

## The Social World of Voguing

Jonathan David Jackson

Vogue,<sup>1</sup> Performance,<sup>2</sup> or its most common name, Voguing,<sup>3</sup> is one of the ritual traditions of a twenty-five year old, working class, African American and Latino/a community of diverse genders and sexualities. Community members have several names for their culture, including the Ball World, the Ballroom Community, and, their most popular term, the Ballroom Scene. Although community members note that it contains elements of martial arts, most members with whom I spoke considered Voguing to be "dancing" like the movement presentations of the popular American stage. Presently, there are three forms of Voguing: Old Way, New Way, and Vogue Femme. My goal in this paper is to speak selectively to the ways in which Voguing's early development, ritualized spatial orientation and ideal performance embodies the Ballroom Scene's transformation of outside influences, and its ethic for kinship.

The Ballroom Scene is the same culture profiled in Jennie Livingston's documentary film *Paris Is Burning*. Despite its name, this community should not be confused with cultures involving ballroom dances like the foxtrot. The Ballroom Scene arose in the middle-to-late 1970s out of mid-twentieth century forms of New York City-based African American Drag Balls (or gender impersonation competitions). This community is a confederation of approximately seventy-five kinship groups that members call Houses.

Over the course of this cultural development, these Houses have contained approximately 8000<sup>4</sup> members in over fifteen cities, predominately along the Northeastern coast of North America. Major cities with Houses are New York, Newark, Jersey City, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C. There are a small number of Houses in midwestern and southern states, primarily Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, North Carolina and Georgia. Many Houses maintain chapters in more than one city. Because midwestern and southern Houses are geographically removed from what is widely considered by members to be the center of the culture in New York City, the styles of midwestern and southern rituals differ.<sup>5</sup>

Social relations in Houses are non-biologically-tied and cross-generational. Whether they are conceived of as peer groups or families, Houses are built on processes of care and critique between members who have gained status within the culture. They are therefore designated as surrogate mothers, fathers, and even grandparents, to other, usually younger members who are surrogate siblings (brothers and sisters) or, as members say, "Children". Rather than infantilized persons with lesser intelligence or skill, the term Children in the Ballroom Scene refers to those with the least experience in the culture. The oldest leading members are called Icons. Current leading members are called Legends. Those pursuing rank are called Up-In-Coming-Children, Stars or, rarer still, Children-Making-Statements.

Although the first Houses founded in the late 1970s were formed because

founding members were close friends and shared similar characteristics (for example, the first members of the House of Christian all attended Catholic schools in greater New York City), since the beginning of the 1980s new members of Houses are recruited literally anywhere that standing members travel. Most new members join Houses as adolescents as young as fifteen, or as young adults between eighteen and twenty-five.

The major criterion for recruitment into a House is the potential to excel in the competitions at a generally half-day long central ritual that some community members used to call a Vogue Ball. Members used the term Vogue Ball to distinguish the ritual from the Drag Balls that took place in New York city prior to the 1970s. Today, members continue to call their main ritual a "Ball," but the terms Drag Ball and Vogue Ball have both fallen out of regular use.

All ritual and dancing in the Ballroom Scene embodies members' understanding of their whole notion of gender and sexuality. Rather than the binary of man and woman, this community conceives of three *sexes*<sup>6</sup> and four *genders*.<sup>7</sup> The community's three sexes are: 1. Woman (one born with female sex characteristics); 2. Man (one born with male sex characteristics); and 3. Intersex (one born with both male and female, or indeterminate sex characteristics).

Although in the Ballroom Scene members are acutely aware that they cannot alter the fact that one is both born and assigned by physicians with certain sex characteristics, members do actively believe in transforming gender by altering one's sensations, ideology, appearance and conduct. Adornment, hormone injections, and surgery assist with these transformations.

The four genders of the Ballroom Scene are as follows: Butch Queens (biologically born males whose every day appearance is masculinized but who nonetheless may act masculinized, hypermasculinized or effeminate<sup>8</sup>); Femme Queens (male-to-female Transgenders<sup>9</sup> in various states of hormonal or surgical processes towards becoming female); Butches<sup>10</sup> (female-to-male Transgenders in various states of hormonal or surgical processes towards becoming male); and Women (biologically born females with a range of masculinized and feminized conduct).

Members of the Ballroom Scene consider themselves to be either mostly male or mostly female and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and/or Transgendered.<sup>11</sup> However, the gendered and sexual meaning of these conceptions and terms is distinct in the community. As a *subculture*—or a people who consider themselves to be a part of larger American society at the same time that they constitute a group unto themselves—the Ballroom Scene is always reconciling their understanding of gender and sexuality with mainstream American heterosexist definitions as well as the definitions of larger Gay and Lesbian worlds or African American and Latino/a worlds.

The ritual of the Ball is the time and space when community members most embrace *their own* gendered and sexual meanings. In their four to ten page Ball invitations (or Ball Flyers), competitive categories are almost always

grouped according to the four genders of the culture. (Figs. 1 & 2.)  
 (Sometimes Butch Queen In Drag is an additional grouping).

*Special Invitation*

On November 22, 1997, I would like to put all differences aside and reunite my family for one special hell raising event. I am sending a special invitation to all my former children:

*Reno - Jamieson Ebony - Mary King Ebony - Warren Ebony - Kennis Ebony - James Being - Malak Ebony - Favour Ebony - Lil Mike Ebony - Eve Ebony - Neon Ebony - Marco (Morica) Ebony - Rodney Thomas - Glenn Karan - Patricia Karan - Abby Karan - Keith Karan - Donald Karan - Renee Karan - Rashard Karan - Joey Karan - Duane Karan - Will Penlon - Aquil Touche - Brittany Swinton - Shiana - Darnay Williams - Sharon Excellence - Troy Excellence - Joe Swisher - Lain Swisher - Amber Swisher - Shickon Swisher - Tracy Excellence - Foundation Jeff - Eugene Mican - Favour Mican - Antoinette (Heaven) Bigli - Sacred Light*

*And The Last Sons On & On*

**And To My Former Mothers:**  
*Ms. Bessie - Adrian Williams - Tyra Milano & Ebony*

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The House Of

**Prestige**

~ Presents ~



**"In The Heat Of The Night"**

**Part 5**

Figure 1. Front and back pages of the 1997 House of Prestige Ball Flyer.

# FEMME QUEENS

1. **Realness** - Can you walk through the roughest neighborhood in your city and not be spooked for being a man? If so, bring it.
2. **Sexy Body** - In Victoria Secrets or Fredericks of Hollywood (Models Vs. Luscious).
3. **Face Extraordinaire** - Double Jeopardy, painted wicked beauty in a white wig and a white dress Vs. unpainted bone snatch beauty in all black with an ovah production. \$\$
4. **European Runway Destruction** - The ultimate catwalk diva punishing the runway, coming from a foreign country.
5. **Hi Fashion Fall Sportswear Spectacular** - The ultimate Hi Fashion statement 1997.
6. **Battle of the Night Stalkers** - Show us what the girls wear to get the job done.
7. **Sex Siren (History 101)** - Pick a sex siren from the past, may it be Marilyn Monroe, Dorothy Dandridge, etc. Reincarnate them through you. Remember, it's sex so sell it! \$\$
8. **Performance Showdown** - The Catfight of the Century. Philly, New Jersey & DC are declaring war! New York must launch the attack! \$\$
9. **Battle of the Grand Divas** - Winter is just around the corner and you spent the day shopping for the hottest pieces. Hit the runway in the High Fashion Fall Sportswear you wore shopping, and when you get to our judges table, give us a peek at your first Winter ensemble. (Bags, Tags and Accessories a must) \$\$
10. **Ms. Prestige '97** - Face, Body & Realness. The woman of the year, the epitome of style, elegance, sophisticated glamour at it's best.
11. **Hi Fashion Trio** - 1 Pair of rock socking pumps, 1 fire pair of glasses & 1 ovah slamm'n' bag.

# WOMEN

1. **The Scandalous Madame X** - Beautiful but sinister. Face, Body & Attitude wrapped in a wicked all black ensemble.
2. **Performance** - In exercise gear, voguing has become a workout, so come dressed to sweat!
3. **Face Extraordinaire** - We want to see that pure, untouched, unspoiled natural beauty that's hard to come by. Everlasting Carta (painted or unpainted).
4. **European Runway** - A sickening walk, an unbothered attitude, cause you are the only bitch, coming from a foreign country.
5. **Bizarre** - You have been chosen by Vivienne Westwood to be the bride in the finale of her Fall Show. Bring us the most sickening one of a kind ensemble for the most special day in a girls life. \$\$

# BITCHES

1. **Realness** - Drug Dealer and his Bitch, the Italian Mob Vs. the Columbia Cartel.
2. **Best Dressed Bitch** - In Hi Fashion Fall Sportswear
3. **Hi Fashion Trio** - 1 Pair of fab shoes, 1 sickening hat & 1 ovah pair of glasses.
4. **Face Extraordinaire** - Prettyboy Vs. Mascujint

Figure 2. Fifth page of the 1997 Prestige Ball flyer. Note that categories are grouped by gender.

Furthermore, be they Butch Queen, Femme Queen, Butch or Woman, competitors generally only compete against members of their own gender. Even before the Ball takes place, competitors must locate their gender according to the community's ideals.

If a community member is successful in competitions at Balls, the member gains prestige. Respected members are socialized into a system of kinship whereby their counsel has the potential to guide neophytes. This counsel is particularly important for members who are working on building positive senses of self in light of many different types of bias. Good counsel and aid with any number of matters including housing, funds, and assistance with gender transformation also helps members negotiate daily struggles of economic disenfranchisement and such interpersonal challenges as managing romance. Thus, the whole system of status attainment serves the needs of empathetic kinship.

However, quests for status also produce relational aggression and the constant stoking of rivalry. Most competitors do not win trophies or cash prizes on the Ball Circuit (or the series of Balls held in different locations by different Houses or individual House leaders within a given year). Nevertheless, their attempts are closely watched by their peers. Even if they do not win, talented competitors who work hard still advance in status and are remembered favorably for their performing. A far lesser number of unsuccessful competitors are deemed unworthy of any kind of recognition. Some of these competitors seek membership in a different House so that they may study with new mentors. Their goal is to learn the ritual traditions from a fresh perspective. They then attempt to reinvent themselves on the Ball Circuit. The most consistently unsuccessful competitors often drop out or are phased out of Houses (usually by being ignored by their House peers). Entangled notions of affirmation and antagonism are the lenses through which this 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.

### **Voguing and the Power to Act**

While some past critics of the Ballroom Scene conducted interviews<sup>12</sup> with community members, no scholar to date has analyzed the culture's experience of kinship with indigenous<sup>13</sup> meanings in mind. However, past critics *did* have much to say about the Ballroom Scene's experience of the larger American culture within which it exists. Their main argument was that the community did not *resist* mainstream influences enough.

Bell Hooks rebuked members of the community for what she assumed to be their "obsession with an idealized fetishized vision of femininity that is White" (1992: 148). Judith Butler claimed that the Ballroom Scene's rituals were ultimately a "fatally unsubversive appropriation" (1993: 231). After seeing *Paris Is Burning*, Patrick Pacheco claimed that community members were self-hating, and "tragic and pathetic" (1991: 19).

These views are encouraged by Jennie Livingstone's *Paris Is Burning*, the only source on which most past interpretations are based. (Space does not permit me to comment further on this film.) Past moralistic views were fueled by an insistence on *looking* for resistance or subversion without understanding indigenous meanings. Without speaking to community members, observing their rituals, or participating in their lives, past critics could not speak with qualified evidence of what the Ballroom Scene *is*, much less of how community members experience other cultures.

Furthermore, past critics overdetermined the effect of community members' marginalization (as poor sexual minorities of color) on their capacity to create their own ways of life. This overdetermination is based on an understanding of the concept of *agency* from British Marxism on which so many post-1980s intellectual movements within Cultural Studies are based.<sup>14</sup> In the Marxist view of personhood, a person's agency is a product of her or his social situation either as an oppressor or oppressed in an increasingly globalized capitalist order.

Philip Brian Harper (1999) argues that when they lost their legal suits against Jennie Livingston and Miramax Films after the national premiere of *Paris Is Burning*, several community members did not gain access through litigation to the mainstream socioeconomic structures that Jennie Livingston and many who watched the film enjoyed. Yet, members *could and did sue* 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' transformation of mainstream notions of beauty<sup>15</sup> and their adoration of ritualized social conflict as a means toward character building.

### Early Development

Voguing is the only ritual tradition in the community that emphasizes *whole-body* improvisatory action. There are six main ritual traditions in the culture. In addition to Voguing, these traditions are Runway, Labels, Body, Face and Realness. At a Ball, the total number of variations of these six traditions often exceeds fifty-five categories. All of the traditions are adaptations of Runway. A brief explanation of Runway, Body and Face contextualizes my arguments about Voguing's early development in the community.

Runway involves forward and backward processional action with minimal articulation of the upper body and simple patterns of pivot turns. Despite its name, the term Runway does not refer to running. It refers both to the required walking in *andante* tempo and to the processional spatial area in which all competitive action at a Ball takes place. Judges for Runway look for a "devastating walk" (as the saying goes) that finds creative expression in minimalism. Minimal action means small both in size and "unbothered" or "cool"<sup>16</sup> in the expenditure of energy.

The expression "unbothered" is particularly important, because judges also expect Runway competitors to appear oblivious to everything around them. This haughty veneer is sometimes described as a "not to be fucked with"

attitude. In Runway, the posture of the body is largely vertical except the spine appears to be slightly swayed because the preferred stance is to push the hips slightly forward when processing and to hang the upper spine back and high in the space around the body while the head remains in place. In contrast to hired models at mainstream fashion industry events, Ballroom Scene competitors have more room to improvise within the limited number of steps and pivot turns called for in this ritual tradition.

Body is a form of Runway with more reduced locomotive patterns. The emphasis here is on the presentation of a body shape that exemplifies a preconceived ideal within the community such as a "luscious" or voluptuous body, a thin "model's" body, a muscular body, or even a stout, "big" body. In one-to-one competitions, performers must "sell that body." This means they must shake, flex, or draw heightened attention to particular body parts. Partial or full nudity often occurs in Body categories.

Face is a variation of Body. Competitors walk very simply toward judges and present their faces for inspection. Judges look for an "unpainted" face (meaning one with no make-up) that is generally free of blemishes and "bone-snatched" (meaning graced with a balanced skeletal structure and equidistance between the eyes, nose, lips and mouth). Aquiline noses, thinner lips and other common white European and Euro-American features are not standards of facial beauty here, yet symmetry is a must. It is generally acknowledged that beyond these standards successful performance in Face categories rests with the whim of individual judges on a given panel. As in Body, performers may be called to "sell that face." They then draw attention to parts of the face by licking their teeth, batting their eye lashes, framing sections of their face with their hands, or holding their faces at very close range and opening their mouths so that judges may inspect for blemishes, traces of make-up or crooked teeth.

Rather than the "gorgeous gowns and showgirl things" (as Dorian of the House of Corey says in Smith 1991: A6) of Hollywood movies and Las Vegas-style cabarets and burlesques, the Ballroom Scene of the 1970s turned to the bodily actions and clothing styles of the fashion industry for creative inspiration. Building on the work of figures like Twiggy, the middle-to-late 1970s saw a steady rise in the prestige of modeling as a profession within American mass media. By the early '80s, the mass media was full of highly paid and liberally photographed "supermodels."

Frankie (a pseudonym) and Willi Ninja indicate that Voguing expands upon minor elements of the performance of Drag Queens such as Avis Pendavis, Crystal Labeija, Dorian Corey (all who later became Femme Queens), and Parris Dupree. (These community members were some of the people who built the traditions on which the present culture is based.) Although the emphasis<sup>17</sup> in Drag was on the presentation of exaggerated adornment and a sense of feminine character (be it one's own or a film or stage celebrity), attention to *form* in bodily action was nonetheless important to '60s Drag in the Ballroom Scene. Community members recall that there were commonly agreed upon systems for the manipulation of elaborate back-pieces, head-pieces, feathers, fans, boas, and other equipment. Willi Ninja spoke of what

the 1960s Drag Queens did with their hands and with fans as being important influences on the particular pointing, framing, and directing of action around the head and bodies of Voguers as they perform. However, despite the emphasis on bodily form in Drag and other traditions, Voguing exemplifies a new ethic of whole-body action in the culture's rituals.

The rise of the six ritual traditions coincided with the development of the first Houses in the late 1970s.<sup>18</sup> Most of the oldest community members, for example Parris Dupree, Kevin Ultra Omni and Marcel Christian, note that the community members who developed Voguing were predominately Butch Queens who specialized in variations of Runway and Face. Although there were early Femme Queens who Vogued (such as Duchess La Wong and Sandy Dior) early Voguing—or Old Way—is still considered to be a largely masculinized ritual tradition (though not hypermasculinized like Breakdance).

Kevin Omni points to what he identifies as the “male category” of “Butch Queen Mod Face” as one of the variations of Face out of which Voguing developed. By contrast, in her interview with Dorian Corey, Patricia Smith notes that Voguing developed from a form of Runway: “A category called ‘pop, dip and spin’ was developed, encompassing staccato, mannequinlike posing (‘Pose. Bam. Pose. Bam,’ says Corey). The Femme Queens found that a bit difficult in their fancy duds, so the category became ‘Poses from Vogue’” (1991: A5).

Community members point to the images of mainstream beauty in fashion magazines as the most important sources for adaptation. It is to these images that Voguing continues to refer obliquely. Willi Ninja notes that naming the dancing after *Vogue* magazine points to the Ballroom Scene's commitment to studying carefully outside influences before they transform them. Important also to the naming of the dancing was *Vogue* magazine's *stature* in the fashion industry. In *Paris Is Burning*, Willi notes that “[the name Vogue] is a statement in itself. I mean, you wouldn't go to a Ball to do the ‘Mademoiselle.’”

By the time Parris Dupree held his first annual “Paris Is Burning” Ball in 1980, what is now called Old Way Voguing was a regularly programmed category. As Dorian said, “if you didn't have [V]oguing at your Ball, honey, you weren't having a Ball” (qtd. in Smith 1991). In addition to Parris himself, some of the seminal Voguers of the late 1970s and early 1980s were Andre Christian, Rodney Ebony, Hector Xtravaganza and Stevie St. Laurent. Jerome “Arms” Omni is often credited with developing the complex upper body articulations that so called “double-jointed” Voguers with overstretched ligaments continue to perform today.

All of the ritual traditions in the community deconstruct mainstream conceptions of bodily appearance and action. How one moves and how one is adorned in rituals are the two most basic indexes for the expression of identity in the Ballroom Scene. Regardless of what they wear while competing, however, performers in the Ballroom Scene overwhelmingly value the importance of sensing and knowing their relationships with others *through movement*, whether it is the minimalist action of Runway or the fully embodied motion of Voguing.



In its most developed form—the form that began to be performed in rituals at Balls in 1980—Voguing explicitly under-emphasizes exaggerated adornment as well as the static posing of mainstream fashion models, foregrounding complex ritualized actions. What one wears in individual Voguing categories is still important today however. Before a Ball, members must peruse invitations to see what attire or (rarer still) equipment may be required for each and every category. However, improvisatory choreographic innovation and adherence to standards for action are the *main* grounds for judges's evaluation of Voguers, not attire.

By the 1980s, the transformation of mainstream notions of beauty became an *embedded* notion in the dancing. Even today, when a Voguer competes at a Ball, she or he is most *immediately* committed to representing his or her House adequately well and advancing in status through successful performance.

I would like to turn now to a brief examination of the spatial orientation of Voguers at a Ball, and to the community's ideals for successful performance. These provide an additional means to explain how the whole system of movement in Voguing and the system's performance at Balls embodies community members' experience of themselves as powerful agents in the creation of kinship.

### Ritual Space

The spatial orientation of a Voguer throughout her or his performance is primarily toward and away from judges. These judges traditionally number no less than six or more than twelve and they represent "front." Front face performances means facing the judges where they sit at the far end of a processional line of action. The spatial arrangement between the Voguers and the sitting judges resembles a "T." The vertical bar of the "T" represents the Voguers' performance space—or runway—and the horizontal bar of the "T" is the space where the judges sit (see Fig. 3).

Cardinal geographical directions of North, South, East and West do not have meaning at a Ball. Voguers orient themselves according to where the judges have been placed. Where the judges sit is usually in a location far removed from the entrance to the Ballroom where tickets are sold (or the rented gymnasium, lodge or wherever community leaders acquire space to hold the ritual). Such a removal isolates judges and draws attention to their special status. Judges' chairs face toward performers (or toward the back of the runway and, therefore, the back of the Ballroom). The judges' panel (a line of chairs) is sometimes raised on a platform so that they gaze slightly down on the action. After the middle 1980s, a wooden runway is also sometimes rented or constructed. It is usually designed to be at a lower level to the judges panel and slightly raised off the floor so that competing performers are seen at least one foot above their peers who flank the sides and back of competitors around the runway.

As all the home video recordings that I have seen show,<sup>19</sup> in Old Way Voguing competitions during the 1980s, competitors are usually present and

huddled next to each other at the back of the runway facing the judges. Voguers also gesture<sup>20</sup> toward other competitors when they move toward and away from the judges. If a raised runway has not been rented or constructed for a Ball, the Voguers must literally negotiate the space to keep, as it were, "on track" and move processionally toward and away from the judges. Some Voguers even dance up and down stairs (if there are obstacles in the rented space) in order to navigate the demarcated processional line of action.

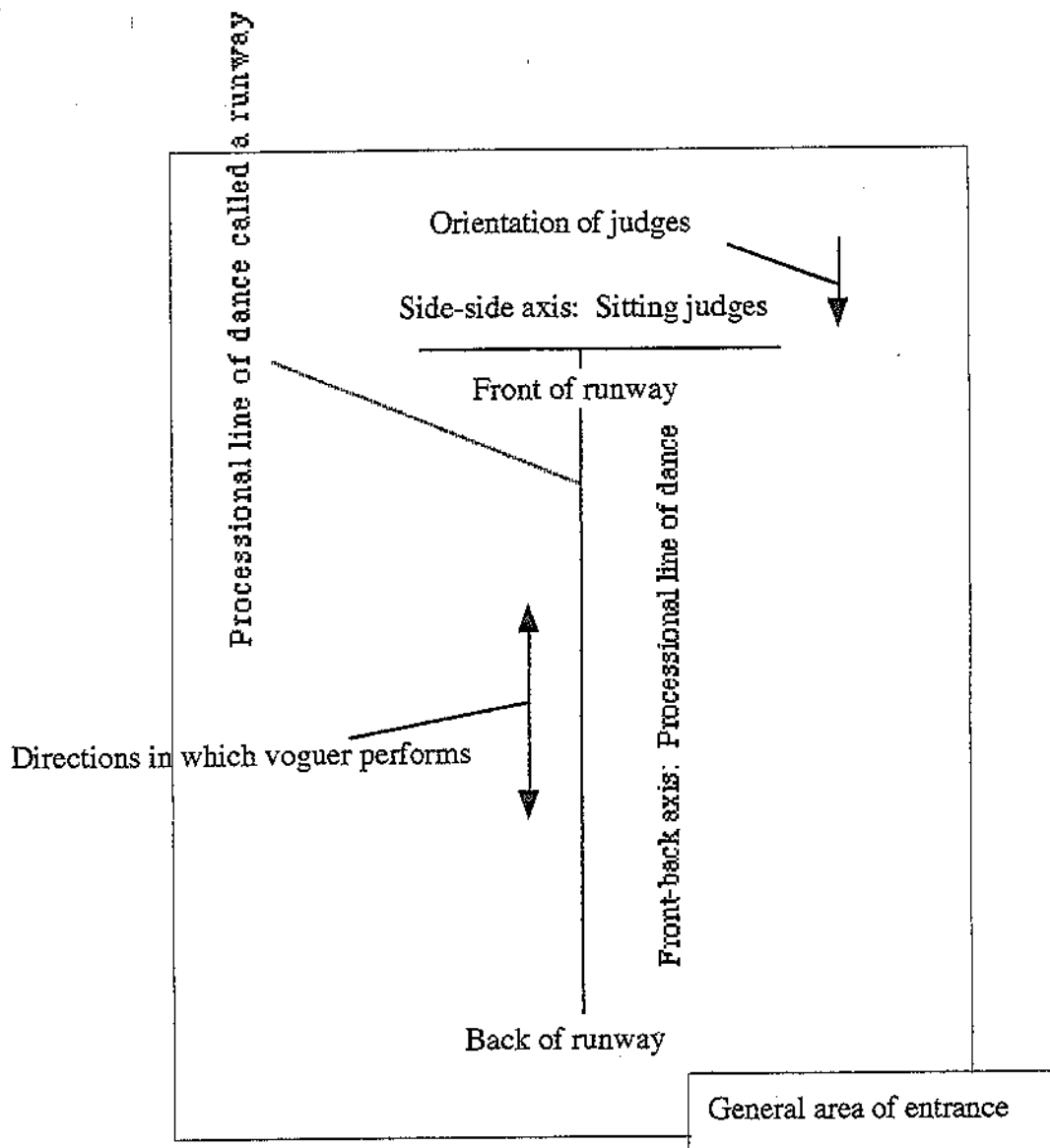


Figure 3: Ritual Space of a Ball

The vocalizations of their peers on all sides, the commentator (or master of ceremonies) and the sounds of the musical accompaniment of the disc jockey (DJ) all affect the Voguers' navigation of space. Responding to the rhythm and phrasing of the music also dictates the contours of individuals' gestures and spatial pathways. Thus, although a Voguer may be largely oriented spatially and conceptually toward the judges throughout her or his dancing, the per-

formance must take into account the physical presence of competitors (so as not to run into them), as well as the calls of community members around them, and the musical accompaniment.

### Ideal Performance

The *specific* criteria for a successful competition in Voguing changes according to the demands of individual Voguing categories at a Ball. However, the general criteria are standardized within the community. Members are not *told* the *general* criteria for successful performance all at once at any one time, they *learn* the criteria over time. Members emphasize the overlapping nature of their aesthetics for action and they do not separate their ideals for performance into isolated modes. Although members do use the expression “elements of vogue” to refer to the basic actions called for in the dancing, my separation of the criteria below into four criteria is for analytical purposes only.

Voguing’s four major aesthetic imperatives are to: 1. stay true to the elements of Voguing; 2. sense a close rhythmic relationship with musical or vocal accompaniment; 3. become possessed<sup>21</sup> or emotionally invested without actually fighting and 4. distinguish an individual style.

A list of the major elements of Voguing is as follows:

*Arm Control/Performance.* These terms mean gesticulating with the arms (in conjunction with the whole upper body) in asymmetrical antiphony with the lower part or the rest of the body. Arms alternate unfolding toward and away from the trunk by articulating proximally (at the elbow) or at the core (the shoulder). Arm gestures also alternate between pointing demonstratively (as if to say, “look *there*,” or “look *here*”) to the competitors’ own body, to competitors, and to judges. Arm control is a means to pattern and control where an onlooker focuses as they watch the voguer perform. Hence, some members use the words “focus points” to describe the places around the body to which one gestures with arm control. “Control” also refers to the work of coordinating arm gestures with the lower half of the body, hands and head.

*Leg Control/Performance.* This term refers to non-locomotive leg gestures—such as raising a bent leg up in counterpoint to an arm that points downward. Most arm control—even in standing, as opposed to locomotive positions—is performed in conjunction with leg control.

*Hand Performance.* This term refers to any gesticulation of the hands. In Old Way and New Way, wrists are not generally limp as they are in Vogue Femme.

*Dips.* This element involves lowering, falling, or descending to the ground. This term also means lowering a body part to the ground—such as the back or torso. Usually dips involve laying the body out back-down on the ground while the legs are torqued in a swastika-like position under the body. Usually dips take several counts. A dip in one count (common to *Vogue Femme*) is called a Machiavelli (or, as members say, an “evil” or “punishing”) dip.

*Duckwalking/Catwalking.* This element involves forward locomotor action with very small steps in a mid-level or low-level squat with the position of the legs being parallel. The image that the action brings to mind, as members tell it, is of a duck gliding on water whose legs are unseen. Catwalking is an updated duckwalking in Vogue Femme. Here the gait is wider and in mid-level with larger steps that give the effect of seductively vamping.

*Floor performance.* This element involves any gesticulation on the ground.

*Twists.* These are torso articulations while gesticulating with the arms. Some twists precede spins.

*Spins.* These are turns into the ground or seated postures. Cat's Eyes, or spiraling spins are one example.

*Poses.* These are arrested action at the end of phrases. Individual actions—or other elements of Voguing—are not posing.

*Pop, Dip, Spin.* This is a traditional sequence of Old Way actions that calls for 1. popping—or fragmented syncopated arm control—in a wide legged, turned out squat 2. Dipping; and 3. Rising out of a dip to spin back into a another dip. This sequence is then repeated as the competitor progresses toward or away from judges.

*Locks.* These are syncopated fragmented gestures initiating in the shoulders in a manner that is so accented that the gesture appears to "lock into place," as members have said. Some locks are made around the body of another competitor without (generally) touching, in a fashion that requires that the "locked" competitor to dip, twist or spin out of the imagined spatial obstacle.

Staying true to the elements of Voguing means learning and perfecting core actions and improvising so as to orchestrate the elements in the sequences that are unique to each of the three forms of Voguing. Improvisation means highly structured invention and not free-style action (as in nightclub dancing). Members' frequent use of the term "compulsory" does not mean "in the same sequence"; rather, it means, "of the same core elements" which must be demonstrated at every competition. Although the organization is improvisational, these basic choreographic elements are carefully agreed upon and passed down through peer-to-peer education and the close observation of exemplary performers. Sometimes these elements are written into the text of Ball flyers and invitations. Understanding these core elements and being able to orchestrate them at the moment of competition is critical. I have seen competitors "gagged" or "chopped" (the words for disqualification) because their actions are too balletic (for example) or not in accordance with the elements of Voguing. An informed observer can often tell who a Voguer may have trained with, and in what House.

Members have many terms for the demand to become possessed in the spirit of the battle, the quality of the music, or the whole work of performing to gain status. Some of the phrases that members have used for emotive possession are as follows: "live for it;" "create attitude;" "battle;" "find the focus;" "find focus points;" "emote;" "work it;" "work for it;" "work it bitch;"

“eat it;” “punish it;” “slay it;” or “believe it.”

When teaching a neophyte member of the House of Prestige how to vogue Old Way before a Ball, Father Alvernian admonished him “not just to *do* it.” He told the Voguer that he had to “feel it.” And as the younger Voguer moved at one practice session, Alvernian chanted while the young Voguer danced, saying, “Attitude! It’s a battle! Punish. Feel it! Find the focus points.” Alvernian continually asked the neophyte Voguer to keep an eye out for competitors, to sense their physical presence and respond to competitor’s actions by creating a sense of rhythmic counterpoint.

In addition, Alvernian asked the young Voguer to react swiftly to what a competitor does in competition. A contrapuntal and dialogical relationship must be formed between competitors. Alvernian often joined the younger Voguer and tested the limits of the neophyte’s ability to negotiate competing ideals. Once during the two weeks before that Ball in 1999, the neophyte Voguer told Alvernian that he was confused: “How can I feel it and be myself and still battle with somebody?” Alvernian said: “ You got to do it all at once and fast because at a Ball you only have seconds or minutes before the category is closed.”

### Conclusions

On the deepest level of meaning, Voguing is about the adaptation of mass media conceptions of beauty as predominantly White, visually-focused, and commodified. In contrast to this beauty in Voguing, is culturally diverse, sociopolitically contested, deeply felt and embodied. On the most immediate level of meaning in the moment of performance at rituals, Voguing’s transformation of beauty is about social conflict and the expression of power among peers.

Voguing’s view of beauty and social conflict is sociopolitically contested because community members understand gender, class, and race to be negotiable and troubled notions. 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 the community.

Voguing is embodied because major human senses—kinesthesia (feeling as if touching or moving), seeing, and hearing—are all brought to bear in systemized whole-body actions. When they Vogue, community members tell at least two overlapping stories. One story involves claiming power from the powerful by disrupting dominant views. The other story involves the formation of a personal aesthetic in competition with peers according to evolving community standards.

**Note:**

This paper is based on approximately five years of participant observation between 1997 and 2001 in Philadelphia and New York City and on oral histories with members of the Ballroom Scene within this region. I arrived at my descriptive analyses of the movement with the help of a short-hand form of Labanotation called Motif Writing (which I learned from Lucy Venable and Vera Maletic at The Ohio State University). For their help with this paper, I owe special thanks to Drid Williams, Brenda Farnell, Marjorie Franken and Ann Jennings.

**Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup> I capitalize common *terms* used by the community, even if the word is used in mainstream American discourse, as a means to signify when their meaning and usage is distinct. I use quotation marks for common *expressions* (descriptive phrases) used by most members of the community.

<sup>2</sup> The term Performance is another word for Voguing in the community.

<sup>3</sup> Here Voguing is spelled without an "e," as in most of the community's Ball invitations and other memorabilia.

<sup>4</sup> The number 8000 is an estimate drawn from most members with whom I spoke. An exact number is difficult to ascertain because: 1. although leading members do count attendance at Balls, all members of Houses do not attend every ritual. House members who cease to compete in or attend rituals are still considered to be in the community; 2. to the extent that Houses are in competition with each other, there is no one unified means to collect information from every House; and 3. many members have passed away from urban violence, HIV, or other illnesses.

<sup>5</sup> The extent to which midwestern and southern traditions differ is not known. Marlon Bailey, a Ph.D. candidate in the African Diaspora program at the University of California, Berkeley, is currently doing fieldwork on Ballroom Scene rituals in Detroit, Michigan.

<sup>6</sup> "Sex" refers here to "the particular chromosomes that are carried in the cells of the body that biologically designate female (XX) or male (XY) and which usually produce the two different patterns of physical development that we associate with men and women" (Burr 1998: 11). Sex also refers to the normative characteristics pertaining to genitals, chromosomes and hormones assigned by physicians at birth. Members do use the words "sex" and "gender" when explaining their gendered and sexual identities.

<sup>7</sup> "Gender" refers to socially-constructed lived expression that encompasses feeling, appearance, conception and conduct. I found that when I used the words "roles" or "gender roles," some of my consultants objected to the apparent implication that the term "role" meant their gender experience was "put on" or faked. Hence, I use the term genders.

<sup>8</sup> The terms "feminized" (or "effeminate") and "masculinized" refer here to fluctuating mainstream notions of female and male conduct. The chief sources for these references in the Ballroom Scene are dominant middle-to-late twentieth century and present day twenty-first century Western European and American values for female and male bodily action and fashion. Western norms for female and male bodily actions such as walking, standing, and sitting have been well documented (see Fortier 1977 and Frances 1979). These are descriptive reports, however, not ethnographies.

<sup>9</sup> In the Ballroom Scene, one is only Transgendered—a Femme Queen or Butch—when one has undergone some type of “Work.” When referring to gender transformation, members understand Work (or “Surge”) to mean a variety of practices, including: 1. the injection of androgen or testosterone (male hormones for Butches); 2. the injection of estrogen or progesterone (female hormones for Femme Queens); 3. surgical augmentation (with the aid of silicone, collagen, or saline) or the reduction of body parts including the face, hips, and chest, and 4. sexual reassignment surgery (SRS). The course of injection for hormones usually involves once- or twice- monthly shots instead of the oral ingestion of pills.

<sup>10</sup> When used in the noun form, the term Butch refers to a gender in the community. Women in the Ballroom Scene also use the word “butch” as an adjectival modifier to describe masculinized Lesbians who do not seek to change gender by surgical or hormonal means.

<sup>11</sup> The meaning of “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered” as descriptions of sexual (here meaning erotic) orientation is problematic in the community. As many members emphasized to me, the words “Gay and Lesbian” in the Ballroom Scene do not always mean “same-gender-loving” and the word “Bisexual” does not always mean loving two genders. This is because Ballroom Scene members often partner with people of *different* genders within their culture (e.g., Butches with Women, or Butch Queens with Femme Queens). Furthermore, when one is Bisexual in the Ballroom Scene, one may actually be interested in more than two genders or interested in two genders that do not conform to the mainstream binary of man and woman. In the community, the word Gay is often used loosely to refer to all eroticism that works against mainstream heterosexual norms. The word Lesbian is often defined more specifically in the Ballroom Scene. Regardless of whether a Lesbian woman is Transgender in the culture, the word Lesbian generally means biologically born Women who partner with biologically born Women.

<sup>12</sup> For example, in two short critical essays, “All About Yves,” (1998: 34-35) and “Queens of Language” (1993: 108-115), Jackie Goldsby based her commentary of the film *Paris Is Burning* on her interviews with Willi Ninja. Cindy Patton’s deconstruction of the popular singer Madonna’s music video “Vogue,” makes good use of Patty Lau’s interview with young Voguers in “Embodying Subaltern Memory” (1993: 81-105). Several present-day community members have suggested to me that Lau’s interviewees may not have been members of Houses and that they Vogued in nightclubs not the traditional ritual of the Ball. Nevertheless, Goldsby and Patton situate Voguing within the values and traditions of the Ballroom Scene. Although there is no guarantee that historical or ethnographic methods will lead to any one particular interpretation of a community, Goldsby and Patton indicate that the rituals of the Ballroom Scene resist mainstream White American capitalist values as well as “chic Gay male dance culture,” as Patton notes in her essay (p. 98).

<sup>13</sup> “Indigenous” here refers to classifications and concepts originating and developing in a specific community, rather than ‘native’ or ‘primitive’ (as it is sometimes defined in mainstream dictionaries).

<sup>14</sup> See Storey (1997) and Grossberg (1992) on Cultural Studies.

<sup>15</sup> I understand the term “beauty” to mean the idealistic imagination of self and others. Although it may not be the case elsewhere, imagined ideals in the Ballroom Scene signify cultural values. I consider cultural values to be the shifting conceptual grounds on which social relationships between people are constructed. These values integrate tangible reality (what is experienced with the senses and through signifying actions) with ideology.

<sup>16</sup> “Cool” here refers to the traditional African American Jazz era meaning of relaxed, unforced elegance, or, as if unbothered by life’s upsets.

<sup>17</sup> The words “emphasis”/“de-emphasis” and “foreground”/“background” refer to the aesthetic principles by which successful performances are judged at Balls.

<sup>18</sup> For example, the House of Labelija formed around 1976, the House of Christian in 1977, and the House of Dupree in 1978. There is some debate about what constitutes the “founding” of a House. Some members consider the regular coming together of peers a “founding” and would date the forming of a House earlier. The dates here refer to the time at which these Houses began identifying common rules of conduct for their members. The word “House” is borrowed from the fashion industry where it designates businesses that center around a particular designer. Its use as a name for a kinship group in the Ballroom Scene is another example of the community’s adaptation of images and ideas from the fashion industry. Most Houses held their first Balls well after their founding. For example, although the House of Ebony was founded in the late 1970s, their first Ball was not until 1982.

<sup>19</sup> Before and after *Paris Is Burning*, members regularly made and continue to make home videos of Balls. Although I have seen far more videos at community members’ homes, I was only able to acquire six of these video tapes for strictly confidential and unreproducible long term personal study. These Beta, VHS and, increasingly, digital tapes, are sometimes critical resources for members to study the stylistic innovations of inactive performers in the Ballroom Scene. Sometimes, in Ball flyers, members will be instructed to go back to the “Ball tapes” and model their performance after a legendary member. Tapes are often sold at Balls or sold, traded or exchanged within the private worlds of individual Houses.

<sup>20</sup> My use of the term “gesture” here is not to be confused with the popular use of the term to refer only to actions of the arms of hands (as in “hand gesture”). Gesture here means the articulation of action disseminated by any area of part of the body (including the *whole* body) as it moves.

<sup>21</sup> The word “possession” is mine—members did not use this term, although they used terms like “emote.” “Possession” here does not refer to religious transfiguration.

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