconstitution of waking life to conform to the impossible desires found in personal and collective dreams. Garland herself was an icon for many gay White men who came of age during the 1940's, 50's and 60's.

In his oral history of the 1969 New York City Stonewall Riots, historian Martin Duberman writes about the association that some of the White gay men he interviewed made with their mourning of Garland's death six days earlier and the anger that precipitated this first large-scale queer and transgender urban insurrection in the United States (Duberman 1994). This association has become part of the lore and legend surrounding the Stonewall Riots. The Black drag queen's performance poses a final question for Livingston's viewers: what does it mean to use this song as a closing theme? Specifically, what is the significance of using a song that harbors the utopian possibility of a place beyond "color" as its animating thematic principle to end this film? The very visibility and production of the Black drag queen's subjectivity is evidence for the impossibility of a post-rainbow (i.e., post-racial) world. In fact, this racial impossibility or closure is the enabling condition of her emergence as both a singular and collective subject (Ferguson 2004).

I contend that the electronic scroll and its evocation of White nationalism as America's real religion and the Black drag queen's performance of "Over the Rainbow" need to be read as thematic and visual poles for *Paris Is Burning* and that the formal visual elements of these scenes are central to this reading. In short, White nationalism is introduced as a theme by a technological mechanism that hovers over the urban space of Times Square: Whiteness is formally visualized in the film's opening shots as transcendent, technological, silent, and non-personal or, more to the point, supra-personal. However, the Black drag queen's subjectivity (and thereby her Blackness) is verbal, kinetic, corporeal, and hyper-visible. These two bookend scenes function as visual equivalents of the racial antinomies that haunt the film's optic and narrative economy: the visibility of the film's Ball walkers is in an unresolved and irresolvable contradiction with the invisibility of Whiteness and its social world hovering above and beyond or just out of reach of the Ballroom.

### Orations of Race and Marriage

*Paris Is Burning* is a race film as foundational, problematic, and delimiting to the emerging subfield of House Ball Studies as D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* is to American Cinema Studies. The desire to make *Paris Is Burning* largely about gender and sexuality or even drag performance is an effort to neuter its profound participation in the visual and political economy of White supremacy. This is not to argue for the dismissal of gender and sexuality as important analytic and visual themes in the film, but to make clear that *Paris Is Burning's* inclusion in all kinds queer and feminist canons may be a sublimation of race in the service of intellectual projects that reconstitute Whiteness by

other means (Guzman 2006). To avoid this particular sublimation, I want to turn my attention now to two moments of orations about race and its power to define life prospects and conditions of dignity for House Ball community members.

The first race oration which I will call “This Is White America” is a monologue that serves as the soundscape for a collection of images that range from Ball walkers in military garb as well as clothes appropriate to a day out at sea on the yacht to various images of White men, women, and children navigating business, shopping, and play in their respective privileged precincts. The second oration is a response that Venus Xtravaganza, a Latina transgender woman, gives to Jennie Livingston’s queries about her work as an escort. In her oration, Venus discusses the “sex work” that is at the core of normative middle class marriage for women and frames her own work as simply a special case of these same dynamics.

“This Is White America” is declaimed by an unnamed Ball walker who never appears on the screen while the photo montage of Ballroom members and privileged White people fills the screen. The Ball walker intones:

“This is White America. Any other nationality that is not of the White set knows this and accepts this till the day they die. That is everybody’s dream and ambition as a minority to live and look as well as the White person is pictured as being in America. Every media you have from TV to magazines to movies to films. I mean the biggest thing that minority watches is what? “Dynasty” and “The Colbys”, of “All My Children”, the soap operas. Everybody have a million dollar bracket. When they showing you a commercial from Honeygrams to Crest or Lestoil or Pine-Sol, everybody is in their own home. The little kids from Fisher-Price toys, they’re not in no concrete playground. They’re riding around the lawn. The pool is in the back. This is White America and when it comes to the minority, especially Black, we as a people for the past 400 years is the greatest example of behavior modification in the history of civilization. We have had everything taken away from us and yet we have all learned how to survive. And that is why in the

Ballroom circuit it is so obvious that if you have captured the great White way of living or looking or dressing or speaking: You is a marvel” (Livingston 1991).

The oration begins with the identification of Whiteness with the nation and the assertion that this co-articulation of Whiteness and American nationality is as irreducible and inevitable a fact as death itself. Nonetheless, the dream of all non-Whites is to “live and look” as well as White people are represented. The Ball walker knows that so much of Whiteness is the ability to be visible and socially viable in a certain way and that a whole apparatus of images is dedicated to reproducing the visual and material economies that subtend it. In short, the upper middle class fantasy that permeates all forms of entertainment and advertising media reflect and reproduce the distant and desired lives of White people for the “minority.” Echoing Marx’s contention of the simultaneity of production and consumption found in *Grundrisse* (Marx 1973: 88-94), the oration posits Whiteness as a mode of commodity consumption that produces certain spatial and familial configurations as well.

The ideological linchpin of “This Is White America” is found in its assertion that Whiteness is ultimately grounded in a multi-century project of racial subject formation or, to put it more sharply, interpellation that has attempted to strip Black people of their cultures and institutions while, paradoxically, creating the material and psychic resources that this same group of people have used to survive the longest “behavior modification” program in history. At the end of his monologue, the unnamed Ball walker returns to the Ballroom performances and inserts them into part of the survival strategy that he mentions earlier in his intervention. The Ball performances are attempts to capture the social, enunciatory, and visual power that Whiteness commands for other purposes: to



create “marvels” that the Ball children can study and use (or, in the words of Junior LaBeija, “Learn it and learn it well!”) in their efforts to make it in “White America.”

Despite years of ethnographic research and community work in New York City’s House Ball community, every time I view *Paris Is Burning* I am still entranced by the analytic acuity and rhetorical elegance of the off-screen monologue I am calling “This Is White America”. The unidentified speaker easily moves from the institutional politics of White nationalism to the predominance of a racist visual media economy to racialized patterns of consumption to notions of normative domesticity and kinship to the history of Black slavery and disenfranchisement and finally to the performative racial logic of Ballroom cultures. He does this in a matter of minutes and, of course, with an *éclat* that puts even the most learned reflections on *Paris Is Burning* to notable shame.

The clarity of his exposition is furthered by his almost inaudible and halted enunciation of the word “America” in his first use of the term “White America.” His halting and failing audibility summons the viewer to listen more closely to his words and to attend to the images before her as if the very silence of Whiteness shuns all forms of performative intervention. What also remains astounding to me is how focused scholars have been on *Paris Is Burning*’s various interview subjects and not on what is clearly the most analytically rigorous and politically radical statement that the commercial release version of the film contains. I contend that this gap or lacunae is a result of the historical conditions of the film’s reception: during the 1980’s and 90’s, the institutional consolidation of feminist studies and the emergence and eventual development of gay and lesbian studies in the American academy. These institutional victories and their

consequent respective and, to a certain extent, overlapping epistemic emphases subordinated the central themes of race and White supremacy in *Paris Is Burning* to obviously relevant, if not defining, gender and sexuality themes: some misreadings are more analytically and institutionally productive than others.

The next oration I wish to introduce into this discussion is one that Venus Xtravaganza gives in an interview sequence near the Christopher Street piers. At this moment in the film, Livingston has obviously asked Venus a number of off-screen questions about the escorting and sex work that some of the transgender women in the Ball social networks engage in to make ends meet. Venus states that she no longer does sex work, but that she has “hustled” in the past and that many of her friends who are transgender women in the House Ball community continue to do so. She recounts an incident that happened to her while she was hustling that frightened her away from any more escorting jobs. She describes how one of her customers upon discovering that she had a penis reacted violently to this fact and she literally jumped out of a window to escape what she surmised at the moment to be his homicidal rage. Venus tells Livingston that this incident and her fear of contracting HIV through her sex work has permanently warned her off from such economic activities.

Viewers later learn that before the film’s shooting came to an end Venus was murdered by one of her customers and discovered four days later in a hotel room by the police. In an interview cross cut with images of Venus wistfully bathed in dusk’s fading summer light and listening to a boom box play free style music on the Christopher Street piers, Angi Xtravaganza, Venus’ house mother, describes detectives taking her to identify

her house daughter's body in the morgue. The poignancy of these images is amplified by the oration that Venus delivers as she makes a clear link between sex work and what she calls marriage by a "regular woman":

"But I feel like if you're married, a woman in a suburbs. A regular woman is married to her husband and she wants him to buy her a washer and drier set. In order for him to buy that, I'm sure that she'd have to go to bed with him anyway to give him what he wants for her to get what she wants. So, in the long run, it all ends up the same way" (Livingston 1991).

This oration locates a certain form of marriage in the spatial and infrastructural arrangements that have produced the White suburbs as an empirical reality and a social imaginary. Venus separates herself from this reality by her use of the term "regular woman" despite the fact that in an earlier sequence of *Paris Is Burning* she imagines an entirely different life for herself as "a spoiled rich White girl." The mise-en-scène of this particular sequence is quite instructive since Livingston interviews Venus in her boudoir prostrate upon her very modest bed. In fact, the only documentary subjects that are interviewed in this manner are Venus and Octavia Saint Laurent; both of whom are young transgender women or, in House Ball parlance, femme queens. Both Livingston's construction of her mise-en-scène and the off screen questions she poses in these sequences reduce her subjects to a hyper-feminized and acquisitive subjectivity that align both of these young women with what is posited throughout the film as the economic and symbolic plenitude of Whiteness.

Nonetheless, Venus' "irregularity" on many levels is what ultimately precludes her from being that "rich spoiled White girl" that is the object of her reverie in her boudoir interview scene. It is this exclusion that allows her to place her own practice of

exchanging sex for economic resources as the fundamental logic between regular men and regular and irregular women. She argues for the moral equivalence between conjugal sex and commercial sex asserting that “it all ends up the same way.” Although the acts and the exchange logic are arguably moral equivalents, do they really end up with similar consequences? Venus’ tragic transphobic murder belies this equivalence at least in the realm of social consequences of and normative incorporation into the “sanctioned fantasy” of suburban heterosexual conjugal domesticity (Harper 1999). In the end, the difference lies in how these equivalent forms of sex-based exchange materialize the erotic and spatial economy of suburban life: one as an ideological and sexual engine of normativity and the other as an always accessible sexual outlet that stabilizes the very sphere that the sex workers are barred from by their irregularity. Venus hit upon a key moral sameness in her oration that stems from her implicit realization that her customers were denizens of that other normative space that her economic-sexual labor supplemented “in the long run.”

Both “This Is White America” and Venus’ monologues are key framing moments in Livingston’s *Paris Is Burning*. They are critical interventions at different scales of the social. “This Is White America” contemplates the complicated visual and commodity apparatus that materializes Whiteness and the real foundation of this “structure in dominance” (Althusser 1971) in the African-American histories of slavery, economic exploitation, and social exclusion. Venus’ oration is focused on the erotic economy and intimacy of power that gives Whiteness as a social apparatus its psychic anchor in pleasure and corporeality (Lancaster 1994). These orations posit a central question that

emerges throughout Livingston's film: what kind of life is available to those who are not of the "White set" in "White America?"

### Documentary Subjects *And* Characters in a Racial Morality Tale

There are five key interview subjects in *Paris Is Burning*: Pepper LaBeija, Dorian Corey, Venus Xtravaganza, Octavia Saint Laurent, and Willi Ninja. With the exception of Octavia Saint Laurent, all these famous Ball walkers are now dead due to transphobic violence or medical complications related to HIV/AIDS. I argue here that Jennie Livingston's editorial choices in her documentary assign a certain key group of her subjects ideological functions that produce what I term a racial morality tale wherein upward mobility, no matter how fleeting, is ultimately figured as the most socially redeeming response to the racial barriers that delimit the Ball children's lives. Her editorial choices produce this effect in two ways: 1) the film's temporal structure bifurcates its internal time between "NEW YORK 1987" and "NEW YORK 1989", and 2) the narrative structure of the film that aligns the content of her subject interviews with the crossover success of Willi Ninja's choreographic efforts as the redemptive moment that transcends the social exclusions that House Ball community members endure.

The effect of the temporal structure is to divide the film into a "before period" where the Ball culture is still outside of mainstream culture and an "after period" in which Ball performance, in the form of voguing, is introduced to mainstream audiences. It is this exposure to mainstream venues that gives the viewer the sense that this underground culture has finally arrived and it is beginning to give those who were sufficiently savvy, talented, and industrious their just reward and entrance into the

middle classes. Livingston's framing of Willi Ninja's meteoric and relatively brief entry into mainstream art and performance venues is the exemplar of this upward-mobility-as-redemptive-telos theme in the film's narrative structure. Suffice it here to say that Willi Ninja is the only subject in the entirety of *Paris Is Burning* filmed at a "legitimate" day job teaching working class Black and Latina women how to prepare themselves for modeling careers by accentuating their "feminine wiles." What follows below is an analysis of these five central interview subjects or characters. Given the scope of this chapter, a complete analysis of each of these characters is impossible. Rather, what I proffer here is a type of structural analysis that exposes the ways that each character, at least partially, serves to bring about the narrative pay off in the film of posing upward mobility as a racial morality tale.

To that end, I juxtapose here the interviews with Dorian Corey and Pepper LaBeija that Livingston includes in her commercial release version of *Paris Is Burning*. In an audio conversation that Livingston includes in the 2005 DVD version of her documentary, she states that she views Dorian Corey as the film's "head" and Pepper LaBeija as its "heart." In fact, during the interviews that are included in the film's commercial release version, Dorian Corey defines a number of emic Ball terms and relates the Ballroom community and its performance cultures to the wider White and straight world around it. Throughout the film, as she applies makeup in preparation for one of her drag show performances, Corey's comments are what one might expect from a native ethnographer or indigenous expert. She is the voice of reason, wisdom, and experience in the film. Corey's role in *Paris Is Burning* is almost exclusively diegetic. Moreover, through still photography featuring earlier incarnations of herself, she stands

in for the historical trajectory of the balls from drag pageants predominated by transgender women to the contemporary balls where butch queens (i.e., men who have sex with men whatever their particular gender presentation might be) dominate the competition and transgender women remain a vital, but socially subordinated part of the community. She argues that the proliferation of categories in the present-day ball scene is a product of an attempt to include those who wanted to walk, but had no desire to engage in the elaborate gender presentation work that drag queen categories called for to be competitive in the venues.

In contradistinction to the social analyst portfolio that Dorian Corey is assigned in *Paris Is Burning*, Pepper LaBeija is presented as the paragon of what ball motherhood means. She explains her own role in nurturing the queer and transgender Black and Latino/a youth who have become her house children. During one of her interviews, Pepper explains how her children “latch” onto her and see her as a replacement for the love that their families of origin have exiled them from. She states that rejection by one’s family creates a deeply felt need to find a substitute family in other more accepting people and places. In one of the film’s more poignant moments, Pepper talks about how she understands these young people because she is “gay” just like them and instantly the camera changes focus to the suddenly illuminated face of one of her children shaking his head in an agreement replete with the echoes of prior familial rejection. That nod is a deeply touching and haunting image that recalls the difficult and, at times, fruitless search for emotional understanding and social space that propels Pepper’s children out of their original kinship networks and into the ball families. Pepper, like Dorian Corey,

symbolizes the travails and personal triumphs of someone who has had to live a life of sexual and gender marginalization in a hostile White world.

Throughout her interview scenes, Pepper talks about the reputation for competitive excellence that the House of LaBeija has maintained since it founded the contemporary ball scene in the late 1970's (Cunningham 1998). She talks about her own personal triumphs in competition and how, according to her own authority as an expert on her standing in the community, she is the most well respected mother in the New York City circuit and her house is the ruling house in the ball scene. As she looks directly at the camera, she sums up her feelings in an impervious declaration: "New York is wrapped up in being LaBeija" (Livingston 1991). Despite this triumphant tone, Pepper is someone grounded in the reality of daily struggles for survival and who clearly as a house mother practices the reciprocity of Black poor and working class kin networks (Stack 1974). She states that if she came into money, she would not feel right unless she could share it with the ones she loves: "I would charter a plane to Paris and we would all go to Paris" (Livingston 1991). Pepper emphasizes how wonderful a life she has had for someone who has never had any real money. She is a person who has come to terms with her own destiny and has few illusions as to what is possible for her in terms of economic success. Her power and prestige is in the Ballroom community and she has no pretensions that she will eventually come to riches and/or fame in the world outside of the balls.

As her multiple interview scenes attest, Dorian Corey, like Pepper, has come to a wise and pragmatic assessment of her possibilities in the society she has lived in as a drag



queen and performer for many decades. As she looks at her dressing room mirror and layers her makeup, she says:

“I always had hopes of being a big star... As you get older, you aim a little lower. And I just say “Well, yeah, you still might make an impression.” Everybody wants to leave something behind them. Some impression, some mark upon the world. Then you think you left a mark on the world if you just get through it and a few people remember your name. Then you left a mark. You don’t have to bend the whole world. I think it’s better to just enjoy it. Pay your dues and enjoy it. If you shoot an arrow and it goes real high, hooray for you” (Livingston 1991).

Both Pepper LaBeija and Dorian Corey are the tempered and battle-worn futures for all the desires for wealth and celebrity that are expressed by the three other younger subjects in the film --- Venus Xtravaganza, Octavia Saint Laurent, and Willi Ninja. Pepper and Dorian have made their peace with “White America” precisely by simmering down their desires to the realm of the possible and the social spheres where they are accepted and have immediate and enduring influence. Their earlier desires for the benefits of upwardly mobility have not been redeemed, but they are getting through the world and thereby leaving their respective marks despite the barriers they have confronted.

In *Paris Is Burning’s* narrative structure, Venus Xtravaganza and Octavia Saint Laurent are the narrative and ideological counterpoints to the seasoned Pepper LaBeija and Dorian Corey. Perhaps, they are, in truth, younger and dreamier versions of these two Ballroom stalwarts. Of course, Venus’ tragic murder forecloses the possibility of imagining a wiser and less wish-saturated future for her outside of the playing time in which her cinematic self now lives for as long as celluloid and digital images perdure. Nonetheless, here I am reframing these two young femme queens as a dyad of desire that

dives deeply into the aspirations for subsumption into White normativity that runs through *Paris Is Burning* as a suturing thematic thread. Further, I want to think their youthful dreaminess up against the sagacity and sobriety of their world-weary elders in the Ball life, Pepper and Dorian. A complete analysis of all the elements that these two young transgender women bring to the film both visually and thematically exceeds the purpose of my intervention here. Rather, I want to focus on a key set of scenes that constitute the thing that comes closest to a dream sequence in the film. The group of scenes or montage is visually antiphonic moving from a reclining Octavia Saint Laurent in her bedroom to a similarly situated Venus Xtravaganza. This is pillow talk with the camera par excellence: the erotic undertone of this series of interlacing monologues is intensified by Venus' little girl demeanor and Octavia's smiling playfulness. Obviously, the fact that a White lesbian is behind the camera and directing the scene is of itself replete with erotic as well as racial implications that can be explored in another context (Butler 1993).

For now, it is important to note that Octavia is filmed with an enormous visual space above her head that reveals a shoddily painted wall with pinup photos of the models she most admires --- almost all of whom are White. Her own stance is one of making her desires known, quite literally, up into that space of images that hangs above her. She is visually dreaming above her head, beyond the limits of reason, beyond her station. The scene frames her desires as really beyond the limits of race or, at least, beyond this iteration of the dominant racial project in the United States. The call and response between these two femme queens is a walk not only to oneiric passages of desires, but to that dream-filled night where racial barriers melt and these women can live

in the suburbs, adopt children, have professional lives or even be celebrities. This femme queen aspirational antiphony is preceded by the end of a sequence where Octavia has gone to one of Manhattan's swanky retail establishments to a public casting call for the prestigious Ford Models agency. She is dressed in an elegant white summer dress with her hair pulled back amongst the dozens or, perhaps, hundreds of would be young models. Octavia is even filmed talking to the only Black Ford agency model there who tells her that they look through 75,000 applications every year when they do this open recruitment event. Obviously, the odds for being picked as a new Ford Models recruit are not good for any of the women who have shown up for this open call and, if truth be told, they are even worse for Octavia given her status as a Black transgender woman. The sequence I am concerned about shows the late Eileen Ford, the director of the model agency, talking to a male reporter who asks her a question about whether the "girls" who become models have changed over her many years of running an agency. Ford responds to this question with an emphatic no thereby setting up the thematic thread of the permanence and unchanging reality of feminine desire for normativity:

Reporter: What have girls become? Are they the same? How are they different?

Eileen Ford: Girls are not different from yesterday or the day before. Everybody who's young has a hope and a dream. And I don't think that it's been any different in the history of the world

Octavia [switch to Octavia in her bedroom]: I believe there's a big future out there with a lot of beautiful things, a lot of handsome men, and a lot of luxury.

Venus [switch to Venus in her bedroom]: I want a car. I want to be with the man I love. I want a nice home away from New York. Up the Peekskills or maybe in Florida somewhere far where no one knows me. I want my sex change.

Octavia: I want to live a normal happy life. Whether it's being married and adopting children whether it's being famous and rich.

Venus: I want to get married in church in white.

Octavia: Sometimes I sit and look at a magazine. I try to imagine myself on the front cover or even inside.

Venus: I want to be a complete woman. I want to be a professional model behind cameras in the high fashion world.

Octavia: I want so much more. I want my name to be a household product. I want everybody to look at me and say "There goes Octavia."

Venus: I want this. This is what I want and I'm going to go for it (Livingston 1991).

This set of intercutting scenes is framed by Eileen Ford's comment that young people are always filled with "hopes and dreams" and that is a permanent state of affairs especially for "girls." Octavia's hopes and dreams are definitely about wealth and, perhaps, a normative form of heterosexual domesticity, but her desire for celebrity trumps those other concerns in the last instance. In her "big future", she wants to be a "household product": a commodity that is subsumed into normative domesticity itself. Venus' dreams are entangled not only in love and being removed from the gritty realities of her life in New York City, but in her desire for a sex reassignment surgery as a way of transubstantiating her subordination even as a very light skinned Latina in "White America." Venus invokes a life of gender and racial completion where she can work in a glamorous job and leave her escorting behind and dress in white for her church wedding. The desires are so intensely expressed in these scenes that it can be difficult to see their articulation as also posing some very problematic questions: What does it mean for Octavia to desire a celebrity status that renders her a "household product" when historically Black women have had just that status, albeit a degraded and exploited one, in slave and Jim Crow market and domestic economies? Or, how is the whiteness of Venus' wedding day dress metonymic for her earlier stated desire to be a "spoiled rich

White girl?” All throughout this montage, the viewer is left to ask whether any of these desires have the possibility of materializing in the lives of these women.

Livingston closes this response and call between Octavia and Venus by switching the time of her film from “NEW YORK 1987” to “NEW YORK 1989.” It is at this moment that we view a member of the House of Xtravaganza voguing for an obviously non-Ball audience at an AIDS fundraiser sponsored by the fashion industry. Voguing has finally found a mainstream and, in this particular instance, an upscale audience. The event was covered by mainstream news outlets and Livingston intercuts local news interviews with celebrities that praise the energy and creativity of the Ballroom voguers. At the end of this sequence, Willi Ninja, in a very different incarnation, is reintroduced to the viewer. In the “NEW YORK 1987” section of *Paris Is Burning*, Willi had expressed his ambitions to parlay his masterful Ball voguing dance skills into a mainstream choreographic and art performance career: “I want to take voguing not to just Paris Is Burning, but I want to take it to the real Paris and make the real Paris burn” (Livingston 1991). Willi appears in this section as triumph personified. Not only is he immaculately groomed, he is wearing an expensive designer earring encrusted with jewels that he bought when he was on a world tour with his dance group. He looks into the camera and insists in a mock defensive tone that he purchased this earring with his own hard earned money and has the receipt for it as proof. Willi has transcended the need to steal or, in ball argot, to mop his luxury wear and accessories. The mother and founder of the House of Ninja has finally arrived. Shots from one of Willi’s vogue music videos are interlaced with his discussing his latest career successes: he reports that “everybody wants a piece of me now.”

His rise has been as amazing as it is meteoric. He has gone from a struggling dance performer and Ballroom star to Madonna's colleague and friend in a very brief time period. Livingston positions Willi as the one true success story that acts as a counter-weight to Venus' brutal and horrific murder in a "seedy New York City hotel." Willi's success is the meritocratic future that Pepper and Dorian might have had if they possessed such talent and drive. Of course, Willi is a gay man and the other characters in this racial morality tale are drag queens or what today might be called transgender women. By structuring *Paris Is Burning* as a racial morality tale wherein a gay man or butch queen is chosen as a role model for personal economic and social progress, Jennie Livingston has recapitulated the history of the Ball community insofar as butch queens did, in fact, appropriate the institutions and cultures that were formed out of the social networks created by transgender women or drag queens.

Outside the narrative and visual space of *Paris Is Burning*, my own "ethnographic entanglements" allowed me to see the outcome of Willi Ninja's life literally in my presence at his funeral with one of my main informants, but also in my meeting him over the last decade and a half at clubs and weekly parties that he hosted in Black and Latino/a queer and transgender social circuits throughout New York City. Willi was gracious, self-effacing, and had an expansive sense of humor and playfulness. Although I promised myself that one day I would try to get him to sit down for a recorded interview, he was never my research informant. To my regret and to the detriment of future House Ball researchers, that interview never came to pass. Nonetheless, Willi knew and was very well regarded by those Ballroom community members who became my informants. In fact, he was one of the few Ballroom legends that I never heard negative gossip about at

all: a singular achievement in a community burdened by the tremendous weight of managing multiple forms of stigma. His connections in my entanglements did afford me a social connection with him that always remained at the level of jest, gossip, and bon vivant. Nonetheless, I came to know his persistent involvement in the House Ball community and his collaboration with community agencies that were working on HIV/AIDS prevention and intervention amongst the Ball families. Willi remained a Ballroom community stalwart until the end of his life. In fact, it was many of his house friends and family who helped to collect the necessary funds for giving him a dignified funeral at the time of his death from complications due to AIDS. Despite the narrative structure that Livingston constructs in *Paris Is Burning*, Willi's life, in the end, traversed a very similar path to the ones that Pepper LaBeija and Dorian Corey blazed before him.

My critique of Livingston's film does not change the fact that her documentary has stood the test of time and remains to this day formally and by way of content the gold standard for cinematic documentary investigations into the House Ball community. Nonetheless, Livingston's filmic desires structure a story that is about the desire for and, in Willi Ninja's case, the fleeting achievement of racial uplift and normalization in the face of insurmountable odds. In the final analysis, she reinstalls meritocratic and upward mobility ideologies that underwrite the suppression of histories of racial exploitation, violence, and terror that are at the heart of the American polity (Ramos-Zayas 2003). Of course, as an empirical matter, Willi did not achieve lasting economic stability or celebrity for that matter. When Willi died, he was living with his mother in the Queens neighborhood he grew up in and bereft of the resources for his final arrangements. It is this gap between what is proposed as the narrative payoff in *Paris Is Burning* and what

my own entanglements in the House Ball community as an ethnographer, trainer of frontline HIV/AIDS preventionist working with the Ball scene, and as a politically engaged intellectual have allowed me to know about the life outcomes of all the interview subjects that renders this a morality tale wrapped up in a race film.

### The “*Paris*” We Never Saw: Outtakes/Filmic Unconscious

As I have mentioned above, the 2005 DVD version of *Paris Is Burning* contains an outtakes section as one of a number of special features. The entire outtakes section has a viewing time of approximately 45 minutes. It is a vast, largely undiscovered archive of previously unseen images, captions, and interviews that I have no doubt will, in the long run, change the scholarly reception of this important documentary on New York City’s House Ball community. Unfortunately, a complete plumbing of this archive would take more than a dissertation chapter section could adequately manage. What I will do here is uncover two themes that are untouched upon in *Paris Is Burning*: the impact of AIDS on the community while Livingston was shooting her film and the dark side of ball family life. I imagine these outtakes as a filmic unconscious that reveals contradictions that were edited out of the film, but remain vital concerns for the survival of the Ballroom community then in the late 1980’s and now during the first decade of the twenty-first century. At the heart of this analysis are two disturbing questions: why were AIDS and the beleaguered and problematic solidarity that ball families experienced left on the proverbial cutting room floor? Or, more to the point, how were these silences productive of the “coherence in contradiction” that secures *Paris Is Burning*’s narrative construction?



There is a plethora of ways of imagining the unconscious: a repository of representations (Freud), a shared set of transhistorical archetypes (Jung), or a linguistic-discursive structure (Lacan) to name a few of the most prominent iterations of this notion. For the purposes of this section, I will configure the outtakes from *Paris Is Burning* as a filmic unconscious. Clearly, this filmic unconscious is a set of images and sounds that are excluded from the narrative structure of the film's commercial release. Nonetheless, I wish to assemble a topology for this filmic unconscious that is not about something that is underneath conscious awareness or submerged from one's line of vision and, therefore, invisible. Rather, I imagine the filmic unconscious contained in the outtakes from *Paris Is Burning* as occupying the same horizontal plane as the commercial version, but standing alongside it and at the periphery or askance to the "*Paris*" we have always seen. This articulation of the unconscious is similar to the experience one might have at a musical concert where one pushes aside other concert-goers to get a clear view of one's favorite diva or performer. One shares the same horizontal plane as the other fans, but they are pushed aside to the margins of one's perception. Despite that visual marginality, their presence is felt and presses up on one's efforts to stay focused on the main attraction.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the outtakes function as those "other scenes" or, more exactly, those

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<sup>1</sup> I owe this articulation of the unconscious to Ben. Sifuentes Járegui who led the Latin@s Freud-Lacan Reading Group at Rutgers University for two consecutive summers in 2006 and 2007. Ben's perspicacious reading and commentary on Freud's and Lacan's writings opened up new worlds of theoretical understanding and strategies for unpacking material cultures in light of the challenges posed by Latin@ Studies as an object of knowledge and a scholarly practice. My intellectual debt to him is great. My companions in this effort, Carlos U. Decena and Yolanda Martínez San Miguel, were indispensable to my own growth by making applications of Freud and Lacan to their own work and an inspiration to me to incorporate revised psychoanalytic framings into this project. I hope my modest and preliminary efforts here reflect well on their intellectual generosity and good will.

“other themes” or edits that secure the narrative logic proffered in the film’s commercial release version. If they had been incorporated into the commercial release, we would experience another “*Paris*” entirely.

In that other “Paris”, HIV/AIDS would be visible and audible. The outtakes from *Paris Is Burning* are of poorer technical quality than the scenes included in the commercial release version. Some outtakes are poorly lit. Others are out of focus. Still, others have no sound track to them and rely on subtitles to communicate what the Ball children featured in these shots are saying. I want to focus on these silent outtakes. They feature exclusively younger Ballroom femme queens who are hanging out either on the Christopher Street piers or in front of ball venues. These drag queens are talking to Livingston’s camera or, as in one outtake, posing vampishly with a condom and a condom wrapper. In the 1990 version of *Paris Is Burning*, the word AIDS is uttered only three times and by the same character, Venus Xtravaganza. She talks about a disgruntled customer calling her a “victim of AIDS” and of her “wanting to give him AIDS.” Venus also tells Livingston in one of her interviews that she has given up escorting because she does not want to “catch AIDS.” The outtakes are replete with images associated with AIDS as well as prevention messages and three of Livingston’s characters (i.e., Dorian Corey, Pepper LaBeija, and Octavia Saint Laurent) talk about AIDS directly.

I wish to attend to the captions that are underneath the images of the drag queens modeling with condoms. The captions read sequentially:

“Dick Busters ... Use them.”; “Lubricated ultrathin for sensitivity. You have to feel it.”; “They’re really good ... buy them ... soon.”; “AIDS is the most deadliest disease in this world.”; “The best thing that you can do ... is carry a condom with

you wherever you go.”; “And you will have a happy life.”; and “They’re ending up paying for AIDS (Livingston 1991).”

These messages are all words that were spoken to the camera by Ballroom femme queens that Livingston interviewed during various street scenes. Obviously, these young women understood how to prevent sexual transmission of HIV through the use of latex condoms and are, in a way, playing with these ideas for the audience. As a unit, these scenes read like a silent movie version of a Ballroom focused HIV prevention message.

In my conversations with Ballroom community members about *Paris Is Burning*, I found that the topic of AIDS inevitably comes up. Specifically, community members usually mention how most of the ball walkers interviewed died of or are living with HIV/AIDS (as is the case with Octavia Saint Laurent). Moreover, they also bring up that most of the people in the film just had no real knowledge of HIV prevention the way that community members now have access to it with ease. Clearly, these outtakes tell a very different story indeed. The silence of these young women replicates the virtual inaudibility and invisibility of AIDS in the commercial release of *Paris Is Burning*. Interestingly, none of the young drag queens featured in this particular set of outtakes is one of the film’s central subjects or even a face in the crowd in the 1990 version. They are inaudible and unnarrativized outside of the captions that frame them.

Two of the three central characters mentioned above make very instructive comments about their feelings about AIDS. Pepper LaBeija and Dorian Corey spend an enormous amount of time being interviewed or at a ball in Livingston’s film. Nonetheless, it is only in the outtakes that they talk about AIDS and its impact on their communities. Dorian Corey expressed how she thought that things were getting better for

“gay people” until “AIDS hit.” She feels that AIDS has been the occasion for a reversal of fortunes for the community. At her dressing room mirror, she tells the camera that she felt no real connection to AIDS when she heard about it at first since no one she knew had it. Later on, she explains, the list of people she knew who had HIV/AIDS or died of it became “frightfully” long. Of course, Dorian is playing community historian again in these sequences, but this time it is the history of AIDS amongst her fellow community members. In her outtake comments, Pepper LaBeija emphasizes how all kinds of people are dying of AIDS including “nuns and babies.” She explains that if it were just “the gays” getting AIDS, then “they would just let them die”, but the widening demographic profile of people living with AIDS is the real cause of concern. Nonetheless, she realizes that even if it were only “gays” dying of AIDS that there might be some public health action if “the rich gays started putting pressure” on the responsible people and institutions.

Finally, in these outtakes, an unidentified Ball child is heard off-screen relating an experience he had in Central Park with a group of what he calls “straight boys”: “They said to us “We are on a mission to ends AIDS. How do we do that? Kill all faggots.” This story unassociated with any of the action on the screen has a floating and menacing quality to it. It also places the problem of AIDS within broader concerns of homophobic and transphobic violence as well as the intentional or unintentional genocidal effect that the pandemic has had on the communities from which Ball families emerge. I have found myself on innumerable occasions listening to Ballroom community members of all age groups share their suspicion that AIDS was invented by the government in one of their failed experiments and that the cure is available, but that too much money is being made

off the medicines and treatment regimes for the cure to AIDS to made available to the public. Moreover, the communities most impacted by the AIDS crisis in the United States are of little concern to the elite political and financial interests that invented and manage the virus.

During these conversations, the name of the former National Basketball Association star, Magic Johnson, was often mentioned as the rare example of a Black person whose continued physical health and financial success was predicated on his ability “to buy the cure for AIDS.” The idea of a genocidal conspiracy against Black people or Puerto Ricans or people of color in general is not a new idea in American political and religious discourse (Briggs 2002, Jones 1993). The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and the wretched government response to that emergency has given these theories more than plausible credence in the minds of many people of color in this society. Nonetheless, at times, I was surprised when frontline preventionists associated with the House Ball community, some of whom I had trained in community public health research, promulgated these theories.

Obviously, if these outtake comments had been included in the film’s cinematic release version, the politics of AIDS would have been introduced as a central component in its narrative arc. I assume that Livingston’s silence on the issue was an attempt to present the New York City House Ball community free of the AIDS-related stigma so prevalent in the late 1980’s. Nonetheless, how would the contours of this race film have changed had the enormity of AIDS as a social problem in the House Ball community been front and center? What filmic desires would have been excluded at the moment of

including these succinct, but powerful outtake scenes? How would Willi Ninja's success be framed in the wake of these comments? Is it possible to tell a racial morality tale convincingly when the AIDS pandemic becomes visible as a political problematic and a life challenge for your interview subjects? Clearly, I am proposing a counterfactual scenario, but my questions are aimed at highlighting the centrality of Livingston's filmic desires in producing *Paris Is Burning* as a race film with AIDS and its impact on the New York City House Ball community under erasure from the beginning.

The other set of outtakes that are of interest to me here are a set of scattered moments featuring Venus Xtravaganza where she expresses feelings about the houses that are in no way alluded to in the commercial release version of *Paris Is Burning*. In one interview scene in her bedroom, she talks about how the houses are "not real" since her house brothers and sisters are never there when she really needs them. She says that the houses might be good to have fun with at a ball or for "showing off in the Village", but they provide no real support when push comes to shove. In another scene that is shot in very poor lighting, Venus stands in front of a table at a ball venue and states that the houses are "bullshit" and "scandal" all centered on a "bunch of stupid trophies." Again, there is no depiction of the lack of solidarity and conflicts that are part of family life in the Ballroom scene. My own ethnographic research on the New York City community confirms the tensions and contradictions that are part of family life and that can lead to the dissolution of house families. These exclusions of AIDS and the messiness of house families as themes in the 1990 version of *Paris Is Burning* function as a visual and thematic block that bolsters the meritocratic elements in what I have called a racial morality tale.

### The “*Paris*” the Children Saw

During the summer of 2007, I conducted a number of formal and informal group discussions with members of the New York City House Ball community. One of these informal group discussions was designed to get a sense of community members’ response to Jennie Livingston’s *Paris Is Burning*. I asked three informants to recruit one or two other community members to come to Manhattan’s East Village Queer Youth Services (EVQYS) Center to watch the film and have a discussion that would last up to two hours after the viewing. The incentive I offered the group participants was that dinner and soft drinks would be served while we watched the film. I had a contact at EVQYS who facilitated the free use of one of their community rooms and visual equipment for the evening. The room itself was comfortably furnished with big couches that gave it a living room ambience. The room’s décor had many queer friendly posters up that featured Black and Latino/a people almost exclusively. Of course, the room’s design reflected the agency’s desire to make the space welcoming for their target population which consisted of mostly Black and Latino/a working class LGBT youth between the ages of 14 to 21 years of age from the New York City metropolitan area.

The seven people who participated in the group discussion were Black and Latino/a queer and transgender identified Ballroom community members in their early twenties or on the cusp of turning 30 years old. All of them were members of house families and one of them was the mother of the New York City branch of the Philadelphia-based House of Prodigy. I specifically excluded anyone from the group that had been in the Ball scene longer than ten years since I wanted to get a sense how

younger community members would respond to *Paris Is Burning*. The group members consisted of three African-Americans and four Latinos/as. There was one woman, a transgender woman, a self-identified gender flexible man, and four men who variously identified as gay, bisexual, bi-curious, and “not labeled yet.” Since the group was assembled by three of my informants, there was a relaxed and joking atmosphere from the onset of our discussion and the more than three hours we spent together had a group “movie night” feel to it.

What follows below is a partial summary of the comments made that evening by various discussion group members. Despite my efforts at a fairly balanced level of individual input while facilitating the discussion, my original three informants and recruiters for the group were more apt to speak and contribute significant themes for the analysis below. This was not only attributable their comfort levels with me as the group’s facilitator, but also a result of their own training as people who do HIV prevention and organizing work in the Ballroom community. These three main interlocutors were Asia, Vivienne, and Patricia and the other group members they recruited were Blue, Marvin, Alex, and Caliente. The limited scope of this section prevents me from describing all these individuals as I have gotten to know them through my participation at Ballroom events and networks. I will make mention of relevant biographical data about them only if they illuminate the comments I have chosen to present here.

After the commercial release version of *Paris Is Burning* ended, there was a long silence that filled the room. Eventually, I ended it by inviting anyone to share their immediate feelings and thoughts about the film. Asia was the first to speak:



I think *Paris Is Burning* is very sad. I kept on thinking: where are these people now? They're all dead girl. What a damn shame.

A number of group members shook their heads as Asia spoke and I asked the group whether or not this was the first time viewing the film for any of them. All of them said that they had seen parts or the whole film before. Caliente who was the youngest member of the group at 20 years old said: "You know what I thought was good? Was the way that Junior LaBeija was the host of the ball and not just like a commentator like the way it is now." This comment provoked a discussion of how much power the contemporary Ballroom commentators have and how the handful of people who do this work have a "monopoly" on power at balls. Patricia who is a transgender woman also made a comparison between "femme queens" then and now:

Those girls ... Venus and them were so in need of facial feminization. They looked a little hard to me. You know? I think when it came to that I think the girls were a little backwards then. I'm not trying to be shady by saying that. I mean I see things that they had that maybe we should have in the scene today, but they needed things that we have now.

Some members of the group laughed while Patricia made her comments. Despite her disclaimer, her comments did have a shady tone to them that the group members picked up on immediately. Throughout the discussion, group members would engage in these types of comparisons as if they were searching for ways in which the Ballroom community has moved forward since the late 1980's and ways in which it lacked what their Ball ancestors had in the Ballroom world presented in *Paris Is Burning*.

In a corrective tone, Vivienne responded to Patricia's comments by saying:

These people had some history behind them. I'm sorry to say this, but I don't see this awareness with today's children. And I really got into how they knew their own culture. Not for nothing, but those queens had acquired a lot of knowledge and experience. Look at Ms. Dorian, she's speaking from life experience. She's

like someone who knows her shit and is wise. Who we got like that now? Huh? Please. I'd like to see someone bring it with the knowledge that Ms. Dorian shows in that movie.

After Vivienne's comments, I asked the group what role does *Paris Is Burning* play in contemporary Ballroom cultures. Blue responded to my query:

I mean I guess it is a good tool to let outsiders know what the history is and was. It's a big reference point. These are our forefathers and mothers. These are the people that started the scene.

These comments by Blue who is known in the New York City community for his creativity and lack of conformity precipitated a wider discussion about the origins of the Ballroom in the Harlem Renaissance "back in the day" and how that history is in danger of being forgotten.

This discussion led the group to consider the role of AIDS in "killing off that history" as Alex phrased it. He expanded on this idea by saying,

The impact of HIV was devastating to these people. Hardly any of them are alive. Look at Willi [Willi Ninja]. I always used to tell people at least Willi and Octavia are still here. Then Willi got sick. I went to see him in the hospital. Same shit as always. Denial, denial, denial. People telling me he was going to get better. What the fuck! He was blind when I visited him. That's all bullshit. Then he died and *then* everybody was at the funeral. When are people going to wake the fuck up?

The tone of Alex's voice and the obvious frustration left the group silent for what seemed a long time. What was the silence about? Was it the silence of losing a well loved member of the community? Or was it the silence that engulfs a community when so many are seropositive and so few are out about it? Or, perhaps, both of these dynamics were at play.

I could sense the discomfort in the continuation of this silence and, good house mother that she is, Asia broke it again by adding:

You have to remember that these people in the movie had dreams. But, my thing is: what were they doing to achieve them? Kim [Kim Pendavis] was the only one that I saw doing his thing. Making his costume with the sewing machine. But, I didn't see nobody worrying about getting their GED or degree or something. To me, they all look like they're struggling. They look beat to me.

At the moment of their utterance, I found Asia's comments to be an evasion of what Alex has just laid out for the group to think about, but evasions have their own productivity as well. Asia's intervention prodded Patricia to expand on her point:

These people were living back in the 80's. There was no recession. That was during Reaganomics. Girl, you should have had coins back then. Started your own business or something.

Marvin chimed in:

And people were creative back then. This [*Paris Is Burning*] made me feel like the children now ... we're superficial. They made their own costumes. That's creativity right there. Name a ball child that can make something like Ms. Pepper was wearing at the beginning. Pepper ate it, but old school way.

This comment initiated a round of laughter and commentary on the beauty of some of the costumes used during the balls featured in *Paris Is Burning*.

After the laughter subsided, Blue made another point:

You have to remember that those bitches back then were survivors. The girls now don't know what those people went through just to survive. Look at what happened to Venus. You'll forgive me if anyone gets offended, but there were no jobs back then because you were a ball child honey. Now, all these fucking agencies want to hire people who got connections to the scene. Please, girl, they didn't see us back then, but now they're up our asses? No shade, but they see us now because they can use us to get coins from the government or whatever.

Asia and Patricia laughed out loud while Blue was making his comments since they knew they were partially aimed at them as women who work in agencies that do outreach to the House Ball community. Asia, of course, responded to Blue's provocation,

Blue, that was shady [a fit of group laughter interrupts Asia for a few seconds], but, at the same time, I agree with you girl because back then they didn't need agencies. I feel that back in the day the houses were real families. Now, what mother is going to take a kid in if they lost their apartment? We don't help each other like that anymore.

Vivienne interrupted Asia by saying:

But, Asia, you've had help. I know your house mother has bought things for you for a ball." Asia responded to Vivienne's statement: "For a ball, girl. That's still about them and the house. Do you know what I mean?"

The conversation continued exploring what a number of group members expressed as a lack of "family feeling" that the contemporary houses exhibit.

At the end of our discussion, I asked the group about the images of wealthy White people in a number of sequences in *Paris Is Burning*. Marvin said that White people "have it all." Patricia responded in a different way:

They treat White people like they're aliens. Like they from another planet. It's not all that now. It's just about the money thing. I just think they equate success with being White.

Asia had the last word before the discussion closed:

Well, look at what happened to them. They disclosed all this personal information for the movie. But, did they get paid? She [Jennie Livingston] got paid lovely. That's pathetic what happened to Ms. Pepper and them.

This informal group conversation clearly ran the gamut from praising the film's subjects for creativity, resilience, insight, wisdom, and practicing a higher ethic of solidarity to condemning them for a lack of initiative, self-sufficiency, and technical backwardness.

My own ethnographic entanglements of many years in the New York City House Ball community lead me to conclude that *Paris Is Burning* is a repository for community members' desires and anxieties about their own histories and the eventual outcomes of their lives. The vexing thing, of course, is that none of the Ball walkers really did transcend the racial barriers described in the film and those biographies are now public knowledge. Alex did, in fact, see Willi Ninja on his deathbed and went to his funeral. Alex must live with Willi's life and death as part of his own history. Also, over the last decade, my screening of *Paris Is Burning* as a university instructor inevitably produced student discussions on how sad they felt for the people featured in it. Initially, I did not understand my students' responses until I realized that their own position as upwardly mobile students of color in the Latino Studies courses I taught precluded identification with someone like Pepper LaBeija or Venus Xtravaganza. In short, their own hope of racial transubstantiation through class mobility insulated or, perhaps more accurately, blocked them from contemplating futures that paralleled the lives of the film's subjects. Thus, they felt sadness in the form of sympathy, but never identification.

In contradistinction, this type of distancing is both necessary and, in many ways, impossible for House Ball community members. How can they claim these people as their "forefathers and mothers" while, at the same time, maintaining their own sense of a progressive personal future? As I watched the group discussion members go back and forth on the film, I became more and more convinced that *Paris Is Burning* was a race film that demanded an act of identification from them that would hail them as tragic and dead. In a sense, that long ago Latino gay teen came back to my consciousness: "So, this is New York City and this is what the gay life is about. Right?" (Livingston 1991). I can

still hear the tremulous uncertainty in that teen's voice and feel my own desire to retort some response that would make sense. Moreover, I felt that the confused and contradictory reactions to the film by the group participants rephrased that teen's statement into: "So, this is what the Ball scene is about. Right?" If they answered in the affirmative, what possible horizon of social transcendence would be available to them in "White America"? Clearly, Ballroom members, like my Latino Studies students, are schooled in the upward mobility and meritocratic ideologies that anchor a US social structure that insists upon an ephemeral ideological equivalence for all citizens while reproducing much more obvious and expansive forms of material stratification every day. *Paris Is Burning* is a mirror of this same ideological formation, but dressed up in the history and cultures of the Ballroom. Moreover, it presents an echo chamber of desire for fame and fortune that still animates competitions and the categories that organize them. As I proposed at the beginning of this chapter, the social limit that was discussed, but never really confronted in the group discussion was Whiteness. How does anyone discuss a limit to subjectivity in the first instance? Therefore, the group participants talked about their limits and their implicit futures via morally instructive contrasts with their Ball ancestors' limits and strengths. Perhaps, for these Ball children to do otherwise, it would literally mean to view a *Paris Is Burning* that has yet to come into being.

### Coda

I am at a restaurant in the West Village having lunch with Hector Xtravaganza. I have gotten to know Hector through Arbert, one of my main informants, who suggested that I talk to him about Ballroom history. Hector is Willi Ninja's father and claims that he was the one who got Willi to go to the clubs and vogue. I make a mental note to ask Willi about this when I do that interview with him that I never seem to get around to doing. Hector is a creature of habit and this is the second time we have lunch at this spot. "Why switch when you got a good thing going?" he tells me. I insist that next time we do sushi or something a little more exotic than high end West Village diner food. He demurs, but I know our next meeting will be here.

As I sip my Bloody Mary and write in my notebook, he tells me about growing up with his Black grandmother in the South and later coming to live with his Puerto Rican mother in Jersey City. I try to get him to draw a timeline for me, but he insists that his memory is shot and dates are impossible for him to recall: "Honey, when I got sick the first time, I got dementia and that just killed my memory." Hector has been HIV positive for close to two decades and actually came out to the community as HIV positive during a House of Latex Ball a number of years ago. Although he is glad to be out about his status, he tells me that he probably should have waited a few more years before he became so public about it. He simply was not ready for the negative reactions to his coming out so publicly. "I thought I would help with the stigma by coming out. You know, so many of the girls are positive and keeping it a secret. Well, it wasn't as simple as I thought. What's done is done. I've learned to live with it."

We start talking about the Xtravaganzas and he regales me with stories about the mother of the house, Angi, and his sister Venus. “We were street kids, baby. We literally slept out on the piers and stole to get something to eat. My mother up and left without telling me and I was out on the street in a matter of weeks.” The conversation turns to *Paris Is Burning* and he begins to tell me about the two teenage boys that are featured at various points in the film. “You know the butch one. Not the little queeny boy, but the butch one. That kid was straight and when the film came out his mother threw him out of his house. That kid was just hanging out and they filmed him with the little gay boy who was his friend. Poor kid, to be thrown out for nothing.” “What happened to the other kid, the little gay boy”, I ask Hector. “You know, I haven’t the slightest idea. I don’t even know who the child was. It’s like he disappeared after *Paris Is Burning*. Who knows what happened to him?”...

... That young teen’s face, voice, and query at the end of the film has haunted me since I began doing my research on the New York City House Ball community. When I am bored at balls, at times, I try to project his face into the future and look around the room to see if anyone fits his description --- always to no avail. Perhaps, he is long dead or moved to another state or country. I like to think of him as a teen ancestral guardian spirit who keeps on asking me the same question: “So, this is New York City and this is what the gay life is about. Right?” This chapter is an effort to answer his last question and through the work of ethnographic critique and analysis to make space for the “*Paris*” of the future that has gone beyond the framing limits of Whiteness itself.



## **Chapter Five: Conclusion/Coda**

This ethnography explores and documents subjectivities that have emerged in the historical intersection between what was a completely autonomous institution built by working class Black and Latino/a queer and transgender men and women and an array of people and programs that have developed in New York City to confront the HIV/AIDS crisis. This network of community-based organizations respond to funding sources and bureaucratic protocols of behavior and thinking that are as far away from the cultural expressiveness and institutional autonomy of the pre-AIDS House Ball community than one can imagine. Nonetheless, these two communities have become entangled with one another and it is this entanglement, on many levels, that defined the personal and professional lives of my informants. In fact, this entanglement has been the enabling condition for their efforts at happiness and meaningful work.

Clearly, they are people who live “betwixt and between” in what at first glance one might construe to be utterly unrelated and incommensurable social worlds (Turner 1970). Yet, my informants produce lives that negotiate both of these worlds while trying to stay true to the work of care that they understand HIV prevention to be for the House Ball community. They may be “betwixt and between”, but they are not in any sense liminal to the queer kinship work and performance cultures that are the motor forces of life in the Ballroom scene. Quite to the contrary, they are leaders, key cultural producers, and working class intellectuals that are respected and whose advice and access to resources are valued in the community. Paradoxically, the persistence of high rates of

HIV infection and transmission amongst the House Ball community is one of the foundations of their ability to be “go to” people for the house family members.

I have already talked about the way this is an ethnography of the productivity of failure both subjectively and institutionally. The race and class exclusions of the Post Stonewall gay and lesbian movement forestalled the development of a network of strong institutions controlled by Black and Latino/a queer and transgender people. Historically, the House Ball families and circuits are a product of those exclusions even before the advent of the contemporary gay and lesbian liberations movement. Many times in the field I was disturbed by the awareness that nothing as grand and complicated as the House of Latex Ball would be possible without the massive suffering that HIV/AIDS has inflicted on the ball families. It took a pandemic for resources to be made available for people like Vivienne and Arbert to play the roles they do in their organizations and in the Ballroom scene. When I finally retreated long enough to write up my data, I was tempted often to provide a univocal rendering of what I have called earlier in this dissertation the HIV/AIDS industry and its attending ideologies --- to engage in critique, but only from the vantage point of the negative dialectic. My own training in Frankfurt School Critical Theory as an undergraduate philosophy student positioned me intellectually well for such an undertaking.

My ethnographic data and my personal relationships with people who saw me as an ally, comrade, friend, and, at times, teacher subverted the temptations toward a facile deployment of the negative dialectic. For all the nonsense and subordination at the institutional level, people like Arbert and Vivienne did, in fact, use these resources for

good ends and functioned as positive role models in the House Ball community, their families of origin, and the broader Black and Latino/a queer community. On more than one occasion, I saw them counsel community members who were on the edge of despair due to being recently diagnosed as HIV positive. At times, these conversations were conducted in the chaos and din of a ball and the steadiness of nerves and compassion that I witnessed made their work in those organizations absolutely necessary and vital for that moment and the many similar moments that no doubt have emerged since I left the field. Of course, those episodes were just a fraction of the emotional and communal labor that my informants took on. In the words of Arbert Latex Evisu, they did “big things” and accomplished “small wonders” and fashioned a pathway for resources and knowledge from their work to their community and into their own lives.

My informants cross boundaries because they make their living that way and their own biographies have conditioned them not only to be cultural polyglots, but to be institutional ones as well. The various disciplines of anthropology, queer of color critique, Latino Studies, African-American Studies, and feminist studies that inform this project are just beginning to become as porous as my informants’ lives. I have tried to write in an ethnographic register that respects and reproduces that flexibility and porosity. My informants simply do not conform to the disciplinary boundaries that careful scholars must work in and negotiate to engage in serious academic dialogue. The emerging field of queer of color critique has deep resonances with what I describe and analyze here, but none of my informants would recognize their own lives or those of their families and communities in much of the theoretical concerns that frame such a discourse. I comfort

myself with the fact that ethnographic writing is still catching up to the layered complexity of our subjects.

There are a number of policy implications that emerge from this dissertation project. The first is that community-based organizations working with the House Ball community should continue to recruit community members to become frontline preventionist and to develop employee benefits package that include tuition remission. The logic of reciprocity at the core of Ballroom kinship practices will make a transfer of skills and social resources more likely and the presence of credentialed community members can have direct benefits for all involved in the scene. Community-based organizations and their funding sources need to encourage Ball families to see their indigenous structures and histories of autonomy as resources that can be deployed to create cooperative economic projects that address unemployment and poverty especially for transgender women in the community who are discriminated against in a transphobic labor market (Hwahng and Nuttbrock 2007). Future quantitative and qualitative research on the House Ball community should be designed to include training components for community members who want to develop their own research and training capacities. All community-based organizations targeting this population should frame HIV/AIDS interventions as capacity-building exercises that build the human and social capital of Ballroom families.

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