

Sabel Gavaldon

# Inappropriate Gestures: Vogue in Three Acts of Appropriation

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To Franka Polari, rest in power.

## ACT 1: Christopher Street Pier, Manhattan, 1988

The Christopher Street Pier is lit by streetlights as gangs of youths gather around two voguers on the Hudson River waterfront. Streetwear, tank tops, gold chains, cologne, bubble gum. It's a sticky summer night and the air is charged with electricity. A third dancer with a head full of curls enters the scene. It's Willi Ninja, mother of the House of Ninja. His hands teach a geometry lesson against the blackboard of the inner-city night sky. They tell a story in a lush, intricate language punctuated by snaps of the wrist, sharp lines, right angles. Each movement is an exuberance.

In the background, one hears the infectious rhythm of an Adonis acid house track, with its fat and juicy bassline. The voguer doesn't blink. His head remains immobile at all times, standing proud, solemn, defiant. Fingers perch on a shoulder before turning into a makeup brush that Willi Ninja uses to apply blush on his cheeks. Never before had a swagger felt so queer, or a queer body had such swag. Among cutting remarks and knowing laughter, the other pier queens strut around him, all flaunting their deviance from the oppressive gender binaries of dominant culture.

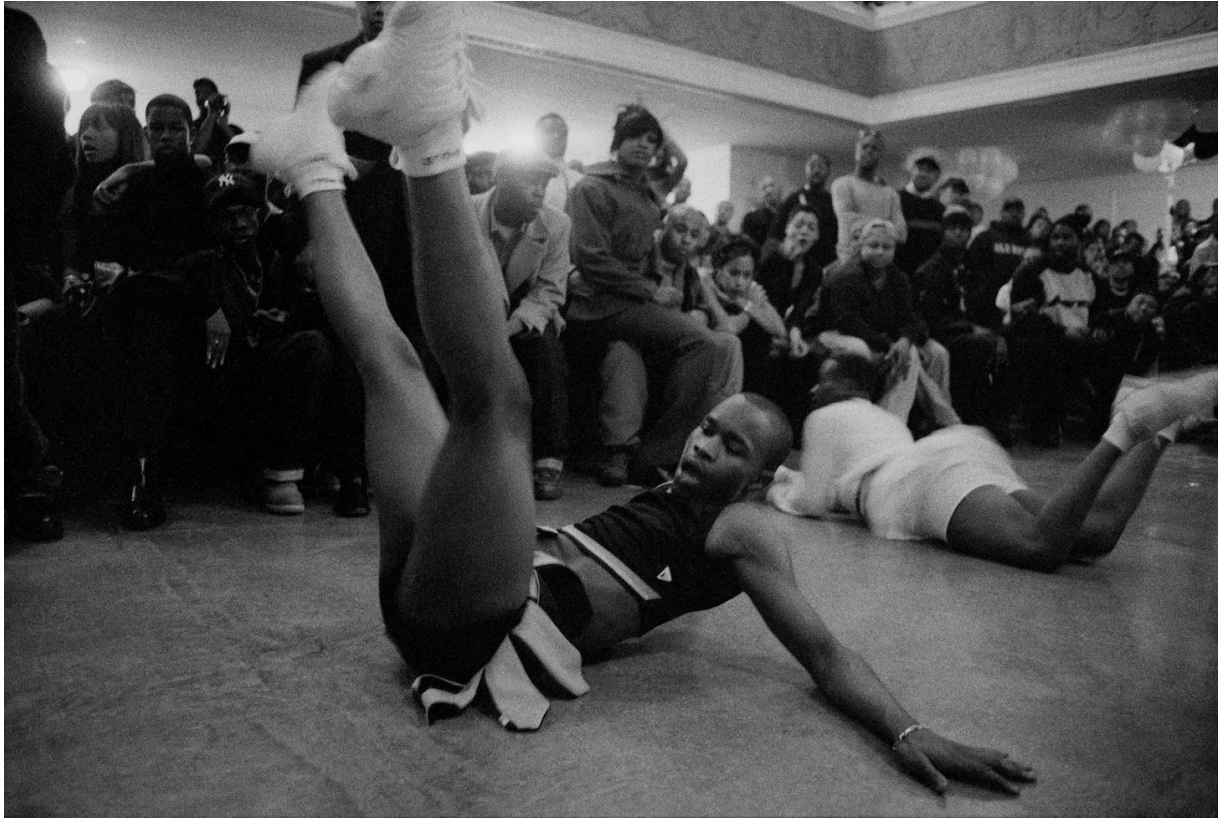
The film is called *Tongues Untied* (1989).<sup>1</sup> Its filmmaker, Marlon T. Riggs. And the street voguing scene described above constitutes one of the earliest filmic documents of the underground culture known as ballroom. Although it flourished in 1980s New York as a response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the history of ball culture spans a century of fragile coalitions among queer folks of color who have been consigned to the margins, incarcerated, and pathologized throughout modernity. Ballroom's micropolitical struggles are in the legacy of the crowded masquerade balls of the Harlem Renaissance. As such, the practice of voguing is an embodied transcription of that history of resilience in the face of white supremacy.<sup>2</sup>

But let's go back to the West Village piers. On the banks of the Hudson River, this "tribe of warriors and outlaws," as described by the poet Essex Hemphill, huddles around a new dancer.<sup>3</sup> This time it's Eddy Diva. Writing hieroglyphs in the air, the voguer's hands entwine around his head. With sleight of hand, he swiftly takes off his glasses to frame his face like the viewfinder on a camera. In vogue, every beat has to be punctuated by a captivating pose. Every move is a snapshot. Every choreography a fashion editorial. With freeze-frame, staccato-like movements, this subcultural dance style incorporates the mechanical rhythm of an

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Purrlette 007 (aka Peligrosa) at the Zodiac Ball, Monterrey, Mexico, 2020. Photo: Sebastián Navarreta.



Gerard H. Gaskin, *Jaimee, Pepper LaBeija Ball*. Brooklyn, N.Y., 1998. Courtesy of the artist.



Gerard H. Gaskin, *Octavia and Danielle, Revlon Ball*. Manhattan, N.Y., 1997. Courtesy of the artist.

analogue camera shutter: Click. Click. Click. Click. This is how the voguing body translates the visual frenzy of a photo shoot into choreographed phrases. The voguer is one with the camera, internalizing its gaze with mechanical exactitude.

In the words of vogue pioneer Archie Burnett, whose life is devoted to the legacy of “old-way” vogue: “Vogue is based on one main principle: the camera first. You need to translate your body in the way the camera will see your best lines. The camera cannot see depth; it can only see length and width. You never waste an opportunity for a good line.”<sup>4</sup>

The voguing body’s incorporation of the camera is inseparable from the medium’s historical, forensic use as a criminal identification tool throughout colonial modernity, championed by police forces and bureaucracies engaged in the systematic monitoring of underclass juveniles by means of photographic archives.<sup>5</sup> During the Victorian era, the invention of sequential photography and motion capture allowed for the breaking down of the language of gesture, recording its infinitesimal elements in precise, quantifiable units at the service of scientific management and its regime of discrete and maneuverable time.

Physicians and anatomists were among the first to use “chronophotography” for a comparative study of human behavior, providing observable evidence for racialized legal frameworks. A distinguished French pathologist-turned-anthropologist went so far as to state with unmistakable pride that the movie camera “expands our vision in time as the microscope has expanded it in space.”<sup>6</sup> New opportunities opened up for the production of anatomical *truth* about the body.

Posture then became an empirical indicator that allowed Western medical doctors, criminologists, and colonial officers to classify subjects according to subtle differences. Scrutinizing them under a scientific lens, every gesture turned into a link in the chain of cultural signifiers that anchors the modern body to gender, race, and social class. In other words, early cinema and photography were first developed as technologies of somatic inscription.<sup>7</sup> Ethnographic film and police records took on the nearly impossible task of creating a comprehensive inventory of gestures, understood as meaningful indicators to stigmatize bodies and make them “legible” within a system of racial, class, and gender demarcations.

Yet posing goes beyond such demands for bodily legibility: a pose is by definition a deliberate, contrived, excessive gesture. It’s the ultimate sign of affectation, insofar as it implies

a heightened awareness of one’s own performance. Photography’s cycle of surveillance, criminalization, and exhibitionism would come full circle with the emergence of urban youth cultures and marginalized groups who began to organize around subcultural styles: clothes, looks, sounds, gestures, attitudes.<sup>8</sup> Youths obsessed with the construction of their own public image – standing proud within and against the carceral logic of colonial modernity. The self becomes the fetish, as cultural theorist Dick Hebdige would say.

Congregating at balls, gay clubs, or on the Hudson River waterfront, gangs of inner-city kids now aspired to the immortality of a photograph. They strike one pose after another, their bodies freezing for a fraction of second, as if the dance could stop time in its tracks. These kids know that to strike a pose is to pose a threat. With voguing, the Christopher Street Pier burst into history. Voguers reappropriated the camera’s voyeuristic gaze, deliberately making a *spectacle* of themselves: Click. Click. Click. Click. They learned to incorporate the mechanics of the camera’s eye and its imperative of self-display, if only to take control of the photographic apparatus and turn it on itself.

Viewers hold their breath as Willi Ninja interrupts the flow of images with a fierce pose. His androgynous body moves against nature, exhibiting a frenzied gender performativity. It’s in the voguer’s cinematic dance moves where this historical interplay between surveillance and subjectivation is best recorded, albeit in code. Voguing’s script is hieroglyphic, a highly condensed form on the borderline between opacity and legibility. Every choreographic phrase defies expectations with an arabesque of hand movements. Every snap of the wrists produces gaps in meaning that exceed the norm. Every single pose opens up new possibilities for subjectivation against the grain of dominant culture. In his semiotics of subcultural style, Hebdige said that a pose is undeniably autoerotic, a sign of self-obsession. One might ask to what extent queer performance is also an auto-poetics, an ongoing exercise in self-making and remaking.

Imitating white women’s poses in fashion magazines, voguing twists the elitist imaginary of haute couture, which is repurposed in the context of balls and made available to a multitude of insubordinate bodies that were consigned to the margins. Appropriation is a double-edged weapon that plays an ambivalent role in shaping the minoritarian public sphere known as ballroom. Marlon T. Riggs came to terms with this paradox in *Tongues Untied*: “Ironic that dance, my ticket to assimilation, my way of amusing, then winning acceptance by

whites, that the same steps were now my passage back home.”<sup>9</sup>

There is a dark irony at play here. Riggs’s words remind us of the fact that there is no straight path to emancipation. Queer people of color have made a tactical use of appropriation and quotation, parody and mimicry in order to survive – physically as well as culturally – within a mainstream society that is hostile to them.<sup>10</sup> Out of sheer necessity, minoritized subjects are continuously engaged in the production of dissenting forms of beauty, subjectivity, and desire. While regarded as a threat to the normative world, these subcultural poetics carry a strong currency that is always at risk of being incorporated into dominant culture.

Queer performance is weaved into the dialectics of assimilation and resistance. It’s the art of using the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house with varying degrees of success. Occasionally, like in the case of ballroom, this ambivalent strategy has given rise to new forms of collective life, even providing a space for political affirmation in the face of terror and social death – a place many call home.

## **ACT 2: Butch Queen Voguing Like a Femme Queen**

The default use of feminine pronouns and terms of address (she, *gurl*, miss) among members of the ballroom scene is a sign of recognition as much as it is an expression of collective identity. This is not without irony, as it contrasts with the sheer demographics of a community founded by black and brown trans women, yet centered around an overwhelming majority of cisgender gay men.<sup>11</sup> In response to the HIV/AIDS crisis, ball culture broadened its social base throughout the 1980s. Its focus would shift to the boys, favoring their forms of expression and competition, often at the risk of rendering invisible the transgender people of color who founded the scene in the first place.

The social fabric of ballroom is organized around groups known as houses, which are in turn based on a revolutionary conception of the nonbiological family. The so-called house system led to the proliferation of kinship networks and care structures among “butch queens” (cis gay men), “femme queens” (trans women), and, to a lesser extent, cis lesbians, trans men, and other nonconforming subjectivities. Negotiating their gender identities in a “contact zone” between minority subjects, the cis boys ended up borrowing (some would say stealing) performative codes that once belonged to transfeminine folks, only to reinscribe them into a homosocial space of male privilege.<sup>12</sup> While not without its own risks, the grammar of vogue was to be transformed through this tense

negotiation.

The history of “vogue femme” is evidence of this. While today it’s the most popular and emblematic voguing style, in the nineties this category made its appearance in the ball scene – though few remember it – with a most revealing name: “butch queen voguing like a femme queen.” The expression has survived in song form, and is still chanted at balls to cheer the boys as they compete against each other in acrobatic dance battles. Pioneered by trans women of color, the very name of vogue femme is testament to this appropriation embedded in its genealogy.

It’s no wonder, then, that art historian Kobena Mercer saw vogue as paradigmatic of the constitutive character that appropriation plays in the popular cultures of the African diaspora.<sup>13</sup> In mimicking the poses of white models in fashion magazines, the Christopher Street Pier kids were able to create their own dance form, whose subcultural language would in turn be the object of appropriation by mainstream artists such as Malcolm McLaren and Madonna. This dialectic of assimilation and resistance shapes the history of voguing. Its spectacular dance battles are a transcription of cultural struggles taking place on a larger scale and in an asymmetrical field of power.

At the peak of the AIDS crisis, ball culture abruptly emerged from the underground into the dominant public sphere. For a fleeting moment, vogue seemed on its way to becoming a mass phenomenon. Slim, light-skinned, cisgender boys from the House of Xtravaganza, the Latino family founded by Carmen Xtravaganza, would star in the music video for Madonna’s *Vogue* (1990). In the iconic video directed by David Fincher, the racial marginality of ballroom is made conspicuous by its absence, sublimated through elegant visual references to the Harlem Renaissance. The high-contrast black and white cinematography, inspired by Isaac Julien’s film *Looking for Langston* (1989), contributed to redress vogue with an aura of respectability and glamour at a convenient remove from its original sources.

The Madonna megahit is a turning point in voguing history. So was the media whirlwind around Susanne Bartsch’s celebrity-packed Love Ball, and the unprecedented box-office success of Jennie Livingston’s documentary *Paris is Burning* (1991), after securing a distribution deal with Harvey Weinstein’s Miramax publicity machine. With the change of decade, vogue in its original form (the old way) began to compete for the limelight with an even more gymnastic dance style (the new way), whose limb contortions would be immediately eclipsed by the arrival of vogue femme.

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Franka Polari and Zebra D at the Purple Mini Ball, Museo Universitario del Chopo, Mexico City, 2019. Photo: Diego Morales Villeda.

It's possible to see in this quick progression of choreographic styles more than just a trend or a change in tastes. Perhaps it was a coded expression of the ongoing tensions, disputes, and negotiations around the presence and visibility of the black transfeminine body in the ballroom scene. While Madonna had offered the world a snapshot of vogue in its most sanitized form (apt for mass consumption), it was the work of transgender women of color who would bring back its incendiary character to the dance form.

Within a few years, vogue was beyond recognition. We owe this mutation to pioneers such as Alyssa LaPerla, Sinia Ebony, and Ashley Icon, immortalized as the "mother of dramatics."<sup>14</sup> Channeling a radical legacy of black transfemininity, these women championed the renovation of ballroom's choreographic language. It was they who broke away from the clean-cut geometry of previous styles in favor of fluid transitions. Combining swagger with wild grace, the femme queens now punctuated their feline strut with spasmodic, over-the-top feminine movements that ended in impossible falls. Their entire bodies filled with drama before collapsing onto one leg. Saturated with gender, fiercely hypersexualized.

Reaching climax every fourth beat, the femme queen's body took flight only to fall backwards onto the ground, seemingly landing on her back. In an ironic twist of history, vogue femme's dramatic spasms and acrobatic stunts transposed onto the dance floor the convulsive gestural language of hysterical seizures invented by doctors and medical photographers during the Victorian era – as racialized, "sexually deviant," and women's bodies entered the sphere of the pathological.<sup>15</sup> Rewriting that history of hysterization, vogue's so-called suicide dip appeared at the same time that overlapping epidemics (AIDS, crack, and its associated neoliberal wave of mass incarceration) terrorized the popular imagination. As artist and writer Anna Martine Whitehead has noted, "It's not hard to understand why these moves were adverts of black communities, since black folks have been dancing joy through danger, loss, and grief for so long."<sup>16</sup>

The boys took note and learned to vogue on high heels. "Butch queens up in pumps," they were called. Soon enough they would get standing ovations competing in the manner of trans women: "butch queens voguing like femme queens." Over time the younger ranks would beat their transfemme peers at their own game, becoming the indisputable center of attention at balls, even at the risk of erasing this dance form's complex history. Once again following the steps of transgender women of color, the vanguard of ballroom broke away from the

homonormative values of white gay culture. Their dance style was about to become more dramatic. The new kids vogue harder, faster, and nastier than anything anyone had seen before, thus making the dance increasingly difficult to teach, imitate, or even appreciate for white audiences.

Vogue's stylistic innovations are caught in the dialectic of cultural recuperation, constantly renegotiating one's distance in relation to dominant culture. This dynamic is structurally inscribed into the dance form, and has historically shaped the ways in which voguers make themselves legible to others. It's no surprise that voguing's natural space is the dance battle. Its mode of enunciation is polemics, an art of disputation. At its core, vogue derives from games of verbal combat (think of the "dozens") and rhetorical strategies developed by the African diaspora under slavery, such as those described by Henry Louis Gates.<sup>17</sup>

In ballroom parlance, coming up with a good "read" means exposing someone's flaws with graceful defiance. On the runway, voguers don't just read, but also mimic and sometimes even parody the opponent's movements in order to choreographically dismantle each other's performance. It's an agonistic framework. It translates into dance form the struggles of queer communities of color whose cultural genius has been systemically appropriated by the entertainment industry, while also finding in appropriation a paradoxical strategy to thrive in the margins of hegemonic society.

Spelled out in the convulsions of the voguing body, this agonistic dynamic permeates every dimension of ball culture. As electronic music fed into the mainstream in the nineties, the sounds of ballroom would also mutate to channel the frantic energy of vogue femme. Just as they lost interest in old-way vogue's straight lines and right angles, the younger generation of ball kids didn't respond so well to the regular beats of disco music and its various offshoots. They grew tired of dancing to the same old Salsoul records and Chicago house tracks with cut-up gospel vocals, which had then become inoffensive, appealing to a broader white gay audience. Instead, the new kids had an ear for the tribal, syncopated, obsessive rhythms of ghetto house and breakbeat. A unique feedback process was taking place between voguers and DJs, which would culminate in the invention of a new underground sound – the "Ha," a genre of ballroom beats reworked from the 1991 club anthem "The Ha Dance," by Masters at Work.

Today, countless bootleg versions circulate in CD-R and MP3 format. Frenzied tribal drums, thunderous crash cymbals, and a raw industrial edge define the modern sound of ballroom. Its metallic crash hitting every fourth beat

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punctuates the dance battles, as the voguer's body collapses dramatically onto the floor. Sampled, remixed, and reworked over a thousand times, the original "Ha" – if such a thing even exists – is built around a vocal sample pulled from the blockbuster comedy *Trading Places* (1983), where Eddie Murphy and Dan Aykroyd (wearing blackface) chant in mock African gibberish, which "The Ha Dance" transforms into a chorus of scornful laughter.

Once dubbed as "America's most bankable modern minstrel" by Marlon Riggs himself, Eddie Murphy is a contested figure in the queer community due to his homophobic stand-up routines during the AIDS crisis.<sup>18</sup> Far from anecdotal, the adoption of such a loaded reference as a rallying cry for ballroom is paradigmatic of queer people's artistry when it comes to reclaiming words (slurs, for example) and cultural artefacts that had been used against them. The sound of the "Ha" resonates with these cultural struggles and battles for meaning. Its history is one of theft and forgery, parody and simulation, appropriation and misappropriation, quotation and revision. The "Ha" is not just a sonic signifier of ballroom. It's the sound of a laughter that runs through history.

### ACT 3: The Sound of Sirens on March 8

Back in 1990, the release of *Paris Is Burning* and Madonna's Blonde Ambition World Tour unleashed an international vogue craze of epic proportions. Ballroom culture had been "Miramax-ed" and reached its peak of mainstream visibility, soon to be forgotten by white gay audiences for whom this subcultural style, detached from its political context, would go out of fashion.<sup>19</sup> Along with the media's attention, the silent majority moved on and relegated vogue to the dust heap of history.

And so the story goes. In the dominant narrative established by the media, ball culture is assumed to have vanished in the mid-nineties. Ironically, this is considered a golden age of ballroom among the scene. The dip (vogue's signature power move) was born in this period. And so were three of the five "elements of vogue" that make up the dance today, including the duckwalk and the catwalk. As it went back into the underground, the ball scene also began its gradual expansion across North America, providing an alternative family for thousands who went on to establish new houses and competitions in every major city with a large African-American population.

Challenging the configurations of oppression formed by the intersection of racism, sexism, and structural poverty, ballroom's social fabric has been a queer sanctuary for youths rejected by their biological families and society

at large. Ballroom houses made it possible to pass on experiences and share vital resources, from everyday survival skills to gender-affirming hormones. Founded by trans icon Crystal LaBeija, the house system presents a rare opportunity for intergenerational dialogue in a community with shocking mortality rates. Ballroom's robust care structures would also contribute to fight the stigma around HIV/AIDS, promoting sexual health awareness within the community.<sup>20</sup> Organized around leaders known as "mothers" and "fathers" (roles that don't always match with one's gender identity), the house system dares the world outside to reimagine kinship beyond blood ties and bloodlines.

The new millennium has witnessed an unprecedented technological acceleration. Diminishing barriers to exchange and communication have led to the exportation of ball culture (or at least its most spectacular aspects) to remote geographical contexts. It's no longer unusual to find houses, local chapters, and groups of voguing aficionados scattered across Europe, Latin America, Australia, or even Japan. This traffic of subcultural codes born from minority survival is not without risk, as it often capitalizes on the erasure of specific contexts and histories. And yet, the globalization of ballroom occasionally gives rise to cultural translations that are full of promise. The scene in Mexico shows great inventiveness in its adoption of an imported culture, as evidenced by the production of its own slang and the way subcultural practices are reshaped in response to the political specificity of its local context.

In dialogue with black queer culture's slippery notion of "realness," the Mexican ball scene has twisted the word "*hechizo*" ("spell," in Spanish) to mean one's outfit, makeup, or wig.<sup>21</sup> The term is used in reference to any of the accessories regarded as visible signs of femininity, but which are also more than that: namely, the semiotic scaffolding of gender as a political fiction. Of course the purpose of an *hechizo* is to captivate, to fascinate, to bewitch. The "spell" of drag is a carefully crafted illusion. As Essex Hemphill reminds us, this "illusion might be considered simply an act of entertainment in the context of the balls if it weren't such a willful act of survival and affirmation."<sup>22</sup>

Deriving from the verb "*hacer*" ("to make" or "to do"), *hechizo* implies something that is made up, fabricated, and therefore in opposition to nature. It reflects an anti-normative understanding of gender as an artificial construct. Drag witchcraft asserts the performative power of talismanic objects such as heels, glitter, and feathers, which take part in



queer rituals and incantations. In such acts of illusionism, gender is invoked as a practice rather than an identity.<sup>23</sup> Gender's magical spell is then revealed as a set of body techniques that sexual dissidents – including drag queens, drag kings, femme queens, and trans men – have learned to recombine in an exercise of subcultural bricolage.

Equally powerful is the way Mexican ball kids have adopted “sex siren,” a mode of gender performance that consists of a hyperbolic display of sensuality to entice the judges. Typically seen as a peripheral category in the US, sex siren is absolutely central to Mexican ballroom, to the point of rivalling vogue femme as the most celebrated competition style and a galvanizing moment in functions. As it turns out, the majority of competitors walking sex siren in these balls are cisgender women. In European ballroom, the growing presence of white, middle-class, cis women is an unmistakable sign of vogue's commodification and distancing from its roots. Whereas in Mexico, a similar gender dynamic takes on a radically different meaning, opening up new possibilities for political subjectivation.

Their arrival announced by reggaeton's dembow rhythm, the so-called “*encueratrices*” (strip-queens) storm onto the runway holding green scarves in honor of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, a feminist symbol of resistance across Latin America. Those scarves are linked to pro-choice campaigners demanding rights to free, legal, and safe abortion. In a hostile environment of rampant gender violence, Mexican ball kids have adopted sex siren as a language of affirmation. Femme joy becomes a public defiance, a collective display of sisterhood in the face of social death, while gender performance reveals itself as something other than the expression of a given identity – namely, the staging of a political conflict. Championed by *norteñas* like Purrlette 007 (aka Peligrosa), Monterrey's undefeated legend and a body-positivity educator, it cannot be a coincidence that sex siren competitors thrive in northern Mexico, where femicides have been counted in the thousands since the nineties.

It's here in Mexico where I would learn that contexts are never given; they are in fact produced, constantly redefined by one's words and actions. Over the course of what seemed like a few hours, the spirited chanting and sassy rhymes of the MCs during the closing ball of the exhibition “Elements of Vogue,” at the Museo Universitario del Chopo, resonated with the uproar of the crowd, tens of thousands of women strong, that took over the Mexican capital on the morning of the International Women's Day strike on March 8, 2020. Neither the police sirens nor

the clouds of tear gas and smoke from fire extinguishers could prevent the upcoming insurrection, as a women-led multitude of strikers of all genders, mothers and daughters, queers and sex workers, marched against the state-sanctioned impunity and obscene necropolitics of capitalist modernity and its gender binary system.

The raging sounds of these women's marches and the previous night's voguing battles were weaved into the same dialectics of hegemony and resistance. Little did we know, then, that this would be the last dance for a long time, as collective life was about to be suspended by the biopolitical imperatives of a global pandemic. And so in Mexico City, I also came to understand the brutal implications of the fact that contexts can't ever be taken for granted; they are slippery, fragile, and subject to change at any given time.

By a cruel quirk of fate, at the end of that long weekend of riots and dance battles we bade farewell to Franka Polari, a true pioneer of Mexican ballroom. Franka was an exceptional MC, both tender and quick-witted, who made space for younger voguers to hit the runway, while punctuating his chants with sharp political commentary. He was proud to carry the house name of LaBeija, and had cofounded the House of Apocalipstick. But most importantly, Franka was a gay mother for an entire generation of queer and trans kids in Mexico, who then created their own houses across the country, making kin and further extending his legacy of care. That legacy outlives him, and so do his chants. As I think of the Women's Day protests on March 8, 2020, I'm also reminded of Franka's rhyme: “*arrasa, goza y posa poderosa*” (slay, rejoice, and pose, empowered).<sup>24</sup>

Although Franka's death marks a turning point in Mexican ballroom, his legacy of sexual dissent and anti-assimilationist politics lives on, still providing inspiration for queer kids to be bold enough to confront the norm. Yet-to-come dancers will carry the Apocalipstick house name, their voguing bodies channeling the powerful materiality and historical density of queer performance at the intersections of race, class, and gender, their hands teaching us ways to move beyond those categories that define as well as confine. Moving away from identity and representational politics, the intricate choreographies of voguing point somewhere else: to a horizon of minoritarian subjectivation.

If I learned anything from the ball scene in Mexico, it's that there is no gesture or pose, however striking, that guarantees a stable reading. Nor is there a performance whose process of signification is ever complete. The language of insurrection has no ontology. Its

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significance is always in dispute. The meaning of each gesture is what is at stake in every single dance battle.

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An earlier and shorter version of this article appeared in the magazine *Revista de la Universidad de México* (March 2021). The ideas in the essay are informed by an ongoing dialogue with Manuel Segade, cocurator of the exhibition “Elements of Vogue: A Case Study in Radical Performance,” first presented at CA2M, Madrid (2017–2018), then at the Museo Universitario del Chopo, Mexico City (2019–2020). I am indebted to the voguers and ballroom activists who shared their situated knowledge throughout this process, including Mother Amazon Leiomy, Archie Burnett, Escorpiona 007, Benji Hart, Galaxia LaPerla, Victoria Letal, Javier Ninja, Lasseindra Ninja, Franka Polari, Twiggy Pucci Garçon, Michael Roberson Garçon, and others.

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**Sabel Gavaldon** is curator of Gasworks, a nonprofit art organization based in South London. His research explores minoritarian poetics and politics, often embracing unorthodox exhibition formats. His touring exhibition “Elements of Vogue” transformed the museum into a dance floor. He was a “La Caixa” Graduate Fellow at the Royal College of Art (2010–2012), and was nominated for the ICI New York Independent Vision Curatorial Award in 2016.

1  
Marlon T. Riggs, *Tongues Untied* (Signifyin' Works, 1989), 55 min. Shot in August 1988, the street voguing scene described above features Eddy Diva, Alexis Infiniti, Willi Ninja, Sean Omni, and Derrick Xtravaganza, among other unidentified ball kids. The excerpt is available on YouTube <https://youtu.be/qwiBAqqafY4/>.

2  
For an account of 1920–30s emerging drag ball culture in Harlem, see Eric Garber, "A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem," in *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Duberman (Penguin Books, 1989), 318–28.

3  
Essex Hemphill, "In the Life," in *Ceremonies: Prose and Poetry* (Plume, 1992), 172–73.

4  
Archie Burnett speaking to students during a workshop at CA2M, Madrid, 2018. Quoted in *Elements of Vogue: A Case Study in Radical Performance*, eds. Sabel Gavaldon and Manuel Segade (CA2M/Motto, 2020), 310.

5  
John Tagg, "A Means of Surveillance," in *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1988), 66–102.

6  
Félix Regnault (1863–1938), quoted in Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Duke University Press, 1996), 46.

7  
Rony, *The Third Eye*, 21–73. See also Linda Williams, "Film Body: An Implantation of Perversions," *Cine-tracts*, no. 4 (1981): 19–35.

8  
Dick Hebdige, "Posing Threats, Striking Poses: Youth, Surveillance, and Display," *SubStance*, no. 37–38 (1983): 68–88. See also Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (Routledge, 1979).

9  
Riggs, *Tongues Untied*.

10  
José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 1–34.

11  
For an auto-ethnographic analysis of male privilege in the ballroom community, see Marlon M. Bailey, *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit* (University of Michigan Press, 2013), 43–55.

12  
Mary Louise Pratt introduced the notion of "contact zone" in

*Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (Routledge, 1992).

13  
Kobena Mercer, "Dark and Lovely Too: Black Gay Men in Independent Film," in *Queer Looks*, ed. Martha Gever, Pratiha Parmar, and John Greyson (Routledge, 1993), 238–55.

14  
Noelle Deleon (@noellearchives), "The History of Femme Performance: A Thread," Twitter, March 23, 2020 <https://twitter.com/noellearchives/status/1241905973566091264/>.

15  
Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière* (MIT Press, 2003).

16  
Anne Martine Whitehead, "Expressing Life Through Loss: On Queens That Fall with a Freak Technique," in *Queer Dance: Meanings & Makings*, ed. Clare Croft (Oxford University Press, 2017), 281–89.

17  
Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford University Press, 1988).

18  
Riggs, "Black Macho Revisited: Reflections of a Snap! Queen," in *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*, ed. Essex Hemphill (Redbone Press, 1991), 324.

19  
I'm borrowing the term "Miramaxed" from Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Movies as Politics* (University of California Press, 1997), 184.

20  
Marlon M. Bailey, "'They Want Us Sick': Ballroom Culture and the Politics of HIV/AIDS," chap. 5 in *Butch Queens Up in Pumps*, 182–220.

21  
This reading of the Mexican drag term *hechizo* is based on conversations with Issa Téllez (aka Escorpiona 007) and Victoria Letal, founding mother of the House of Apocalipstick, during the balls at the Museo Universitario del Chopo, Mexico City, organized within the exhibition "Elements of Vogue."

22  
Essex Hemphill, "To Be Real," in *Ceremonies: Prose and Poetry* (Plume, 1992), 120–21.

23  
For an account of gender performance and queer parody as signifying practices (rather than as an expression of a given identity), see Moe Meyer, "Reclaiming the Discourse of

Camp," introduction to *The Poetics and Politics of Camp* (Routledge, 1994), 1–19. See also Paul B. Preciado, "The Ocaña We Deserve: Campceptualism, Subordination, and Performative Politics," in *Ocaña*, ed. Pedro G. Romero (Ediciones Polígrafa, 2012), 412–38.

24  
Franka's chant is recorded in this ballroom beat produced in collaboration with NAAFI, a DJ crew and record label based in Mexico City <https://soundcloud.com/lao/ao-ft-franka-polari-arrasa-g-oza-y-posa-apocalipstick-1/>.

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e-flux journal #122 — november 2021 Sabel Gavaldon  
Inappropriate Gestures: Vogue in Three Acts of Appropriation