Engendering space: Ballroom culture and the spatial practice of possibility in Detroit

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This article examines the ways in which Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) members of the Ballroom community create black queer space to contend with their spatial exclusion from and marginalization within public and private space in urban Detroit, Michigan. Existing in most urban centers throughout North America, Ballroom culture is a community and network of Black and Latina/o LGBT people. In this ethnography, I delineate the multiple functions of two mutually constitutive domains of Ballroom culture, kinship (the houses) and ritualized performance (the ball events). I use queer theories of geography and draw from Sonjah Stanley Niaah’s notion of performance geography to examine the generative socio-spatial practices that Ballroom members deploy to forge alternative possibilities for Black LGBT life in Detroit. In many ways, members of the Ballroom community work to challenge and undo the alienating and oppressive realities of built environments in urban centers by undertaking the necessary social and performance labor that allow its members to revise and reconfigure exclusionary and oppressive spatial forms.

Keywords: performance geography; performance ethnography; kinship; black queer space; spatial marginalization; socio-spatial practices

Introduction: the legendary House of Prestige’s Anniversary Ball

It is 21 June 2003, and for the first time, the Legendary House of Prestige will hold its national anniversary ball in Detroit, Michigan, to celebrate 13 years of existence. Duchess Prestige, a Butch Queen and the housemother of the Legendary House of Prestige, asked me to arrive early to The Tom Phillip Post Lodge to help decorate the hall for the ball. I am waiting outside the front entrance in the parking lot in my car with a 17-year-old ‘wanna be’ Ballroom kid. We are the only people there. ‘The Post,’ as we call it, is located on Gratiot Avenue just east of downtown Detroit. The Post is an after-hours club, and, according to Ballroom members, it is owned by an older Black man who is friendly to the Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) crowd. The east side neighborhood in which the Post is situated is an area of the city that reflects a socio-economic geography in transition. Hence, some parts of the area suffer from urban blight while other parts show signs of ‘urban renewal’ – gentrification. As someone who was born and raised in Detroit and who frequented the Post, I know that the area in which it is located is considered dangerous, as is the case for all of the clubs and bars where Black LGBT people socialize in Detroit.

In Ballroom culture, a North American Black and Latino/a LGBT community and network, anniversary balls are referred to as ‘Overall Balls.’ An Overall Ball is akin to a

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family reunion because the occasion brings house members together from all over the country to celebrate the year their house was founded. At ball events, participants compete individually or on behalf of his/her house in performance categories based on gender and sexual identities, body presentation and fashion, and voguing. The Legendary House of Prestige’s Overall Ball is being thrown to commemorate the day of the houses founding in June of 1990 in Philadelphia by three Black gay men, Carlos, Ali, and Alvernian. This ball expects to draw Prestige members from all over the country, representing 13 chapters, so we want to showcase an emerging Detroit Ballroom scene. As the chapter and the city hosting the Overall Ball, it is our responsibility to secure the hall and decorate it, organize the ball, and host the commentators and the out-of-town members of the house. In recent years, the anniversary ball has been held in Philadelphia and New York City. But Father Alvernian wanted to raise the profile of the Prestige house and expand its chapters throughout the country, including in the Midwest.

As a member of the Detroit chapter of the Legendary House of Prestige, I am especially looking forward to participating in my first Overall Ball event. Duchess told everyone, including those who have come from as far as Buffalo, New York, to get to the hall at 2:00 pm, so we can prepare it for the evening’s festivities. He figured this would give people time to sleep in since we had all hung out together until very late the previous night. As I wait, I realize that belonging to the Ballroom community requires patience because nothing seems to begin or end on time, I experience a range of emotions, such as anxiety accompanied by the excitement and anticipation of meeting, working, and socializing with people to whom I am connected through house membership but whom I have never met. It is all part of the experience of working together to prepare the space for the communal performance ritual and of the larger work of building and sustaining this community.

The Black and Latina/o LGBT people who participate in Ballroom communities are primarily poor and working class and live in urban centers throughout North America. It is not surprising that Black LGBT communities have a complicated relationship to space. Black LGBT people’s relationship to urban space, private and public, is one of contestation, violence, and exclusion on the one hand and resistance, negotiation, and revision on the other (McKittrick 2006; McKittrick and Woods 2007). As I posit in the pages that follow, Black LGBT people are largely excluded from or marginalized within gay spaces, such as gay neighborhoods and bars and clubs that are marked as white (Nero 2005; Bell and Binnie 2004; Oswin 2008), and from Black heteronormative spaces. Ballroom members often respond to forms of exclusion and marginalization by using performance to carve out – to engender – and transform normative geographies into spaces of communal celebration, affirmation, and support. For Ballroom members, space is a cultural production rather than a concretized fixed location. This article delineates and analyzes the ways in which the Ballroom community creates what I refer to as ‘Black queer space,’ through kinship and performance practices. I use the terms socio-spatial practices or labor to describe the actual work, tasks, and activities that members undertake. Extending Judith Halberstam’s (2005) notion of queer space, I define Black queer space as the place-making practices that Black LGBT people undertake to affirm and support their non-normative sexual identities, embodiment, and community values and practices (Halberstam 2005; Oswin 2008).

First, I provide a brief overview of Ballroom culture, including its unique gender system and kinship structure. Second, I describe the ways in which Black LGBT people are often excluded from or marginalized within the ‘homes’ of their families of origin. The Black LGBT members of the Ballroom community perform family in ways that
reconstitute the home as a socially configured ‘house.’ In so doing, Ballroom members creatively forge conditions of safety that are often unavailable to them in other Black cultural and social spaces (Lefebvre 1991). I highlight how Ballroom members join kinship and ritualized performance at ball events to create alternative spaces for both individual and collective self-fashioning, affirmation, and sociocultural support. Members of the Ballroom community deploy these social practices to create Black queer space. Finally, I highlight what Ballroom members do within these spaces to foster more livable lives for themselves in Detroit, in particular, and in the larger US society.

I argue that Ballroom communities challenge, undo, and transform the exclusionary realities of built environments in urban centers by undertaking the necessary social and performance labors that allow members to revise and reconfigure exclusionary, oppressive, and violent spatial forms. Such an examination of the socio-spatial practices in which Black LGBT people are engaged brings into focus the liminal and interstitial dimensions of spatiality for Ballroom members as they contend with exclusion from or oppression within ‘fixed, tangible, and concretized spaces or built environments’ (Soja 1989).

The social world of Ballroom culture

Although contemporary Ballroom culture has existed for at least five decades, this community of Black and Latina/o LGBT people remains largely underground and unknown. Since its beginnings in Harlem more than 50 years ago, Ballroom culture has expanded rapidly to every major city in the USA, including Chicago, Atlanta, Baltimore, Charlotte, Cleveland, Detroit, and Philadelphia. Sometimes called ‘house ball culture,’ Ballroom was first captured in popular media in Jennie Livingston’s popular documentary film, Paris Is Burning (1990). Livingston’s documentary was the first work to bring mainstream exposure to Ballroom practices in the late 1980s in New York City, and it continues to be the film most screened and referenced, even by Ballroom members. Given the limits of documentary film as a genre, Paris Is Burning provides only a glimpse into the world of this cultural practice. The Aggressives (2005) by Daniel Peddle and Wolfgang Busch’s How do I Look (2006) are examples of more recent documentary films that capture Ballroom in its more contemporary form. Yet despite the aforementioned films and other popular media coverage, this unique and generative culture has received scant scholarly attention.3

With advancements in social media technologies – including Yahoo Groups, MySpace, Facebook, and YouTube – that have helped to facilitate Ballroom as an international social network, the culture is on the move, expanding its sociocultural reach across national boundaries to locations such as Canada, Japan, and the UK.4 This enables this sexual community to transcend national boundaries and geographic spatial limits and to be engaged and consumed on a global scale (Johnston and Longhurst 2010). Although the topic extends beyond the purview of this article, this expansion necessitates a re-examination of the mutually constitutive relationship between race, gender, sexuality, and geography.

Three inextricable features constitute the social practices of Ballroom culture: the gender system, the kinship structure (houses) and the ball events (where ritualized performances are enacted). First, what members refer to as the ‘gender system’ is a collection of gender and sexual subjectivities that extend beyond the binary/ternary categories in dominant society such as male/female, man/woman and gay/lesbian/bisexual, and straight. This system is the basis of all Ballroom subjectivities, familial roles,
and the competitive performance categories at ball events. In this system, categories of sex, gender, and sexuality are linked but not always conflated (see, e.g., Figure 1).5

The gender system is integral to Ballroom performative gender and sexual identities, kinship structure, and ball events. Regarding the former, each member of the Ballroom community identifies as or is assigned one of the six categories in the gender system. Because gender performance is central to self-identification and can imply a whole range of sexual identities in Ballroom culture, the system reflects how the members define themselves largely based on the categories they walk (perform). Although my main focus is on other aspects of Ballroom culture in this article, it is important to note that some of the categories in the system are strictly gender categories, such as Femme Queens. Hence, Femme Queens can be straight, lesbian, bisexual, and queer. However, other categories in Ballroom conflate gender and sexuality, e.g. the Butch Queen. Yet, the category ‘Women,’ consisting of cisgender women who live as such (with few exceptions), demarcates gender, while implying a range of sexualities. Those in the Women category are primarily straight, feminine lesbians, or queer. This gender system does not totally break from hegemonic norms of sex, gender, and sexuality, but it offers more gender and sexual identities from which to choose than available to members in the ‘outside’ world. For, if, as R.W. Connell suggests, ‘masculinity . . . is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experiences, personality, and culture’ (1995, 71, my emphasis), then Ballroom culture’s gender system constitutes multiple places in gender and sexual

The gender system in Ballroom culture

Three Sexes
1. Female (a person born with female sex characteristics)
2. Male (a person born with male sex characteristics)
3. Intersex (a person born with both male and female or indeterminate genitalia).

Six-Part Gender System:
1. Butch Queens (biologically born males who identify as gay or bisexual men; they are and can be masculine, hypermasculine or feminine).
2. Femme Queens (transgender women or male-to-female (MTF) at various stages of gender reassignment; i.e. hormonal or surgical processes).
3. Butch Queens up in Drag (gay men who perform in drag but do not take hormones and do not live as women).
4. Butches (transgender men or female-to-male (FTM) at various stages of gender reassignment, masculine lesbians or a female appearing as male regardless of sexual orientation).
5. Women (biologically born females who are gay, straight-identified or queer).
6. Men (biologically born males who live as men and are straight-identified or not gay-identified).

House Parents:
1. Mothers: Butch Queens, Femme Queens, and Women
2. Fathers: Butch Queens, Butches, and Men

Figure 1. The gender system in Ballroom culture.
relations. Ballroom members expand gender and sexual possibilities by taking up multiple articulations and performances of both masculinity and femininity.

The gender system defines the roles that members serve in the house. In Ballroom culture, houses are kinship structures that are configured socially rather than biologically. Although houses are mostly social configurations, at times, they serve as literal homes or gathering places for their members (Arnold and Bailey 2009). These mostly social configurations are typically named after *haute couture* designers, but some are named after mottos and symbols that express qualities and aims with which the leaders want a house to be associated. These alternative families, as it were, are led by ‘mothers’ and ‘fathers,’ house parents who provide guidance for their ‘children’ of various ages, race and ethnic groups (usually Black and Latino/as), and genders and sexualities, who come from cities and regions throughout North America.

The most conspicuous function of houses is organizing and competing in ball events. The gender system and kin labor I have described create a close-knit community that expresses its essence at these events. House parents recruit, socialize, and prepare their protégés to compete successfully in performative identity and performance categories. When one ‘walks a ball,’ the participant competes in the categories that coincide with their gender identity within the Ballroom community. For instance, a Femme Queen can only ‘walk’ (perform) in categories that are listed under the Femme Queen heading. These intensely competitive performances at the ball events are a part of communal gender practice that occurs and is enhanced within the Black queer spaces that Ballroom members produce.

In the Ballroom scene, these competitive categories abound, for example, ‘realness’ categories such as ‘schoolboy realness,’ call for a performance in which participants are judged on how effective they act, dress, and walk, in ways that are indistinguishable from any other working class man or woman in every day society, as in the case of schoolboy realness, a working class young man going to school. Participants compete vigorously against one another on behalf of their respective houses, and, at times, as individuals, in which case they are ‘free agents,’ or ‘007s.’ The ball event is the central means through which members of the community affirm, celebrate, and constructively critique its fellow members. Thus, the gender system – or the gender and sexual subjectivities – and the ball events combined with the social relations that underpin and exist within the houses (both within and outside the ball space) are mutually constitutive and, taken together, make up the social world of Ballroom culture.

This article is based on performance ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted among this community for more than 6 years, 5 years of which were carried out as an active member of three chapters of The Legendary House of Prestige: Detroit, Los Angeles, and the San Francisco Bay Area. I conducted interviews with 35 members of the Ballroom community, some of whom I interviewed multiple times. I attended and competed in over 30 ball events in Detroit, Atlanta, New York City, Philadelphia, Miami, Louisville, Charlotte, Indianapolis, Oakland, and Los Angeles, and I participated in all house meetings and activities.

Because performance is the primary way in which the Ballroom community organizes and sustains itself, my work with the Ballroom community necessarily takes a performance ethnographic approach. For a performance ethnographer, performance is at once the object of study, the approach to data collection and the theoretical framework through which the data are analyzed (Madison 2012; Conquergood 2002). Performance ethnography allowed me to play the role of what the late performance ethnographer Dwight D. Conquergood (2002) calls a co-performative witness. This approach requires
one to perform and to lend one’s own body and labor to the process involved in the cultural formation under study, particularly when it involves a struggle for social justice. Therefore, performance is a vehicle for moving across seemingly disparate social locations and registers of knowledge. In this context, rather than being simply a participant/observer, I was co-performer, member, and community advocate as well as theorist and critic.

Geographies of exclusion: race, gender, and sexuality

The Black LGBT members of the Ballroom community suffer ‘spatial marginalization’ in a variety of forms (Sibley 1995; Wilkins 2000). By spatial marginalization, I mean the ways in which Black LGBT people are structurally prohibited from, denied access to, and oppressed within public and private spaces due to the race, gender, and sexual identities they claim and the socially transgressive practices in which they engage. For instance, increasingly, Black geographies reflect the material realities and consequences of race and racism (McKittrick and Woods 2007, 6). While urban geographies like Detroit are replete with racial segregation and stratification, Black LGBT people, who live among Black communities, are largely excluded from or oppressed within these Black geographies, particularly their Black homes and families of origin. At the same time, white gay communities and the spaces they create and inhabit are unwelcoming at best and outright hostile at worst to Black LGBT people (I elaborate more on this below). These multiple forms of marginalization constitute geographies of exclusion that compel Ballroom members to create their own spaces of inclusion, affirmation, and celebration. I draw from David Sibley, where in his book *Geographies of Exclusion: Society and Difference in the West* (1995), he suggests that ‘geographies of exclusion’ amount to expressions of a monopolization of space by the powerful and privileged in society and a relegation of ‘weaker groups’ to less desirable environments, while systemically excluding these groups from more desirable spaces (ix). The Ballroom community is but one example of collective Black queer spatial practices of possibilities. Below, I elaborate the spatial conditions under which Ballroom members engage in the social production of Black queer space.

Theorists of geography such as Susan Craddock (2000), Edward Soja (1989), Henri Lefebvre (1991), and others have argued convincingly that space (including architecture and built environments) is as much a social entity as it is a material one. As Soja suggests, spatiality, like society itself, exists in both material and concrete forms and as a set of social relations between people and groups (Craddock 2000; Lefebvre 1991; Soja 1989). For Johnston and Longhurst, space is ‘complex, changeable and discursively produced, and imbued with power relations’ (Johnston and Longhurst 2010, 16). Space is a result of human action, interaction, and participation in social space or ‘broader geographies.’ Particularly for Black LGBT members of the Ballroom community, performance is also a way in which people create, shape, and inform geography (Wilkins 2000). Indeed, space is produced out of dynamic processes of social action and agency. Yet, too often, those who are marginalized by race, gender, and sexuality are the victims of exclusion and oppression based on place-making power moves by privileged and dominant institutions and actors (Wilkins 2000, Sibley 1995; Soja 1989; Smith 2008). Structures of heteropatriarchy and racism and white supremacy influence Black people’s quotidian encounters with public and private space.

Although there has been a great deal of focus in the media on the rapid decline of urban centers like Detroit, there has been very little discussion on the ways in which protracted
racial inequality has influenced deindustrialization, increased poverty and under- and unemployment (Sugrue 1996; Sugrue 2005). Furthermore, it is clear that all of these material (spatial) realities of systemic racism have contributed to the decline in urban America. For instance, in *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, Thomas Sugrue (1996, 2005) argues that ‘the most visible and intractable manifestation of racial inequality in the postwar city was residential segregation’ (2005, 8). He argues that protracted racial segregation joined with deindustrialization, white flight, and hardening ghettoization are the causes of current crises in urban centers like Detroit throughout the USA (2005, 8). It is important to note that Sugrue contends that the aforementioned conditions are a result of policy and economic decisions made by political institutions and actors (2005, 8). This brings into focus the ways in which social geographies – spatial exclusion and inclusion – are structured in part by race. This ‘uneven development,’ according to Sibley, is expressed in racial, socio-economic and spatial terms that constitute the geography of capitalism (Sibley 1995; Gilmore 2002).

Detroit is the largest majority Black city in the USA with 83% of its 713,777 residents identifying as Black/African American in 2010. Detroit is also one of the most segregated cities in the USA. Thus, combined with a growing disparity between the wealthy and the impoverished, Detroit has one of the poorest populations in the country. In 2000, the city had a 7.8% unemployment rate. Over the course of my research, unemployment increased consistently and was at 17% when I concluded data collection proper in 2007. According to the 2000 US Census, between 26.8% and 33.4% of individuals in Detroit reported living in poverty. These sobering socio-economic data reflect spatial realities for a predominantly Black and largely working class and poor city. Hence, in Detroit and other urban centers like it, at best, Black people have a vexed relationship to space (architecture and built environments) in cities in which spatial arrangements are structured by/through racial inequality (McKittrick and Woods 2007). However, albeit less obvious, these deleterious socio-economic realities and their spatial expressions impact Black gender and sexually minoritized people in more perilous ways (Oswin 2008).

Since many Black people in the USA experience and struggle against racial exclusion and oppression expressed in socio-spatial terms, home and family serve as sites of refuge, safety, and social support. For Black people, the home is represented and experienced as what hooks (1990, 41) has referred to as the ‘homeplace,’ a safe space. Homeplace is viewed as a space of shelter and refuge from and resistance against harsh urban realities to which Black people are subjected not only to race, class, and gender oppression but also to violence and exclusion. As an overcompensatory response to racist renderings of Black family formations as backward and deviant, these formations consolidate around heteropatriarchy, literally, excluding or suppressing Black gender and sexual minorities (Lubiano 1998; Johnson 2005; Bailey 2010). As a sociocultural and a material unit, the Black biological family and the home are bound together by an ideology that fetishizes the heteropatriachal nuclear family. According to Black common sense, the home is the *space* of reproduction and the maintenance of a (respectable) heteronormative social, gender, and sexual order (Lubiano 1998, 232). Therefore, while for some Black people the Black *homeplace* is a safe one, for many Black LGBT people the heteronormative home is experienced in very different – less affirming – terms.

Homelessness among LGBT youth in Detroit, many of whom are Black, is a telling example of the ways in which Black LGBT people are excluded from their homeplace of origin. It is estimated that each year, 20–40% of the 1.7 million runaway and homeless youth nationally identify as LGBT. In an interview I conducted with Ms Laura Hughes, Executive Director of the Ruth Ellis Center, a youth social services agency for runaway
and homeless LGBT youth in Detroit, she stated that each year 2000 youth will become homeless because of their LGBT gender and sexual identities. Most of these LGBT youth who are homeless in Detroit are Black. And it is worth mentioning that many of the Ruth Ellis Center’s clients are LGBT members of the Ballroom community. In general, Black LGBT people are not able to rely on or have full access to these Black spaces – the home as a building and the biological family, and the heteronormative social arrangement and practices within this built environment that give it meaning. The ideology that sutures heterosexual gender and sexual norms to the Black home obscures, disciplines, and even jettisons all non-normative gender and sexual practices.

Some Black LGBT people are either forced out of or choose to leave the biological homeplace. Those who remain often experience the home and biological family as coercive, as an often tacit (and other times explicit) ‘familial ultimatum’ that requires them to hide or dispense with their non-normative gender and sexual identities and practices in order to remain a full-fledged part of both the (biological) family and home (concrete building) in which this family lives. Full access to the heteropatriarchal homeplace affords one the shelter, clothing, food, and other resources that family and home are believed to provide. My research demonstrates a connection between the heteropatriarchal structure of the home (Johnston and Longhurst 2010) and how my interlocutors experience the most difficulty relating to and living with their fathers. For instance, when I interviewed Will, a Butch Queen, from the House of Ford in Detroit, he discussed his relationship with his parents, one in which he believes is influenced by his sexual identity. He explained that although he is close to his mother, he is basically estranged from his father because of his gay sexuality.

Brianna, a Femme Queen free agent in the scene, discussed how her relationship with her father deteriorated, she believes, because she lives as a transgender woman. ‘I probably lost the relationship that I had with my father … we were real close. It won’t be like it was,’ said Brianna. Although Will Ford and Brianna’s stories are among a diverse range of experiences that my interlocutors described, a common factor for most LGBT Ballroom members is that their relationships with their biological families suffered, negatively impacting their lives in the Black home, because of their non-conforming gender and sexual identities and practices. Thus, for Black LGBT people in Ballroom, the heteronormative space of the home – of the biological family, and of the heterogendered social and sexual relations – continually reproduces confinement, regulation, and exclusion. And for many, this space is often experienced in violent ways.

For Black LGBT members of the Ballroom community, the social configuration of the house, the kinship system in the community, undertakes the labor that biological families and homes are either unwilling or unable to do. The reconfiguration of the biological familial home to the house of kinship for Ballroom members is one means through which they produce Black queer space. For instance, although there are times when, as Prada, a Butch Queen from the House of Escada notes, Ballroom houses are actual shelters for ‘those lost souls to craft’ and cohabitate,’ for most members of the community, the homeplace is a sociocultural undertaking rather than what Soja calls a ‘concrete spatiality’ (Soja 1989, 120). The house in the Ballroom community is performative in that it both exposes the ideological and fetishistic basis of the home and the biological family, while at the same time it takes on the actual labor of social support, affirmation, and critique upon which the community depends in the ‘house.’

Pokka, the father of the Legendary House of Prestige’s LA Chapter, makes this point when he described how his gay mother Ariel, a Femme Queen and, at the time of our interview, the house mother of the LA Chapter, helped him through tough times with his
biological family. ‘She guided me through the gay life. She played a motherly figure. She kept me out of trouble by helping me with who to date and who not to date. We had conversations that I could not have with my biological mother. My parents knew about me but Ariel got me through the gay lifestyle,’ said Pokka.

Another example of the important function of the Ballroom house is the relationship between Tino and Noir Prestige. Noir brought Tino into the Ballroom scene and into the Legendary House of Prestige. At balls, both Tino and Noir walked in Butch realness categories, walking thug realness and schoolboy realness, respectively. And both Noir and Tino identified openly as gay men living with HIV, and devoted their careers and activism to HIV-prevention issues. Even though Noir was older, Tino took on the ‘big brother’ role in Noir’s life. Their relationship provided very specific needs for each: Tino always reminded Noir to take his antiretroviral medications, while Noir helped Tino budget his money. The relationship between Tino and Noir is a testament to how two Black gay men forged a brotherhood through friendship both within and beyond the Ballroom community. ‘We are truly brothers,’ Tino said emphatically about Noir and him. These were common narratives told to me from many of my interlocutors and fellow Ballroom members. Such relationships make clear the integral role that Ballroom kinship plays in the lives of its Black LGBT members and how it challenges and provides alternatives to the heteronormative spatialities of biological families from which many members come.

The Ballroom house is a practice of possibility (Madison 2010) and the means through which members of the community reconstitute the ‘home’ as a ‘house’ within a Black LGBT context, performing the labor of kin under the terms and values of Ballroom culture. And regardless of whether or not the ‘house’ is a ‘home’ – a building – house members consider themselves a family and do a whole host of activities together to fortify their kinship ties. Unlike in Ballroom members’ biological families, the emphasis is placed on the labor involved in developing and maintaining relationships that add meaning to the house (Arnold and Bailey 2009; Bailey 2009; Bailey 2010).

Ballroom communities and black queer spatial practices (place-making)

After waiting for 3 hours, I finally saw cars full of people, most of whom I had never seen before, pulling into the parking lot. Passengers got out of their cars carrying McDonalds and Burger King bags. ‘Is Duchess here yet?’ several people asked. ‘Not yet,’ someone responded. Soon Duchess drove up with a car full of other folks, all carrying black plastic bags from the store. ‘Ok, let’s do this, kids,’ said Duchess. As soon as we walk into the rather old-looking large hall, Duchess, along with a personal friend who accompanied him, starts delegating duties. ‘I need someone to set up some tables and chairs and start laying this tile down for the runway,’ says Duchess. At some point during all the activity, I stand back and look around to see all of these men, women, and transgender men and women laying tile, arranging tables and chairs, cleaning dishes for the bar, decorating the platform and table for the judges, cutting ribbons, lifting tables, hanging streamers, mopping the floor, and cleaning toilets and sinks. Some of us are chatting, laughing, flirting, and just having a good time with one another even though many of us have not met before. We all work together to prepare the hall for this anniversary and reunion ball, regardless of gender and sexual roles. Even though Duchess is delegating, she is also working. We all indulge in the excitement and pleasure of preparing the space for the performance ritual of which we are going to partake in just a few hours.

Just as Black LGBT people in the Ballroom community are excluded from or marginalized within their Black biological families and homes of origin, they have similar
experiences in public domains in urban centers like Detroit. Black LGBT people do not have the luxury of safe, permanent, and reliable spaces in which to congregate and socialize, such as bars and clubs in gay districts. These are luxuries afforded to primarily white gay and lesbian communities (although some gay bar districts have a diverse patronage in many respects) these areas and the buildings in them are dominated and owned by whites, notwithstanding the Black owner of the Post in Detroit that I reference above (Nero 2005).

As political scientist Shane Phelan (2001) remarks, many spaces of gay consumption are spaces of bounded exclusions based on race and gender and other phobias against erotic and sexual minorities (cited in Bell and Binnie 2004, 1810). These are gay districts such as Boystown in Chicago, the Castro in San Francisco, West Hollywood in Los Angeles, Chelsea in New York, and gay districts, neighborhoods, and strips in other cities like Dallas, TX, Columbus, OH, and Indianapolis, IN. Drawing from Phelan further, Bell and Binnie (2004) point out that as some of these gay consumption spaces begin to open up to non-gay identified consumers, the boundaries around these spaces get redrawn to keep the unwanted queers out. I argue that in most cases, the unwanted queers are working class and poor LGBT people of color (Bell and Binnie 2004). In Detroit, for instance, the gay strip in Royal Oak, MI, a suburb of Detroit, is dominated by white middle and upper class men who exhibit both overt and covert forms of racism against Black and other LGBT people of color. The few spaces to which Black LGBT people have access are often temporary – one or two nights a week – and located in heavily surveilled areas or in ghettos where bars and clubs are owned by whites.16

Because Black LGBT people live within and among Black heteronormative spaces and are largely excluded from white LGBT spaces in Detroit, Ballroom members reconstitute a heteronormative homeplace into a queer house, one that welcomes and nurtures their Black LGBT lives. Yet, in Ballroom culture, there are no houses without balls, and there are no balls without houses (Arnold and Bailey 2009). These kinship units and practices are joined with ritualized performance to produce Black queer space at ball events. Therefore, it is crucial to examine these two dimensions together to understand the extent to which the community undertakes a radical practice of kinship and place-making through performance.

In her essay, ‘Performance Geographies from Slave Ship to Ghetto,’ Sonjah Stanley Niaah (2008) argues that performance geography highlights the way that people living in particular locations use strategies of performance not only to survive the challenges of urban life but also as ways to transform and give new meanings to locations for communal purposes. In Ballroom communities, performance, often ritualized, is the nexus between the social configuration of the house and the ball events that houses organize and compete in. I draw from Niaah’s notion of performance geography to illustrate the ways that members of the community produce space and to highlight the generative, sociocultural, and spatial practices they deploy to forge alternative spatial possibilities for Black LGBT existence in urban Detroit. Since ball events occur in spatial configurations that members produce collectively, these configurations are fundamental to the culture.

In the opening ethnographic vignette, I am waiting to begin this process of socio-spatial production with my fellow house members. Once a ball location is secured, transforming the spatial arrangement is essential to the overall ball and the ritualized and competitive performances that are enacted. Standards for the spatial arrangements of balls are well known throughout the Ballroom community. As with most Ballroom practices, these standards are not written anywhere; they are just known. These arrangements are indispensable to the ritual and competitive performances undertaken at the balls. For
example, at one of the first balls I ever attended in Detroit (in 2001), the House of Ford had to drastically rearrange the Crystal Ballroom in the Masonic Temple to make it look and feel like the proper space for a ball. The Masonic Temple is known as a multipurpose venue and although it hosts many different types of events, normally when it is rented for local community gatherings they are large heteronormative events, namely weddings or religious gatherings. It was thus ironic but necessary that the House of Ford work creatively to rearrange and transform this space used mostly for heteronormative events in preparation for their ball. Not only does this demonstrate that balls can be held practically anywhere as long as the space is transformed in the appropriate manner, but it is also an example of the Ballroom community’s commitment to creating the space and the occasion for its members to come together.

Before I describe further the ritual performances at balls, I want to delineate the spatial arrangements in which they occur. Fundamental to the spatial transformation is a ‘T’ formation by which audiences and performances are arranged (Jackson 2002, 34). The performer’s runway is a narrow area positioned in between the spaces allocated for the audience on both sides. Runways can be constructed in a variety of ways. They can be configured via an elevated platform, a colorful rug, or a design etched onto the floor. This arrangement is intended to resemble the runway that professional models use, which is elevated and runs throughout the audience so that designers and other onlookers can get a full view of the models in their clothing. In Ballroom, the performances on the runway occur in between audience members on either side of the runway, while other audience members are scattered throughout the room. More often than not the spatial arrangement of the audiences changes at various moments during the ball. Members end up surrounding the runway on three sides with the panel of judges at the front end of the runway (Figure 2).

The panel of judges, consisting of no less than six prominent members of the Ballroom scene, is positioned at the front of the runway off to one side and allows the judges to directly face the performers. It is worth noting that judges are selected by the housemother and/or the housefather of the house that organizes the ball. These members are usually well known as successful competitors in the Ballroom scene on local or national levels. The seating for the panel of judges is often elevated slightly to give the judges the best visual perspective. All performances occur in the direction of the judges. There are several categories that require the judges to scrutinize a performer’s lower body; some categories include floor performance. The table for the DJ is positioned just above the panel of judges, either to the right or to the left of it. Contestants and crowd members stand at the back end of the runway, the area directly facing the panel of judges. All of the space outside of the arrangement of the ‘T’ is a general area where members of the crowd stand and sit to view the performances. This is also the area from which participants emerge. The affirmation, the status, and the sense of belonging enjoyed in this communal spatial arrangement at ball events are not typically afforded to house members in the outside world.

Although people engage in ritual performances in a variety of locales, Ballroom’s spatial organization and the labor involved in creating it directly inform the communal nature of this event. The runway is not only a site where recognition and affirmation are conferred, but it is also the space in which vigorous competition and critique occur in the presence of members of the larger community. The runway is the focal point, the place of spectacle, and the nexus of the interrelationship between the onlookers, participants, the commentator, the judges, and the DJ (Figure 3).

Most importantly, the runway is the place where the blend of energies in the room converges to spur on the performance of the person on the runway – this is similar in many
respects to the manner in which call and response techniques converge to render a song for Black church services and events. When house members prepare a space for a ball, they adhere to the traditions of and respect for the social dynamics of Ballroom culture to ensure that their ball will be memorable. House parents, especially, are aware of what it takes to host an ‘ovah’ ball, so they arrange the space carefully to create the environment for a transformative experience.

Spatial arrangements signify, facilitate, and maintain a social hierarchy in Ballroom culture. For instance, the judges’ location in the ‘T’ and their role in the ritual are a testament to this fact. During the ball while sitting on the panel, judges do not participate in the actual performance as the audience, the commentator, and the DJ do; nevertheless, they wield enormous power. They perform the task of judging under extreme pressure from competing interests (mainly the other houses). The spatial location of the ball’s various participants helps to facilitate and enforce a balance of power between judges and the commentator (although it often does not). The commentator is facilitator of each category. A single judge can chop a participant if that person’s performance is determined as being below the standard for the category. During a category competition, if one judge chops a competitor he or she is eliminated from that category. The commentator is also positioned in a way that he can impact a judge’s decision and, in extreme cases, override a judge’s chop. Below, I demonstrate the role of the commentator and his or her ability to influence the outcome of a category based on, by and large, the spatial position that the commentator occupies during the ritual.

One of the most climactic vogue battles I observed during my research was between Diva D. Bvlgari (from Detroit) and a member of the House of Chanel (whom I will refer to

![Figure 2. The Ballroom culture ground plan.](image-url)
as Chanel going forward) at the Ebony Ball in Atlanta in 2004. Bvlgari and Chanel are the fifth set of performers to battle. The DJ plays ‘The Ha Dance,’ a house music mix that is the signature song for voguing in Ballroom culture. Both tall and lean Butch Queens, Diva D. Bvlgari and Chanel stroll down the runway toward the judges, performing one of the basic elements of New Way Vogue: ‘soft and cunt’ arm control. When they get to the judges table, the ‘nasty battle’ begins, marked by the commentator’s chant, ‘Brrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr ow.’ The commentator roams about the space between the performers, the judges’ table, and the crowd. The two voguers spin around and drop on the count of one. They execute what Ballroom members call a ‘Machiavelli,’ on the beat of the music and on the commentator and the crowd’s ‘ow.’ ‘Pitty pat, pitty pat, pitty pat, ow,’ Jack Givenchy, the commentator, chants as the two voguers simultaneously perform another spin and dip combination. The commentator’s chant assists the competitors during their performance by keeping them on beat and enabling them to show off their, in this case, voguing skills.

Figure 3. Ninja Prestige voguing at the Love is a Message Ball in L.A. in 2005.
Yet, the ultimate goal for each performer in a vogue battle is to execute the elements of vogue in a fashion that distinguishes him from his opponent. During the contest, alternating between facing each other and the judges' table, Chanel and Bvlgari throw shade at one another using stylized arm motions, and feigned gestures at each other’s faces. After they perform a series of spin and dip combinations, the commentator gives the signal for the competitors to wind down their performances and to get ready to end on a pose on the count of three. Ebony and Bvlgari stand in front of the judges and gradually minimize their performance to very fluid but precise arm and hand gestures. ‘One, pitty pat, pitty pat, pitty pat, two pitty pat, pitty pat, pitty pat, three, pitty pat, pitty pat pitty pat, and hold – that – pose,’ said the commentator. Diva D. Bvlgari does a final slow dip and ends his performance. This final move must end on the beat the commentator and the music provide. Both competitors are exemplary in their voguing skills, mixing ‘soft and cunt’ with ‘dramatics.’ In voguing, ‘dramatics’ are hard, fast and aggressive moves. ‘Judges, who do you see; who do you want?’ asks the commentator in a musical rhythm. Diva D. Bvlgari wins the contest, but he loses the category finale in which he competes against a member of the House of Ebony and another member from the House of Chanel. The member from the House of Ebony wins the overall battle. The contestants congratulate each other and leave the runway to go back into the crowd.

I use this example to argue briefly three points: the first is, as indicated in Figure 2, the positions of the judges, the commentator, and the other actors that make up the spatial arrangement as a whole coincide with the status of the actors in the ritual, their roles and performances, and the social dynamics in the Ballroom community. The judges are usually elevated and spatially situated to decide which competitor(s) win the category, as it is enacted on the runway. The commentator is positioned in-between the judges and the audience/participants, and thus functions as an interlocutor. He or she mediates the socio/spatial dynamics that occur during the performance. The space and the social dynamics that play out during the ritual are hierarchical yet flexible; they reinforce the social organization of Ballroom culture that is widely accepted by its members.

Second, Ballroom spatial arrangements have specific criteria, but the configuration does not remain fixed throughout the duration of a ball. The role of the spectator is active and transitive; spectators are expected to ‘help out’ with the performances. There are times when the spatial arrangements hamper the spectators, who sometimes feel confined during climactic moments at the ball. During many performances, the audience becomes so excited that the ‘T’ configuration transforms because audience members go onto the runway and encircle the performer(s) and the commentator. In other words, with the performers in the middle, audience members get ‘caught up’ in the moment and surround the performers and, in effect, end up obstructing the view of the judges. A common element of performance traditions in the African Diaspora, the circle appears often in Ballroom performance even when the spatial arrangement is not originally configured in such a way.

Finally, for Ballroom members, spatial practices and ritual performances are brought together to foster a sense of belonging, safety, and sociocultural affirmation (albeit brutally competitive at times). Hence, as Lefebvre (1991) writes, space is a product of social interaction, deeply rooted in a dialectic between space and the transformative practices of social subjects. Thus, the spatial arrangements that are codified within Ballroom culture and implemented at all balls, no matter the location, are ‘socio-spatial practices’ (Lefebvre 1991, 8). And, perhaps most importantly, these socio-spatial practices represent the possibilities of queer social transformation in spatial terms. Because Ballroom members create a social sphere betwixt and between domains that are replete with racism, elitism,
sexism, and homophobia, the culture exists within a liminal zone. Therefore, the socially reconfigured space of the ball is where the members convene to create continuity, new identities, and new strategies for adaptation and survival (Conquergood 1998, 221). Ultimately, Black LGBT people congregate and create community in spaces of liminality, which can be violent, tragic, and, at the very least, inconvenient. At the same time, however, these spaces of liminality offer moments of possibility and freedom, even if those moments are ephemeral.

**Conclusion: performing family, creating black queer space**

Later, toward the beginning of the ball, at the end of the Grand House March, Frank Revlon, the commentator, looks at all the members of the Legendary House of Prestige who have come from all over the country to this anniversary ball in Detroit and says, ‘DJ, cut the music. Cut the music please. Do you see this? – Gesturing throughout the room – Do you see this? They are sixty odd deep; this is Ballroom evolution. Now, we need to take this from state to muthafuckin’ state to muthafuckin’ state to muthafukin’ state.’ Revlon’s proclamation and charge to his fellow Ballroom members illustrates that the house is not only a social configuration but also a ritualized spatial practice and a Black queer performance geography.

Ballroom exemplifies the transformative nature of culture and illustrates that the tasks of building a community, of self-fashioning, creating, and sustaining social configurations such as houses are ongoing. Ballroom’s participants undertake these necessary tasks in the interstices within and between the home and the house by remaking family. They also take up the aforementioned tasks within and between concretized spatialities of the built environment and the transformed space of the ball event. My point here is not to romanticize Ballroom culture and suggest that the practices in which its members are engaged totally transforms the oppressive conditions under which they live. I do not suggest that Ballroom members undo convergent race, class, gender, and sexual marginalization in urban spaces like Detroit. Instead, I argue that members ‘make do’ with what they have in an effort to forge lives that are more livable (Butler 2004).

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**Notes**

1. The house that hosts the ball provides the commentators’ transportation, lodging, and a fee. For local commentators, the house pays the fee only.
2. I became acquainted with Duchess while we worked together on an HIV/AIDS prevention program with the Ballroom community at Men of Color Motivational Group, Inc. (MOC), a now defunct Black LGBT agency in the city.
4. To see how voguing has expanded to Japan, view the following links: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QGuPzT5ls8&feature=related and http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZVuRysgYSw&NR=1
5. My outline of the six subjectivities within the gender system is drawn from my ethnographic
data that include my attendance/participation in balls, my analysis of numerous ball flyers, and
interviews that I conducted with members from all over the country over a nine-year period.
Despite a few discrepancies among different sectors of the community, the general components
of the system are standard throughout the Ballroom scene. The gender system is separate but
inextricably linked to the competitive categories that appear on ball flyers. At balls,
competitive performance categories abound, but the gender system serves as the basis upon
which the competitive categories are created.

6. For a video example of this category, see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xws6bQTYFFo.

7. Considering that Ballroom culture is primarily a North American phenomenon, some of the
interviews are with members from other cities such as Atlanta, Philadelphia, Oakland, and Los
Angeles. Even though I focus on the social geography of Detroit, my data reflect the national
scope of Ballroom culture, as I have attended several balls elsewhere in the country.

8. It is worth noting the an integral part of my performance ethnographic research involved me
working as a staff consultant for a now-defunct HIV/AIDS prevention organization, MOC,
which ran a prevention program that targeted the Ballroom community in Detroit and was
funded by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC).

9. Fabian (1990). The cultural anthropologist Johannes Fabian claims that researchers must move
from informative ethnography to performative ethnography. Fabian suggests that the
ethnographic process is a performance between the researcher and his or her interlocutors. It
must move beyond communication and dialog to a more interactive exchange of knowledge.
According to Fabian, performative ethnography offers an opportunity to alter and negotiate the
power relations that come with the territory of doing ethnographic work. Fabian suggests that
doing ethnography with and not of a particular group allows for a stronger partnership to
develop between the researcher and his or her informants.

10. This was the rate of unemployment as of July 2005 taken from a report created by the
gov. The poverty statistics are taken from the United Census Bureau 2000.

11. For more statistics on homelessness among young LGBTQ people, see US Department of
Health and Human Services at http://www.thetaskforce.org/downloads/HomelessYouth.pdf

12. These statistics were provided by the Ruth Ellis Center. Please see http://www.ruthelliscenter.org/

13. In Ballroom, a free agent is a competitor who does not belong to a house.

14. In Ballroom, craft or crafting signifies fraudulent activities or obtaining items or services
(clothing, plane tickets, hotel rooms, and cars) through illegal means—mainly identity theft. It
is also called ‘stunts’ or ‘stunkus.’ This activity is rampant in Ballroom culture and constitutes
a secret economy within the scene, even though some members are caught and serve jail time.

15. In Ballroom culture and the larger Black LGBT community, male and female pronouns are
often used interchangeably. Duchess is a Butch Queen (a gay man) but he is sometimes referred
to as she.

16. Ballroom culture is a subculture of larger Black LGBT communities; the culture is not
synonymous to larger Black LGBT communities. Ballroom is not always viewed favorably
among other Black LGBT people. This point is beyond the purview of this article but when
understood in the context of the other forms of exclusion that Ballroom members suffer, the
conditions under which they live and produce alternative spaces are made clear.

17. In Ballroom ‘ovah’ means that an event, a person or a performance is very impressive,
extraordinary, or remarkable.

18. In society, ‘cunt’ is typically used to refer to a woman or a vagina in a derogatory manner.
However, in Ballroom culture, this term has been appropriated and given a quite different
meaning. Members use cunt as an aesthetic criterion that signifies ultimate femininity or a
feminine quality in a performance.

19. A Machiavelli is a very dramatic spin and dip combination in vogue performance. Many
members refer to this aspect of vogue performance as ‘falling out.’

20. Being shady or ‘throwing shade’ means underhanded or indirect dealings, or someone’s
attempt to undermine a person without being overt. When judges are called shady it usually
means that they are judging the contestants in an unfair or biased manner.

21. During the Grand House March, the house that organizes the ball introduces its membership to
the ball participants. This practice occurs during the beginning of the ball, and the commentator
calls out or recognizes each member and the categories they walk for which he/she is known.
Notes on contributor

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References


Este ensayo examina las formas en que las personas negras lesbianas, gays, bisexuales y transexuales (LGBT) miembros de la comunidad de baile (ballroom) crean un espacio queer negro para disputar su exclusión espacial del espacio público y privado en Detroit, Michigan y su marginalización dentro de este. La cultura ballroom, que existe en la mayor parte de los centros urbanos de Norteamérica, es una comunidad y una red de personas negras y latinas LGBTQ. En esta etnografía, describo las múltiples funciones de dos dominios mutuamente constitutivos de la cultura, afinidad (las casas) y performance ritual (los eventos) ballroom. Utilizo teorías queer de geografía y me baso en la noción de Sonjah Stanley Niaah de geografía de performance para examinar las prácticas socio-espaciales generativas que despliegan los miembros para forjar posibilidades alternativas para la vida negra LGTBQ en Detroit. De muchas formas los miembros de la comunidad ballroom trabajan para desafiar y deshacer las realidades alienantes y opresivas de los ambientes construidos en los centros urbanos al abordar la necesidad social y el trabajo performativo que permiten a sus miembros revisar y reconfigurar las formas espaciales exclusivas y opresivas.

**Palabras claves:** geografía de performance; etnografía de performance; afinidad; espacio queer negro; marginalización espacial; prácticas socio-espaciales
生产空间：底特律的国标舞文化与空间实践的可能性

本文检视国标舞社群中黑人男女同性恋者、双性恋者与跨性别者（LGBT），如何创造黑人酷儿空间，以对抗他们在密西根底特律都会区的公共及私人空间中所遭受的空间排除与边缘化。在全北美大多数的市中心中，国标舞文化隶属于黑人与拉丁裔的社群及社会网络。我将在本民族志中描绘国标舞文化中两个相互构成的领域的多重功能：亲属关係（家族）以及仪式化的表演（舞会）。我运用酷儿地理学的理论，并採用Sonjah Stanley Niaah的‘表演地理学’之概念，检视国标舞成员所部署的具有生产力的社会 – 空间实践，为黑人LGBTQ社群在底特律的生活打造了另类可能。就诸多方面而言，国标舞社群的成员，透过採取让成员得以修正并重构排除与压迫性空间形式的必要社会及表演劳动，挑战并消解了都会中心造成环境异化与压迫的现实。

关键词：表演地理学; 表演民族志; 亲属关係; 黑人酷儿空间; 空间的边缘化; 社会-空间实践