

Structures of kinship

Houses and practices of care in Ballroom culture are predicated on protection, precarity and prejudice, writes *Marlon Bailey*



DUSTIN THIERRY

‘Houses provide a source of family nurturing that a lot of kids often don’t get at home’, said Prada of the House of Escada in Detroit. Prada describes one of the most important roles that houses play in Ballroom culture, as a space of queer kinship, performance and care. Ballroom communities create an alternative world that consists of a kinship structure that critiques and revises dominant notions of gender, sexuality, family and community.

In recent years, the community has gone global. There is a Ballroom scene in nearly every major city in North America and cities throughout Europe, such as Paris, London and Amsterdam, to name but a few. Notably, the FX cable network series *Pose* has given the Ballroom community, and Black and Latinx LGBTQ+ people, new international visibility, as has the recent HBO series *Legendary*. Yet, beyond *Pose* and *Legendary*, and films such as *Paris is Burning* (1990), *The Aggressives* (2005) and *Kiki* (2016), not much is widely known about Ballroom culture and its rich and resilient history that spans more than five decades.

Beginning in the late 1960s and early ’70s in Harlem, New York, Ballroom culture (sometimes referred to as house, ball or drag ball culture) is a Black and Latinx LGBTQ+ cultural formation. The House of LaBeija, founded in 1970, was one of the first houses in the scene. Although the modern Ballroom scene began more than fifty years ago, some dimensions of this cultural formation date back to the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s; for instance, drag performances were a staple at Black LGBTQ+ underground venues, such as private parties, speakeasies and nightclubs in Harlem, as well as other urban centres throughout the US. There is also a long history of Black queer people forging alternative kin and families of choice to survive the twin oppressions of white supremacy and homophobia in the US; in her celebrated documentary, *Living with Pride: Ruth Ellis @ 100* (1999), Yvonne Welton chronicles the life of Ruth Ellis, highlighting how, from 1946 to ’71, Ruth and her

partner Babe had a house in Detroit where Black LGBTQ+ people would congregate and socialise: a space of refuge and familial and community care for people who had nowhere else to go. Like many queer communities of colour in the early mid-20th century, Ballroom culture has been deeply underground, while also serving as a safe space for LGBTQ+ people

of colour who face forms of oppression based on race, class, gender and sexuality.

LGBTQ+ youth of colour are among the most structurally vulnerable sectors of the US population. In today’s Ballroom scene in the US, most people are working class or poor, and disproportionately suffer from racism/white supremacy, homophobia and transphobia, as well as dispossession, exclusion and marginalisation in their communities of origin. More specifically, they are more vulnerable to unstable housing and homelessness, violence, mental health problems, suicide, substance use and HIV/AIDS. According to sociologist Brandon Andrew Robinson, LGBTQ+ youth of colour ‘face the harshest consequences of structural racism, racial profiling and over-policing, surveillance and punishment’.

In the face of this violence, Ballroom culture structures provide social and familial support. Houses are the means by which members of the Ballroom community experience cultural belonging and care in ways that are often more supportive and affirming than in their families and communities of origin. The house is an alternative family formation underpinned by a distinct system of genders and sexualities. What is referred to as the gender system in Ballroom culture consists of gender and sexual identity categories that do not exactly coincide with dominant gender and sexual identities; for example, in Ballroom culture, Butches are trans men, Femme Queens are trans women, and Butch Queens are gay men. Ballroom members recognise that all gender and sexual categories exist on a continuum.

Ballroom houses, as alternative families, consist of parents and siblings which are part of an expansive network of kin throughout the scene including aunts, uncles, grandparents and other extended family roles. In Ballroom, your sex assignment or gender identity does not necessarily determine the role you play in the family. Ballroom members reconfigure what genders perform certain gender roles in this kin unit. Hence, Butch Queens can be mothers and fathers, some Butches are fathers, and many Femme Queens are house mothers.

House parents, whom I refer to as ‘platonic parents’, provide guidance for their ‘children’, who are typically poor or working class, of various ages, race and ethnicities (usually Black and Latinx), genders and sexualities, and from cities and regions throughout North America. Unlike their heteronormative families of origin, house parents are usually friends and not sexually or romantically involved. These Ballroom members join together to lead and provide guidance for their house members – engaging in domestic activities and celebrations – and to create a ‘powerhouse’

in Ballroom culture

Dustin Thierry captured one such space: the Concrete Kiki Ball (opposite) on the roof of a multi-storey car park in Berlin in 2019 was hosted by German Mother Zueira Angels



for performance competitions at balls.

While they often provide social and emotional safety, houses are not usually concrete spaces and buildings; yet, sometimes houses do serve as actual homes. Like Ruth and Babe's 'gay spot' in Detroit, members of the Ballroom community hang out at the house mother or house father's home. For instance, in the early 2000s, Mother Goddess, the overall mother of the House of Rodeo, lived in a house with other members of the scene called Lakewood Estates, on Detroit's East Side. Prada Escada suggested that houses are not just social units of family but sometimes serve as actual physical shelters for members to 'cohabit'.

Hence, in Ballroom culture houses serve as families and shelters of choice and sometimes of necessity. Houses not only provide familial care and social support, but they also organise ball events. Houses and balls are two core social dimensions of Ballroom culture that are inextricably linked; typically, there are no houses without balls and there are no balls without houses. Ballroom communities are transient and hold balls at different places; the transformation of spaces for balls is linked to the kinship and supportive structures that Ballroom members produce and enjoy. Balls are the events where the essence of the community is expressed.

House parents recruit, socialise and prepare their children to compete successfully in categories based on performative gender and sexual identities, vogue and theatrical performances, and the effective presentation of fashion and physical attributes. Rather than in Madonna's *Vogue* music video in the '90s, this combination of dance and performance practices from the African diaspora is a total creation of the Ballroom community. Participants vigorously compete against one another on behalf of their respective houses, and, at times, as individuals. Ballroom kin-making and performance are all a part of the cultural labour in which the participants of Ballroom communities are engaged to alter or contend with the social conditions in which they live.

In Detroit and other urban centres like it, at best, Black and Latinx people, in general, have a vexed relationship to architecture and built environments, in which spatial arrangements are structured by and through racial inequality. However, albeit less obvious, the inequitable socio-economic realities and their spatial expressions impact Black and Latinx gender and sexually minoritised people in pernicious ways. Typically, LGBTQ+ people of colour do not have the luxury of safe, permanent and reliable spaces in which to congregate and socialise, such as bars and clubs in gay districts. These are afforded to primarily white gay and lesbian communities

(although some gay bar districts have a diverse patronage); these areas and the buildings in them are dominated and owned by white people.

Ballroom communities deploy innovative strategies to address their spatial marginalisation in urban centres. Despite its recent global exposure, the scene remains a mostly clandestine community in the US. The popular representation of Ballroom culture is the spectacle: public performances for all to see. In reality, balls are held in the dead of night at clubs and sometimes hotel ballrooms, often on late Sunday nights. The time of day protects members from violence and ridicule that members of the community might experience in public spaces during the day. Balls are also held off the beaten track, so to speak, for financial reasons. Houses rent the space at which they will host a ball but do not have the funds to pay up front, beyond paying a deposit. The full hall rental fee is paid with the proceeds from the ball admissions fee paid by all attendees and participants. This is another practice of collective care that the Ballroom community, mostly houses, provides for its members.

Currently, Ballroom culture is in a paradoxical situation. The community has evolved into a global cultural phenomenon that was created by Black and Latinx LGBTQ+ people in Harlem. However, there is a downside to Ballroom's expansion throughout the globe. The Black and Latinx communities who created this cultural phenomenon have not gained the recognition they deserve. Systemic racism and white supremacy, homophobia, cissexism and transphobia continue to structure the conditions and experiences of Black and Latinx LGBTQ+ communities throughout the world, particularly in the US. Ballroom community members are hyper-visible in the media, but the producers and directors of the films, TV series and shows are, generally, not members of the communities they depict.

While the community's increased popularity and exposure have garnered much-needed professional opportunities for LGBTQ+ people of colour, particularly Black and Latinx queer people, this hypervisibility also obscures the racism, white supremacy, homophobia and transphobia that they face day to day in urban social geographies. Nonetheless, the practices and structures of Ballroom culture help to mitigate the dangers faced by the members of the community. Securing spaces that are off the beaten path and less expensive to rent, holding ball events in them in the dead of night and forging alternative kin-ties are examples of how Ballroom members protect and affirm themselves and their, still underground, cultural and spatial practices.

House members see themselves as a family and reinforce their kin ties with activities such as trips, holding family reunions, celebrating birthdays, shopping for a ball, bailing each other out of jail and fighting with and for one another, as depicted in 2017 TV series *Pose* (opposite)

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