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Seeing and Being Seen: Ballroom Culture as a Space Subverting Intersectional and Systemic Oppressions in *Pose FX* (First Season, 2018)

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Introduction

Pose's first season (2018): between fiction and reality

Created by Steven Canals, Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk, *Pose* is an American drama TV series which was produced by the premium channel *FX* and which ran for three seasons from 2018 to 2021. As framed in the series' pilot episode, *Pose* takes place in 1987 when, in Allentown, Pennsylvania, a young aspiring Black[1] dancer named Damon (Ryan Jamaal Swain) gets thrown out of his home after his father finds out that he is gay: he then flees to New York City with only a backpack on his shoulders and bright aspirations for his future. After sleeping on park benches for a few nights, he stumbles upon Blanca (Michaela Jaé Rodriguez), a trans[2] woman of color who has just left her chosen family called "House" to create her own, the House of Evangelista. She takes Damon under her wing and invites him to join her newly-formed house, taking on the position of a mother figure by giving him shelter and food.

Pose's first season shows the intersecting lives of the queer[3] members of the House of Evangelista within a family life setting and environment. Blanca, the house "mother,"[4] provides life guidance and maternal love to her children: Angel (Indya Moore), who works both as a dancer and sex worker, Lil Papi (Angel Bismark Curiel), a teenager who engages in drug dealing to make ends meet, as well as Damon and his boyfriend Ricky (Dyllón Burnside) who also aspires to be a dancer. Another central character to *Pose* is Pray Tell (Billy Porter), who is a close

[1] In *The Diversity Style Guide*, journalist and professor Rachele Kanigel wrote that "[capitalizing] races [...] offers a modicum of respect, a recognition that these are not just colors but ethnicities like Asian American, Jewish and Greek." In that matter, I chose to capitalize the word "Black" in this thesis.

[2] There is an ongoing debate concerning the use of the terms "transsexual" or "transgender" when referring to trans people. Indeed, "transsexual" refers to a trans person who went through gender confirmation surgery while "transgender" refers to a trans person who did not go through the surgery, but still identifies with a gender different from the one that was assigned at birth. I will use the term "trans" followed by a noun referring to people ("trans women" or "trans characters"). I chose to use this term because I do not wish to divide trans people into these distinguishing categories. By using the term "trans", I separate a person's "transness" with this person's genitals whether they fit the gender they identify with or not.

[3] During the 1980s, the LGBTQ+ community appropriated the word "queer", once used in a derogatory way, as a means to "[relate] to a sexual or gender identity that does not correspond to established ideas of sexuality and gender, especially heterosexual norms." (*Oxford English Dictionary*) In an academic setting, the term *queer* was first used by author and theorist Teresa de Lauretis in the essay "Queer Theories: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities, An Introduction" in 1991. It sought to counteract the views on homosexuality as a marginal and deviant "life-style" in opposition to heterosexuality, but also to shed light on the intersectional challenges lived by queer people and thus including race, gender and class in queer analysis.

[4] In Ballroom, houses are led by chosen "mothers" or "fathers" who provide guidance to their "children". The emulation of family will be explored in the second part of this dissertation.

friend of Blanca's and who also acts as an authority figure, being the "emcee"[5] of the ball events. In the first season, viewers also get to see the growing tensions between the members of the House of Evangelista and those of Abundance, which Blanca left to create her own in the pilot episode. The House of Abundance consists of Blanca's own mother, Elektra (Dominique Jackson), a reigning champion within the realm of Ballroom culture as well as her children, Lulu (Hailie Sahar), Candy (Angelica Ross), Ricky (Jason A. Rodriguez) and Cubby (Jeremy McClain). The extensive array of characters that make up the chosen families in *Pose* and the intricate relationships it involves indicate a sense of community and kinship that is prevalent in the show's first season. In addition to being central to the chosen families, this notion of community also prevails during the "ball" events, which are performative social constructions that rely on the labor of house members.

Ballroom is a subculture that revolves around kinship and balls: they are events taking place every week and consist only of queer people of color, especially Black, Asian and Latinx.[6] As Blanca puts it in the pilot episode, balls are "a gathering of people who are not welcome to gather anywhere else, a celebration of a life that the rest of the world does not deem worthy of celebration." (00:27:22) In addition to accounting for the exclusion faced by her peers in *Pose*'s diegetic world, Blanca's words also emphasize the inclusion created by queer people of color within Ballroom to counteract excluding behavior. The pilot episode therefore brings its main characters to posit balls as spaces of inclusion for the excluded where contestants "walk" certain categories, allowing them to express their gender and sexual identity as well as emulate a certain social class that they cannot access outside the walls of Ballroom. According to Janet Mock, a writer and director for the show, the characters' narratives in *Pose* "center on what it is like living, struggling and striving in a world not built for them to thrive,"[7] all the while fostering relationships within a subculture that allows these individuals to express their identities on their own terms. This dissertation will explore how the first season of *Pose* presents Ballroom culture

[5] In Ballroom, the "emcee" is a person who comments on the performances that are enacted during the ball events. Their presence is central to those performances as they convey information on the quality of the contestants' overall presentation.

[6] In Spanish, a woman of Hispanic descent may be referred to as "Latina" and a man "Latino." However, as queer individuals may identify with multiple gender identities, I chose to refer to people of Hispanic descent as "Latinx" in order to not refer to queer people through the lens of the heteronormative binary gender system that is "man" and "woman."

[7] Mock, Janet. "'Pose' Writer Janet Mock on Making History With Trans Storytelling (Guest Column)." *Variety*, 16 May. 2018, https://variety.com/2018/tv/columns/pose-writer-janet-mock-ryanmurphy-column-1202803368/. Accessed 24 February 2022.

as a metaphorical and concrete space that subverts the systemic and intersectional oppressions faced by queer people of color.

Yet, even though I posit Ballroom culture as an inclusive space, the first season of *Pose* instantly puts into focus the tensions between its numerous characters. Because the space that the balls offer is placed within a competition in which contestants receive a mark by a panel of judges based on how authentic their performance was, as well as trophies and acclaim from their peers, Ballroom relies predominantly on competition. Its very first scene attests to the paradoxical quarrels in the spaces of inclusion that the subculture offers. The show starts on the image of a character voguing in Elektra's apartment, as the members of her house try to choose the category they should walk at the next ball. Elektra steals Blanca's idea, which the latter highlights, challenging the authority of Elektra as Mother. The interaction leads to Blanca's estrangement and isolation because the members of her house—some of whom are also trans women—call her a "cross-dresser," which results in her exclusion as Blanca identifies as a biological woman. Putting Blanca far away from the other characters of the house, the camera emphasizes her exclusion in addition to the dialogue that foreshadows the paradoxical tensions that may arise in a community that nonetheless relies on the value of inclusion.

Given the paradoxical aspect of *Pose*'s opening scene, how can the tension between inclusion and exclusion be studied throughout this paper? In *Décoder les Séries Télévisées* (2017), Stéphane Benassi described the meaning and syntax of series' pilot episodes that are relevant for the analysis of *Pose*'s paradoxical opening on inclusion and exclusion:

> [L]a matrice d'une œuvre de fiction plurielle [permet] de définir, de qualifier et de fixer les invariants du récit (et donc d'induire les variations possibles), déterminant ainsi d'une part sa forme syntaxique et, d'autre part, ses principales caractéristiques diégétiques et idéologiques. Bien qu'étant une notion de nature conceptuelle, la matrice se matérialise toutefois en premier lieu à travers sa consignation dans la bible et sa formalisation dans le pilote de chaque œuvre. Chaque formule reposerait selon nous sur les cinq paramètres (sémantique, spatial, temporel, narratif et discursif) affectés par la dialectique variation/invariance lors des processus de mise en série et/ou en feuilleton des récits [...], et leur exploitation consisterait, pour les scénaristes, à faire varier les paramètres sémantiques, temporels et narratifs dans le cas d'un développement feuilletonesque, et les paramètres spatiaux et discursifs dans le cas d'un développement sériel.[8]

Benassi sheds light on the systems used in TV series to study, in a pilot episode, multiple possibilities ahead of the production of the entire season. Thus, this first interaction between Blanca and the rest of her house will actually kickstart one of the main narrative plots of *Pose*'s

[8] Sepulchre, Sarah (ed.). *Décoder les Séries Télévisées*. Paris: De Boeck Supérieur, 2017, p. 115.

first season: the rise of her house in Ballroom culture. In parallel, the tensions with the House of Abundance will come to an end in the series finale of *Pose*'s first season, attesting to a mirror effect during which the problems created in a series' pilot will find reconciliations towards the end. The paradoxes presented in *Pose*'s pilot episode thus give the audience an array of complex dimensions that offer multiple answers to the questions raised by Ballroom.

Even though *Pose* has garnered critical acclaim in its three-season span, the subculture that it depicts has remained underground for a long time. Indeed, in his book *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance and Ballroom Culture in Detroit* (2013), professor of gender studies and Ballroom scholar Marlon M. Bailey stated that Ballroom did not get mainstream exposure until the release of Jennie Livingston's 1990 documentary, *Paris is Burning*.[9] The latter documents the lives of New Yorkers living through the Ballroom subculture from the mid to late 1980s, a narrative which echoes the diegetic period of *Pose*'s first season. Containing various interviews from queer people of color, explanations of Ballroom's performance system as well as numerous shots from the balls, Livingston's documentary is described as a "thoughtful exploration of race, class, gender, and sexuality in America."[10] It has won a dozen awards and was also selected by the Library of Congress to figure in its National Film Registry, a national collection of films deemed of cultural and historical importance,[11] highlighting its impact at the time of its release. Multiple scholars and theorists have however highlighted the limits of Livingstone's documentary. For instance, in *Paris is Burning: A Queer Film Classic* (2013), Lucas Hildebrand argued that Livingston "has been criticized for not being more self-reflexive in locating herself in relation to her subjects or disclosing her identity."[12] In other words, critics condemned the possibility that Livingston may have appropriated and exploited queer Black and Latinx culture. Nonetheless, *Pose*'s producers and writers expressed their interest in the documentary on various occasions, calling it a "gift" and an "entry point for folks when it comes to Ballroom."[13] Highlighting the documentary's authority on the making of *Pose*, scholars

[9] Bailey, Marlon M. *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance and Ballroom Culture in Detroit*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2013, p. 4.
[10] Green, Jesse. "Paris Has Burned." *New York Times*, April 18 1993, https://www.nytimes.com/1993/04/18/style/paris-has-burned.html?sec=&spon=&pagewanted=all. Accessed 7 November 2022.
[11] Rio, Malcolm. "Architecture is Burning: An Urbanism of Queer Kinship in Ballroom Culture" *Thresholds*, Vol. 48, 2020, p. 123.
[12] Hildebrand, Lucas. *Paris is Burning: A Queer Film Classic*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2013, p. 17.
[13] Dry, Jude. "'Paris Is Burning': 'Pose' Writers and Creators Reflect on Landmark Documentary." *Indie Wire*, June 24 2019, https://www.indiewire.com/2019/06/paris-is-burning-pose-writers-react-lgbt-film-1202152502/. Accessed 7 November 2022.

Koch-Rein et al. in "Representing Trans: Visibility and its Discontents" argued that the series was built from "the events, settings, aesthetics, and community" covered by *Paris is Burning*,[14] which highlights the long-lasting impact of the documentary on more recent pieces of work. Although keeping in mind that *Pose* is a fictional show, it is because of this impact and its narrow connection with *Paris is Burning* that I will use the latter as a secondary source. Indeed, I intend to use quotes from real Ballroom members in order to support some of my arguments. This is also justified by the fact that, since *Pose* is still a recent TV series, there is still a limited number of scholarly articles on the subject.

The creators of *Pose* thus shed light on a subculture designed to act as a safe space for the excluded. Because *Pose* takes inspiration from the real-life Ballroom culture, the show gives an extensive meaning to the words "seeing" and "being seen" by bringing Ballroom to the center of mainstream popular culture, allowing its subjects to be seen by the audience and transforming the series into a political piece of entertainment. Indeed, the sense of community, love and acceptance we witness throughout its first season deeply contrasts with the exclusion that the characters face in their everyday lives. In this thesis, I seek to investigate the various systemic oppressions which resulted in the creation of Ballroom as depicted in the first season of *Pose*.

"Seeing" and "being seen:" representation, hegemonic norms and intersectional discriminations

In order to explore the characteristics that make Ballroom a safe space for its members, I first need to account for the oppressions faced by queer people of color that pushed them to create such a space of inclusion. By relying on the works of recognized U.S. scholars, philosophers and sociologists, I seek to explore the extent of the verbs "seeing" and "being seen" by linking these oppressions with the discriminating processes that are inflicted upon their bodies through the act of gazing.

The first bodily feature that I want to explore is race. Robyn Wiegman, a professor of literature and gender, sexuality, and feminist studies at Duke University, draws the bridge between visual meaning and systemic oppressions in *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (1995). She takes the example of the shift from classical organizations of knowledge,

[14] Koch-Rein, Anson, Haschemi Yekani, Elahe and Verlinden, Jasper J. "Representing Trans: Visibility and its Discontents." *European Journal of English Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 2020, p. 1.

mainly based on the Renaissance, to a modern classification of biological features with the rise of human sciences as a field of studies in the 17th century. According to her, this new classification became a tool to name and signify differences among human beings, the most visible difference being race, which she describes as "a fiction—as a profound ordering of difference instantiated at the sight of the body."[15] Race is in fact built through the body as a signifier of difference in opposition to whiteness. She also mentions a "visible economy of race," a visual epistemology which is "an economy of parts that enables the viewer to ascertain the subject's rightful place in a racial chain of being:"[16] in the context of gazing relations between people of color and white people, an instant link is made between the one who is seen (the subject) and the one who sees (the bearer of the gaze), making race not only scientific, but also social and cultural. This last quote reveals that such gazing relations are asymmetrical: this visible economy of race implies that if the subject is a person of color, they may be seen both through the lens of its different race as well as the whiteness of the one who is seeing because the term difference involves a relational process of comparison. Yet, this does not mean that a person of color will not gaze through the lens of their own race too, which will be the focus of the second part. Examining both the body and the subject as different is a process called "marking" (a term used by Wiegman in her work and which I will rely on throughout this dissertation), a process where the body is the feature that acts as a signifier, a marker of difference through which racial discourses are operated on individuals of color.

George Yancy, a distinguished philosopher and professor, explored such discourses in his 2008 work *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America*:

> My darkness is a signifier of negative values grounded within a racist, social, and historical matrix that predates my existential emergence. The meaning of my Blackness is not intrinsic to my natural pigment; it has become a value-laden "given," an object presumed untouched and unmediated by various contingent discursive practices, history, time, and context. [...] Hence, the meaning of my Blackness is constituted and configured (relationally) within a semiotic field of axiological difference, one that is structured vis-à-vis the construction of whiteness as the transcendental norm. To say that whiteness is deemed the transcendental norm is to say that whiteness takes itself to be that which remains the same across a field of difference. Indeed, it determines what is deemed different without itself being defined by that system of difference. Whiteness is that according to which what is nonwhite is rendered other, marginal, ersatz, strange,

[15] Wiegman, Robyn. *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995, p. 24.
[16] Ibid, p. 21.

native, inferior, uncivilized, and ugly.[17]

Yancy accounts for the enduring hegemonic norm of whiteness and the racial discourses that give meanings to other races, notably Blackness. These discourses have allowed for intellectuals and many others to represent Black as "inferior"[18] through religious and scientific justifications, embedding this belief at the core of the American system to justify social stratifications such as the institution of slavery or segregation, among others. In that sense, I want to give a further meaning to "seeing" and "being seen" by linking those verbs with the concept of representation as explored by Stuart Hall, a professor, sociologist and cultural theorist who relied on the concept of representation throughout his career notably by incorporating gender and race into the field of cultural studies. In *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Hall links the concepts of culture and representation and posits that

> It is by our use of things, and what we say, think and feel about them – how we represent them – that we give them a meaning. In part, we give objects, people and events meaning by the frameworks of interpretation which we bring to them. In part, we give things meaning by how we use them, or integrate them into our everyday practices. [...] Our 'circuit of culture' suggests that, in fact, meanings are produced at several different sites and circulated through several different processes or practices (the cultural circuit). Meaning is what gives us a sense of our own identity, of who we are and with whom we 'belong' – so it is tied up with questions of how culture is used to mark out and maintain identity within and difference between groups.[19]

Hall's quote suggests that a relation of comparison does exist between the one who sees and the one who is seen, and that this relation is anchored within historical, socio-cultural and specific meanings, or modes of representation. I link Hall's theory with the action of marking by arguing that the bearer of the gaze, if they are white, may indulge in a racist process of representation involving discourses that place whiteness in a positive light and Blackness in a negative one. It is because of the complex imbrication of cultural representations and hegemonic norms that I posit racism as a systemic oppression which marks people of color, including the Ballroom members in *Pose*, as different.

Following the example on discourses given to race, I seek to extend the action of marking and representation to gender and gender identity as well as their relation to hegemonic norms. Feminist theorists and philosophers have highlighted the patriarchal dimension of U.S. society to

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[17] Yancy, George. *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008, pp. 19-20.

[18] Brion Davis, David. *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966, p. 49.

[19] Hall Stuart. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: SAGE Publications, 1997, p. 3.

"refer to the social system of masculine domination over women."[20] A patriarchal society relies on discourses concerning gender as fixed and binary: people who were born as "males" or "females" should therefore behave as such in a set of shared cultural representations and practices which created the concepts of masculinity and femininity. This has been explored by philosopher Judith Butler whose work intends to depart from essentialist views on gender by analyzing and deconstructing such concepts. In "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," (1988) she relies on scholars such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty or Simone de Beauvoir and posits that

> the act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again.[21]

In that sense, by distinguishing sex from gender, Butler argues that gender is culturally constructed by a patriarchal society's representations of it. This shows that by performing the gender they were assigned to at birth, people follow and reproduce social rules that are scripted into the heteronormative binary gender system of "male" and "female," masculinity and femininity. Those rules can go, in Western cultures, from wearing high heels for people who were born as biological women or wearing short hair for people who were born as biological men. I therefore ask: what about trans and non-binary people, within and outside of Ballroom culture, who challenge this binarity by adopting a more fluid way of expressing the gender they identify with? Or what about gay people or lesbians who are cisgender[22] but still enact behaviors that can be seen as gender ambiguous?

Just like the aforementioned visual epistemology of race, the normative concept of gender is based on essentialist and biological aspects of the body, which means that any bodily expression that departs from this normative concept would be seen as different and deviant. For example, a cisgender gay man may be marked as different because of a body language deemed feminine, and a trans woman performing her gender like any cisgender woman could have her

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[20] Pilcher, Jane and Whelehan, Imelda. *50 Key Concepts in Gender Studies*. London: SAGE Publications, 2004, p. 93.

[21] Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4, 1988, p. 526.

[22] I use the word "cisgender" to refer to a person who does not experience gender dysphoria which the *Meriam-Webster* dictionary defines as "a distressed state arising from conflict between a person's gender identity and the sex the person has or was identified as having at birth."

body marked as different if her biological genitalia is revealed. In that sense, gender is also a social construct which also involves an unbalanced relation of gazes: indeed, the Ballroom culture depicted in *Pose* consists entirely of individuals deemed different by people who indulge into patriarchal and heteronormative hegemonic norms. The latter, with their specific and binary representation of gender, will see queer people and their body expressions as different, again enacting an unbalanced relation of power between the one who sees and the one who is seen. Thus, I rely on the concept of "passing" which is prevalent in Ballroom and often mentioned in the first season of *Pose*. Passing can be referred to as "the process whereby a person adopts the guise of a different group's member in relation to one's race, gender, nationality, or sexual orientation."[23] This concept is directly linked with the representation of an individual in the eye of the one who is seeing: in the context of trans women specifically, the act of passing indicates the wish to be seen as any other cisgender woman and thus to be unmarked from difference. Throughout this dissertation, we will see how passing is central to the action of performance and unmarking within and outside of Ballroom culture.

Even though I present the oppressions linked to race, gender and sexuality separately, I posit that they are not mutually exclusive. The documentary *Paris is Burning* actually starts by showing a gay man talking to the camera: "You have three strikes against you in this world. Every Black man has two: that they're just Black and they're male. But you're Black and you're male and you're gay…"[24] This quote highlights the possibility of an interconnection of oppressions depending on the individual's multiple identities, including queer people of color, who often stand at the intersection of racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia. The 1980s—the decade in which the first season of *Pose* takes place—saw the theorization of multiple feminist and intersectional concepts from scholars such as civil rights activist Audre Lorde's concept of the "American mythical norm," critical race theory scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw's metaphor of the "basement" or author and social activist bell hooks's "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy." Lorde was an American writer, civil rights activist and Black feminist who, in a 1984 essay called "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," conceptualized what she called the "American mythical norm" as follows:

> white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure. It is with this mythical

[23] Dias, C. K. et al. "'Passing' and its Effects on Brazilian Transgender People's Sense of Belonging to Society: A Theoretical Study." *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology*, Vol. 31, No. 16, 2021, p. 691.
[24] *Paris is Burning*, 01:31.

> norm that the trappings of power reside within this society. Those of us who stand outside that power often identify one way in which we are different […].[25]

Through the mythical American norm, Lorde emphasizes the connection between hegemonic norms and discriminations faced by the people who stand at the very far end of this norm, among whom queer people of color. The queer community is diverse: queer people may indeed identify with multiple gender and/or sexual identities. Thus, not all members of the queer community check the same prerequisites of this mythical norm: for example, gay men of color, because of their race but also because of their sexual orientation, as shown in the quote from *Paris is Burning*. A cause-and-effect relationship may take place as racism and homophobia may prevent them from accessing employment, thus leading to a precarious financial situation which further estranges them from the mythical American who is "financially secure." By theorizing the mythical American as a national model, Lorde shed light on the systemic intersectional discriminations that people who do not fit to that norm may face.

Lorde's theorization of the systemic racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia can be linked with the "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy," which bell hooks conceptualized throughout her scholarship, notably in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992) or *Reel to Real: Race, Class and Sex at the Movies* (1996). A white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, which I will write throughout this dissertation as "WSCP"[26] from now on, is made of intersectional discriminations that prevent people who do not belong to the mythical norm from accessing the same opportunities as those who actually do. To that extent, hooks's concept condones Lorde's vision of the American mythical norm.

The last intersectional concept I seek to use is Crenshaw's metaphor of the "basement." A teacher at the UCLA School of Law and Columbia Law School as well as a civil rights activist, Crenshaw published a paper in 1989 entitled "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" in which she theorized intersectionality and introduced the metaphor of the "basement," which also echoes Lorde's myth and prefigures hooks's WSCP concept:

> Imagine a basement which contains all people who are disadvantaged on the basis of race, sex,

[25] Lorde, Audre. "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference." *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*. Trumansburg: Crossing Press, 1984, pp. 114-123.

[26] It is worth noting that the abbreviation "WSCP" resembles that of "WASP" or "White Anglo-Saxon Protestant", which is often used to refer to middle- and upper-class white Americans and can be considered as the American mythical norm in a white supremacist capitalist society.

> class, sexual preference, age and/or physical ability. These people are stacked-feet standing on shoulders-with those on the bottom being disadvantaged by the full array of factors, up to the very top, where the heads of all those disadvantaged by a singular factor brush up against the ceiling. Their ceiling is actually the floor above which only those who are not disadvantaged in any way reside. In efforts to correct some aspects of domination, those above the ceiling admit from the basement only those who can say that "but for" the ceiling, they too would be in the upper room. A hatch is developed through which those placed immediately below can crawl. Yet this hatch is generally available only to those who-due to the singularity of their burden and their otherwise privileged position relative to those below-are in the position to crawl through. Those who are multiply-burdened are generally left below unless they can somehow pull themselves into the groups that are permitted to squeeze through the hatch.[27]

Crenshaw highlights levels and layers of discrimination faced by "disadvantaged" people who all stand in a basement. In other words, while the basement includes all those who do not check at least one prerequisite to belong to Lorde's American mythical norm, going up from the bottom up of that basement, Crenshaw sheds light on those who are "disadvantaged by the full array of factors:" those who stand at the bottom of the basement because they stand at a crossroads of multiple discriminated identities (like trans women of color, for example). She compares them to those who stand at the top of that basement who suffer from one type of discrimination, and could be included in the norm, as long as they do not disrupt the WSCP or allow it to be seen as less exclusive. Bringing together the metaphorical space of exclusion and the gazing relations, I posit that a WSCP, by placing a certain race, gender or sexuality at the center of the norm, instantly places people that fit into Lorde's mythical norm at the center of society. Conversely, people who do not fit into these norms are displaced on the margins of that society: a metaphorical space of exclusion made of people who stand at the bottom of Crenshaw's basement, including queer people of color. Thus, I present the Ballroom scene as one of those metaphorical, but also physical spaces that stem from the intersecting oppressions enacted by the WSCP.

This process of creating a produced knowledge about what is normal and what is different was tackled by many sociologists through the concept of "Othering,"[28] which is central to the power dynamics that lie in the action of seeing. Political geographer Alison Mountz linked the idea of space and the Other in a chapter of *Key Concepts in Political Geography* (2009):

> The process of creating the 'other' wherein persons or groups are labelled as deviant or

[27] Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, Vol. 1989, pp. 151-152.

[28] Throughout this thesis, the word "Other" will be used as a noun, a verb or an adjective.

> non-normative happens through the constant repetition of characteristics about a group of people who are distinguished from the norm in some way. To assume that unions between men and women are the norm, for example, is to other same-sex couples. To take the census in a way that places Caucasian at the centre or single racial categories as the norm is to other 'mixed race' identities or non-white identities that complicate the checking of a singular box on a form. Such racialization places whiteness at the centre, and persons of colour on the outside of normal. [...] Not only are individuals 'othered' through practices surrounding gender and sexual identity, but entire populations are othered by performances of international relations, often through intersecting processes of racialization and sexualization.[29]

With the use of the verb "create," Mountz reinforces the aforementioned unbalanced characteristics of human relations, in which the bearer of the gaze may construct the Other by seeing the body and producing knowledge through their own identity. Just as importantly, Mountz discusses the existence of a center, made by the hegemony, and its margins, made of people who are seen as deviant, thereby creating metaphorical exclusions with systemic hegemonies that include some and exclude others.

After making such a connection between space and exclusion, I therefore want to nuance the meaning of "being seen:" indeed, since queer people of color are deemed different and that the gaze has the power to exclude, I posit that they are not subjects in such relations, but objects constructed by the eye of the mythical American. In that sense, queer people of color are not always properly seen by the people in a WSCP, but rather looked at,[30] as their relations are based on unbalanced ways of looking. It is in the light of such oppressions that I intend to study Ballroom as depicted in *Pose* as a safe space for the excluded where queer people of color will get to be properly seen by their peers: in that case, "seen" meaning being cheered on and acknowledged. In spite of the tensions between the House of Evangelista and the House of Abundance, the first season of *Pose* highlights the love and celebration that is lived by the characters within Ballroom, notably in the House of Evangelista where every member benefits from a family-like support, away from the cultural representations of their race, sexuality or gender identity imposed by the WSCP. The storylines viewers get to see in *Pose* go beyond those markers of difference. The novelty of such narrative arcs was highlighted by several newspapers

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[29] Gallaher, Carolyn, Carl T. Dahlman, Mary Gilmartin, Alison Mountz and Peter Shirlow (eds.), *Key Concepts in Political Geography*. London: SAGE Publications, 2009, p. 328.

[30] The differences between being "seen" and "looked at" was first introduced by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). She stated that women were subjected to a "to-be-looked-at-ness" which attracted the voyeuristic gaze of male spectators. However, in an intersectional approach, bell hooks argued that such views only applied to white women. She expanded the concept for Black women in numerous works such as in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*.

and online critics in contrast with works in television and film which would only rely on cultural representations of queer people deemed negative. Therefore, in order to properly analyze *Pose*'s first season, I want to explore the genesis of the series as well as the way the aforementioned cultural representations also worked to Other queer people on screen.

Othered queer people in film and television: why *Pose*?

At the time of its premiere in 2018, *Pose*'s novelty was praised by many critics, describing the first season as "revolutionary"[31] and "unprecedented."[32] *Pose* finds its origins in a script originally written by Steven Canals, one of the co-creators of the series, who stated in a 2019 *Remezcla* article:

> As a queer Afro-Latino who grew up in the Bronx in the '80s, […] it isn't difficult for me to tap back into that experience. You know, I may not specifically be [...] a trans woman of color who is part of the Ballroom community, but I know what it feels like to want a life bigger than the one that I'm living. I know exactly what that feeling is. And so it's easy to tap into the emotional part of these characters' journeys.[33]

In the writing of *Pose*'s pilot, Canals brings together authority and authorship by implementing his identity and experiences into the production of the series. This connection was also made by Janet Mock, a writer and director for the show, who shared her thoughts on trans representation in the media in a 2018 *Variety* article. As a trans woman of color,[34] she stated that she and her community "were seen through the narrowest lens—either as points of trauma, treated as freaks, or mere punchlines."[35] In *Pose*, most of the characters' storylines are centered on where they see themselves in the future. Mock also emphasizes how trans narratives have been misrepresented in the media by using the concept of "seeing" and representation. Therefore, the aforementioned cultural representations destined to Other queer people also worked in television and film. In *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender and Sexuality at the Movies* (2004), Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin state that "images of people on film actively contribute to the ways

[31] Framke, Caroline. "TV Review: 'Pose' on FX." *Variety*, 30 May 2018, https://variety.com/2018/tv/reviews/pose-fx-review-ryan-murphy-1202824492/. Accessed 8 October 2022.
[32] Venable, Malcolm. "The Mind-Blowing 1990 Documentary You Must See Before Watching Pose." *TV Guide*, 29 May 2018, https://www.tvguide.com/news/outer-banks-season-3-release-date-trailer-cast-and-everything-to-know/. Accessed 8 October 2022.
[33] Betancourt, Manuel. "Steven Canals on How Growing Up as a Queer Afro-Latino in 1980s Bronx Prepared Him to Write 'Pose'." *Remezcla*, 2019, https://remezcla.com/features/film/pose-interview-steven-canals/. Accessed 07 April 2022.
[34] Mock, op. cit.
[35] Ibid.

in which people are understood and experienced in the 'real world.' Furthermore, there are multiple and varied connections between film and 'real life' [...]."[36] They also add that

> every cultural artifact – book, movie, music video, song, billboard, joke, slang term, earring, etc. – is an expression of the culture that produces it. Every cultural artifact is thus a text that conveys information, carrying the ideological messages of both its authors and the culture that produced it.[37]

Benshoff and Griffin link cultural context and representation to describe the authority of the enunciator producing representation. In other words, since audiovisual work reflects a society's cultural context, the cultural artifacts that Other queer people in real life are also shown on screen. Thus, the cultural representations and the hegemonic norms of a WSCP that work on an individual scale also work in representing queer people on screen in terms of casting, narratives and portrayals, sometimes by constructing them as Others.

How does the Othering of queer people work on screen exactly? In her thesis published in 2018 entitled *On Being Trans: Narrative, Identity, Performance, and Community*, Chloe Jo Brown summarized some of the possible stereotypes that were used to portray trans people and characters on television and film. She gives the example of the *Jerry Springer* show (NBCUniversal, 1991-2018) where trans guests would be portrayed as "dishonest […] and sexually deviant."[38] In TV series and film, trans characters are often portrayed as sex workers such as in *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998-2004) or *Desperate Housewives* (ABC, 2004-2012). Trans characters were also portrayed as "mentally ill" with psychopathic tendencies such as in *Nip/Tuck* (FX, 2003-2010) or *The L Word* (Showtime, 2004-2009), the latter depicting dangers related to the use of hormones which were then proven untrue.[39] In the case of gay men, Kylo-Patrick Hart stated in "Representing Gay Men on Screen" (2000) that they were often depicted as "promiscuous" or "effeminate" at the start of the 1970s,[40] stereotypes which would slowly fade at the start of the 1990s to make place to more complex, three-dimensional

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[36] Benshoff, Harry M. and Griffin, Sean. *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender and Sexuality at the Movies*. 2nd ed., Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, p. 3.
[37] Ibid, p. 14.
[38] Brown, Chloe Jo. *On Being Trans: Narrative, Identity, Performance, and Community*, 2018. Western Kentucky University, Graduate thesis, p. 77.
[39] Lopez, Quispe. "6 myths about trans people from TV and film — and the truth behind them." *Insider*, 9 July 2020, https://www.insider.com/myths-about-trans-people-from-tv-film-and-the-truth-2020-7. Accessed February 6 2022.
[40] Hart, Kylo-Patrick R. "Representing Gay Men on American Television." *The Journal of Men's Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2000, pp. 62-63.

characters.[41]

Linked to the portrayal of trans characters are the narrative arcs on their stories, their bodies and the discovery of their transness. In her 2013 thesis *Transgender Representation in the Media*, Jessie Jobe uses the example of the movie *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) which tells the story of Brandon Teena, a trans man who ran away from home. Once his new friends discover that Brandon is trans, they attempt to see his genitalia and end up beating him up and raping him. Even though Brandon was not based on the stereotypes that were mentioned above, the violent and tragic destiny of trans people is a narrative that is commonly used in film and "[leaves] a less-than-encouraging message about what can happen when [trans people] have the courage to do what is right for them."[42] Other works have indulged in the hypervisibility of trans characters once their transness is revealed, such as the sitcom *The Cleveland Show* (Fox, 2009-2013) in which a character throws up after having found out that another character was a trans woman. Those portrayals convey the idea that pain and suffering are the only outcomes of coming out as trans in narratives, resulting in the Othering of trans people on screen. Moreover, in a series of statistics published by the *Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation* (GLAAD), it was shown that in a selection of 102 episodes portraying trans characters from 2002 to 2012, 54% of them "were categorized as containing negative representations at the time of their airing."[43] Jobe highlighted the shortcomings of such representation, stating that

> if consumers base their expectations on what they see on television or read in books, they may inadvertently make assumptions about cultures or environments that are simply untrue. False assumptions become prejudices if they are reinforced often enough and can lead to discrimination. In a vicious cycle, these prejudices are reproduced and portrayed over again, reinforcing it further. In this sense, media both educates and reflects our society's beliefs, whether or not these portrayals and beliefs are accurate.[44]

Jobe, like other scholars I have relied on so far, draws the bridge between fiction and reality in which cultural representations produce knowledge about trans people both in real life and on screen in cycles of misrepresentation involving the portrayal of trans characters both in the roles they play and the narrative arcs that surround their stories.

Can this be also related to *Pose*'s casting? A lot of cisgendered actors and actresses were

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[41] Ibid, p. 69.
[42] Jobe, Jessica N. *Transgender Representation in the Media*, 2013. Eastern Kentucky University, Bachelor thesis, p.16.
[43] "Victims or Villains: Examining Ten Years of Transgender Images on Television." *GLAAD*, https://www.glaad.org/publications/victims-or-villains-examining-ten-years-transgender-images- television. Accessed February 6 2022.
[44] Jobe, op. cit.

cast to play trans characters in fictional pieces of work such as *Friends* (Chandler's father played by Kathleen Turner, 1994-2004) and again *Sex and the City*, or in movies such as *Transamerica* (2005) or *Albert Nobbs* (2011). Gender studies scholars such as Jamie C. Capuzza and Leland G. Spencer highlighted the possible issues related to such casting in "Regressing, Progressing, or Transgressing on the Small Screen? Transgender Characters on U.S. Scripted Television Series." (2017) They argued for the legitimacy of trans actors and actresses to embody characters that may share similar experiences related to their transness in opposition to cisgender actors. Yet, they instantly qualified their approach by stating that such on-screen experiences are closely related to the production of audiovisual works, more specifically the way those characters are written. However, such casting also prevents less known trans actors and actresses from accessing those roles, which is an issue addressed by Mock in the *Variety* article: "trans people [were] an overwhelmingly underemployed demographic and have watched with gritted teeth as non-trans actors have embodied [their] realities onscreen."[45] This shows that in addition to roles and narrative arcs, casting is also central in the production of a work destined to shed a more positive light on the trans community. It is to that extent that Mock suggests that *Pose* has "made history"[46] for multiple reasons. First of all, unlike the works mentioned earlier, it consists of the largest trans cast ever seen on television[47] with five trans actresses that are series regulars and not secondary characters considered as mere sidekicks. Instead, *Pose* puts trans characters at the center of the narrative, which allows them to be fully explored as complex human beings. In the same *Variety* article, Mock indeed stated that those characters

> cannot be defined solely by their transness. [...] Their transness may not [be] the sole focus of our story, but it's also not sidelined. [...] Their narratives are not limited by their transitions and rarely do we meditate on their origin stories. […] Our characters are the center of their own stories rather than plot devices, serving as martyrs who teach non-trans protagonists a lesson about authenticity and self-assuredness.[48]

Mock emphasizes the fact that the trans characters in *Pose* and the narrative arcs they are given depart from the representation seen as negative of the late 1990s and the 2000s. Thus, it is interesting to note that Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk—two cisgendered white men who did not have the same experiences and emotional baggage than Canals or Mock—chose to take a step back from production in order to let their counterparts create the narratives that would best

[45] Mock, op. cit.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Betancourt, op. cit.
[48] Mock, op. cit.

fit the experiences of trans people.

Throughout this Master's dissertation, I endeavor to rely on the first season of *Pose* in order to explore the complex connection between "seeing" and the wish to "be seen" in return. I will show that the foundations of such relations reside in the power of the gaze, and will put the emphasis on the body as a visible entity acting as a vessel allowing the WSCP to represent queer people of color's identities through the lens of their own cultural artifacts and stereotypes. Thus, I will analyze how Ballroom, as depicted in *Pose*, both within and outside the realm of the balls, acts as a metaphorical and physical space of inclusion. A space that counteracts the intersecting oppressions faced by the queer characters of color of the series, I will explore the ways in which those characters regain agency by subverting the hegemonic norms that put them on the margins of society. Throughout this dissertation, I will rely on the concept of the Other as well as the intersectional theories I have mentioned in order to highlight the markers of difference as well as the intersectional and systemic levels of oppression faced by queer people of color. Moreover, using those theories and concepts will help me analyze the different gazing relations that all create different meanings within the people who are being looked at or seen.

Outline

Othered individuals in *Pose*: metaphorical and physical spaces of exclusion

In the first part, I will explore the concrete and metaphorical spaces of exclusion that are presented in the first season of *Pose* and the Othering of queer characters of color. I will analyze how the various queer characters of color face systemic and intersectional oppressions in the heteronormative and patriarchal circles of the show's WSCP. In order to tackle the concept of hegemonic norms and its consequences on queer individuals of color, I will first take the example of Damon and his rejection from his biological family early in the pilot episode. I will begin this part by demonstrating how the heteronormative and patriarchal norms work at the scale of the traditional family ideal. Then, in order to follow Damon's path from Allentown, Pennsylvania to New York City, I will rely on social geography to analyze the places of New York in which the characters of color in *Pose* live and socialize. I will link this analysis to the social stratification that resulted from the gentrification process in New York at the end of the 1970s, and show how this stratification acts as an indicator of the displacement of Othered queer people of color at the metaphorical and concrete margins of society. However, in order to

account for such displacement, I will also explore the construction and place of whiteness in *Pose* in a comparative analysis. This will allow me to align the gentrified places in which white characters live and work in *Pose*—which are built along at least one prerequisite of Lorde's mythical norm—and the spaces concentrated by queer people of color who stand at the bottom of Crenshaw's basement. Lastly, I will focus on Angel and Elektra, two trans women of color in *Pose*, and work on their romantic relationships with Stan and Mr. Ford. This subpart will help me theorize intersectional concepts on trans identity specifically in order to show how these two characters are commodified and fetishized in their own relationships with cisgender white men. This will epitomize once again the tensions between the center and margins of *Pose*'s WSCP that are at the heart of gazing relations in *Pose*.

Pose's subversive house system through Ballroom: celebrating queer identities of color in familial spaces of inclusion

My second part will question the way queer people of color challenge the various intersecting oppressions they face through Ballroom's house system as shown in *Pose*. I will explore how queer characters of color shift from Others to subjects through the chosen family, notably the House of Evangelista led by Blanca. This subpart will posit the house system as a first solution for the queer characters of color to find the safety nets necessary to counteract the WSCP's power dynamics. To do so, I first endeavor to take the example of Damon and Angel and show how Blanca validates their queer identities within the private sphere of their chosen family. Such validation will help me highlight the subversive essence of Ballroom's house system as a provider of emotional support. Then, I will take the analysis further and argue that through the house system, House children will be encouraged to celebrate their queer identities within the public sphere. I will show how Blanca provides educational and economic opportunities not only for her children, but also for other house members such as Elektra in spite of their feud. Shifting from private to public, I will show how the House of Evangelista subverts the hegemonic and intersecting norms that result in a lack of access to education and employment for queer people of color. Lastly, I want to analyze the ways in which *Pose*'s house system provides safety nets regarding the fight against the HIV/AIDS epidemic. In spite of the government's silence and misinformation on the disease, I will show how the House of Evangelista counteracts the vulnerability facing such a crisis by means of awareness, social

support and group testing sessions. This last part will help me account for the meaning of family in *Pose* and how the redefinition of the hegemonic biological family will help transcend the meaning given to the HIV/AIDS virus.

***Pose*'s subversive ball events: recentering the margins through performances of the self**

In the last part, I endeavor to keep a reading of Ballroom culture as subversive and focus on the ball events. I will present those balls as yet other spaces of inclusion where queer people of color celebrate their non-conforming identity by renegotiating the meanings of authenticity and identity, thus displacing their transgressive queer identities at the center of Ballroom culture. Linking the concept of space with the stratification of the balls, I will first emphasize the empowerment and acknowledgment of their identities by being properly seen and cheered on by their peers thanks to their performances and the gazing relations that can be observed during the balls. The first subpart will reconcile the differences between "seeing" and "looking," this time in the context of the balls: when performing, queer people of color will get to be truly seen by their peers, even in events as competitive as the balls. Then, I will endeavor to show how queer people of color get to "unmark" themselves thanks to the categories of the ball events. I will rely again on the concept of queer geographies and explore the concept of "passing" and the quality of the performances enacted by the contestants, keeping in mind that processes of unmarking are a way for queer people of color to redefine the norms regarding transgressive queer identities. Lastly, I will dedicate the last subpart to the complex intricate rejection and emulation of the WSCP. I will focus on the use of categories in *Pose* as a means to emulate social classes, opportunities and appearances for queer characters of color. In this subpart, I will show that performance does not only allow them to fully express themselves: it also makes it possible to show their peers that by emulating those inaccessible opportunities, they challenge the representations of *Pose*'s WSCP in a paradoxical blend of emulation and rejection of the concept of whiteness and heteronormativity.

I. Othered individuals in *Pose*: metaphorical and physical spaces of exclusion

Visual epistemologies of race, gender and sexuality mark queer people of color as different and displace them on the margins of society. How are these margins showcased in *Pose* physically and metaphorically? The eight episodes of the first season allow for an in-depth contextualization of the oppressions faced by the main characters. How does the series discuss the tensions between the center, epitomized by the American mythical norm, and its margins, characterized by Crenshaw's basement? I will here rely on political and social geography in the making of exclusion. Allison Mountz, whom I previously mentioned, brings together political geography and the concept of the Other when she stated that "cultural geographies of the 'other' rely heavily on spatial metaphors to locate and place identities and difference in the landscape."[49] I suggest that the queer and racialized identities of *Pose* are concentrated in geographical spaces of exclusion that materialize the systemic and intersectional oppressions that Other queer characters of color on the basis of their visual epistemologies that are seen by the WSCP as transgressive. Operating such an analysis will help to shed light on the metaphorical and concrete spaces of exclusion that make up the margins and its center.

a. Othered queer youth and queer homelessness in the making of a traditional biological family

Damon's path from Allentown, Pennsylvania to New York City is an example of the displacement of *Pose*'s queer characters of color on the physical and metaphorical margins of society. In other words, the rejection from his biological family sets the stage for the representations of *Pose*'s center and margins through the image of a traditional family ideal. Thus, in order to analyze queer geographies of color in the show's first season, I will explore how *Pose*'s pilot episode places the institution of family as a vector of oppressions that stem from a WSCP's patriarchal and heteronormative norms: I will first draw a link between the margins and center of a WSCP and the institution of family.

[49] Gallaher, Carolyn, Carl T. Dahlman, Mary Gilmartin, Alison Mountz and Peter Shirlow (eds.), *Key Concepts in Political Geography*. London: SAGE Publications, 2009, p. 332.

In her 1998 paper "It's All in the Family: Intersections of Gender, Race, and Nation," Patricia Hill Collins, a sociology professor, presents an approach to the institution of family that is linked with American national identity. She argues:

> Situated in the center of "family values" debates is an imagined traditional family ideal. Formed through a combination of marital and blood ties, ideal families consist of heterosexual couples that produce their own biological children. Such families have a specific authority structure; namely, a father-head earning an adequate family wage, a stay-at-home wife, and children. Those who idealize the traditional family as a private haven from a public world see family as held together by primary emotional bonds of love and caring. [...] The power of this traditional family ideal lies in its dual function as an ideological construction and as a fundamental principle of social organization. [...] The "family values" that underlie the traditional family ideal work to naturalize U.S. hierarchies of gender, age, and sexuality. For example, the traditional family ideal assumes a male headship that privileges and naturalizes masculinity as a source of authority. Similarly, parental control over dependent children reproduces age and seniority as fundamental principles of social organization. [...].[50]

With the use of the adjective "traditional," Collins treats the institution of family in the United States as a reflection of the American national identity that relies on heteronormative and patriarchal essentialist views on gender roles: since the "traditional family ideal" works as a "fundamental principle of social organization," the institution of the heteronormative biological family supposedly emulates the WSCP's patriarchal norms. She pushes her analysis further and gives concrete examples of how this social organization may work on a micro basis, such as the male authoritarian father figure or the image of the stay-at-home wife and mother. In other words, Collins' views on American national identity condone the fact that a society's essentialist and hegemonic norms may be reflected throughout generations in American families. Thus, in the case of a family member being queer, a dichotomy may appear between a WSCP's center (represented by the traditional biological family) and its margins (characterized by a member's queer identity). Since Collins argues for a family as a social organization, family members going against the WSCP's norms may be subjected to silence or abuse because their sexuality or gender identity may disrupt this social organization. These social hierarchies are explored throughout her paper:

> Working in tandem with these mutually constructing age and gender hierarchies are comparable ideas concerning sexuality. Predicated on assumptions of heterosexism, the invisibility of gay, lesbian, and bisexual sexualities in the traditional family ideal obscures these sexualities and

[50] Hill Collins, Patricia. "It's All in the Family: Intersections of Gender, Race, and Nation." *Hypatia*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 1998, pp. 62-65.

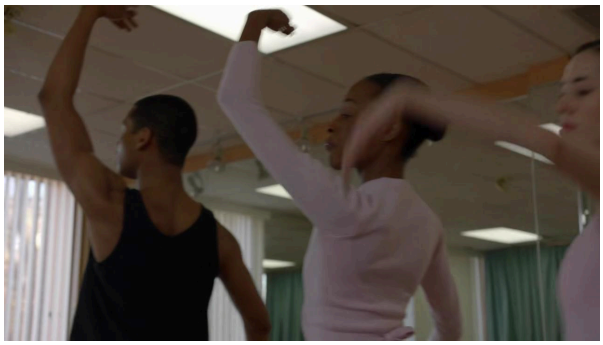
> keeps them hidden. Regardless of how individual families grapple with these hierarchical notions, they remain the received wisdom to be confronted.[51]

By operating an intersectional analysis of the American traditional family ideal, Collins emphasizes the heteronormative mechanisms that may reject or silence queer individuals who do not fit a WSCP's hegemonic norms. Thus, a family setting may act as a space of exclusion for queer youth of color who do not fit Lorde's heteronormative mythical norm. In other words, a family setting may be the center stage for the dichotomy between a WSCP's center (Collins' "traditional family ideal") and its margins (its queer members). In several cases, this space of exclusion may result in the physical rejection of a queer member from their family. In such cases, by disrupting this social organization, queer youth of color go from one space of exclusion (their familial setting) to another (the streets).

Damon's first appearance takes place right after the opening credits, putting his character as a vector of change for the storylines to come. Yet, his exclusion is not the first storyline presented to the viewers: instead, emphasis is put on his aspirations first. His first scene begins with an establishing shot of his ballet school, along with the name of the city at the bottom right corner of the screen indicating where it takes place. As the editing transitions to the inside of the school, the camera pans to the left and shows an array of female ballet dancers, only to show Damon at the end of the row. The camera stops on Damon and follows him as his movements depart from the classical ballet training and shift to modern dance. The scene uses numerous discursive and stylistic tools to establish Damon's identity as different. First, the camera panning to the left reveals that all female dancers wear the color pink, establishing the stereotypical belief that ballet dancing is a gendered activity predominantly made for women. While this camera pan brings together womanhood and femininity, it stops on Damon who is the only one wearing only black clothing. Thus, the camera stands him out in the scene: as the piano music accompanying the dancers and the teacher's indications all fade in the background, the off-diegetic instrumental of the song *On The Radio* by Donna Summer starts playing. Damon then stops being in cue with the other students and starts dancing at his own pace, indicating his need for self-expression and hinting at him being different from his peers.

[51] Ibid, p. 65.

"Pilot" – *00:10:52 – Establishing shot of Damon's ballet school*



"Pilot" – *00:11:08 – Damon dancing*

As Damon leaves the school, the several shots showing his house give information about his socio-economic status and his place in a traditional family ideal similar to Collins' views. The establishing shot of the exterior of his house shows that he lives in a suburban area in Allentown, hinting at the possibility of a way of life similar to that of a nuclear family. As he enters the house, the static camera frames the dining-room in the background: the presence of a dining table with several chairs highlights yet another traditional family setting.

"Pilot" – *00:11:39 – Establishing shot of Damon's house*

"Pilot" – *00:11:46– Shot of Damon's house*

As Damon enters his bedroom, he retrieves a shoe box hidden under his bed containing a music tape of Donna Summer's aforementioned song. Because the camera follows Damon and frames him into the different rooms he crosses, this progressive movement from the school to his house denotes a path from the public to the private sphere, framing Damon as a moving agent towards the private space of his bedroom. This mobility is linked to his passion for dancing by the ongoing use of Donna Summer's song outside the diegesis. This physical space is hidden from the public sphere, first by the presence of the multiple drapes hiding his bedroom from the outside world, and then by the close-up shot used to show the audience Donna Summer's tape,

which epitomizes Damon's expression through modern dance, but also links it to the possible rejection he may face regarding his queer identity.

"Pilot" – *00:12:03 – Damon taking his tape under his bed*

"Pilot" – *00:12:06 – Close-up of Damon's shoe box*

As he inserts the tape into his radio and presses the "play" button, the private sphere also becomes a space of expression since he begins to dance frantically to Donna Summer's song. Since Damon only expresses himself through his movements, the scene appears to be a dialogue between Summer's voice and Damon's movements. The hidden tape, which shows that Damon is hidden from the WSCP, encapsulates his bedroom as a space of expression where he can fully express his queer identity.

However, Damon's father walks in on him. He shuts off the radio and tells Damon he found out about the ballet school thanks to an old colleague that saw him wearing ballet shoes in the streets. Referencing a colleague of his highlights the tension between the public and private spheres: he demands an explanation, to which Damon responds: "I'm a dancer, and I'm gay." (00:13:22) This confrontation is rendered through the use of close-ups, showing Damon locking eyes with his father. I would like to link this defiant look with hooks' concept of the oppositional gaze, which she theorized in the aforementioned *Black Looks: Race and Representation* by stating: "Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality."[52] This close-up shows the oppositional gaze that is operated by Damon, who confesses his love for dancing to his father in spite of the hostile interaction he is facing and the possible rejection that may result from it.

[52] hooks, *Black Looks,* op. cit.*,* p. 116.

"Pilot" – *00:13:10 – Close-up of Damon's father*

"Pilot" – *00:13:13 – Close-up of Damon*

Moreover, not only does Damon look back in search of agency, he also comes out to his father at the same time, asserting his queer identity by linking it with his passion for modern dance. This echoes another phrase from hooks, "talking back." In *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (1989), she states:

> Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of "talking back," that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice.[53]

By holding his gaze and asserting his identity, the character of Damon engages in both an oppositional gaze and the action of talking back in order to resist the heteronormative oppressions invoked by his father. Moreover, I argue that in that scene, "talking back" also involves Damon coming out to his family. The political act of expressing himself goes from silence (him dancing to Donna Summer) to oral resistance. However, his father hits and whips him with his belt after saying: "you don't know what it's like to be a man, to struggle." (00:13:39) In this scene, Damon's rejection is emphasized by the low-angle shot that gives more power to his father as he is taller than Damon. By placing the two characters in those specific positions, the camera accentuates the power relations between a father's authoritarian figure and a queer son in search of agency. In addition, the spatial organization of the shots' composition reinforces the series' discussion of margins and center.

[53] hooks, bell. *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. Boston: South End Press, 1989, p. 29.

"Pilot" – *00:13:37 – Low-angle shot of Damon's father*

This scene encapsulates Collins' analysis of the traditional family ideal as built by the WSCP's hegemonic norms. Indeed, Damon's father seems to emulate heteronormative and patriarchal rules regarding gender roles by inferring that "struggling" corresponds to masculinity. In parallel, he reinforces the aforementioned belief that ballet dancing and creativity in general are made for women, and that men who engage in such practices are seen as "sissies." (00:12:59) The low-angle shot is reminiscent of Collins' approach to traditional gender roles within the family, as it puts Damon's father in a position of power that echoes the figure of the "male headship that privileges and naturalizes masculinity as a source of authority."

As Damon's mother interferes to stop the beating, his father grabs him and physically throws him out of the house. It is interesting to note that Damon's aforementioned movement from public to private takes into effect once again, only in the other way around. The editing is composed of fast transitions that shows Damon being taken out of his room, down the staircase and thrown on the front lawn, emphasizing his rejection from the private sphere of the biological family into the public realm of homelessness. Through the sharp editing of the scene, Damon's Othering becomes gradually physical and geographical as he is thrown on the front lawn for the neighbors to see.

"Pilot" – *00:14:14 – High-angle shot of Damon on the ground*

"Pilot" – *00:14:16 – High-angle shot of Damon's father*

The high-angle shot shows Damon on the ground, instantly followed by a low-angle shot of his father saying "you're dead to me." (00:14:18) This performative sentence characterizes the fracture between the traditional family ideal and queer identity that results in Damon becoming homeless. As his father goes back into the house, his mother meets him outside. After slapping him, she says: "How could you betray me this way? I went against your father's words, supported your creativity, and you bring filth into my home? And you know the Bible condemns homosexuality and God will punish you by giving you that disease." (00:14:24) Not only does his mother's words account for their Christian background, which is one of Lorde's prerequisites to belong to the mythical norm, it also brings together the HIV/AIDS epidemic and Christianity by treating homosexuality as a punishable offense. This scene epitomizes the tensions between *Pose*'s center and margins, which cannot cohabitate within Damon's house. In that sense, not only does this house in the suburbs represent a first space of exclusion from which queer identities are rejected, it also epitomizes the geographical Othering of Damon as he has to move to New York City, a more cosmopolitan space where he will live on his own.

In the pilot episode of *Pose*, Damon will migrate from Allentown to New York City to become a famous modern jazz dancer, only to sleep on park benches with only a backpack on his shoulders. Damon's rejection from his family is an example of how biological families that emulate a WSCP's hegemonic norms may not truly see its queer members of color, but simply look at them through the lens of their transgressive queer identities and may create spaces of exclusion within the home. Yet, in *Pose*, these heteronormative spaces of exclusion do not only exist within the biological family, and are also experienced by numerous queer characters of color in the main setting of New York City. By means of a historical and political analysis of the city, I will now show how the contrast between looking and seeing is at the center of the

representations of the margins and center of *Pose*'s WSCP for the other characters in New York.

b. The gentrification of exclusion and the making of racialized spaces of exclusion in *Pose*

While the first subpart focused on Damon's family exclusion, this second subpart will follow his path to New York and focus on the spaces of exclusion that make up the queer racialized geographies of the city as depicted in the show. In order to account for the tensions within *Pose*'s WSCP in New York, I will first work on the geographical Othering of *Pose*'s queer characters of color by analyzing the places in which they live, work and socialize. As *Pose*'s first season contains eight episodes, its format as a TV show allows for an expansive exploration of the numerous neighborhoods of the city. The different areas and apartments shown throughout the season all carry meaning as some of them correspond to physical spaces of exclusion and epitomize the characters of color's Othering. Thus, in order to introduce the urban organization of space in *Pose*, I seek to work on the gentrification process of New York City that took place at the end of the 1970s in order to show how polarized the city was before the decade *Pose* was set in.

Starting in the 1950s, New York faced multiple tensions that polarized the debate around how the city was managed,[54] especially around its management of public spending and immigration. The end of the Second World War saw a rise in immigration on a national scale: in *All the Nations Under Heaven: Immigrants, Migrants, and the Making of New York* (1996), American Studies professors Frederick M. Binder et al. argue that, starting in the 1950s,

> [a]s whites departed for the suburbs, African Americans and Puerto Ricans moved to the city. African Americans from the South fled a Jim Crow social order, racial violence, economic hardship, and the postwar mechanization of agriculture, which threw black farmers off the land. [...] Puerto Rican migrants, driven by population growth and unemployment in their homeland, also migrated in growing numbers.[55]

The authors posit that, by a push-and-pull effect, the city of New York gradually became a haven for immigrants who wanted to escape racism and poor economic conditions. Moreover, the 1965 Immigration Act put an end to the previous quotas that favored Anglo-Saxon immigrants and

[54] "New York City." *Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/place/New-York-City/Administration-and-social-conditions. Accessed 2 April 2022.

[55] Binder, Frederick et al. *All the Nations Under Heaven: Immigrants, Migrants, and the Making of New York. Revised Edition*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019, p. 187.

prevented others from emigrating, which resulted in another wave of mass immigration of which New York was the main setting. This immigration on multiple levels encouraged white citizens to move to the suburbs. Binder et al. treat this phenomenon, called "white flight," in their aforementioned work:

> The rush to the suburbs in Greater New York was part of a national trend in postwar America. [...] The racial dimension of suburbanization was significant. [...] African Americans and Latinos, who were unable to get mortgages and typically earning lower salaries, did not get their fair share of this bounty. [...] By policy and practice most Latinos and African Americans were confined to the city's more troubled neighborhoods. [...] By the 1960s, the division between an increasingly "black" city and its white suburbs was born. City neighborhoods acquired a newly racialized geography that hardened boundaries between people, between communities, and between New York City and its suburbs.[56]

The authors argue that the massive white migration to the suburbs accelerated an already existing making of a space linked to whiteness in New York, made possible because of the intersectional and systemic oppressions that made it easier for white people to earn higher salaries and get mortgages. In parallel, this phenomenon highlights the making of a racialized space: this space was made of people of color who, because of the systemic oppression of racism, did not benefit from the same economic opportunities as their white counterparts. This "ghettoization" led them to live in less expensive areas consisting of declining neighborhoods. Starting in the 1960s, the decline of these areas intensified because of an ongoing economic and financial crisis. Binder et al. highlighted such economic tensions, and stated:

> New York City's size and diversity generated huge needs and demands [...]. The city's expenditures grew rapidly in the late 1960s. As businesses left the city, taking jobs with them, rising expenses could not be covered by municipal tax revenues. With unemployment rising in the early 1970s and the city relying on short-term bonds to plug holes in its budget, New York's finances grew shaky.[57]

By shedding light on New York's economic crisis, Binder et al.'s work brings together those economic tensions with the "white flight" phenomenon, which both disrupted the tax revenues of the city and contributed to its first recession which started at the end of the 1960s and culminated in 1975 when the city almost declared bankruptcy.[58] The economic, racial and cultural tensions that stemmed from these key-events converged during the city's power outage of 1977. In *The Restless City: A Short History of New York from Colonial Times to the Present* (2006), History

[56] Binder et al., op. cit., pp. 185-186.
[57] Ibid, p. 200.
[58] "New York City", *Britannica*.

professor Joanne Reitano accounts for this convergence and states that the riots following the blackout "were perpetrated by people who, with a 30 percent unemployment rate (60 percent among young minority men), had 'nothing to lose.'"[59] Reitano demonstrates that the socio-economic tensions brought by the fiscal crisis and the ghettoization process impacted underprivileged individuals, thus epitomizing the decline of the neighborhoods only accessible to people of color. She also argued that little by little, New York came to be seen as dangerous and sinful: she accounts for this negative image and points that

> the rise of prostitution in Times Square further earned [New York City] the label "sin city." A startling conglomeration of ills confirmed New York's image as the worst of all possible worlds. Rampant arson, ravaging disease, surging welfare roles, high unemployment, untrammeled drug use, brazen crime, filthy streets, sprawling graffiti, crumbling schools, huge rats, extensive homelessness, fiscal bankruptcy, police corruption, and political scandals horrified the nation. [New York City] epitomized the problems everyone else hoped to avoid. It symbolized the urban crisis.[60]

This spatial organization showcases the making of a physical center, characterized by the suburbs, and its margins, which are made of people living in the declining neighborhoods: this tension between center and margins is representative of the high polarization of New York in the 1980s, the decade in which *Pose* is set.

After a successful campaign based on counteracting the economic crisis, Edward I. Koch was elected mayor of New York in 1978. Under his administration, he enacted various policies of urban restructuration which aimed at renovating numerous buildings and neighborhoods of the city to attract new upscale professionals in order to increase the tax revenues. In his thesis entitled *Drag Hinge: "Reading" the Scales Between Architecture and Urbanism* (2019), architect designer and Ballroom scholar Malcolm Rio deals with such urbanism and observed:

> In the eighties, New York City experienced a tremendous building boom. [...] This rise mirrored the eccentricity also occurring in eighties corporate culture and media, where opulent displaces of one's prestige and status were not only admired but a barometer of the nation's economic and social health. It is no wonder then that many of the postmodern projects erected in [the] eighties were tied to industries of finance, media, and luxury commerce.[61]

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[59] Reitano, Joanne. *The Restless City: A Short History of New York from Colonial Times to the Present*. New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 190.

[60] Ibid, p. 181.

[61] Rio, Malcolm. *Drag Hinge: "Reading" the Scales Between Architecture and Urbanism*, 2019. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Masters thesis, p. 59.

By bringing together the gentrification process of New York and the overall opulence that characterized the 1980s, Rio accounts for the city's new urban policies designed to attract new upscale workers whose economic capital would match the opulence of this gentrification process. However, not everyone could benefit from this prosperity, which resulted in a specific social stratification in the city. Binder et al. discussed this inequality and argued:

> Examining ethnicity, economics, and neighborhoods in this new city in the 1980s, the political scientist John Mollenkopf noticed a contradictory patchwork of changes. More New Yorkers were working, the average household was earning more, and in most neighborhoods housing stock was improving. But the prosperity was "unevenly distributed." Whites gained the most, blacks held steady, and Latinos lost prosperity relative to both groups. [...] Neighborhoods of native-born African Americans, like Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant, and neighborhoods of Puerto Ricans, like East Harlem and the South Bronx, were places of declining or low gains in income.[62]

Relying on works by John Mollenkopf, Binder et al. show the other side of gentrification and argue that the city was highly polarized in the 1980s in an architectural and political sense. In *Queer Latino Testimonio, Keith Haring, and Juanito Xtravaganza* (2007), professor Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé worked on the migration of queer people of color to New York and their involvement in the Ballroom scene. He gave a similar account of this excluding gentrification regarding queer people of color:

> Many of [New York City's] inner-city neighborhoods remained a devastated war zone of abandoned and burned-out buildings and vacant lots, overrun by the drug trade and patrolled by an unsympathetic police that identified their impoverished, working-class residents, mostly Latino and black, as the cause, rather than the victims, of their neighborhoods' decline.[63]

Cruz-Malavé shows that housing and zoning inequalities were reinforced during this gentrification process. People of color, because they do not check every prerequisite to belong to Lorde's mythical norm and face systemic racism, were prevented from moving to the suburbs or benefiting from this gentrification, thus explaining their presence in the neighborhoods described by Cruz-Malavé in *Queer Latino Testimonio*. In "The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race: Theorizing the Hidden Architecture of Landscape" (2007), American Studies professor George Lipsitz draws a similar link between race and space and stated:

> The lived experience of race has a spatial dimension, and the lived experience of space has a racial dimension. People of different races in the United States are relegated to different physical

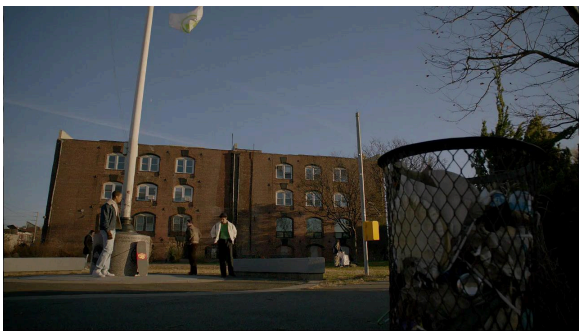
[62] Binder et al., op. cit., p. 204.
[63] Cruz-Malavé, Arnaldo. *Queer Latino Testimonio, Keith Haring, and Juanito Xtravaganza.* New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007, p. 63.

> locations by housing and lending discrimination [...]. The racial demography of the places where people live, work, play, shop, and travel exposes them to a socially shared system of exclusion and inclusion.[64]

Because they stand at the intersection of racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia, queer people of color stand at the bottom of Crenshaw's basement, which is no longer theorized in the strictly metaphorical sense of the term, but also illustrated by the aforementioned social stratification of New York. Those neighborhoods which are at the margins of society, such as the South Bronx, Bushwick or Harlem became "symbols of urban disaster"[65] while areas such as Park Slope or the Upper East Side of Manhattan characterized the opulence and wealth brought by gentrification, encapsulated by the American mythical norm. This social stratification, proof of the tensions between center and margins, is symbolic of the divisive nature of the 1980s and is at the heart of every episode of *Pose* and its various settings.

What are the spaces of exclusion that indicate the geographical Othering of queer characters of color in *Pose*? Throughout its first season, the "piers" act as one of the main areas that did not go through the aforementioned process of gentrification. Facing the Hudson River, it is where most of the queer characters in *Pose* meet and socialize. The piers appear frequently throughout the first season: in the pilot, the first establishing shot of the piers gives an extensive view of desolate and neglected industrial buildings. Moreover, in a scene from "Access" (S01, E02) in which Damon and Lil Papi talk about the ballet, the audience sees a low-angle shot of another abandoned building in the background and a full trash bin in the foreground, which emphasizes the filthiness of the area.

"Pilot" – *00:34:12 – Establishing shot of the piers*



"Access" – *00:47:48 – Low-angle shot of the piers*

[64] Lipsitz, George. "The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race: Theorizing the Hidden Architecture of Landscape." *Landscape Journal*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 2007, pp. 12-13.
[65] Binder et al., op. cit., p. 201.

These shots fit the description of the places of "urban disaster" described by Binder et al. and represent the impoverished concrete margins of society that act as spaces of exclusion for queer people of color. Moreover, the two aforementioned scenes also show that the piers are the place where Angel and Lil Papi earn money: the former is a sex worker and awaits for her potential clients by the road while the latter deals drugs in front of a vandalized building. This shows that since Angel and Lil Papi are people of color, and the former being a trans woman, they do not have the same access to economic opportunities as the white characters in *Pose*. In that sense, the series suggests that poor economic opportunity for people of color explains why they resort to illegal ways to make money in order to sustain themselves. The penultimate episode "Pink Slip" (S01E07) also showcases their search for income on the piers: Angel still awaits for clients by the road while Lil Papi deals drugs in front of a barrel on fire.

"Pink Slip" – *00:12:18 – Long shot of the piers*

"Pink Slip" – *00:43:02 – Long shot of the piers*

This time, the scenes take place at nighttime. Unlike in the previous screenshots, the absence of light creates a threatening atmosphere, especially with the use of long takes in which Angel and Lil Papi appear smaller than they actually are, as if threatened by the surrounding impoverished area. The piers represent the space of exclusion that is the bottom of Crenshaw's basement, as white heterosexual people that characterize hooks' WSCP are not present in the aforementioned scenes.

Another setting that is central to the Othering of queer characters of color in *Pose* is Blanca's apartment, which also seems to fit Binder et al.'s description of impoverished areas as the setting appears neglected when Blanca moves in. For example, when she visits her apartment in the pilot episode, she looks at the building in a low-angle shot: the windows are partly hidden by the tree on the left side of the screen and the emergency stairs. Inside the apartment, the medium close-up frames Blanca in front of barred windows. Unlike Angel and Lil Papi who

appear as hypervisible and in danger at the piers, the use of barred windows in the apartment makes it appear as hidden from the outside world, epitomizing another space of exclusion.

"Pilot" – *00:19:30 – Low-angle shot of Blanca's building*

"Giving and Receiving" – *00:19:56 – Shot of Blanca's apartment*

Thus, just like Damon's bedroom, the space of exclusion and queer expression that is Blanca's apartment belongs to the private sphere—the margins of *Pose*'s WSCP.

Similarly, when Damon and Ricky exchange gifts in "Giving and Receiving" (S01E03), an establishing shot of their bedroom shows that the room has cracked and dampened walls, which creates a sense of neglect that is emphasized by the poor, gloomy lighting in the scene. In the same episode, Blanca hugs Damon in a tracking shot with an arch door with broken glass in the foreground: by framing the characters in this neglected arch, the camera takes the viewers into yet another space of exclusion that epitomizes Cruz-Malavé's descriptions of impoverished areas.

"Giving and Receiving" – *00:44:33 – Long shot of Blanca's apartment*

"Giving and Receiving" – *00:44:45 – Establishing shot of Damon's bedroom*

The long takes used in those shots also show the emptiness of the rooms and the lack of furniture, attesting to the characters of color's socio-economic status.

Paradoxically, these concrete margins also act as a space of expression: in the pilot episode, a voguing[66] competition takes place at the piers, and in "Access" (S01E02), Damon and Ricky can express their love by hugging romantically on a bench. Since the people from the WSCP are not part of those racialized spaces of exclusion, the queer characters of color are able to express their sexuality and gender identity far from the society that rejects them. *Pose* tackles the tensions between its WSCP and the queer characters of color through a physical separation of those characters: if there are racialized spaces in *Pose*, there are also spaces which discuss the notion of whiteness, which brings me to explore the spatial organization of the white characters of *Pose*.

c. Spatial organization and representation of whiteness in *Pose*

In order to fully grasp the extent of the geographical and social Othering of the characters of color in *Pose*, I seek to compare the aforementioned racialized spaces of exclusion with the opulent and lavish spaces that most of the series' queer characters of color are excluded from and which are representative of the gentrification process of the 1980s as depicted in the show. By focusing on the representation of the physical and geographical spaces occupied by the WSCP, I intend to show how the construction of whiteness is showcased by the spatial organization of the white characters of the series.

In the aforementioned *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992), hooks discusses the representation of whiteness in the imagination of Black people. She posits that whiteness is not considered a proper race, unlike Blackness, and that in this normalized and undisclosed construction lies one of the roots of white supremacy. She states:

> Since most white people do not have to "see" black people (constantly appearing on billboards, television, movies, in magazines, etc.) and they do not need to be ever on guard, observing black people, to be "safe," they can live as though black people are invisible and can imagine that they are also invisible to blacks.[67]

hooks argues that the lack of representation of Black people in the urban space and mass media allows white people to apply this invisibility to their own perception of them, thus reinforcing white supremacy and racism. Her approach also echoes the nuance that is to be made between

[66] In Ballroom culture, "voguing" is a dance which involves complex dance moves that stand between delicacy and stamina.
[67] hooks, *Black Looks,* op. cit., p. 168.

looking, via the aforementioned epistemology of transgressive identities, and truly seeing an individual. hooks also describes a "fantasy of whiteness" in mass media and cites Richard Dyer, an expert on the representations of whiteness in popular culture and media. In his essay "White" (1988), he observes:

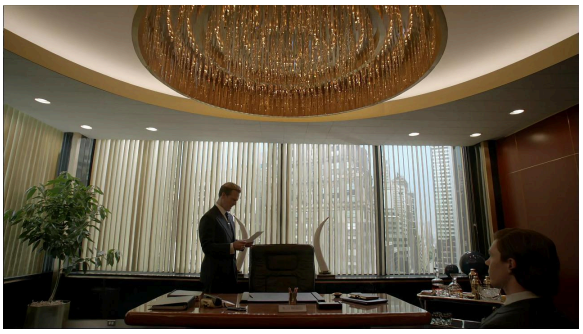
> Power in contemporary society habitually passes itself off as embodied in the normal as opposed to the superior. This is common to all forms of power, but it works in a peculiarly seductive way with whiteness, because of the way it seems rooted, in common-sense thought, in things other than ethnic difference... Thus it is said (even in liberal textbooks) that there are inevitable associations of white with light and therefore safety, and black with dark and therefore danger, and this explains racism [...].[68]

Thus, whiteness is at the same time made invisible in the minds of white people and hypervisible in the way they are represented in mass media. Since media representation reflects the society in which it is produced, I argue that this fracture between invisibility and hypervisibility also occurs in the public space. By being in spaces that echo the concept of whiteness, people of color stand out not merely because of their race, but rather because the concept of race is inherently rooted in difference. In that sense, the creation of racialized geographies paradoxically relies on the absence of white people in a push-and-pull effect that results from people of color's hypervisibility in spaces mainly represented by whiteness.

Even though *Pose*'s main characters are all queer people of color, the series also comprises several characters from the WSCP, notably Stan, Angel's love interest throughout season one. In the pilot episode, he appears for the first time with a tidy hairdo, a smoking and a long beige trench coat when he applies for a job in Manhattan. The scene begins by an establishing shot of a street in Manhattan and the entrance of the Trump Tower, whose golden entrance is reminiscent of Rio's description of lavish gentrified infrastructures. The office in which his interview takes place characterizes the opulence of the WSCP, as shown by the camera tilting down from a big golden chandelier in a low-angle shot of the setting which gives power to the sophisticated wooden walls, the big desk or the scenery behind the window.

[68] Dyer, Richard. "White." *Screen*, Vol. 29, No. 4, 1988, p. 45.

"Pilot" – *00:32:25 – Establishing shot of Trump Tower*



"Pilot" – *00:32:45 – Low-angle shot of Stan's boss' office*

The golden color of the chandelier as well as the overall bright lighting of Stan's boss' office condones Dyer's views on the representations of whiteness. Because of his socioeconomic rank and the fact that he performs his gender according to heteronormative norms, Stan checks almost every prerequisite of Lorde's mythical norm, being "white, thin, male, young, heterosexual [...] and financially secure."[69] Thus, he stands above Crenshaw's basement in which characters like Angel, Blanca or Pray Tell remain. Unlike those characters, Stan lives, works and socializes in the places that fully underwent the gentrification process of the 1980s, such as the office at the Trump Tower. Interestingly enough, in *There Goes the Hood: Views of Gentrification from the Ground Up* (2006), Sociology professor Lance Freeman attests that "Donald Trump is a larger-than-life real estate developer whose name is synonymous with the rich and powerful," and that people like him "stand in as metaphors for powerful forces that act in ways to the detriment of residents of gentrifying neighborhoods."[70] This parallel between Donald Trump and the prosperity of New York in the 1980s attests to Stan's socioeconomic status: as a matter of fact, when he and Angel meet for the first time, the latter says: "I can't believe you work for Donald Trump. That's so super impressive" ("Pilot", 00:41:41), characterizing the juxtaposition of the WSCP and queer people of color in spite of their different places in Crenshaw's basement.

The viewers discover later in the same episode that in spite of his attraction for Angel, he is married to a woman named Patty (Kate Mara), with whom he has two children and lives in the suburbs in New Jersey. The notion of whiteness is also discussed through the suburbanization of the city represented by Stan and Patty's house. In "Access" (S01E02), a scene opens with the camera panning from a golden chandelier to Stan working. The chandelier has a golden color

[69] Lorde, op. cit.

[70] Freeman, Lance. *There Goes the Hood: Views of Gentrification from the Ground Up*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006, p. 113.

similar to the one in his boss' office, which again echoes his socio-economic rank. Moreover, in "Giving and Receiving" (S01E03), Stan and his family are all sitting in the living room for Christmas day. The shot showcases the bright lighting of the room as well as the omnipresence of the color white, emphasized by the big white Christmas tree. Moreover, the big window in Stan's and Patti's house resemble the one in the office in the Trump Tower, which both contrast with the barred window in Blanca's apartment, attesting one again to the differences between gentrified and racialized settings.

"Access" – *00:29:50 – Camera's emphasis on the chandelier in Stan's and Patty's house*

"Giving and Receiving" – *00:447:00 – Long shot of Stan's and Patty's living room*

Unlike the settings occupied by the queer characters of color in the series, the emphasis on white and golden colors in the settings occupied by the WSCP, as well as the fancy furniture and appliances all epitomize the upscale aspect of the gentrification and suburbanization of New York as well as the overall consumerism and prosperity of the 1980s. This contrasts with the queer characters of color's settings, which are quite dark and impoverished, especially if we compare Blanca's and Stan's Christmas trees: the former is small and green, while the latter if big and white, which brings together the socio-economic rank and whiteness of the characters that live in the suburbs.

In addition to Stan's place of work and the home in the suburbs, the viewers also get to see where he and his wife socialize, such as the Rainbow Room: a real place at the Rockefeller Center where upscale people can eat and dance. The scene opens on a shot of a panoramic view on the Empire State Building. The camera operates a dolly zoom backwards and shows Stan and Patty drinking champagne and eating lobster. They are dressed formally: Stan is wearing a tuxedo and Patty an emerald fancy dress and a tidy bun, attesting to their socioeconomic status. The prosperity of this status is also rendered by the extravagantly large restaurant with big

windows, luxurious chandeliers and a dancefloor with an orchestra, emphasized by the dim, intimate lighting and the use of a gold color palette throughout the scene.

"Pilot" – *00:50:57 – Close-up of Stan and Patty eating dinner*

"Pilot" – *00:57:55 – Long shot of the Rainbow Room*

The opulent, gentrified settings in *Pose* discuss the notion of whiteness. Lipsitz tackles this white spatial organization, when he states:

> A white spatial imaginary, based on exclusivity and augmented exchange value, functions as a central mechanism for skewing opportunities and life chances in the United States along racial lines. Whiteness, as used here, is an analytic category that refers to the structured advantages that accrue to whites because of past and present discrimination. [...] [W]hites benefit from the association of whiteness with privilege and the neighborhood effects of spaces defined by their racial demography.[71]

The selected screenshots show that the characters of the WSCP in *Pose* socialize in lavish infrastructures that represent an upscale way of life. It is worth noting that the scene in the Rainbow Room takes place directly after the aforementioned voguing competition at the piers: by operating such a transition, the editing accounts for the places of the characters in Crenshaw's basement, encapsulating the tensions between center and margins in *Pose*.

As the gentrified settings stand above Crenshaw's basement, a complex relationship of gazes can therefore be observed, one that condones hooks' views on whiteness. By living away from opulent neighborhoods, queer people of color are invisible to the WSCP, thereby giving the latter full legitimacy to further exist and to further exclude. Even though distance is showcased through the editing of the episodes, *Pose* also discusses the interactions between the center and its margins in a physical juxtaposition of those two spaces. Indeed, *Pose*'s pilot discusses the wish of the queer characters of color to get closer to that center in terms of economic and social opportunities. This is the case of Angel who, in the pilot episode, wants to apply for a job on

[71] Lipsitz, op. cit., p. 13.

Park Avenue. The first establishing shot tilts the camera down from the top of a skyscraper to the ground, indicating the lavish New York City and the top of Crenshaw's basement which Angel who, by wanting to apply for a job, wants to be part of.

"Pilot" – *00:45:39 – Low-angle shot of a building in Park Avenue*

"Pilot" – *00:45:45 – Close-up of Angel gazing at the building*

As Angel gazes up at the building in front of her, the low-angle shot contrasts with that of Blanca's apartment because this time, there are no fences or bars to separate the building in front of her. As the windows and overall facade are free to fully receive the sunlight, the opulence of the building can be seen by anybody in the outside world. Angel appears to be dazzled by the lavish architecture, which is emphasized by the cut to a long, low-angle shot which makes her smaller.

"Pilot" – *00:45:50 – Low-angle shot of Angel*

"Pilot" – *00:45:59 – Angel going up the mechanical stairs*

However, this shot also shows that she stands out: unlike the people around her who are dressed semi-formally, Angel is wearing platform shoes, bright clothes and an afro, which all act as markers of difference in a place as upscale as Park Avenue. Following Butler's approach to gender performance studied in the introduction, Angel embodies the visual attributes that belong to the female gender in order to perform it in the public space. As she goes up the elevator surrounded by that lavish setting, her movement from bottom to top seems to refer to a possible

social mobility. Indeed, followed by her dazzled gaze attesting to her wish for economic opportunity, the elevator seems to represent Angel's moving proximity with the people that stand above Crenshaw's basement. Thus, in the first part of the scene, the progressive movement from exterior to interior seems to create the illusion of accessing that economic purpose emphasized by Angel's longing optimism.

However, the saleswoman in the store tells her they are not hiring in spite of a sign saying otherwise. She, too, performs her gender the same way Angel does: she has a tidy hairdo and a carefully-chosen outfit which fits into the fancy aesthetic of the store as shown in the establishment shot showing the entire boutique. Following Dyer's views on the representation of whiteness, this establishment shot also shows the omnipresence of the color white, emphasizing this setting as an opulent, white space. Moreover, the notion of whiteness is also discussed by the fact that her style contrasts with that of Angel. Combined with the two characters being physically separated by a counter, the scene is reminiscent of Crenshaw's basement, in which the two characters stand in separate places.

"Pilot" – *00:46:11 – Establishing shot of the boutique*

"Pilot" – *00:46:25 – Angel separated from the saleswoman*

Angel can see the saleswoman, who represents the space above the basement, but the latter does not truly see her: she only looks at her in a wish to make her leave her store. Adopting an intersectional reading of the scene, it is worth asking what pushed the saleswoman to adopt such an exclusive behavior: is it her appearance attesting to her social class, the fact that she is Black or that she is a trans woman? In all cases, Angel is rejected from the center of *Pose*'s WSCP. This interaction condones hooks' previous quote on the representation of whiteness. As Angel stands in a space mainly represented through the concept of whiteness, the white saleswoman may assume that her own whiteness is part of the norm, and thus invisible. Yet, since Angel differs from this normative whiteness in the eyes of the saleswoman, the latter has the power to

further exist and further exclude those who do not fit the norm. This is how the saleswoman can Other Angel by only looking at her: the former can go in any public space, while the latter is looked at because she does not seem to belong to a geographical space performing whiteness and its representations. In other words, the saleswoman's gaze carries a rejection that results from her own belonging to the lavish store. When confronting the saleswoman, Angel says "so, what's the problem, am I too much woman for you?" as the camera focuses on her in a medium-close up shot of her defiant face including the saleswoman in the screen composition. By asking if she is "too much woman," Angel emphasizes her trans identity and attempts to use this marker of difference as an affirmation of her legitimacy to actually belong to the center and express her gender identity.

"Pilot" – *00:46:18 – Close-up of the white saleswoman*

"Pilot" – *00:46:21 – Angel questioning the saleswoman's gaze*

Just like Damon and his action of talking back in the first subpart, Angel searches for the possibility of agency by interrogating the saleswoman's gaze: she states that she is in fact a woman and that she should be treated as such. In Angel's search for agency, the script as well as editing and camera angles operate a hypervisibility of Angel's transgressive identities: yet, it also highlights Angel's consciousness regarding the saleswoman's social mechanisms of exclusion and her attempt to counteract her own Othering. Although she is eventually asked to leave the store, this interaction displays the interconnecting discriminations faced notably by trans women of color which prevent them from accessing the same opportunities as white cisgendered women, which forces Angel to engage in other activities in order to survive.

In the first season of *Pose*, the settings which discuss whiteness are the center stage for the tensions between the WSCP's center and margins. Because the white characters in *Pose* stand above Crenshaw's basement, they get to enjoy the upscale parts of New York City while its queer characters of color stand on the physical and metaphorical margins of society. These tensions are

at the heart of the nuance between "looking" and "seeing," because queer people of color are mostly looked at in spaces that discuss whiteness. Yet, the interactions I explored so far epitomize systemic and intersectional oppressions, they take place between guest characters that the audience will not see again. In the case of Angel and Elektra, however, tensions and fractures can be seen on an intimate level in their respective relationships with white, cisgender and heterosexual men. By analyzing such relationships in the first season of *Pose*, I endeavor to qualify my observations on the frontier between white and queer racialized spaces, as well as the nuance between "looking" and "seeing" in the context of the trans characters of color in the series and their romantic relationships.

d. The making of the intimate Other: trans identities of color in romantic power relations

In this subpart, I wish to push further my analysis on the tensions between the WSCP's center and margins and explore another type of Othering that is shown to the audience in *Pose*. After having explored the settings discussing whiteness in the series and their representations, as well as the racialized spaces made of queer people of color, I wish to qualify my arguments on the interactions between those two parallel spaces. In order to do so, I will focus on the characters of Angel and Elektra, who both are trans women of color, and their romantic relationships with Stan and Mr. Ford respectively. I will first show that because they all stand in different places regarding Crenshaw's basement, their relationships lie in unbalanced power dynamics that still rely on the aforementioned oppressions. In order to remain in an intersectional analysis of the queer identities of Angel and Elektra, I will also argue that their transness acts as a vessel through which those two characters are Othered on the basis of their gender identity. Because their intersecting identities are seen both as transgressive and arousing by their respective partners, I will show that those relationships result in the display of their bodies for the pleasure of the male gaze.

All the while relying on the introduction in which I worked on visual epistemologies of gender, I seek to expand on the notion of transness and gender performance to better grasp the notion of Othering regarding trans women of color. In order to work on this different type of Othering, I seek to provide further theoretical context on trans identities of color and their performances in a WSCP. In her paper "Doing Gender, Doing Heteronormativity: 'Gender

Normals,' Transgender People, and the Social Maintenance of Heterosexuality," sociology professor Kristen Schilt draw the link between trans identity and heteronormativity:

> Heterosexuality requires a binary sex system, as it is predicated on the seemingly natural attraction between two types of bodies defined as opposites. The taken-for-granted expectation that heterosexuality and gender identity follow from genitalia produces heteronormativity—even though in most social interactions genitals are not actually visible. People do not expect a mismatch between "biological" credentials and gender presentations but rather assume that gendered appearances reflect a biologically sexed reality [...]. This assumption is not always warranted. Transgender people—people who live with a social gender identity that differs from the gender they were assigned at birth—can successfully do masculinity or femininity without having the genitalia that are presumed to follow from their outward appearance.[72]

Schilt instantly distinguishes a trans person's gender identity and their genitalia,[73] which does not always match the gender they identify with. Thus, her approach highlights how trans identities are not made up of a person's genital organs, but rather the way they perform their gender, which echoes Butler's concept of gender performativity explored in the introduction. Moreover, Schilt argues for an essentialist view on gender by heterosexual people, in which the gender that is performed always follows the genitalia that is attached to this gender.

In order to work on the Othering of the trans characters of color in *Pose*, I seek to take a different turn. I posit that in a WSCP, the opposite situation may arise: a cisgender heterosexual person may be aware of someone's trans identity, and that action of knowing might push them to engage in all types of relations with trans people whose genitalia differ from their gender identity. Attraction to trans women who did not go through a gender confirmation surgery may be defined as objectification, or "fetishization." In a study that focuses on the sexualization of trans women of color, scholars Anzani et al. define the fetishization and objectification of trans women as follows:

> [W]hen fetishism is utilized in reference to an attraction toward transgender individuals, fetishism refers specifically to the sexual investment in transness (i.e., body, identity, status, etc.) as an overvalued sexual object, rather than the holistic individual [...]. While the literature that has dealt with fetishism of transgender people is scarce, the perspective adopted is mainly focused on fetishization seen as a form of sexual objectification (or sexualization) of transgender women or a sexual attraction to transgender identities [...]. On the one hand, the experiences of discrimination and body objectification both start from a dehumanizing perception of the target. Therefore, both experiences come from the same matrix of dehumanization, and discrimination can be considered

[72] Schilt, Kristen. "Doing Gender, Doing Heteronormativity: 'Gender Normals,' Transgender People, and the Social Maintenance of Heterosexuality." *Gender & Society*, Vol. 23, No. 4, 2009, p. 443.
[73] According to Meriam-Webster, "genitalia" refers to the genital organs of a person.

> a form of dehumanization. [...] Sexualization [...] is aimed at establishing a power dynamic, subjecting transgender (and cisgender) women to cissexist power.[74]

Anzani et al. shed light on the fragmentation of the trans body that may take place in relationships between trans women and cisgender heterosexual men, who may not see them as who they really are, but only frame them through their genitalia. This consists in the first difference between "looking" and "seeing" regarding trans women living in a WSCP. This exoticisation was tackled by hooks regarding women of color. In *Black Looks*, she links this objectification with the aforementioned concept of the Other:

> Certainly from the standpoint of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, the hope is that desires for the "primitive" or fantasies about the Other can be continually exploited and that such exploitation will occur in a manner that reinscribes and maintains the *status quo*. [...] When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other.[75]

hooks' discussion of the Other and exploitation highlights the power relations that may take place between people that stand at the center of a WSCP, and those who stand on its margins. I expand hooks' notion of power to trans women of color, and argue that power relations may take place between a cisgender white male, standing above Crenshaw's basement, and a trans woman of color who stands at the bottom. In light of this theoretical context, I want to analyze how the Othering of Angel and Elektra is rendered in the first season of *Pose* through their respective romantic relationships. How are heteronormativity, fetishism and commodification all operated onto those trans characters of color, ultimately impacting their trans experiences in a redefinition of the relation between "seeing" and "looking?"

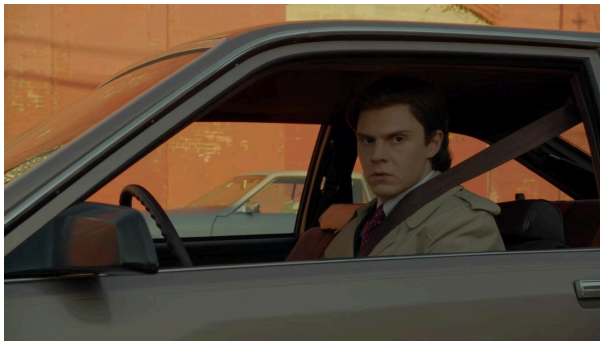
Even though Angel and Elektra are both committed to cisgender heterosexual boyfriends, their situations and upbringing differ. Since it is a drama TV series, its opening season's eight episodes allow for a progressive evolution of their relationships for the audience to see. In the case of Angel, her relationship with Stan begins in the pilot episode, when the former still engages in sex work in order to make ends meet. As Angel awaits clients at her usual spot, Stan sees her from behind the wheel of his car. The camera frames Stan from behind looking at Angel

[74] Anzani, Annalis, Lindley, Louis, Tognasso, Giacomo, Galupo, M. Paz and Prunas, Antonio. "'Being Talked to Like I Was a Sex Toy, Like Being Transgender Was Simply for the Enjoyment of Someone Else': Fetishization and Sexualization of Transgender and Nonbinary Individuals." *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, Vol. 50, No. 3, 2021, pp. 897-898.

[75] hooks, *Black Looks*, op. cit., pp. 22-23.

through the window of his car: as she stands against a light pole from afar, the camera emphasizes Angel being on display for Stan's pleasure. The shot cuts to a close-up that zooms in on Stan's face, putting the emphasis again on Stan's action of gazing insistently.

"Pilot" – *00:34:43 – Close-up of Stan gazing at Angel from afar; Angel put on display by being framed through Stan's window*



"Pilot" – *00:34:48– Zoom-in on Stan gazing at Angel*

This scene foreshadows Stan's power over Angel—a domination that takes several forms. First, because the scene fits into the narrative timeline of the pilot episode, as the previous scene showed Stan for the first time being hired for a job in Park Avenue. As I previously mentioned, Stan checks numerous boxes to belong to Lorde's mythical norm: he is white, heterosexual and financially secure, the latter being emphasized by his suit under his beige trench coat. In that sense, the scene epitomizes the difference between him and Angel: as the scene begins, Stan goes from a space representing whiteness (the Trump Tower) to a racialized space of exclusion (the piers), where Angel works. Interestingly, Stan remains in his car for the entire scene, attesting to the physical separation of both characters. Moreover, Stan's gaze echoes the concept of the "male gaze," developed by film feminist Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema:"

> In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.[76]

I rely on Mulvey's concept of the male gaze and apply it to Stan. Yet, *Pose* does not indulge in a male gaze in its production, but merely by the character of Stan. Thus, the televised staging of the scene under study only works to emphasize Stan's fetishization of Angel's transness.

[76] Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen*, Vol. 16, No. 3, 1975, p. 11.

Moreover, many intersectional scholars, including hooks in *Black Looks*, offered an alternative approach to the male gaze to apply it to women of color in a WSCP.

As Stan and Angel go to a motel, the former asks her to take off her skirt. Again, the shot/reverse shots used during the interaction shows Stan's objectification of Angel's genitals.

"Pilot" – *00:37:08 – Close-up of Stan looking at Angel*

"Pilot" – *00:37:17 – Over-the-shoulder shot of Angel taking of her skirt*

By the use of over-the-shoulder shots which always show Stan in the frame, the camera puts the emphasis on him as a spectator of Angel's body, which is fragmented through his male cisgender white gaze. The same devices are used when Angel has broken up with Stan later in *Pose*'s first season: in "Love is The Message" (S01E06), Angel works as a dancer in Show World. As a new client puts coins in the machine to lift the curtain, the face of Stan appears through the window.

"Love is The Message" – *00:25:22 – Close-up of Stan*

"Love is The Message" – *00:25:25 – Close-up of Angel framed through the window*

Even though Stan came back to Angel, she is still framed through a window that physically separates the two characters. Not only does this separation attest to their different places regarding Crenshaw's basement, the setting in itself is also charged with meaning. Indeed, the window normally allows spectators to look at Angel dancing in her underwear: this meaning attests to Stan's early sexual objectification. I argue that the window acts as a metaphor

encapsulating Angel not truly being seen by Stan, but merely looked at through the lens of her transness. Even though they will get back together after this encounter, Angel's framing as well as the omnipresence of the color red all foreshadow a danger to come, that is, being sexually fetishized for the male gaze again.

Although their relationship progresses differently, Elektra's and Mr. Ford's romantic encounters follow the same sexual objectification. At the beginning of the first season of *Pose*, it is established that Elektra has been with Mr. Ford. for several years. He pays for her rent and gives her an allowance through which she can indulge in an opulent lifestyle. In "The Fever" (S01E04), Elektra asks Mr. Ford about a possible gender confirmation surgery. He immediately refuses, saying "I want you as you are. You get cut up by some doctor, that's someone else. The woman I have has always had… something extra." (00:17:20) While Elektra sees herself outside of her genitalia, Mr. Ford indulges in the opposite approach by not distinguishing Elektra's person from her trans identity. He then says:

> I know what I like, but I can't explain why my dick gets hard knowing that yours is there, all I know is that I want it in the room. Now maybe it's because I like the feeling of knowing that I'm getting away with something that no one else knows about… I just want it there. (00:17:52)

This quote attests to Mr. Ford's sexual objectification of Elektra as well as a regulation of the trans body, which echoes Angel's own objectification by Stan. The lack of agency for those two characters resulting from Stan's and Mr. Ford's cisgender male gazes indicate the possible Othering of trans women of color on a sexual basis, which consists of an oppression that stems from the heteronormative and patriarchal hegemonic norms of *Pose*'s WSCP. Thus, this cisgender male gaze epitomizes the nuance between "looking" and "seeing:" as Angel and Elektra are only seen through their transness, they are merely looked at by their partners and not truly seen for who they are. This echoes Anzani et al.'s approach to transness and fetishism, in which sexual objectification and discrimination "come from the same matrix of dehumanization."[77]

Angel and Stan's relationship will take a different turn as the notion of space is discussed in the context of intimacy. In "Giving and Receiving" (S01E03), Stan also offers to pay for a new apartment for Angel. As she sees it for the first time, the shot/reverse shots take the audience in yet another opulent setting epitomized by the size of the apartment and the white and gold colors,

[77] Anzani et al., op. cit., p. 898.

which follows the same representations of whiteness I previously worked on. Yet, in the same episode, Angel waits for Stan to come home to celebrate Christmas Eve with her. As he never arrives, she sits by the window and starts crying. Thus, Angel being promised an upward social mobility through her lavish apartment is counteracted by her sitting alone and waiting for Stan to finally come.

"Giving and Receiving" – *00:16:07 – Shot of Angel's new apartment*

"Giving and Receiving" – *00:51:21 – Close-up of Angel framed through the window*

The use of a close-up framing her through the window attests again to Angel being on display. Because she was promised an upward social mobility, Angel being on display frames her as a kept woman with no possibility of evolution. Even though Stan is not in the scene as he never arrives, Angel remains in a paradoxical and ongoing shift between hypervisibility and invisibility: the former takes place when she is with Stan, and the latter is rendered through her being alone in the apartment that he pays for.

Elektra's relationship also follows the same trajectory regarding the connection between spaces performing whiteness and a promised upward social mobility. Again, power dynamics are shown in the exploration of space in the series: Mr. Ford, just like Stan, is close to the mythical norm as he is heterosexual, rich and white. These dynamics are rendered in the very first scene of the pilot episode, in which the House of Abundance are all dancing and preparing dinner in Elektra's living room. Resembling that of a penthouse, her apartment reminds the audience of a lavish structure in an upscale neighborhood: by showing the entire room with the use of high-angle shots, the camera emphasizes the size of Elektra's opulent apartment. The big windows as well as the omnipresence of the gold furniture in the close-ups of Elektra all attest to an opulent economic baggage that is allowed by her transactional relationship with Mr. Ford.

"Pilot" – *00:01:12 – High-angle shot of Elektra's apartment*

"Pilot" – *00:01:59 – Close-up of Elektra surrounded by gold furniture*

Indeed, these opulent settings bring me to qualify, but also confirm, the analyses I made in the discussion of white and racialized spaces in *Pose*. I argued that most characters of color in the series were excluded from the places discussing whiteness. Yet, Elektra's and Angel's apartments cinematically echo the aforementioned representations of whiteness only to be applied to Elektra and Angel, who are trans women of color. Since they are not the ones paying for this opulent lifestyle, I argue that their relationships only attest to Stan's and Mr. Ford's domination over them: as the female characters stand in Crenshaw's basement, the cisgender male characters stand at the top. Thus, *Pose*'s first season hints at the possibility of social mobility in relationships based on power dynamics.

The concepts of space and fetishism will converge once again when those relationships will end, resulting in social and spatial exclusion for Angel and Elektra. As the episode "Pink Slip" (S01E07) marks the end of their respective romances, the episode ends on a scene that echoes once again the intersecting oppressions that prevent trans women of color the same access to employment and housing as their white straight counterparts. Elektra's relationship with Mr. Ford ends because she went through gender confirmation surgery. After having found out about it, he broke up with her and evicted her from the lavish apartment, confirming his sexual objectification of Elektra's transness as a transactional feature of their romantic encounters. Similarly, Stan and Angel break up because of the weight of their different worlds. As Angel walks into her apartment, the audience realizes that Stan took out all the furniture. The camera operates a low-angle shot of the apartment as Angel gathers her belongings: this specific shot, which was previously used to emphasize the opulence in the spaces discussing whiteness, now epitomizes Angel's rejection from the WSCP once again. Similarly, a tracking shot shows

Elektra walking down the streets. Unlike the usually lavish settings she stands in, she is now walking in a street that represents the spaces of exclusion I mentioned earlier because of the overall dirty aspect of the setting and the presence of sex workers in the background.

"Pink Slip" – *00:42:15 – Low-angle shot of Angel leaving her apartment*

"Pink Slip" – *00:42:47 – Shot of Elektra walking down the streets*

The end of this episode marks the rejection of Angel and Elektra from the opulent spaces they got access to thanks to their transactional relationships. The editing puts into perspective those two characters and their similar experiences relating to their exclusions: after Angel leaves her apartment, the audience sees her a few minutes later on the piers, engaging in sex work again. As for Elektra, she begins to work as a dancer at Show World, echoing Angel's previous job. Her scenes and those of Angel's take place at the same time in a sharp editing that echo a shared push-and-pull effect that takes place once their respective transactional relationships end on the same episode. This shows that in a paradoxical dynamic of oppression, Angel and Elektra were commodified in their own relationships through fetishization, but also in the only opportunities they can get to make ends meet after the promise of upward social mobility was not fulfilled neither by Stan nor Mr. Ford. Thus, Angel's and Elektra's romantic encounters epitomize another way of being Othered that stems from sexual fetishization and commodification. By linking the concept of white and racialized spaces, these relationships showed that power dynamics can also be explored throughout romantic interactions that still encapsulate the tensions between center and margins.

Through this first part, I intended to discuss whiteness in *Pose* and how the series juxtaposes whiteness with other racialized spaces in which its queer characters of color must remain because of their place in Crenshaw's basement. The various settings account for the metaphorical and concrete displacement of the queer characters of color on the margins of *Pose*'s

WSCP, which are emphasized by the interactions of those characters with white people, notably through Angel's and Elektra's wish to get closer to the center. In a wish to challenge the meaning of the verbs "seeing" and "looking," I sought to investigate the Othering that may take place in romantic interactions between the white heterosexual and queer characters of color in the series, which only resulted in another form of oppression. I therefore ask: how do the queer characters of color in *Pose* counteract the oppressions by recentering their narratives from margins to center? In my second part, I will show how Ballroom's house system acts as a social space that allows its members to be seen by their peers, rather than merely looked at. By studying the house system as it is shown in *Pose*, I will work on the ways in which queer people of color transform these spaces of exclusion to include their own community in the space of inclusion that is Ballroom, where they can subvert the hegemonic norms and redefine them to make them theirs.

II. *Pose*'s subversive house system through Ballroom: validating queer identities of color in familial spaces of inclusion

By relying on Ballroom's house system as shown in *Pose*, this part will aim at exploring how Ballroom culture creates familial spaces of inclusion that counteract looking at the characters of *Pose* as different and transgressive. In order for this part to highlight the subversive aspects of the oppressions presented earlier, I will rely on the notion of social support that was introduced earlier by Quintana et al,[78] who define a family's social support as "[emotional and financial] safety nets," a notion which encapsulates several behaviors that help foster an uplifting environment for queer youth. Yet, as I previously mentioned, the characters of *Pose* did not enjoy these safety nets within their own biological families because of their queer identities, which is something that Patricia Hill Collins mentioned in her aforementioned paper: "Predicated on assumptions of heterosexism, the invisibility of gay, lesbian, and bisexual sexualities in the traditional family ideal obscures these sexualities and keeps them hidden."[79] Thus, I endeavor to show the various ways in which *Pose*'s house system does not keep its queer members' identities hidden, but on the contrary validates and exposes them through the house system that is prevalent both in Ballroom culture and in *Pose*'s first season. The eight episodes of the show's first season allow for a detailed account of Ballroom's house system as a social device fostering emotional, economic and health-related support to a queer youth that cannot always rely on their biological families because of their sexuality or gender identity. I will study the house system as a creator of spaces of inclusion for an excluded queer youth of color.

a. Queering the family: *Pose*'s house system validating queer identities through the recognition of the queer subject

As we have seen through the example of Damon in the first part, by disrupting the social organization of their family, queer youth of color go from one space of exclusion (their familial setting) to another (the streets), two spaces that may share the same systemic and intersectional oppressions working against queer people of color. Because they cannot access their biological parents' safety nets anymore, they may be at risk living in the streets. In "It's All in the Family",

[78] Quintana et al., op. cit., p. 9.
[79] Hill Collins, op. cit., p. 65.

Patricia Hill Collins explained that "family [is] held together by primary emotional bonds of love and caring."[80] By relying on her different approaches on family and queer identities, I endeavor to find the meaning of those "emotional bonds" in *Pose*'s first season. Thus, I want this first subpart to investigate how, within *Pose*'s house system, this notion of emotional support first corresponds to the validation of queer identities within the private sphere of the chosen families.

The existing literature on Ballroom culture posits its house system as a central aspect to its members' lives,[81] as the kinship that revolves around the different houses gives queer people of color the safety nets that Collins' traditional family ideal could not provide anymore. To qualify the notion of "home" and introduce Ballroom's house system as a social space, I rely on Bailey's paper "Engendering Space: Ballroom Culture and the Spatial Practice of Possibility in Detroit" (2014). When discussing the concept of "family" and its polysemy, he observes:

> For Black people, the home is represented and experienced as what hooks [...] 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 [...].[82]

By bringing together the notions of "refuge" and "homeplace," Bailey argues for a place in which Black people could avoid the realities brought by a WSCP's norms. Yet, Bailey's paper qualifies this notion of "home," which provides a "safe space" from the WSCP for people of color, but yet may sometimes exclude queer members and treat their identities as marginal. This paradoxical aspect of the heteronormative Black family helps to understand Damon's rejection from his biological family, which I mentioned in the first part: although his parents are far from Lorde's mythical norm, they still emulate the WSCP's heteronormative and patriarchal rules on gender and sexuality. In the same paper, he then argues for Ballroom's house system as a solution to this exclusion:

> 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

[80] Hill Collins, op. cit., p. 62-65.
[81] Bailey, Marlon M. "Gender/Racial Realness: Theorizing the Gender System in Ballroom Culture." *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 2, 2011, p. 368.
[82] Bailey, Marlon M. "Engendering Space: Ballroom Culture and the Spatial Practice of Possibility in Detroit." *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, Vol. 21, No. 4, 2014, p. 495.

> 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.[83]

Bailey's approach encapsulates the subversive aspect of the house system, which aims at emulating the image of a biological family of color all the while fostering protection and validation of the queer identities that were rejected in the first place. Similarly, according to Blanca in the pilot episode, "a house is the family [people] get to choose. I'm a house mother. I provide a support system for my children and housing if [they] need it." ("Pilot", 00:26:52) Blanca's words give information on the social tools used through Ballroom's house system to uplift its children. Houses act as social spaces that are made of a Mother or a Father who take care of their different children on multiple levels—primarily through shelter, basic utilities and acceptance. In his paper "Gender/Racial Realness: Theorizing the Gender System in Ballroom Culture" (2011), Bailey provides an observation of the social organization of the subculture and its impacts on its members. He indicates that "houses are kinship structures that are configured socially rather than biologically,"[84] emphasizing the fact that blood ties, unlike biological families, do not make up the house system: instead, it is the search for community and acceptance that binds the members together. Similarly, in "Architecture is Burning: An Urbanism of Queer Kinship in Ballroom Culture" (2020), Ballroom scholar and architectural designer Malcolm Rio brings together racialized geographies and chosen families in the making of an alternative queer community of color. Rio observes:

> Houses [...] [are] a queer construction of family that offered solidarity and support against the myriad urban crises countless [queer people of color] endured including HIV/AIDS, homelessness, sex work, drugs, and commonplace bigotry. Thus, in the absence of filiation, Pepper, Freddie, and Angie[85] construct affiliative relationships through the house. These bonds, however, should not be mistaken as a congregation driven by tragedy; rather, the foundation of every house is the desire to support and love fellow house members and remove them from close proximity with the urban crises in their everyday life. Both Freddie and Angie make clear that biology does not determine the form of kinship but rather the rituals of support and care.[86]

Similar to Bailey's analysis, Rio explores a construction of family based on queer identities, which contrasts with Collins' aforementioned traditional and biological family ideal. These bonds that rely on the wish for acceptance and love within marginality is something that echoes

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[83] Ibid, p. 496.
[84] Ibid, p. 367.
[85] Those names refer to Pepper, Freddie and Angie Xtravaganza, members of the eponymous house and who all appear in *Paris is Burning*.
[86] Rio, "Architecture is Burning", op. cit., p. 129.

hooks' work. In her 1989 paper "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," hooks praises the idea of a society's margins as an opportunity for love and uplifting, a type of margin that "offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds."[87] In her work, hooks argues for margins as a space not of deprivation, but a space where change and love are possible. By depicting margins as a space of resistance rather than as a site of exclusion, hooks redefines those margins as a space of lingering celebration. Even though hooks writes from the point of view of a Black woman in the United States, I suggest that working on the margins as a site of resistance can also be applied to queer people of color in Ballroom and its representations in *Pose*. I emphasize her use of the verb "see" in the last line of the aforementioned quotation, which is reminiscent of our nuance previously made between "seeing" and "looking." Even though *Pose*'s queer characters of color remain in the margins, it is there that resides the power to truly see its members in a validation of their queer identities and as an act of resistance.

There lies the subversive aspect of Ballroom's house system: the subculture does not create new spaces out of nothing. Instead, the house system takes an institutionalized ideal that queer people of color were rejected from in the WSCP, in which they re-appropriate it to make it theirs, with their own rules. Because Ballroom's house system performs the ideal of family and puts queer identity at its center, I suggest that these "queer forms of alternative kinships"[88] are not in complete opposition to heteronormative norms. Rather, they endeavor to create spaces of inclusion out of the very norms that oppress queer people of color. Paradoxically, then, understanding Ballroom's reliance on hegemonic norms to shift their power is important to grasp the meaning of this subversion. Indeed, since the house system presented in *Pose* contains mothers, fathers and children, it emulates the image of a traditional nuclear family all the while implementing queer identities within that ideal to shift its norms. Thus, because this social system plays on the normative rules of family rather than creating new and independent social devices, its foundations lie in the political act of treating queer identities as central rather than marginal. In achieving so, Ballroom culture strips away the power of a WSCP's hegemonic norms by shaping its margins in a normative, alternative way—a political and gendered recentering of those margins. This provides clear information on the main purpose of kinship

[87] hooks, bell. "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness." *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, No. 36, 1989, p. 20.
[88] Hildebrand, op. cit., p. 60.

within Ballroom culture: providing shelter to homeless queer youth shows an attempt to bring social reparations and safety nets to queer people of color through alternative community building based on acceptance and support.

Bringing together Collin's notion of emotional support, as well as the recognition of queer identities it entails, I will now study the representations of such recognition in *Pose*. Indeed, this ongoing reshaping of a WSCP's margins within a family setting is central to the first season of the show, notably with Blanca's newly created House of Evangelista. Throughout the eight episodes, the audience gets to witness the rise of her house as new members join episode after episode. Blanca and Damon cross paths as their lives get to a turning point: the former just left Elektra's House of Abundance after discovering she has HIV, while the latter comes to New York after being rejected from his biological family. They meet in the pilot episode at Washington Square Park Fountain, where Damon dances in exchange for money. He wears the same clothes as the previous scene in which his father throws him out of the house which creates a proximity between those two scenes and emphasizes Damon's precarious situation.

"Pilot" – *00:26:05 – Long shot of Damon dancing*

"Pilot" – *00:26:12 – Medium close-up of Blanca*

By operating such a transition, the camera and editing emphasize Blanca's action of seeing Damon's creative expression, rather than looking at him through the lens of deviance. After introducing herself to Damon, she says: "how does someone as talented as you wind up dancing for a whole bunch of junkies?" (00:26:40), confirming her interest in his passion for dance—which translates into queer expression following our analysis of Damon dancing in his bedroom in the first part. As she refers to herself as a house mother and invites him to join her house, Blanca instantly turns the space of exclusion that is the park into one of inclusion. More than her wish to provide him shelter and care, Blanca validates Damon's queer identity in this

metaphorical space of inclusion. In this first encounter, queer expression is validated through the recognition of the queer subject, which encompasses the action of seeing rather than looking.

The shot cuts to a scene which gives more contextual information and depth to Blanca's character, which will give an additional value to the concept of queer recognition in the series. As the scene begins, it opens on a long shot of Damona and Blanca having dinner in a restaurant. As is shown by the camera work, they are again both framed on an equal footing as they get to know each other.

"Pilot" – *00:29:41 – Long shot of Damon and Blanca having dinner*

Blanca, by discussing life as a queer person, turns the public space that is the restaurant into a space of inclusion, emphasized by the physical proximity of both characters. Yet, she takes this inclusion further and starts reminiscing about her own youth as a trans woman of color, and the time when her mother discovered her queer identity:

> Well, [my mother] couldn't abide by that. She banished me from her home and her heart. I cried like a baby, I left and never looked back. When you get rejected by your mother, your father, you're always out there looking for someone to replace that love you're missing. I want you to take my address. Come when you think is right for you. If nothing else, tonight you got an education. (00:31:23)

More than validating queer identities, the recognition of the queer subject is also made possible when reciprocation between a house parent and a house child is possible. This reciprocation, emphasized by the aforementioned proximity between the two characters, is symbolized by the camera and the shot/reverse shots it operates between Blanca and Damon.

"Pilot" – *00:31:42 – Close-up of Blanca*

"Pilot" – *00:31:56 – Close-up of Damon*

In addition to the recognition of Damon as a queer subject, Blanca giving him her home address encapsulates *Pose*'s house system as maker of inclusive spaces for queer youth of color. This shows that the concept of "home" is permanently negotiated by Blanca.

In *Pose*, because the biological family is used to lay the foundation for the characters' independence and their migration to New York, it is worth noting that in the case of Damon, his parents are not seen again. After the pilot episode, he mentions his biological parents only once, in "Giving and Receiving" (S01E03). This Christmas-themed episode puts the emphasis on queer identity at a time of the year that is dedicated to the institution of family. The episode starts with a close-up of a Christmas wreath, before tilting towards Blanca, Damon, Lil Papi and Angel getting a Christmas tree together.

"Giving and Receiving" – *00:00:28 – Tilt shot of the House of Evangelista getting a Christmas tree*

"Giving and Receiving" – *00:00:35 – Shot of the House of Evangelista during Christmas*

As the editing cuts to a shot of the House decorating their tree, transitioning from the public to the private sphere, the camera emphasizes the proximity of the members during an activity that is usually done within the biological family. Indeed, as Blanca compliments Damon's tree decorations, he reminisces over his childhood memories and his queer identity at Christmas time:

> We used to do it all the time, my mother and me. I mean, Christmas was the only time that I could be myself, with all the fun colors and clothes. I played Melchior in the church nativity play, and my mom took me to Jo-Ann's to buy fabric for this big, gold robe that I would wear in the show. I mean, even my dad, when I came out of my bedroom to show him… he laughed. I mean, any other day and he would've taken off his belt. (00:00:37)

Damon's recollection of Christmas with his biological family accounts for an almost utopian dimension of this holiday, during which societal conventions seem to vanish for a short period of time. Conversely to his father's daily outbursts of violence, Blanca responds: "well, in this house, you can be the king of Arabia and wear golden robes every day of the year" (00:01:08). The dialogue as well as the editing of the scene encompass how *Pose*'s house system gives its children safety nets by validating their identity. While talking about his memories, Damon performs a choreographed spin, supposed to mime his performance as a child. The editing then cuts to Blanca looking and smiling at him.

"Giving and Receiving" – *00:00:58 – Low-angle shot of Damon*

"Giving and Receiving" – *00:01:15 – Medium close-up of Blanca*

This cinematic device, which was also used to frame their first encounter in the park, encapsulates the reciprocation that takes place between Blanca and Damon, whose queer identity is not merely validated, but celebrated by his chosen family. By encouraging Damon's expressive style, Blanca reinforces the fact that what is seen as transgressive in *Pose*'s WSCP is deemed normal within the private realm of their house. By being recognized by Blanca as a queer subject deemed worthy of validation, Damon shifts from excluded Other (within his biological family) to included subject by the power of queer kinship represented by *Pose*'s house system. Similarly, when Blanca asks Angel what she wants for Christmas, she begins telling her own story about a time she expressed her gender identity as a child:

> When I was 6 years-old, my father took me with him to the department store to buy some Christmas presents. I saw this one pair of red pumps with a four-inch heel. I swear to God, I had never seen anything quite so beautiful in my entire life. When no one was looking, I took one,

> snuck it home, hid it underneath my coat. When we got to the apartment, I tried running straight to my room. It slipped out and fell onto the floor, right in front of my mother and my father. I begged them to let me keep it. My father slapped me across the face for stealing. But more so for what I chose to steal. What kind of little boy cries over a patent leather red pump, right? He treated me different after that. (00:02:03)

Angel's story is yet another example of a traditional biological family emulating a WSCP's heteronormative rules on gender identity which labels a red pair of pumps as female and not the other way around. As her story unfolds, the editing transitions to a pan that goes from Damon to Blanca, who are both attentively listening to Angel's story, showing their unity as a house in the context of transphobia. Moreover, as Angel begins crying, the medium close-up is replaced by a close-up, emphasizing Angel as a subject telling her own story.

"Giving and Receiving" – *00:03:02– Close-up of Blanca*

"Giving and Receiving" – *00:03:31 – Close-up of Angel*

The subversive aspect of the house system will once again be seen in the last scene of the episode. As the House of Evangelista all sit in a restaurant to celebrate Christmas Eve, Blanca gives her gift to Angel, a pair of patent red shoes just like the ones she stole when she was 6 years old. As the extreme close-up shows the audience the pair of shoes, a melodramatic off-diegetic music starts playing. The editing transitions to a close-up of Angel smiling and crying at the same time. By the use of such devices, Angel's emotion is captured for the audience to see, as the scene depicts the meaning of receiving a gift that celebrates one's queer identity.

"Giving and Receiving" – *00:55:49 – Extreme close-up of Angel's shoes*

"Giving and Receiving" – *00:56:05 – Close-up of Angel crying*

Angel's emotion is instantly connected to her close relationship with Blanca as the editing cuts to a shot showing both of them hugging—along with Pray Tell crying at the right side of the frame. This shows that the aforementioned safety nets through validation are not only given from a mother to her daughter, but are also shared with all members as well. Since queer identity is what binds them together, the members of the House of Evangelista all see Angel's gift as one that is charged with a meaning that validates them.

"Giving and Receiving" – *00:56:11 – Shot of Damon and Ricky watching Angel*

"Giving and Receiving" – *00:56:24 – Shot of the House of Evangelista*

As the episode and the scene ends, the camera operates a backwards tracking shot of the House of Evangelista eating. Just like the previous shot, the scene also puts the emphasis on food and eating together as a family as a wide shot encapsulates the whole family. In my analysis of the house system as subversive, I contrast those two shots with that of Damon as he enters his house in my previous subpart.

"Giving and Receiving" – *00:57:29 – Tracking shot of the House of Evangelista eating dinner*

"Pilot" – *00:11:46– Shot of Damon's house*

These two shots use the same visual device that is the wide shot in order to put the table at the center of the frame. The table often represents important moments in representations of traditional family ideals. However, as I mentioned in my first subpart, the dining table at Damon's house is empty when he goes into his bedroom. Even though this is explained by his parents not being home at the time of the scene, the use of the same shot to show the House of Evangelista all eating together encompasses the subversive aspect of Ballroom's house system. Indeed, since its subversive aspect lies in the redefinition of spaces of exclusion that already exist, showing all the members of the house eating together in a wide shot transcribes the shift from biological to chosen family.

The episode "Giving and Receiving" (S01E3) follows the same narrative construction as the pilot episode concerning Damon's rejection: as those queer characters of color's storylines begin with rejection from their biological family, it is reconciled at the end through the validation of their queer identities within the house system. More specifically, Blanca takes the very same aspects that her children's biological families saw as transgressive (Damon's passion for dance and Angel's shoes) and shifts their meanings to celebrate and validate them in a loving and supportive system. The subversive aspect of the house system lies in this transformation: by pushing her children to embrace their queer identities through emotional support, *Pose*'s house system shifts a WSCP's paradigm that deems them as transgressive. Blanca's validation of her children's queer identities goes beyond this emotional basis. As I mentioned in my first part, several characters of color in *Pose* get rejected from employment because of their queer identities, pushing them further away from Lorde's "financially secure" mythical norm. Throughout the first season of *Pose*, Blanca not only pushes her children to embrace their queer

identity, she also seeks to encourage their education and effect change regarding their economic stability. In my next subpart, I endeavor to explore the subversive aspect of *Pose*'s house system by Blanca's wish to find economic opportunities for her children.

b. "I'm his mother": *Pose*'s house system validating queer identities through educational and economic opportunities

Throughout the first season, numerous queer characters of color do not have the same access to employment and education as their white counterparts. Because of the cycle of poverty created by intersectional and systemic oppressions, queer characters of color may get further away from Lorde's mythical norm and be displaced in Crenshaw's basement. A dichotomy may appear between the celebration of queer identities in the private sphere of Ballroom's house system and the potential rejection of those queer identities in the public realm on a socio-economic level. Building upon this push-and-pull effect of poverty, this subpart aims to interrogate the role of socio-economic capital acquisition in the subversion of the margins. In other words, I want to show that Blanca does not validate queer identities only through the provision of shelter and food. She takes the meaning of inclusion further by interrogating the possibility of upward social mobility for her children—and, at the same time, by fostering socio-economic opportunities for her children to subvert the margins of the WSCP they live in. Even though I present Blanca's provision of social support and access to economic opportunities separately, I argue that these two aspects are not mutually exclusive. Rather, in the series, the search for educational and economic opportunities is a direct result of the social and emotional support that validate queer identities.

What is the value of socio-economic opportunity in *Pose*, and its bonds to the WSCP? I first wish to link queerness and homelessness to show that opportunity is yet another safety net central to Blanca's parenting methods. In the aforementioned report *On The Streets*, the authors suggest that

> [h]omeless youth also cite lack of affordable housing options, incomplete education, inaccessible job markets, and ongoing drug use as reasons for homelessness. Additionally, larger social factors such as poverty, institutionalized discrimination, and incarceration are also noted to be factors contributing to youth homelessness.[89]

[89] Quintana et al., op. cit., p. 5.

This approach follows the push-and-pull effect of poverty built upon my analysis of racialized spaces in the first part. Yet, Quintana et al. argue for a greater vulnerability to a WSCP's systems of oppression for homeless queer youth. Since queer people of color may face systemic oppression both in the public sphere of the WSCP and the private sphere of their biological families, this cumulative factor may increase an already existing unemployment rate or lack of education for homeless queer youth of color. In *The Alienated Subject*, geography professor James A. Tyner engages in an extensive critique of capitalism and social inequalities. He underlines an individual's necessity to contribute to a capitalist system that nonetheless strives for a specific social order that may exclude them.[90] I emphasize this act of survival to argue that, in *Pose*, Blanca's search for socio-economic opportunities seeks to go beyond the act of surviving. On the contrary, by securing access to upward social mobility, Blanca will allow her children to contemplate a future and go against the WSCP's fixed social hierarchy that displaces them at its margins.

Damon's aspiration to become a professional dancer is shown to the audience even before he joins the House of Evangelista. As he is still homeless at the beginning of the pilot episode, he wanders around New York City and stumbles upon the New School for Dance, a new school that secures an educational background for aspiring ballet dancers. As he walks in front of the school, the low-angle shot makes him smaller than he actually is, epitomizing the dazzling architecture of the building. Similar to Angel's scene in Park Avenue, Damon looks at the building with wishful eyes: as the sign "The New School for Dance" is set on the building, the architecture is brought together with Damon's aspirations for his future. In my analysis of queer identities and Damon's homelessness at that time in the episode, his dazzled gaze echoes Quintana et al.'s approach to queer youth homelessness and the inaccessibility of the school for him, since he still has to sleep on park benches.

[90] Tyner, James A. "The Alienated Subject: On the Capacity to Hurt." *University of Minnesota Press*, 2022, p. 113.

"Pilot" – *00:25:11– Low-angle shot of Damon looking at the building*

"Pilot" – *00:25:13* – Reverse shot of Damon

As he walks in front of the building, he watches the dancers inside the room. As he stops and looks at the inside of the room, the shot/reverse shots show a dichotomy between the dancers, who get to assert their passion for ballet, and Damon, who is restrained to the outside. As he is shown framed through the window of the school, the camera is placed inside the room, which emphasizes his homelessness and the impermeability of the margins he stands in. In other words, Damon is physically and economically unable to access the education he wants but that he can nonetheless see through the window.

"Pilot" – *00:25:18 – Zoom-in on Damon gazing at the dancers*

"Pilot" – *00:25:26 – Reverse shot of the dancers*

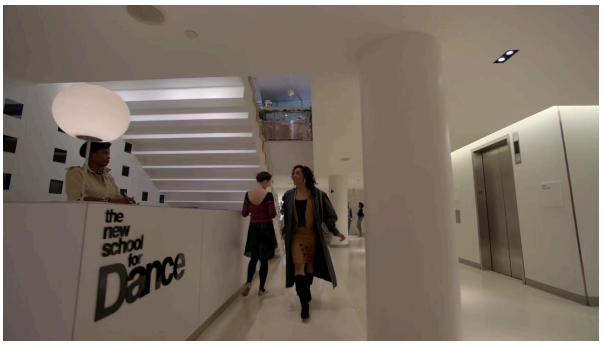
Even though the New School for Dance epitomizes Damon's interest in ballet, the educational background it provides to its students may also attest to a possible upward socio-economic mobility. Since education may guarantee a better employment rate, combined with the fact that ballet dancing is often seen as a culturally and economically upscale activity, the school represents an opportunity to detach himself from the oppressive low employment rate—and the economic disenfranchisement it entails.

Upon the creation of her house in the pilot episode, Blanca enunciates her rules to ensure the proper organization of her chosen family. She puts educational and economic opportunities at the center of her parenting methods as one of her rules is the following: “all of my children are required to pursue an education. [...] Education is key if you want to get ahead in this world.” (00:52:45) As she utters those words, Damon, Angel and herself are all sitting at the dining table, which echoes the traditional family setting I mentioned at the end of the previous subpart, bringing together emotional support and educational opportunity. Later in the pilot episode, Damon confesses that he did not send out his application out of fear of not being chosen. Thus, the entire House of Evangelista comes with Damon to the New School for Dance to try and secure a place for him even though he missed the deadline. The low-angle shot used to frame the dazzling building echoes the aforementioned scene in which Damon wishfully looks at the dancers: this time, he gets to enter the building with the help of his house.

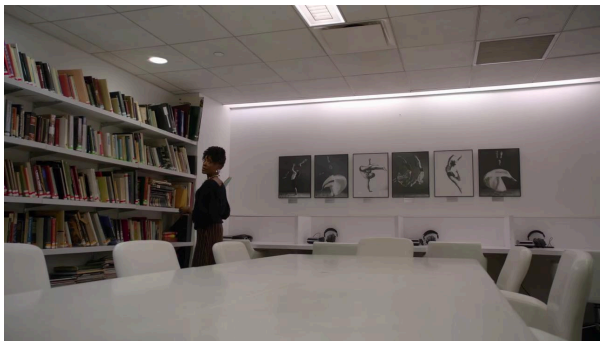
“Pilot” – *00:52:48 – Shot of the House of Evangelista eating together as a family*

“Pilot” – *01:07:13– Low-angle shot of the New School for Dance*

As they all enter the building, the omnipresence of the white color echoes a lavish architecture, emphasized by the low-angle shots that make Blanca’s surroundings bigger. Thus, the representation of this specific space echoes ballet dancing as an upscale activity and the creator of economic, social and cultural opportunities. As Blanca enters the Dean of the School’s office, she stands at the far end of the room, physically separating the two characters: Helena St. Rogers (Charlayne Woodard), by standing between a big bookcase and pieces of art, echoes a greater educational background and cultural baggage than Blanca.



"Pilot" – *01:07:17 – Low-angle shot of Blanca in the school*



"Pilot" – *01:07:28 – Wide shot of the Dean of the school*

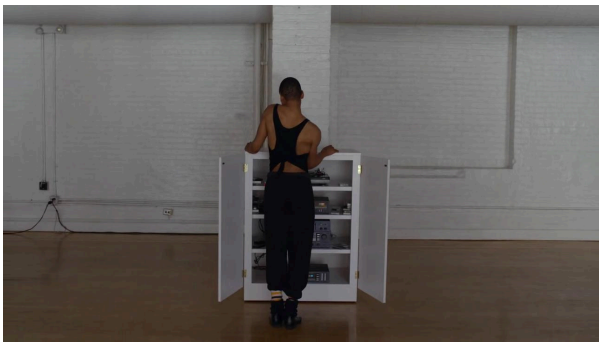
Interestingly, even though the space is represented as lavish, and the two characters are physically and metaphorically far away from each other, it does not follow the same dynamics of exclusion as those I discussed in my first part. Because Blanca and Helena are both Black women, whiteness is detached from the fancy setting. Blanca is informed that it is impossible for Damon to get an audition as he missed the deadline. In order to convince her to grant him an audition, Blanca intervenes in Damon's favor:

> *Blanca*: This young man is a very special talent. [...] Do you know what the greatest pain a person can feel is? The greatest tragedy a life can experience? It is having a truth inside of you and you not being able to share it. It is having a great beauty and no one there to see it. This young boy has been discarded and he is so young, he believes that it has something to do with who he is. It's like cancer. It is going to eat at him from the inside until he starts to resent even the best parts of himself.
>
> *Helena*: I don't know what you want me to do, we've accepted our fall class, we are full.
>
> *Blanca*: No, but he is special. He's got all the talent and all the hurt you need to be a true artist. Let him dance for you, give him a chance. Give him three minutes of your time, when was the last time you were truly surprised by something in your life?
>
> *Helena*: Who are you again?
>
> *Blanca*: I'm his mother. (01:07:47)

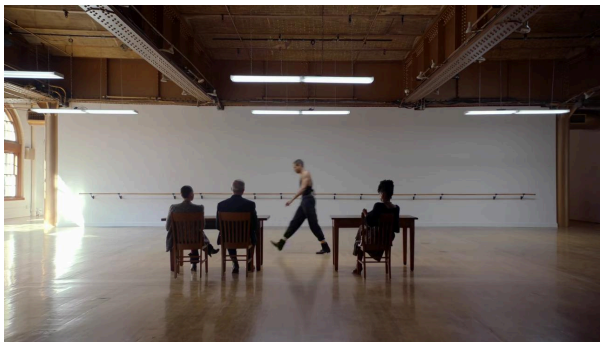
In Blanca's statements, Damon's recent rejection from his family, his passion for dancing and the baggage brought by his queer identity all converge in the wish for educational and cultural opportunity. In her last sentence, Blanca asserts her authority as Damon's mother for the first time: brought together with Damon's recent homelessness, the scene acts as a bridge between Damon's life in Allentown and his new life in New York City. In addition, it would be worth

conjecturing that this dialogue contains a subtext regarding Blanca's own transness, and that she wants to create the opportunities she did not have access to when she was younger.

After the Dean accepts to see Damon dance, the scene cuts to a wide shot of him standing in the audition room. As he enters the music tape into the radio for his audition, the extreme close-up on the tape reminds the audience of his first scene of the pilot episode and the progress he has made since then. The next cut to a wide shot shows the jury in the foreground. As Damon was dancing in the private space of his bedroom at the beginning of the episode, he is now dancing in front of three people, creating a fracture between the episode's introduction and conclusion. Thus, Damon's queer identity shifts from the private sphere of secrecy to the public sphere of validation.



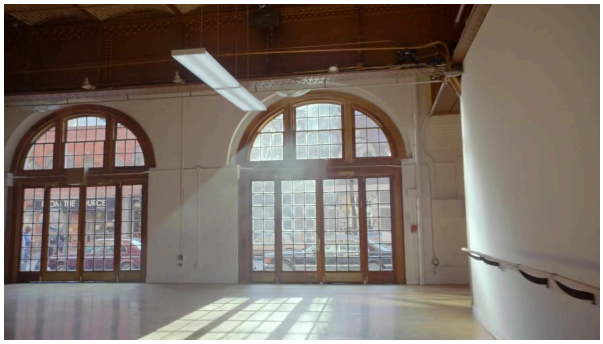
"Pilot" – *01:10:35 – Wide shot of Damon beginning to dance*



"Pilot" – *01:10:41 – Wide shot of Damon and the jury*

Yet, the scene is also composed of numerous shots that frame Damon alone in the room, emphasizing his legitimacy as a queer subject who is watched by a panel of judges. Moreover, the fracture between the private and public spheres is emphasized in a zoom-in on the windows of the room. Contrary to Damon's bedroom which had small windows with drapes, those windows are clear and big enough for the audience to see the exterior of the building, epitomizing Damon's shift from a private to a public space of expression.

"Pilot" – *01:11:42 – Wide shot of Damon dancing*



"Pilot" – *01:13:14 – Zoom-in on the windows*

Interestingly, as the use of wide shots emphasizes the metaphorical and physical space given to Damon to express his passion and queer identity, those shots also place him at the center of the room. Placing this transgressive character in that specific way brings together *Pose*'s margins, represented by Damon's Blackness and homosexuality, as well as its center with ballet dancing's cultural and economic prestige. Since Damon is here because of Blanca, I argue that this is an example of the show's house system recentering the margins in a celebration of what is deemed transgressive by the WSCP's hegemonic norms. As the song ends and silence sets in the room, leaving only Damon panting for the audience to hear, Helena slowly walks towards him. In a series of close-ups, she looks at him with a smile and tears in her eyes before hugging him in a cut to a backwards dolly zoom.

"Pilot" – *01:14:32 – Close-up of Helena smiling*

"Pilot" – *00:13:37 – Low-angle shot of Damon's father*

In addition to showing great proximity between the characters of Helena and Damon, I argue that the scene acts as a rupture with the beginning of the pilot episode, in which the use of low-angle shots transcribed an unbalanced relation of power between Damon and his father, as seen in the screencap showed above. Conversely, in the scene under study, Helena and Damon are presented on an equal footing as the camera frames both of them face to face. Even though Damon is taller

than Helena, no position of power is present in the scene: instead, operating such a camera movement creates a relation of recognition and celebration of Damon's queer identity by Helena. During Damon's audition, margins and center cohabit in a redefinition of the spaces of expression that allow for Damon's queer identity to be truly seen. Indeed, as Damon was only looked at by his father, Blanca and Helena will not only validate his talent, but will see his potential and provide him with a socio-economic opportunity and a promise of upward mobility. This narrative arc used in *Pose*'s pilot episode encapsulates the power of the series' house system to secure upward socio-economic possibility in a system that rejects queer people of color, resulting in a subversion of the systems of oppression. In other words, Damon's path from a homeless boy to an educated subject shows that *Pose*'s house system aims to recreate societal socio-economic spaces to help its queer children of color to thrive. Thus, I argue that in *Pose*, the value of such opportunity is not only financial or educational, but is also directly linked with the recognition of the queer subject that is deemed worthy of sustaining themselves in a society that prevents it.

In terms of economic opportunity, I wish to push my analysis further regarding *Pose*'s house system. As the audience saw the highs and lows of the feud between the House of Evangelista and the House of Abundance, that quarrel will come to an end in the final episode of the season, "Mother of the Year" (S01E08). As Elektra starts to work at Show World to make ends meet after Mr. Ford broke up with her, she is still homeless and has to sleep on park benches and in fast-food restaurants. In a scene in which she is waiting for a client in a booth, the music starts playing and she begins dancing. Yet, as the curtain lifts, it is no one other than Blanca behind the window.

"Mother of the Year" – *00:14:45 – Close-up of Elektra*

"Mother of the Year" – *00:14:49 – Close-up of Blanca*

This scene pictures a discursive event that highlights the house system's subversive essence: although the red light becomes omnipresent, just like the aforementioned scenes between Angel and Stan, it does not represent a danger to come because Blanca stands in front of Elektra with a smile on her face. The transparent window, which was once used as a metaphor for the fragmentation of the trans body, is now used to broadcast the nuance between "looking" and "seeing." With the use of the shot/reverse shots, the scene shows a balanced relation of gazing between Blanca, who truly sees Elektra by wanting to help her, and Elektra, who accepts Blanca's help in spite of their ongoing feud.

Later in the episode, Blanca convinces Elektra to apply as a hostess at Indochine, the upscale restaurant where Stan and his supervisor often eat at. In an establishing shot of the restaurant, several elements of the setting remind the audience of the upscale places discussed in the first part: the high ceilings, dim lighting and the presence of the gold color again epitomize a place often occupied by people close to Lorde's mythical norm. As the two women start arguing, a medium close-up shot frames them and an elderly couple passing them by and looking at them. Since they are white and wear formal clothing and hairstyles, the elements used in Angel's scene to represent whiteness are once again used to show that Elektra, because of her intersecting identities, stands out in this space of exclusion, emphasized by the couple's stare.

"Mother of the Year" – *00:11:59 – Establishing shot of Indochine*

"Mother of the Year" – *00:12:07 – Medium close-up of Elektra and Blanca being stared at*

The dialogue that the two women exchange sheds light on the lack of educational and economic opportunities I mentioned for queer people, especially for trans women of color who stand at the crossroads of several oppressions:

> *Blanca*: You're not going to be a peasant. They're hiring hostesses. Glamorous, regal and refined. You fit the bill, and they pay well.
>
> *Elektra*: I can't.

Blanca: Yes, you can. My house, my rules.

Elektra: What if they ask me to tally people's bills? I didn't stay in school long enough to learn how to operate a calculator.

Blanca: Bitch, they ain't asking you to be a mathematician. All you gotta do is look pretty and judge people. Now get over there and ask for a goddamn application. (00:12:09)

In spite of Elektra's lack of educational background, which instantly prevents her from getting an application, she is convinced to apply for the job of hostess. Moreover, this dialogue also echoes Blanca's authority as a mother fostering economic opportunity not only for her children, but for her own mother as well. Later in the episode, Pray Tell goes on a date with a man at Indochine. As they both enter the building, it is Elektra who welcomes them: the audience then realizes she was hired after Blanca's insistence. The close-up shot used to show Elektra attests to her successful social mobility: she wears a formal dress, a tidy hairdo and golden earrings which fit the lavish setting she works at.

"Mother of the Year" – *00:14:46 – Close-up of Elektra*

Following Butler's argument on gendered performances mentioned in the introduction, it is interesting to note that not only does Elektra's appearance attest to her social mobility, it also attests to her ability to perform the gender she identifies with and be treated as such, since no transphobic behavior can be seen in the scene under study. Once again, the frontier between private and public sphere is broken for Elektra, who shifts from dancer in the private booths of Show World to hostess in a setting representing the WSCP's center. Moreover, this scene reconciles the paradoxical element presented to the audience in the first scene of the show's pilot: despite Elektra's behavior towards Blanca throughout the first season, Blanca nonetheless offered her shelter, food and economic opportunity because they are all part of the same community.

Because Elektra was hired in a space that discussed whiteness, Blanca's insistence highlights her redefinition of the hegemonic norms that prevents queer people of color to access employment. Thus, by bringing together transgressive queer identities and economic opportunities, the house system as shown in *Pose* shifts what is deemed as marginal and turns it into something central to one's socio-economic baggage. The scenes, which contrast with Angel's rejection in my first part, highlights the importance of unity and togetherness in the subversion of the WSCP's norms. Indeed, in the case of Damon and Elektra, Blanca was always physically present in the scene when securing a place for them in capitalist systems. As Blanca epitomizes the subversion of those systems through her chosen family, the scenes I studied also demonstrate how moving geographically together as a house can be a discursive and altering moment for the queer characters of color of the series. Building upon this power for change, I seek to look into another systemic crisis that *Pose*'s house system is able to subvert: that of their access to treatment during the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the series, especially when faced by queer youth of color. By relying on the differences between facing the epidemic on one's own and surrounded by one's chosen family, I will use the representations of the crisis in *Pose* to show how its house system also subverts one's ties to sexual practices and awareness in systems of oppression that would not take into account queer sexualities. Thus, bringing together the house system's subversive support and physical unity, I will show how *Pose*'s house system also validates queer identities in the resistance against the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the series.

c. "The world wants us dead": *Pose*'s house system validating queer identities through the fight against the HIV/AIDS epidemic

In *Pose*, the HIV/AIDS[91] epidemic and the way it was treated by U.S. policies in the 1980s is one of the main themes of the series's first season as it influences the way the show's queer characters of color apprehend their queer sexual well-being as well as their futures. As mentioned before, the pilot episode sets the foundations for the entire season by positing its characters' societal rejections, but also by foreshadowing upcoming solutions to foster support and progress. Thus, it is interesting to note that Blanca chose to leave the House of Evangelista right after she discovered she was HIV positive in the first few minutes of the pilot episode. As a house Mother, she will seek to protect her children from the dangers of the epidemic all the while

[91] "HIV" stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus, which attacks and weakens the immune system. "AIDS" is the final stage of the virus, and stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome.

fostering a sense of unity and togetherness between her several children. Regarding the meaning of family and queer identities in *Pose*, I wish to push Quintana et al.'s approach further when it comes to the "safety nets" they argued for. In their aforementioned report, they observe:

> Homeless gay and transgender youth are at extreme risk of developing physical or mental health conditions, and need access to safe, culturally competent health services. This may include services such as inclusive sex education, condom access (and use education), HIV testing, and general health services.[92]

As Quintana et al. posit that homelessness can lead to misinformation on the epidemic, I wish to bring together this push-and-pull effect and the "safety nets" they mentioned earlier. Since children need safety nets that include support on several levels, I argue that awareness on the HIV/AIDS epidemic also constitutes a safety net in itself for queer youth of color. In that sense, this subpart will aim at showing how Ballroom's house system creates spaces of inclusion based on awareness and sexual well-being for its queer children of color. By exploring the different ways in which Ballroom's house system guides its children through the epidemic in the first season of *Pose*, I will show how its house system validates queer identities. Ultimately, this subpart will aim at highlighting once again how that guidance is subversive in its essence.

In order to shed light on the subversive aspect of *Pose*'s house system and its fight against the epidemic, I will first link the WSCP's hegemonic norms with the treatment of the crisis on a political basis. Although reports show that the HIV/AIDS epidemic began to spread slowly in the Democratic Republic of the Congo at the beginning of the 19th century,[93] the first signs of infection appeared in 1980 in the United States. Referred to as a "gay cancer"[94] in the early years, public health services nonetheless investigated quickly to understand the origins of the virus and study how it was transmitted. However, the Republican President of the time, Ronald Reagan as well as his administration, remained silent in the first years of the breakout. After a tumultuous presidential campaign that revolved around religion, family and an overall conservatism on multiple levels, Reagan was elected president in 1980. In *Reagan* (2015), historian and professor Françoise Coste wrote:

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[92] Quintana et al., op. cit., p. 15.
[93] "AIDS Crisis Timeline." *History*, 14 June 2021, https://www.history.com/topics/1980s/hiv-aids-crisis-timeline. Accessed 19 February 2023.
[94] Ibid.

> Mais [les] interlocuteurs à la Maison Blanche [...] étaient tous des responsables issus des rangs de la droite chrétienne qui ne parvinrent jamais à dépasser une interprétation strictement religieuse, conservatrice et moralisatrice de cette maladie apparue d'abord au sein de la communauté gay. À leurs yeux, toute intervention présidentielle au sujet du sida serait revenue à soutenir publiquement l'homosexualité, ce qui était bien évidemment hors de question. Aussi l'Administration fit-elle jusqu'à la fin du second mandat "comme si" le sida n'existait pas.[95]

This quote shows that Reagan publicly mentioned the HIV/AIDS epidemic for the first time in 1985—the same year in which the annual estimated infections peaked at 130,400[96] in the United States. In a socio-economic approach of the HIV/AIDS crisis regarding queer individuals, Scott Carollo argues in "Queer Subjectivity in the Time of AIDS and Beyond" (2020):

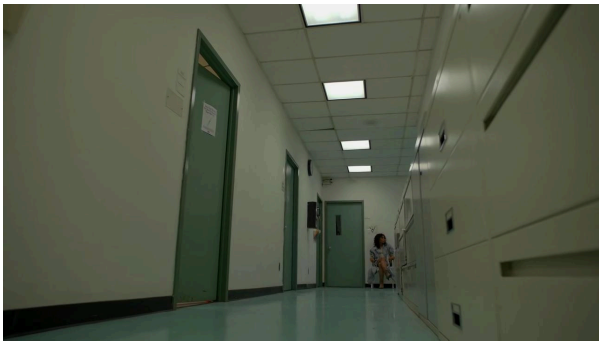
> Perhaps some of you know the term "disaster capitalism," used by the journalist Naomi Klein in her book *The Shock Doctrine*. It's a term Klein uses to describe the deliberate neoliberal strategy to further its reach by exploiting the confusion and vulnerabilities created by natural disasters. I'd like to apply this to the AIDS epidemic. AIDS was a *natural disaster*, which gave rise to certain growth opportunities: it was a time of coming out and coming together, taking care of one another; it engendered the mobilization of political agency. But AIDS, as scene of natural disaster, also opened up the opportunity, culturally, for the vulnerable queer mind and body to become the dumping ground for hatred, revulsion, and all of our deep confusions, anxiety, and shame about gender and sexuality, enacted with a force, I believe, even more destructive than the virus itself.[97]

As Carollo sheds light on societal abjection and the making of a queer identity during the epidemic, his observations account for the hegemonic norms of a WSCP and their long-lasting consequences on mental health and identity. In light of such information, I argue that the epidemic further estranged queer people of color from the WSCP's center because of already existing markers of difference and stigmas, which can alter the way queer individuals manage the crisis in terms of protection, testing and medical care.

The dangers related to the HIV/AIDS crisis as well as the lack of information and awareness from the WSCP's center all converge in *Pose*, which puts the epidemic at the center of characters' narrative throughout its first season. In one of her first scenes in the pilot episode, Blanca gets tested for HIV in a scene that illustrates the vulnerability and isolation of queer people of color regarding the epidemic. As the scene opens in the hospital, the low-angle shot of Blanca framed from afar makes her smaller than she actually is, highlighting a threatening environment as well as her isolation since she is alone in the shot. A few seconds later, the

[95] Coste, Françoise. *Reagan*. Paris: Perrin, 2015, p. 387.
[96] Bosh, Karin A., Hall, H. Irene, Eastham, Laura, Daskalakis, Demetre C. and Mermin, Jonathan H. "Estimated Annual Number of HIV Infections — United States, 1981–2019." *MMWR*, Vol. 70, No. 22, 24 June 2021, p. 801.
[97] Carollo, Scott. "Queer Subjectivity in the Time of AIDS and Beyond." *Jung Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 2020, p. 60.

camera frames her once again, this time through a small window. As the pattern of the pane echoes a barbed wire, the camera puts the focus on Blanca's isolated state when getting tested for HIV.



"Pilot" – *00:15:57 – Low-angle shot of Blanca at the hospital*

"Pilot" – *00:16:05 – Framing of Blanca through a small window*

The cinematic form of the scene emphasizes the isolation and vulnerability that may take place regarding a disease that the WSCP's center treats as a punishment. The aforementioned theories as well as this analysis show the link between a WSCP's center and its consequences on queer individuals regarding how the HIV/AIDS crisis was managed in the 1980s. Similarly, in "The Fever" (S01E04), great emphasis is put again on the epidemic and its consequences on the members of the House of Evangelista. As the episode is entitled "The Fever", this title already foreshadows the lack of awareness that takes place regarding someone's first symptoms and the labor undertaken by the house system to support its members. As Blanca and Pray Tell walk along the piers and talk about the future of their children, the latter confesses he does not get tested anymore because of the treatment of the epidemic by the government. He admits:

> I know that Ronad Reagan will not say the word "AIDS". Health insurance will not cover any treatments. The world wants us dead. They don't think this is a plague. They think this is some sort of divine justice or Darwin's answer for sodomy. I used to get tested every month. But now I'm just extra careful when I do what I do and I am living my life. [...] You knowing and me not knowing is not going to change the fact that at some point, this shit is going to run us all down. (00:31:30)

Pray Tell's words do not express a lack of awareness regarding the virus and its dangers: on the contrary, it foreshadows an insight into the government's management of the disease, which it treats as a punishment. In that sense, his views echo those of Coste's and Carollo's when discussing the role of the U.S. government during the epidemic. Yet, solutions will be found by Ballroom members to counteract the consequences of such misinformation. I will now show that

Ballroom culture seeks to subvert this lack of awareness through the guidance provided by its house system, displacing the epidemic from a silent punishment to a danger worth preventing.

Indeed, many Ballroom scholars argued that rather than hiding it, the epidemic was central to its house system as all house members were subjected to awareness, guidance and frequent testing. Ballroom scholars Marlon M. Bailey and Emily A. Arnold accounted for the house system's authority when protecting house children from the government's misinformation on the epidemic. In their aforementioned paper "Constructing Home and Family," Bailey and Arnold shed light on the link between culture, Ballroom's house system and HIV/AIDS prevention:

> For YAAMSM [young African American men who have sex with men] [...] members of the ballroom community, the sex-gender system, the houses, and the balls foster and affirm more flexible and expansive gender and sexual expressions and identities not available to them in overall society, and allow them to forge kin-ties and construct homes based on these more expansive identities [...]. The sex-gender system underpins the gender and sexual relations within houses, and this aspect of the ballroom community is integral to providing and supporting unique forms of HIV prevention and treatment to community members.[98]

Bailey and Arnold posit that the house system provides spaces of inclusion where awareness regarding the epidemic is possible for queer people of color. They later give extensive details related to the roles of house mothers when guiding their children through the epidemic:

> First, as nurturers and confidants, butch queen or femme queen mothers[99] are the key people that young people turn to when discussing the intimate details of their sexual encounters. Second, mothers play a crucial role in teaching their house members to be safe and to use condoms with their partners, giving men specific practical tips on how to manage and negotiate sexual encounters. Third, house mothers provide support when young men engage in risky activities, by taking young house members for HIV testing, and by identifying various resources such as housing, medical care, and support groups for house members living with HIV/AIDS.[100]

Thus, Arnold and Bailey argue for Ballroom's chosen families as a support system that protects queer youth from the government's misinformation on the crisis, especially in the 1980s, the decade in which *Pose* is set. In other words, Ballroom's house system provides "spaces of possibility"[101] where protection against the dangers of the epidemic—including misinformation—is possible for its queer people of color.

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[98] Bailey, M. and Arnold, E., op. cit., p. 183-184.

[99] "Butch queen" or "femme queen" are gender categories proper to the Ballroom subculture. For creative purposes, the subculture depicted in *Pose* chose not to provide a detailed account of the gender categories and instead use the word "house mother" in every episode.

[100] Ibid, p. 185.

[101] Bailey, "Engendering Space", op. cit., p. 497.

In the first season of *Pose*, Blanca will bring the HIV/AIDS epidemic to the center of her parenting methods. In order to counteract the isolation and vulnerability epitomized by her own aforementioned HIV testing, she will aim at creating spaces of awareness and discussion that rely on togetherness and comprehension. The episode "Access" (S01E02) focuses on Damon's new relationship with Ricky, whom he met at a ball. Damon goes home from their first date early in the morning, and as Blanca awaits him, he admits that he never spoke to anybody about gay love:

> [My father] was saying all this stuff about women's anatomy and things like that. The whole time, I was thinking "this is not the information I need to get. Sweet baby Jesus, this is not helping me." But I couldn't ask him the questions I really wanted to know, which was about what men do together and stuff… or, I'd be found out. And I was afraid he'd kill me. (00:16:48)

This quote shows that for Damon, lack of awareness about gay sexual practices directly stemmed from his family's heteronormative parenting, which may have also been influenced by formations of homophobia present in Black families as was mentioned by Bailey when working on Black politics of respectability. Then, Blanca takes the opportunity to warn him about queer sexual well-being and gives him advice on love and sexuality:

> Gay life is hard. [...] No one ever plans on having sex. And I can't be your mother and your conscience. I'm not going to always be here to protect you. You are a good-looking young man, and soon, you are going to want to start exploring. But you gotta make smart choices. As a gay man, you have options when it comes to sex. [...] Just promise me you'll protect yourself. There's a virus out there and if you catch it, it will kill you. If you need condoms, you ask for them, and if I'm not around, you go to the clinic. Understood? (00:17:42)

In that scene, not only does Blanca give Damon advice on sexual practices between men, she also warns Damon about the importance of safe sex and the use of condoms. The subversive aspect of Ballroom's house system can be seen again in that scene, as Blanca gives the information Damon needed in his biological family. As his mother, Blanca epitomizes the gendered social device that is the house system by giving him advice and guiding him through gay lifestyle. In the scene, the shot/reverse shots that alternate between Damon and Blanca show a relation of proximity, emphasized by the hug that is exchanged at the end in a close-up shot. In addition to this, this scene follows the same cinematic tools used at the end of Damon's audition: the shot/reverse shots also exemplify how Blanca not only recognizes Damon as her child, but also as a queer subject deemed worthy of enlightenment regarding queer sexual practices. In that

specific scene, the recognition and validation of the queer subject finds their values in the resistance against the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the protection of queer children of color.

"Access" – *00:17:47 – Medium close-up of Blanca*

"Pilot" – *00:19:22 – Close-up of Blanca and Damon hugging*

Blanca and Damon's dialogue echoes Bailey and Arnold's first two points when discussing the role of chosen families regarding the epidemic, which are "discussing the intimate details of [their children's] sexual encounters" and "teaching their house members to be safe and to use condoms with their partners," epitomizing the safety nets that are provided by house parents to house children. Even though queer sexuality and the epidemic are related, Blanca accounts for the fact that gay sex does not need to be seen as dangerous as long as it is done safely. By separating gay sexual practices from the HIV/AIDS crisis, Blanca strips away the stigma and vulnerability attached to the epidemic at that time, and fosters a situation of awareness and knowledge for Damon who met someone for the first time.

The subversive aspect of *Pose*'s house system instantly contrasts with Damon's aforementioned exclusion from his biological family, in which his mother told him that the disease was a punishment from God. Rather than treating it as such, Blanca encourages Damon to practice safe sex and experience his queer identity in a guidance that counteracts the WSCP's misinformation on the HIV/AIDS epidemic. As a matter of fact, because Blanca, a woman of color, pushes Damon to explore his sexuality, this scene provides an additional example of *Pose*'s house system being a reflection of the Black heteronormative family model. Whereas an intersectional model of comprehension was not possible in Damon's biological family, Blanca reunites blackness and queerness in inclusive parenting tools rather than having one identity counteracting another. Thus, through the example of Blanca's house, *Pose*'s first season presents a familial model of intersectional awareness that validates queer identities of color.

Even though Blanca's role is central to giving information to her children, she also takes care of them when they contract symptoms that increase their suspicions regarding the virus. In "The Fever," (S01E04) the focus is put on Damon once again, who contracts symptoms that echo those of the HIV virus. As he is sick in bed, Blanca tries to nurse him back to health by giving him medicine. Just as importantly, she asks him questions about his sexual encounters with Ricky—and whether those were protected or not. The camera frames the two characters so that she stands above him. Even though the same cinematic devices are used to frame Damon's father and his power over him, the scene under study instead frames Blanca's watching over her children to protect them from the epidemic, emphasizing once again the contrast between biological and chosen family. In addition to nursing them when sick, she also guarantees that awareness is raised concerning the symptoms and their possible meaning. Blanca's urge to protect her children is emphasized as the scene ends with soft extra-diegetic music and a close-up of Blanca looking upon Damon.

"The Fever" – *00:12:57 – Medium close-up of Blanca taking care of Damon*

"The Fever" – *00:13:17 – Close-up of Blanca looking upon Damon*

Even though "The Fever" puts the focus on Blanca's authority as a mother, it also puts the other children of her house at the center of the HIV/AIDS epidemic as they also help those who are sick and guide them through an understanding of their symptoms. The scene cuts to one in which Angel comes to feed Damon a few hours later:

> *Damon*: When Mother came in here earlier today she was asking me all this stuff about sex. Like what Ricky and I got up to and if we were having safe sex. Why would she be asking me questions like that?
>
> *Angel*: She's scared you're seroconverting. People be fine and looking good, and then they get like a bad flu. Lots of time, that flu means you're seroconverting. Which is the first sign that you have the virus.
>
> *Damon*: You mean AIDS?

Angel: I'm sure you're gonna be okay. (00:14:38)

As Blanca asked questions about Damon's physical state earlier, Angel took on the task to give him answers in that specific scene. This shows that house sisters and brothers also provide safety nets for their siblings in need: those safety nets consist of guidance and support for those who go through the suspicion of being HIV positive. Proximity is once again highlighted between house members thanks to the use of close-ups and camera framing. Because Angel feeds Damon, this proximity also shows that she seems to be aware of how HIV is transmitted—not by physical proximity, but sexually. Thus, this scene also symbolizes the awareness that is paramount in *Pose*'s house system, which is another way of validating queer identities exposed to the epidemic.

"The Fever" – *00:15:00 – Close-up of Angel and Damon talking about the epidemic*

"The Fever" – *00:15:27 – Close-up of Damon*

Yet, this scene also encapsulates the threatening aspect of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, which is rendered through the visible sweat coming out of Damon's forehead and the dialogue that leaves the audience unsure of Damon's condition.

Another scene in "The Fever" will represent the house system's solidarity and validation of queer identities through the fight against the epidemic. As the men of the House of Evangelista are all gathered around a meal in a restaurant, Pray Tell, the father of the house, tells them they need to get tested together as a house. As the scene takes place in the same episode as Pray Tell's aforementioned monologue on the epidemic, I argue that there lies the subversive aspect of Ballroom's house system regarding the fight against HIV/AIDS. Indeed, while he admitted he did not get tested anymore, Pray Tell still instigated a session at the hospital thanks to the space of inclusion and awareness of his own house. This shows the solidarity and uplifting that take place within *Pose*'s house system gives its members the safety nets that are required to

face the crisis carefully and change their views on its dangers. This solidarity is shown in the restaurant as the camera frames Lil Papi, Damon, Ricky and Prey Tell all in the same shot, emphasizing their togetherness in the fight against the epidemic.

"The Fever" – *00:33:08 – Medium close-up of the House of Evangelista agreeing to getting tested*

"The Fever" – *00:37:00 – The House of Evangelista getting tested together*

In a later scene, the audience sees them again, this time in a hospital hallway: the same one Blanca waited for her test results in the pilot episode. Interestingly, the scene contrasts with that of Blanca's, since she was not with any members from the House of Abundance. This contrast highlights the differences between individual and collective testing. Indeed, the same cinematic devices used in the restaurant are used in the hospital, as the camera pans to a shot which frames the four characters side by side in the hallway. This contrast, as well as the numerous characters being framed in the same shots, shows the importance of unity in *Pose*'s house system: by moving physically as a house, the queer characters in the scenes support one another through queer recognition and provide a means to subvert the WSCP's treatment of the epidemic. This scene echoes the third point made by Bailey and Arnold regarding the role of house parents in the prevention against the epidemic: "house [parents] provide support when young men engage in risky activities, by taking young house members for HIV testing [...]," bringing together Ballroom's house system and the redefinition of the meaning of the epidemic. By bringing together the hospital—a setting that was pictured as threatening in the pilot episode—and the solidarity taking place within the House of Evangelista, the scene represents the spaces of inclusion created by the house system to guide its members through the epidemic and validate their queer identity. Since this solidarity contrasts with the vulnerability and isolation that stems from the WSCP's misinformation, this resistance subverts the hegemonic norms as it provides the safety nets needed to navigate through the crisis with help and support.

As Ballroom's house system is central to the subversion of hegemonic norms in the first season of *Pose*, this second part aimed at exploring the different ways in which the members of the House of Evangelista redefined the meaning of family on numerous levels. Because I explored the way the traditional and biological family ideal reflected the norms of a WSCP, I intended to analyze how the house system, as a social device, reflected their own definitions of what they deemed as normative. By transforming the WSCP's spaces of exclusion into spaces of inclusion and resistance, the queer characters of color in *Pose* provided the safety nets needed to safely apprehend the members' queer identities. As the house system, and notably Blanca, provided safety nets that first relied on basic utilities and a validation of queer expression within the private sphere, I argued that this support based on love and acceptance provided a first subversion of the WSCP's norms regarding the image of family. By offering Damon shelter and love, Blanca provided a first solution to his previous familial oppression. Through his newly-found house, Damon was able to express the queer identity that was silenced within his biological family. Yet, Blanca took this identity into the public realm as she managed to get Damon enrolled in the New School for Dance, giving Damon the opportunity of social mobility all the while nourishing his passion for modern dance. Bringing together the safety nets mentioned in the first subpart and this economic opportunity, Blanca aimed at fostering a better future for Damon. Yet, those safety nets do not end on opportunity, as *Pose*'s house system also created spaces of inclusion and awareness regarding the HIV/AIDS epidemic, in which queer members of color could talk about their sex lives, receive information on the crisis and get tested together as a family. In a subversion of the WSCP's norms that deemed the disease as a punishment, Blanca and her house provided the safety nets needed for queer youth of color to apprehend their sexual lives in a safer way. Yet, Ballroom's subversive essence does not end at its house system, and the queer geographies of inclusion I worked on do not only take place within the restrained sphere of family. Since Ballroom is a subculture that is proof of queer and racialized place-making, it also relies on central moments that redefine hegemonic norms on a bigger scale: the events of the balls. By keeping in mind that Ballroom's house system and ball events go hand-in-hand, the third and final part will aim at exploring the numerous devices used by the queer characters of color in *Pose* to subvert hegemonic norms in yet another setting which will give them the opportunity to recenter their marginal identities in the space of inclusion of the ball events.

III. *Pose*'s subversive ball events: recentering the margins through performances of the self

In order to emphasize the subversive aspect of the Ballroom subculture, I showed that its house system is proof of queer and racialized place-making practices in a counteraction of a WSCP's hegemonic norms. Though the creation of queer familial spaces is central to the first season of Pose, I now want to focus on another central element in the subculture: the ball events that take place in every episode of *Pose*—and how those balls are subversive in their essence, too. Through this part, I endeavor to show how *Pose*'s ball events act as queer geographies that redefine what is deemed transgressive and shift it to the realm of the normative. Interestingly, such a shift was already a central aspect to our second part and the meaning of family in both Ballroom culture and *Pose*. Such a similarity is explained by the fact that ball events, according to Bailey, are "inextricable"[102] from the house system within Ballroom culture:

> [I]n Ballroom culture, there are no houses without balls, and there are no balls without houses. [...] Balls and houses are mutually constitutive. This interconnection between kinship and performance creates the conditions for the twin labor—kinship and performance—that builds and sustains the community.[103]

I want to use Bailey's words to qualify the arguments that will be made in this third part: such a similarity between Ballroom's house system and ball events means that in order to analyze the latter in *Pose*, I will sometimes rely on the same subversive reading used for the former. While focusing on *Pose*'s ball events, I will take the opportunity to show those shared similarities with its house system and how they both work in pairs to foster spaces of inclusion for the marginalized queer characters of color in the show's first season.

How does *Pose* account for the subversive essence of its ball events? Interestingly, Bailey describes "performance" as central to the ball events within Ballroom. Because performance is a concept I used thoroughly since the introduction, I will elaborate on the meaning(s) of performance in and outside of the ball events to show how queer contestants of color use performances of the self to not only counteract, but also subvert the WSCP's oppressions in *Pose*. Throughout those pages, I will interrogate the values of performance within Ballroom, but also in the WSCP. As a matter of fact, I will show that the performances enacted by the

[102] Bailey, "Gender/Racial Realness", op. cit., p. 367.
[103] Bailey, *Butch Queens Up in Pumps*, op. cit., p. 127.

characters may also give them the tools to "pass" as the gender they identify with around people from the WSCP. I will extensively use the concept of "realness," prevalent in Ballroom culture, to show how performance transcends the walls of Ballroom. To answer those questions, I will rely on the "inextricable" dimension of Ballroom's house system and ball events, as pointed out by Bailey, and use the concept of performance as a point of departure to study the strategies of resistance and subversion enacted by the characters. Performance as a field of studies will prove to be central to *Pose*'s ball events, and this notion will help me account for the relation between "seeing" and "being seen" and analyze how the show's characters aim at repairing the link within Ballroom.

a. Being seen and being cheered on through Ballroom: *Pose*'s ball events as social and spatial devices

In order to analyze the way queer characters of color in *Pose* counteract the aforementioned intersecting oppressions through the subversive ball events, I endeavor to theorize the balls and show how they disrupt the distinction between "seeing" and "looking" through the show's first season. Since these dynamics of oppression within the show's WSCP relied on the action of "looking" through the transgressive lens of the queer characters' intersecting identities, I will explore how balls provide a private space of inclusion where those characters will not only get to be watched by their queer peers of color, but also get to be truly seen and cheered on. Thus, in this subpart, I will focus on the interconnection of spatial and social organization of the balls and examine how those queer geographies redefine the broken relation between "seeing" and "being looked at."

Those balls, which take place at night in enclosed areas of New York City, are competitive gatherings that rely on performances of the self during which the queer characters of color in *Pose* can freely express their sexuality or gender identity. Those competitions consist of a panel of judges who give the contestant a mark based on the quality of their performance, which is always accompanied by an "emcee" who comments on the movements, clothing and attitude of the performer. As the ball events are gatherings consisting only of queer people of color, most of them are part of the audience and watch as the contestant perform the correct categories, which can rely on social class, gender or sexuality. Thus, the multiple roles undertaken by members during the events already encapsulate the social dimension of the balls

in Ballroom culture, during which everybody has a specific place. In *Pose*'s pilot episode, Blanca gives Damon as well as the audience an introduction to the organization of those events as she takes him to his first ball:

> A ball is a gathering of people who are not welcomed to gather anywhere else. A celebration of a life that the rest of the world does not deem worthy of celebration. There are categories—people dress up for them, walk. There's voting, trophies… Better than money—you can actually make a name for yourself by winning a trophy or two. And in our community, the glory of your name is everything. (00:27:22)

This scene, which takes place in the first half of the pilot episode, guides Damon as well as the audience through the balls as a place specifically created for performing acts of all kinds by mentioning how contestants of color "walk" a category—which means to compete in front of an audience. "Walking," a term that is inherent to Ballroom and which draws inspiration from the influence of the fashion magazine "Vogue" in the 1980s,[104] indicates an idea of performance that is given by the contestants to an audience and a panel of judges. In the context of Ballroom, performing refers to dressing up and acting a certain way depending on the category the contestants are walking. Even though Ballroom consists of specific rules that are proper to the subculture, the concept of performance is widely used in multiple aspects of everyday life, and is also an extensive field of research in academia. In spite of Ballroom's complex mechanisms, the main definitions of performance echo the way Ballroom contestants use this notion of performance—both in their everyday lives and within the walls of Ballroom. In *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (1996), Marvin Carlson, an American drama and theater professor, gives readers an introduction to performance studies and how they can be extensively applied to many situations:

> [Performance] is a very specific event with its liminoid nature foregrounded, almost invariably clearly separated from the rest of life, presented by performers and attended by audiences both whom regard the experience as made up of material to be interpreted, to be reflected upon, to be engaged in-emotionally, mentally, and perhaps even physically.[105]

Carlson's notion of separation between performance and real life echo Ballroom culture's use of performing acts as an essential part of its communitary essence. In other words, the performances enacted by queer contestants of color within Ballroom are directly linked to the "community" Blanca mentioned in the pilot episode: contestants are being watched and cheered on, while the

[104] Davis, Chloe O. "The Blackness of Queer Vernacular." *Gay & Lesbian Review*, Sep.-Oct. 2021, pp. 14-16.
[105] Carlson, Marvin. *Performance: A Critical Introduction*. New York, Routledge, 1996, p. 253.

audience engages in such performances. Thus, I link Carlon's study of performance to Blanca's words and emphasize Ballroom not only as a performing setting, but also as a social formation, made of people with specific roles.

Indeed, because Ballroom is described by Blanca as a community, the concept of performance and the social aspect of the ball events work in pairs to foster an inclusive space for the excluded. Because she emphasizes the exclusive aspect of the WSCP, this suggests that Ballroom culture in general constitutes an answer, a social space of inclusion made possible by queer and racialized place-making practices relying on solidarity and similarity. By relying on a WSCP's margins to explain the social concentration of queer characters of color in such spaces of inclusion, Blanca highlights how the balls act as social devices that allow marginalized queer identities to freely express themselves away from the WSCP exclusive behavior. I wish to link the social formation that are the ball events with the aforementioned concept of performance in my reading of *Pose*, a link that was also highlighted by Bailey when quoting scholar Sonjah Stanley Niaah in his paper "Engendering Space." In an analysis of the ball events in Ballroom, he posits:

> 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. [...] [M]embers of the community produce space and [...] highlight the generative, sociocultural, and spatial practices they deploy to forge alternative spatial possibilities for Black LGBT existence [...]. Since ball events occur in spatial configurations that members produce collectively, these configurations are fundamental to the culture.[106]

Again, the "sociocultural practices" mentioned by Bailey attest to the social dimension of the ball events, which aims at including every member of the subculture in the making of a ball. Just as importantly, it shows that this sociocultural labor accounts for the process through which Ballroom transforms the racialized spaces that are a WSCP's margins into spaces of inclusion and resistance. Yet, Bailey's approach also builds upon the "spatial practices" operated by Ballroom members to foster a sense of belonging and community within the subculture. As Bailey brings together sociocultural and spatial labor in the making of a ball, this analysis questions the role of social geography in the making of a space of inclusion and expression. I argue that this creation of spaces of resistance within a WSCP's margins qualifies what was said in the first part of this dissertation: within the walls of Ballroom, the "cultural geographies of the

[106] Bailey, "Engendering Space", op. cit., p. 498.

'Other'"[107] that Mountz worked on are counteracted by means of transformed geographies relying on queer identity and celebration. Bringing together spatial significations and performance studies will help create a subversive reading of the ball events in Ballroom culture, in addition to showing the link between resistance and the power of seeing.

In Ballroom, this interconnection of social, spatial and performative practices is at the heart of the bridge between "seeing" and "being seen" and the subversive shift from geographies of exclusion to those of inclusion. In his aforementioned paper, Bailey expands on those practices during the ball events:

> 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. [...] Fundamental to the spatial transformation is a 'T' formation by which audiences and performances are arranged [...].[108]

Bailey provides an extensive analysis of the spatial arrangements of the balls, which are considered as a practice on their own: thus, his analysis sheds light on the connection between sociocultural and spatial practices in the making of a ball event. Since the contestants get to perform in the middle of a "T" formation, they can be watched by the surrounding audience as well as the panel of judges at the same time. This means that the action of "gazing" is at the heart of the contestants' performances, as they are not only watched, but also cheered on and validated by their peers, which is explained by Bailey in the same paper: "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."[109] Bailey's observations attest to the subversive essence of the ball events, which aim at redefining what is deemed worthy of affirmation within the walls of Ballroom. Indeed, it is in this emphasis on the action of "gazing" that lies the subversive aspect of the ball events: while performing, queer people of color are not merely "looked at" through the transgressive aspect of their identities, but truly seen by their peers because they relate to their sexualities or gender identities and validate them within their own sphere of inclusion. Interestingly, in "Engendering Space" is included a rendering of a ballroom's ground plan in order for his readers to have a broader understanding of the importance of those spatial practices:

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[107] Mountz et al. (eds.), *Key Concepts in Political Geography*, op. cit., p. 332.
[108] Bailey, "Engendering Space", op. cit., pp. 498-499.
[109] Ibid, p. 499.

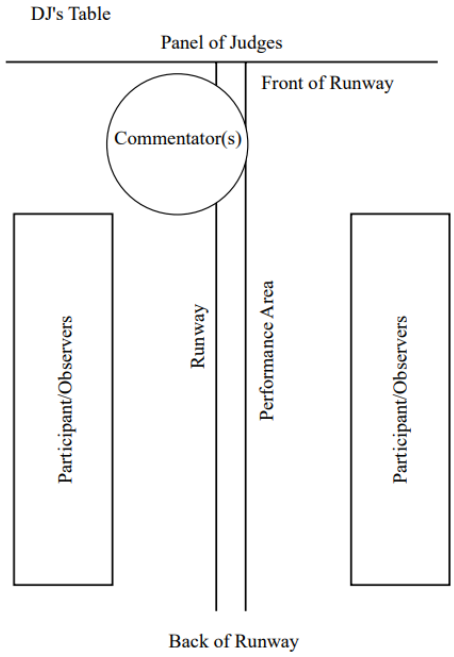

Figure 1 – Ballroom ground plan issued by Marlon M. Bailey

While their sexuality or gender identity were seen as transgressive within the WSCP, those visual epistemologies will be placed at the center of the subculture on a metaphorical (because those transgressive identities are now seen as culturally part of Ballroom's own ideological center) and physical level during the balls, attesting to a subversive recentering of a WSCP's margins within the walls of Ballroom. Moreover, this rendering also attests to the social dimension of the ball events: even though the audience stands on both sides of the room, they are not displaced on the margins. On the contrary, their spatial position allows them to see the contestants and cheer for them from around the room, attesting to the ongoing dialogue between Ballroom members.

The first scene of *Pose*'s pilot episode puts the emphasis on those subversive ball events, as well as their inextricable link with Ballroom's house system. Being the first scene of the pilot, it guides the audience through the aforementioned social and spatial practices of the balls thanks to its numerous cinematic devices. As the episode begins when the House of Abundance decides what category they should walk as a house, they all go into a museum to steal ancient clothing that fits the theme. As they all get ready for the ball, the frenetic music stops and the camera cuts to a close-up of Pray Tell's microphone. As the audience sees the microphone before seeing his face, the focus is put on speech, which is the emcee's main asset during the balls. The camera pans to Pray Tell as he announces the category: "Royalty. The category is: bring it like royalty!"

(00:06:35) This sentence links chronologically the House of Abundance's choice of category with the ball event that takes place in the following scene, but it also accounts for the performative aspects of the ball events. As a matter of fact, the segment "bring it like" involves an imitation, a cultural representation of the attitude and clothing made possible by the category. Thus, the queer contestants of color's performative acts are merely visual. As Pray Tell utters those words, the editing cuts to an establishing shot of the ballroom.

"Pilot" – *00:06:30 – Close-up of Pray Tell's microphone*

"Pilot" – *00:06:40 – Establishing shot of the ballroom*

By putting together the close-up of the microphone and the establishing shot showing the full extent of the ballroom, the editing highlights the interconnecting devices used in the ball events to foster the ongoing dialogue that will take place between the emcee, the contestant and the audience, as the people on both sides of the room can be seen in the establishing shot. In that sense, viewers also get to see the table of judges in the back of the room: as Pray Tell ends his announcement, the camera cuts back to him and starts zooming out to progressively show each judge at their table. At the same time, "Harmony" by Suzi Lane starts playing. The complex camera movements that quickly shift from one character to the other, as well as the choice of the song, results in a cohesion between the different people making up this ball event as well as providing the audience a rendering of the "T" formation discussed by Bailey.

I take this analysis further, and seek to conjecture as to the notion of fidelity behind *Pose*'s production, and the role of the camera and editing process in these first few shots. Because this scene takes place even before the show's opening credits, the ball events are put at the center of *Pose*'s first season. As it is common in filmmaking, establishing shots are necessary to introduce the audience to the spaces in which the action takes place—encapsulated by the first shots of the ball scene. Yet, by putting together the scene and Bailey's aforementioned ground

plan, I emphasize how similar the fictionalized ballroom is to Bailey's real-life account of that space. It is worth conjecturing as to *Pose*'s production, and the way it uses the notion of fidelity and authorship to give a minute account of Ballroom's geographical mechanisms. Regarding these similarities, I argue that the editing process and the camera act as a discursive device that not only introduces the audience to the way the ball events work, but also as a way of affirming fidelity and authorship in *Pose*'s representation of Ballroom culture, which adds to my reading of the ball events as both social and spatial spaces.

These aspects will be linked to performance as the camera cuts to the first contestant of the category. The audience sees a woman in a dress that resembles that of a queen, along with a fan and a crown.

"Pilot" – *00:06:46 – Zoom-out on the panel of judges*

"Pilot" – *00:06:48 – Medium close-up of the first contestant*

In a medium close-up, the camera places the performer in front of it in a POV shot. As the previous shot showed the panel of judges, the character now looking directly into the camera encapsulates a relation in which the judges look at the contestant perform, and in which the contestant also looks at the judges in a cohesive relation of "seeing" and "being seen." At the same time, Pray Tell comments on her performance: "You own everything. Everything is yours. You own those jewels, you own those punches, you own your name. You own every [...] thing that is there." (00:06:51) His comments emphasize the visual dialogue that takes place between those who see and those who are seen in an exchange of comments and looks charged with the cultural and social power held by those who are performing. Moreover, this performance is complete thanks to the cheering audience that applauds the contestant from every side of the room. The editing to the audience encapsulates the omnipresent cheering—and acceptance—by means of fast transitions from the contestant to the audience as well as the sound of their screams blended with the music playing in the background.

"Pilot" – *00:06:51 – Shot of the cheering audience*

"Pilot" – *00:06:53 – Close-up of a cheering woman*

The camera's emphasis on the audience pushes me to qualify my study of the roles undertaken by the characters in the ball events. Even though those roles are distinct, is the power of choosing who wins and who loses a competition held only by the judges? Is it possible for the audience to have authority over these decisions, too? Indeed, even if the audience does not actively participate in their peers' performances, we can see that their facial expressions widely differ according to the performances in front of them. Even though my analysis of this scene relies on the necessity of every member to have a distinct place in the labor that is the ball event, I argue that the distinct roles occupied within *Pose*'s ball events may overlap, leading to the audience having a power of altering the judges' decision over the winner of a category. In other words, the way the audience reacts to the performances, emphasized by the camera angles and the close-ups that account for their reactions, may also alter the decision-making process of the judges, which adds to my reading of the scene as an ongoing dialogue between the different members. Taking into account the fact that Ballroom is introduced for the first time to the real-life audience watching *Pose*, I also ask if this notion of dialogue has a discursive power over the way we, as watchers, engage in those competitions.

This social dialogue of acceptance will continue as the House of Abundance starts to walk the category. Lamar, one the house's children, is the first contestant to enter. As he begins to walk towards the judges, Pray Tell's scream already attests to his validation of Lamar's costume, attitude and overall performance. Similarly, the audience's cheering gets even louder, which hints at the popularity of the House of Abundance within the walls of Ballroom.

"Pilot" – *00:06:55 – Close-up of Pray Tell screaming*

"Pilot" – *00:06:57 – Medium close-up of Lamar walking*

The House of Abundance's popularity is also rendered by the audience and the panel of judges all standing up. By acclaiming their performances, not only do the members of Ballroom celebrate the house's varied sexualities and queer identities, they also confirm the power and influence that the house possesses within the realm of Ballroom, which echoes Blanca's words later in the pilot episode: "Better than money—you can actually make a name for yourself by winning a trophy or two. And in our community, the glory of your name is everything." Following Pray Tell's reaction to the House of Abundance, I want to question the notion of authority I mentioned earlier in that part. In that scene, what is the value of Pray Tell as an emcee that comments on the performances he sees? The first shot of the scene, a close-up on his microphone, indicates that he is a narrator that guides both the show's and real-life audiences in the interpretations of the performances and their quality. Yet, as the scene progresses, I argue that Prey Tell is not merely a narrator anymore: he has authority as the character that helps others interpret what they see and how they see it. I base my argument on the show's use of audiovisual discursive strategies to guide the audience(s) through the interpretation process: the camera may focus on Pray Tell in close-up shots, but because the scene also focuses on the dialogue it presents, the editing may cut to shots of either the contestant or the audience. Yet, Pray Tell's words can still be heard: the sharp shifts to his voice becoming off-screen sounds attests to his never-ending presence and authority not only as a narrator, but as a powerful translator that will interpret the performances in front of him for everybody to hear.

"Pilot" – *00:07:57 – The audience standing up*

"Pilot" – *00:08:05 – Zoom-out of the judges standing up*

This first ball scene gives the viewers proof of the cohesive dialogue that takes place between the different people in this ball event, attesting to the social practices used within Ballroom and their connections with the idea of space. The aforementioned establishing shot, which echoes Bailey's ground plan in "Engendering Space," allows the viewers to grasp the places of each category of people that make up the ball event in order to understand the meaning of their social interactions. I argue that this cinematic rendering of social and spatial practices epitomize the subversive aspect of Ballroom's ball events: while the queer characters of color in *Pose* are rejected in the show's WSCP on the basis of their transgressive visual epistemologies, those characters are celebrated within the walls of Ballroom because they are truly seen and cheered on by their peers thanks to those same epistemologies. In addition to the fast-paced transitions from the judges' table to Pray Tell, the contestant and the cheering audience, *Pose*'s cinematography use strategic camera movements, sounds and sharp editing: those tools convey the idea that balls act as social devices that encapsulate Ballroom's queer and racialized place-making practices in the expression of the self and the acceptance of the other—a subversive shift from "being looked at" to "being seen."

Since I argued that the ball events redefine looking relations through social and spatial practices, I also posit that this scene operates a metaphorical and physical recentering of the WSCP's margins of the series. By being cheered on for the same visual epistemologies that Other them in the WSCP, the queer characters of color in *Pose* adapt to the norms and codes within Ballroom, which put queer identities at the center and strip them from their transgressive dimensions. Because Ballroom is made entirely of queer people of color and that their queer identities are treated as normative, it also means that the hegemonic norms corresponding to Lorde's mythical norm are put on the margins of Ballroom. This metaphorical recentering of the

WSCP's margins will become physical in the scene under study. For example, Angel enters the room with a princess gown and a scepter and Elektra comes in a few seconds later wearing a queen's ornament, both placed at the center of the room, which encapsulate their places within Ballroom. Angel's shot highly contrasts with her scenes shown in the first part, in which she was framed as smaller than she actually was (in Park Avenue) or in threatening situations (at the piers), which all indicated her social and geographical Othering. In that specific scene, the camera frames her not in a situation of exclusion, but in a low-angle shot that highlights her prestance and power as a performer and as a trans woman of color within Ballroom. The setting and camera work together to put Angel in a situation of hypervisibility that differs from the one she was in during her relationship with Stan: as she is under the spotlight, she stands out from everybody else in the room, attesting to her place at the center of the subculture. This position is metaphorical with the use of the lighting, but also physical, since she stands at the center of the room for everyone to see.

"Pilot" – *00:08:23 – Low-angle shot of Angel*

"Pilot" – *00:09:13 – High-angle shot of Elektra*

Elektra's apparition carries the same subversive meaning. Unlike Angel, she is framed in a high-angle shot that also emphasizes her place at the center of the room—and her position as the matriarch of the House of Abundance, since she is the only one wearing a queen's ornament. As Elektra fully receives the light from the numerous spotlights, she is also hypervisible for everyone to see, while the audience stands outside the spotlight. Thus, social and spatial practices are brought together with the recentering of the margins as the shot shows her surrounded by the audience who celebrates her performance and her queer identity, two elements that are placed metaphorically at the center of Ballroom's social norms.

Yet, it is worth asking about the value of Angel's and Elektra's queer identities in the scene. In the diegesis of the scene, it is unclear as to the reasons why those characters belong to

the queer community. As the extradiegetic audience is still being introduced to the subculture and the characters, this ball scene blurs the frontiers between heteronormativity and queerness: indeed, both Angel and Elektra seem to perform the female gender, a message that is also sent by the camera which provides a visual discourse that seems to be imbedded in heteronormativity. I argue that these discourses are at the center of the balls' subversive dimension: by performing the gender they identify with, neither Angel and Elektra want to be seen as trans women, but cisgender women. Paradoxically, by being framed as hypervisible characters (due to their central physical place in the scene) in a queer setting, the heteronormative nature of their performances is encapsulated by the camera who frames them as cisgender women by not fully disclosing their queer identity. In other words, this means that the nature of performance in *Pose* aims at questioning the audience's own codification of gender, which attests to the subversive aspect of *Pose*'s ball events, but also to the show's production in and off itself.

By studying *Pose*'s first ball scene, I sought to examine the way Ballroom's social and spatial practices worked together to draw a bridge between the act of "seeing" and that of "being seen." A balanced relation that could not take place within the show's WSCP, this relation of validation and celebration is at the heart of *Pose*'s ball events as they allow its performers to be cheered on by their queer peers of color. As I studied the spaces of exclusion that displaced *Pose*'s characters on the margins of its WSCP in the first part of this dissertation, this analysis searched for possible solutions to counteract the characters' social Othering. Thus, the ball events as shown in *Pose* act as a space of expression and inclusion in which its queer characters of color get to redefine hegemonic norms within the walls of Ballroom and operate a queer recentering of the WSCP's heteronormative margins. Yet, a paradoxical aspect of Ballroom should be highlighted to qualify this thesis. Even though the subculture is proof of Black and Latinx place-making practices that rely on inclusion, its ball events remain competitive in their essence. Competition involves winners and losers, and the dialogue I worked on throughout this part will also take effect in the rejection of some contestants. In the scene under study, a performer begins to walk the category before the House of Abundance arrives. As she walks to the panel of judges, Pray Tells says: "I don't know of a princess or a queen who gets their clothes from Casual Corner." (00:07:05) Following the laughter from the audience, the contestant loses the category and walks out of the room with the other performers. This is proof of the sometimes

"brutal"[110] aspect of the ball events. Even though Ballroom relies on inclusion and support, it still comprises criticism linked with the competitive aspect of the balls, but also the necessity for queer people of color (notably trans women) to "pass" in the WSCP. Such a notion will be tackled in the third subpart of this dissertation. Since I argued that they were excluded from the opulent spaces representing Lorde's mythical norm, I will now analyze how the show's queer characters of color counteract their socio-economic exclusion by reappropriating the aforementioned representations of whiteness during the ball events.

b. Subverting the representations of social class in *Pose*'s ball events

The following part will aim at providing a more detailed account of the performances enacted during the balls and how they add to the subversive reading of those presentations of the self. As many categories in *Pose* rely on the emulation of upscale social classes, which have been linked to whiteness throughout the show's first season, I seek to explore the ways the show's queer characters of color use performance to counteract their socio-economic Othering within *Pose*'s WSCP. I will show how contestants use specific categories and enact certain visual tools—like clothing or body movements—to show that social and economic opportunities are also accessible to them, even though those characters face rejection from Lorde's mythical norm in the show's WSCP. In order to do so, I will go back to the aforementioned places that discuss whiteness and that work as spaces of exclusion against queer people of color, and see how Ballroom contestants not only appropriate those representations of whiteness, but also redefine their meaning with their own rules. Indeed, the scenes of exclusion I studied in the first part linked whiteness with opulence and socio-economic influence. By challenging the norms of a WSCP that prevents queer people of color from having the same socio-economic opportunities as their white counterparts, I will argue that the performances enacted by Ballroom contestants allow them to visually belong to Lorde's mythical norm within the realm of their subculture. By visually redefining their belonging to the WSCP's center, the characters of *Pose* bring together the margins and center of the show's WSCP in performances. Thus, I argue that the performances enacted by the queer characters of color in *Pose* result in a mythical yet paradoxical subversion of the socio-economic norms of the show's WSCP, which I endeavor to qualify throughout this second subpart.

[110] Bailey, "Engendering Space", op. cit., p. 502.

In Ballroom culture as well as in the first season of *Pose*, categories are numerous, and many of them focus on the performance of social groups that differ from those of queer people of color. In order to grasp the meaning of the strategies of performance enacted by Ballroom contestants to reflect upscale social classes, I will first go back to the concept of excluding spaces I analyzed throughout this dissertation. In "Engendering Space," Bailey analyzed this socio-economic inequality for queer people of color in the making of the Ballroom subculture. He relied on what he coined "geography of capitalism," which he described as "the ways in which social geographies—spatial exclusion and inclusion—are structured in part by race."[111] In addition, Bailey, by also relying on the works of sociologists David Sibley, Thomas Sugrue and Craig L. Wilkins, argued that queer people of color face what he calls "spatial marginalization." He observed:

> 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.[112]

The "geography of capitalism" mentioned by Bailey, which results in marginalizing spaces, brings together the first part of this dissertation with the performances enacted by Ballroom contestants. Because they cannot access the same opportunities as their white counterparts, queer people of color will get to visually embody these inaccessible opportunities through means of performance.

This subversion of socio-economic hegemonic norms is at the heart of the ball events. In *Paris is Burning*, a segment is dedicated to the category "Executive Realness." As the camera shows the audience Black gay men walking the category in tailored and upscale suits, the voice of drag performer Dorian Corey is heard in the background. As the camera cuts to her face in her boudoir during an interview, she begins to talk about social class and opportunity in the making of performance:

> In real life, you can't get a job as an executive unless you have the educational background and the opportunity. Now, the fact that you are not an executive is merely because of the social standing of life. [...] And those that do are usually straight. In a ballroom, you can be anything you want. You're not really an executive but you're looking like an executive and therefore you're showing the straight world that "I can be an executive. If I had the opportunity I could be one, because I look like one." (00:14:58)

[111] Ibid, p. 495.
[112] Ibid, pp. 494-495.

Corey shows here that during the ball events, performance is a visual tool used to show that social class is merely a performing act, a role that is played on a daily basis. In the field of sociology, Corey's views embody the numerous concepts that echo the daily presentation of the self. In their paper "Identity and Self-Presentation in the House/Ball Culture: A Primer for Social Workers," sociologists Rowan et al. relied on those concepts to apply it to Ballroom culture, more specifically the act of performing a social class that differs from those of Ballroom contestants. In a theorization of such concepts, they rely on the early work of sociologist Erving Goffman and explore the daily performances enacted by not only queer people of color, but also those from the WSCP:

> Goffman (1959) recognized "the world as a stage" and the human ability to enact social roles and scripts through impression management. [...] Like actors on a stage, people in everyday life make decisions about and manage presentations of self in relationship to assumed roles. This is frequently called the dramaturgical approach.[113]

By using Goffman's "world as a stage" theory where any human being gets to perform their persona in several ways, Rowan et al.'s approach to the everyday presentations of the self helps understand Corey's views on performance: in the context of the category "Executive Realness," if queer people of color can enact the same visual tools used by actual businessmen, at least during their performance, they could access the same opportunities as their white and/or straight counterparts because appearances are intrinsically linked with one's place in society.

Since these social classes are often associated with upscale and opulent lifestyles associated with whiteness, the contestants' performances often involve lavish clothing as well as tidy makeup, hair and accessories that epitomize the spaces from which they are excluded in the WSCP. The search for opulence was tackled by Rowan et al. when applying Goffman's sociological approach to Ballroom culture:

> Some members of the ballroom community chase the illusion of opulence in the midst of poverty. On the night of a ball, they are adorned in rhinestones and glitter, often wearing expensive gowns or other performance costumes, carefully tailored to achieve the effect necessary to win a category. [...] In most cases, the ball patron could not afford to purchase the items from their own personal finances.[114]

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[113] Rowan, Diana, Long, Denis D. and Johnson, Darrin. "Identity and Self-Presentation in the House/Ball Culture: A Primer for Social Workers." *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, Vol. 25, No. 2, p. 179.
[114] Ibid, p. 188.

By using the word "illusion," Rowan et al. emphasize the visual aspect of the contestants' performances that contrast with the lack of access to employment that result from the intersecting oppressions they face. Their approach highlights the opulence that stems from the categories that seek to emulate inaccessible social classes. Indeed, since queer contestants of color can show they can belong to upscale lifestyles linked to whiteness, they show their peers that even though they stand in the margins of the WSCP, they could access its center because they can perform the prerequisites to belong. Interestingly, the notion of performance is applied in many instances by Ballroom members: performing social class is frequent, but it also echoes Butler's aforementioned theory of gendered performances in "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," which confirms that the field of performance studies is central to Ballroom culture and the first season of *Pose*. Whereas its characters (whether from its margins or its WSCP) engage in daily performances crafted to represent their gender or social class, the notion of "performance" will be explored further during *Pose*'s ball events, which act as extensive and dramatized "shows" for everyone to see, building a bridge between being seen and seeing oneself. Central to all these definitions of "performance" is the concept of "realness."

Indeed, the concept of "realness" is intrinsically linked to that of visually "belonging." To members of Ballroom culture, realness is a tool used to examine the extent of a performer's authenticity regarding the category they are walking. A contestant achieving a great performance and winning a category attests to their ability to fit into the world they are emulating, which is at the center of the competitive dimension of the ball events. In "Engendering Space," Bailey points out the importance of "realness" within the subculture:

> 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.[115]

Ballroom contestants, by being "indistinguishable" from the rest of society during the ball events, aim at blurring the lines between race, class and gender.[116] Since opulence is often associated with whiteness in *Pose*, the performances under study raise the question of the visual epistemologies that remain visible to the ballroom audience, notably their race. As the characters

[115] Bailey, "Engendering Space", op. cit., p. 493.

[116] Because "realness" mirrors the interconnecting oppressions faced by Ballroom contestants, its use is not limited to class, but gender, race and sexuality as well. Although they are not mutually exclusive, I will focus on "realness" regarding gender and sexuality in the third subpart.

of *Pose* do not engage in skin-lightening techniques to appear less Black, the concept of "realness" as well as the overall transformative aspect of Ballroom performances is so based on the malleability of the body that it goes beyond the visual epistemology of race. Even though the contestants are Black, the fact that they "pass" because of their body language, clothing and accessories show that contestants also redefine the meaning of the corporeal, which pushes me to adopt a subversive reading of the ball events. Indeed, because they emulate the opulent visual epistemologies of those who reject them outside of Ballroom, queer contestants of color engage in a subversion of those norms because within Ballroom, the act of performing equals that of being. Thus, I argue that those performances of social class do not merely rely on imitation: rather, they stem from an emulation of specific clothing, body movements and staged ways of being that embody the social class they cannot access outside the subculture. Because their movements from the WSCP's margins to its center are malleable through performance, queer people of color engage in a redefinition of what is deemed transgressive and shift their visual subjectivities to recenter the margins in which they stand in an illusionary act of resistance. This subversive reading follows the one used in the second part of this dissertation: by enabling this "subversion by emulation," queer people of color reappropriate norms they were rejected from and apply it through the transformative prism of Ballroom culture. Thus, performing class within Ballroom allows for its contestants to not only recenter the margins they stand in, but also to subvert the WSCP's hegemonic norms because they embody what they otherwise cannot access outside Ballroom, attesting to the mythical and transformative aspects of the ball events. I therefore ask: how are those subversive and transformative performances rendered in *Pose*'s first season?

Numerous categories emphasize this malleability of social class in the show's first season. The first ball scene shown to the audience is the aforementioned "Royalty" category, which consists of an opulent socio-economic lifestyle because the House of Abundance enacted a power and influence its members could not achieve outside of Ballroom. Moreover, the fact that they have to steal the clothing and accessories echo Rowan et al.'s quote on relying on crime to be able to walk the balls. These transformative class performances are used throughout the pilot episode, emphasizing their importance. For example, once she meets Damon dancing in the park, Blanca takes him to his first ball. Interestingly, as they enter the ballroom, the category taking place is that of "Executive Realness" mentioned by Dorian Corey, attesting to the

influence of *Paris is Burning* on the show's production. By the means of close-ups, the first contestant appears to the audience with a suit, a tie as well as a cashmere coat hanging on his shoulder. The poised walk as well as the confident attitude of the performer embodies the image of a powerful businessman benefiting from an upscale profession, while the aforementioned complex camera movements and use of lighting again epitomize the contestants' subjectivities when performing this class representing financial power and influence. Pray Tell, the emcee, puts the emphasis on the contestant's appearance: "These are high-powered businessmen of the 80s. The suit, the 401(k), the IRA. That chocolate cashmere!" (00:28:35) "401(k)" and "IRA" being investment plans in the United States, Pray Tell's commentary links the contestants with cultural references that emphasize the opulence of their performances. Similarly, a few seconds later, another contestant begins to walk along with a woman. He is wearing a white tuxedo while she has an opulent fur coat, a golden sequined dress and a matching clutch.

"Pilot" – *00:28:35 – Close-up of a contestant walking the "Executive Realness" category*

"Pilot" – *00:29:13 – Shot of contestants seating at a table*

They push their performative act by adding a scenario to their walk: by seating at the table, not only do the contestants enact the image of a heterosexual couple, they also add the concept of space to their performance, as if they were sitting in a high-end establishment. The idea of space is pushed further by Pray Tell: "Calling this Executive Hustler realness, y'all. The sepia Don Corleone at the Russian Tea Room!" (00:29:19) Because *Pose* relies on the ongoing tensions between its WSCP's center and margins, it is interesting to note that the visual epistemologies the contestants emulate resemble that of the white upscale characters of the show. For example, the suit of the first contestant looks like the clothes Stan wears following his job interview at Park Avenue, while Pray Tell's "Russian Tea Room" reference echoes the Rainbow Room where Stan and Patty eat in formal clothing. By applying the same features used to represent whiteness and opulence to themselves, queer contestants of color show their peers that if they could, they,

too, could access the same power and influence granted by a high-level position in the corporate world. Moreover, as the contestants walk the category, Blanca mentions the concept of realness and explains it to Damon: "Realness is what it's all about. Being able to fit into the straight, white world and embody the American dream. But we don't have access to that dream. And it's not because of ability, trust me." (00:29:02) Blanca sheds light on the performative system in Ballroom that is linked with Dorian Corey's approach to class performance and Goffman's theory of the "world as a stage," and emphasize on the inclusive dimension of Ballroom that seeks to counteract the exclusion of *Pose*'s WSCP, embodied by the American dream.

Although the category "Executive Realness" does exist in the actual subculture, *Pose* comprises other categories that do not exist outside the fictional work. An example would be the category "High Fashion Evening Wear," taking place in the pilot episode. As the category begins, Pray Tells speaks in the microphone: "High Fashion Evening Wear. Ladies who have everything. Please and thank you. [...] The lifestyles of the rich and famous realness." (00:48:39) Female contestants begin to walk, clothed in chic garments made of head accessories and long dresses. The first contestant wears a black and golden dress with a matching hat, while another is dressed all in white. Not only do they wear opulent clothing, they also emulate body gestures that are poised and feminine. The theatrical aspect of their performances encapsulates their subjective meaning: contestants do not engage in realistic representations, but instead operate exaggerated renderings of the way they view femininity and opulence. In other words, the visual aspect of *Pose*'s performances indicate that contestants engage in an exaggeration of a cultural representation.

"Pilot" – *00:48:45 – Close-up of a contestant walking the "High Fashion Evening Wear" category*

"Pilot" – *00:49:37 – Close-up of a contestant walking the same category*

Indeed, these socio-economic categories show that performances are anchored in cultural representations of what is deemed opulent and lavish by Ballroom members. As a matter of fact,

the extravagant garments used by performers within Ballroom are only a reflection of the economic boom of the 1980s under the Reagan administration, a decade in which "conspicuous consumerism"[117] was at its peak. Another example is the "Dynasty" category that is shown in the episode "Access" (S01E02). Taking direct inspiration from the eponymous soap opera that garnered critical acclaim in the 1980s, Pray Tell introduces the category before it begins: "The category is Dynasty. I want to see all the rich bitch fantasy in full effect!" The first contestants all appear in fancy clothings and enact the same poised and feminine body movements as the aforementioned scene under study. A contestant wears a golden dress with padded shoulders, while a camera pan shows contestants dressed in a red dress and a sequined purple garment that fit the prosperous prerequisites of the "Dynasty" category.

"Access" – *00:40:03 – Close-up of a contestant walking the "Dynasty" category*

"Access" – *00:41:36 – Close-up of a contestant walking the same category*

Yet, Pray Tell's commentaries indicate that these performances are not worthy of a "10"—the higher mark in Ballroom— which takes the audience back to his authority as a commentator. As the contestants all stand in front of the judges, Elektra enters the Ballroom under the applause of the audience. The same visual tools are used to operate the performance of an upscale lifestyle: she wears a blue dress with shoulder pads, a matching clutch, a ring and a tidy hairdo that emphasizes her big diamond earrings. By walking in an athletic fashion, Elektra moves towards the panel of judges, who all give her the highest mark possible. She moves her arms towards the camera in a low-angle shot that highlights the influence and power she tries to convey through her performance.

[117] Pendergast et al. (eds.), *Bowling, Beatniks, and Bell-Bottoms: Pop Culture of 20th-Century America*. Detroit: U X L, 2002, p. 1105.

"Access" – *00:41:03 – Elektra walking the "Dynasty" category*

"Access" – *00:41:21 – Low-angle shot of Elektra*

I contrast the performances studied in this part with the theorization of racialized spaces explored in the first part. Because opulence came to be culturally attached to the decade of the 1980s, as I showed through the gentrification of New York, queer contestants of color in *Pose* perform this same opulence because they cannot access those gentrified settings in the show's WSCP. To that extent, since *Pose*'s characters get to recenter the margins they stand in by performing socio-economic influence, the show's class categories epitomize the fracture between hegemonic culture shown in the media and the actual place of queer people of color outside this hegemonic cultural opulence.

Interestingly, the category "Dynasty" does not exist in real-life Ballroom, and was invented for creative purposes by *Pose*'s production. This shows that the series places popular culture and mainstream representations of opulence at the center of the ball events for its contestants to emulate. Indeed, the show *Dynasty* (ABC, 1981-1989) told the story of two rich albeit feuding families—the Carringtons and the Colbys—and their search for power and influence over one another. Following the regular soap opera themes[118] revolving around romance, treason and most importantly money, the series brought together the prosperous essence of the 1980s and its cinematic rendering on television. Figure 2 below attests to the opulent lifestyle rendered in the series thanks to the formal hairstyles and clothing of the characters, who all wear chic gowns and formal suits:

[118] Sepulchre (ed.), *Décoder les Séries Télévisées*, op. cit., p. 133.

Figure 2 – Promotional picture of *Dynasty* (ABC, 1981-1989)

Pose's reference to *Dynasty* goes beyond the name of the category. The link between the two pieces of work is conducted by Pray Tell and his ongoing authority as a commentator, who keeps referring to the names of the characters and actresses in *Dynasty* when commenting on the contestants' performances: "Here we have Dominique Deveraux, replete with boa" (00:40:00) or "Is it Krystle Carrington—Linda Evans?" (00:40:30) Not only does he draw a link between the names of the actresses and the characters they play in *Dynasty*, is it worth noting that even *Pose*'s production is involved in this link between fiction and reality, as attested by Elektra's appearance in the previous shots, whose hair and appearance resemble that of Alex Colby, played by British actress Joan Collins. By continually using the ballroom as a reflection of *Dynasty* and its opulence—and to some extent, operating a representation of another representation—the overall scene attests to the fracture between hegemonic popular culture and queer people of color's actual place within the WSCP. For example, in a 2006 *New York Times* article, journalist Alessandra Stanley pointed out: "'Dynasty' wasn't just about big hair, big shoulders and catfights in the lily pond. The ABC series was the fictional libretto of the Reagan presidency—the triumph of a glittering gerontocracy."[119] This means that in *Pose*, characters giving their own representation of another cultural representation—the soap opera *Dynasty*—attests to the ongoing cultural hegemony of that time, and the contestants' wish to show their peers they, too, can belong to such opulent lifestyles because they are able to perform it. While Stanley's words emphasizes the cultural legacy of *Dynasty* as a common experience, Malcolm Rio qualifies this monolithic approach in "Architecture is Burning:"

[119] Stanley, Allessandra. "A Look Back at 'Dynasty' and the Excess of the 1980's." *New York Times*, May 2 2006, https://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/02/arts/television/02stan.html. Accessed April 18 2023.

> [Queer people of color's] painful testimonies of violence, desperation, and sex work reveal an underbelly of the '80s, in which the prosperous images projected by primetime television fare such as *Dynasty* and *Dallas* were far removed from the lives of many [queer people of color].[120]

I argue that this separation mentioned by Rio is at the heart of the class performances in the first season of *Pose*. Ballroom contestants, who stand at the margins of society, perform inaccessible lifestyles and social classes by emulating the WSCP's center. Such an appropriation of the cultural and visual codes that they are rejected from attest to the subversive essence of the ball events. Indeed, since in Ballroom, performance is the contestants' way of accounting for the fragile aspect of the fracture between margins and center, the way they can appropriate those visual codes attest to their ability to belong to the center, too, resulting in a subversion of those codes by appropriating them and applying them to their own transgressive identities.

Yet, this subversion goes beyond those categories, and the linguistic devices used in Ballroom to refer to its people or its amenities is also charged with meaning. For example, in *Pose*, Blanca's House of Evangelista gets its name after Linda Evangelista, a white supermodel that rose to fame in the 1980s and 1990s. Similarly, Elektra's House of Abundance implies a search for an ongoing opulence, attesting to both houses reflecting representations linked to opulent social classes and prosperity. In addition, even the name "Ballroom" connotes a search for socio-economic influence, since Ballroom dancing is culturally seen as an upscale activity. Because they appropriate the representations of opulence—and, thus, whiteness—they are rejected from in the media and the WSCP, the show's queer characters of color strip away the visual epistemologies that mark them as transgressive and emulate the opportunities they cannot access in terms of space, economic influence and social acceptance. In doing so, they use the mythical and transformative space that is Ballroom to reconcile the fracture between the intersecting oppressions they face and the dazzling images they see in the media—resulting in a socio-economic recentering of the margins they stand in.

In this part, I intended to show how *Pose*'s ball events allow its queer contestants of color to go beyond the limits of the corporeal and counteract the systemic and intersecting oppressions that prevent them from a fair access to employment. Corporeal, in my study of *Pose*'s trans identities, refers to the logical relation between mind and body, and I will study how such a concept can be analyzed when, for the trans characters of the show, the link between mind and

[120] Rio, "Architecture is Burning", op. cit., p. 126.

body (gender identity and birth gender) must be repaired. Because they perform the social classes they are rejected from in the WSCP, contestants strip away its hegemonic norms and state that performing is equal to being. In a redefinition of what is deemed possible within the realm of Ballroom, the performances shown during the ball events emphasize the fragile aspect of transgressive and normative visual epistemologies that can all collapse by means of body gestures, clothing and attitude. During the ball events, the contestants' performances are anchored in the concept of appropriation: while the queer characters of color in *Pose* are rejected from the WSCP's center outside the walls of Ballroom, they choose to appropriate those very visual codes and representations in their performances to show their peers that what they cannot access is merely based on appearances. In other words, by emulating the world they cannot access, queer contestants of color show that because they can perform an opulent social class, the characters that represent the WSCP's center in *Pose* also engage in performing acts too. I seek to go further on the malleability of the body and the redefinition of visual epistemologies I explored. Even though they are numerous, categories in *Pose* do not always focus on social class and economic influence. While I used the concept of "realness" for the characters to properly emulate social classes and prestige, other performances extensively use this concept, especially regarding the trans characters of color in *Pose*. Thus, the last subpart will focus on how characters develop strategies involving realness to be seen as the gender they identify with—in and outside of Ballroom.

c. Using realness to unmark queer identities through *Pose*'s ball events… and beyond

In this last subpart, I will shed light on other types of categories that are also predominant in *Pose*'s Ballroom culture: those that put the emphasis on gender and sexual realness. For example, we have seen that in the context of the aforementioned "Executive Realness," gay men must emulate an upper scale business attitude and attire. However, they also have to emulate a hypermasculine ideal to fit the representation of an influential businessman in the corporate world. Thus, I now want to focus on issues of gender and sexual representations within the ball events, and this subpart will aim to show that categories that focus not on social class but gender identity or sexuality involve an additional set of tools that will serve queer contestants within Ballroom, but also outside its walls. Indeed, as realness can refer to how one can perform a social class, it also intersects with how one can perform the gender they identify with, or how one can

perform the sexuality they identify with day after day—like gay or lesbian homosexuality, for example. Even though I present class, gender and sexual categories separately, I argue that they are not mutually exclusive as they all rely on the notion of "passing." This part will focus specifically on female trans characters in the series and the strategies they develop to perform their gender identity and the femininity that comes with it. Thus, I will work on the immutable aspect of gender and sexual performances and the tools used by the contestants of *Pose* to emphasize their transgressive queer identities in a way that will make those identities disappear outside Ballroom—a transformative and subversive "unmarking" of those identities.

Since Ballroom culture is intrinsically composed of queer people of color, their gender identity and sexuality are central to the performances they enact in Ballroom. Thus, the visual aspect of their performances should be highlighted in this subpart. By relying on Robyn Wiegman's theory of visual epistemologies in the first part of this dissertation, I argued that people of color may be "marked" because of their race as a visual epistemology that created difference in the eyes of white people. I push this analysis further, and argue that because of the intersecting oppressions of race, gender, sexuality and class in the United States, queer people of color's identities may be marked as transgressive not only on the basis of race, but regarding gender identity and sexuality as well: this echoes the scene analyzed in the first part in which Angel asked the saleswoman if she was "too much woman." Because "realness" relies on the use of normative visual norms only to be applied to trans women of color, its use is paradoxical in its essence for several reasons. Because trans women rely on normative and essentialist rules on gender in order to "pass" as cisgender women, the performances they give in the ball events will also give them the tools to be indistinguishable in the WSCP. In other words, by performing the gender they identify with, trans women of color will emulate the same concept of visual epistemology and appropriate the same visual features they are rejected from in the WSCP only to apply them to themselves, and thus, to shift it to the realm of the normative in the private sphere of Ballroom but also in the public life. Bailey highlights this use of essentialist norms only to apply it to trans women of color and redefine them:

> Racialized, classed, gendered and sexualized performances, self-presentations, and embodiments, to a large extent, give realness its discursive power in both the ballroom scene as well as in society at large. [...] Thus, "realness" ultimately signifies the possibility of deception—an

> enduring illusion—positioned at the crossroads between the ballroom world and the "real world."[121]

The use of the words "deception" or "illusion" echoes the concept of "passing," or the way a person can properly emulate a hegemonic class, sexuality or gender identity according to the norms of the WSCP. Moreover, Bailey sheds light on the importance of such a concept during the ball events, but also in the WSCP. Indeed, performing one's gender in Ballroom may enact validation from the subculture, but performing in the WSCP in an indistinguishable way may provide safety for trans women of color. For example, I showed in the first part how the character of Angel was Othered not only by the saleswoman, but also by Stan, who engaged in fetishizing behavior, which both show that trans women who are not able to entirely pass may be at risk of social marginalization. To rely on Wiegman's notions again, appropriating essentialist norms on gender may allow trans women of color to stop being "marked" according to their transgressive gender identity, and be seen as any other cisgender woman. In Ballroom and queer literature, this indistinguishable dimension is called "unmarking," which works differently during the ball events and in the WSCP. Bailey discusses strategies of unmarking developed by trans women of color:

> [Realness categories] [demonstrate] the skill of the competitor to instantly change her/his gender performance from "unclockable," meaning they unmark themselves as queer, to "clockable," marking themselves as queer. [...] Therefore, because the Black body is read through and within a visual epistemology, where gender and sexual hierarchies are corporeal, ballroom members refashion themselves by manipulating their embodiments and performances in ways that render them visible and remarkable within the ballroom scene but invisible and unmarked in the world outside of it [...].[122]

Bailey's approach condones the paradoxical reading of "realness" categories I explored so far. Within Ballroom, trans women of color will benefit from the celebrated hypervisibility of their performances—yet, in a redefinition of the corporeal, the acclaim in the ball events will transcribe what realness aims for in the WSCP: being seen as any other cisgender woman. Numerous are the ways in which trans women of color can alter their bodies episodically or permanently so that they may pass as cisgender women both within and outside Ballroom. Gender performances do not only include body gestures or specific clothing, it may also involve surgical or cosmetic procedures that aim at enhancing their bodies to appear more "feminine" in the eyes of the people seeing them. In other words, the malleability of the body I mentioned in

[121] Bailey, "Gender/Racial Realness", op. cit., p. 378.
[122] Ibid, p. 380.

the second subpart can also be applied to gender, and trans women of color may choose to enact certain images of what is deemed "feminine" through heteronormative representations of gender.

How can a subculture be subversive if it nonetheless relies on essentialist and heteronormative norms on gender? In Ballroom literature, emulation does not equal mere imitation, and the appropriation of visual representations—even hegemonic ones—still revolves in the wish to counteract systemic and intersecting oppressions. This paradoxical aspect of Ballroom performances was tackled by Bailey in *Butch Queens Up in Pumps*:

> Realness, then, as both a set of criteria and a way in which Ballroom members apply and adhere to these criteria, often conflates anatomic femaleness with womanhood and anatomic maleness with manhood [...]. These cases demonstrate that realness serves as a strategy of resistance to hegemonic gender and sexual norms in terms of the violence to which members are subjected if they do not disguise their gender and sexual nonconformity. Yet, on the other hand, members' enactment of realness ends up reinscribing and relying on these same norms to view and judge each other within the community.[123]

By arguing for the concept of realness as a token of safety for trans women of color, Bailey emphasizes the transformative aspect of gender performances both within and outside Ballroom. As I have explained in the first part, the trans characters of *Pose* may be at risk of being Othered on multiple levels by the WSCP because of the visual epistemologies that mark them as trans—or, in other words, their inability to pass as cisgender. Without taking away the paradoxical dimension of those performances, Bailey sheds light on the ball events as a space of resistance, even though it relies on hegemonic visual representations. I argue that there lies the subversive dimension of realness performances: by appropriating essentialist rules on a gender they are rejected from in the WSCP, not only will trans women of color enact these rules in the WSCP, these rules will also allow them to perform their gender within the WSCP. A subversion through emulation that relies on the redefinition of femininity, gender performances will allow trans contestants of color to express their gender identity in front of their peers, but also in the society that previously rejected them in a set of performances charged with resistance.

In the first season of *Pose*, female trans characters face the challenges of the visual epistemologies given to their bodies and marking them as transgressive through the show's narration. In that matter, all of them deploy certain strategies to unmark themselves from their queer identity. In "The Fever" (S01E04), the focus is put on Elektra and the ways she is

[123] Bailey, *Butch Queens Up in Pumps*, op. cit., p. 68.

perceived by the outside world. In the first part, I already worked on a scene in which Mr. Ford, Elektra's boyfriend, forbids her to go through gender confirmation surgery. The scene that takes place right after epitomizes Elektra's insecurities regarding her male genitalia and will allow me to study the concept of realness regarding trans women of color in *Pose*'s Ballroom. In this ball scene, Elektra begins to walk the "Femme Queen Realness" category: the name already attests to the specificity of the category, during which trans women must perform the gender they identify with authentically. During her performance, Elektra dances and expresses her femininity thanks to her red dress, matching hat and stilettos. Thanks to Pray Tell's authority, her performance is a success, as he immediately praises her attitude: "Y'all better be ready for inspection, because we're touching skin tonight! [...] Here she comes, and it's Miss Elektra Abundance, a woman who knows how to flaunt what God hath given her. And she is enhanced to perfection. [...] Give it to me, girl!" (00:23:58) Elektra's successful performance is emphasized by the use of lighting that highlights her features and puts her in the center of the room, following the cinematic tools I explored in the first subpart. Yet, a second contestant appears. Unknown from the audience watching the episode, Pray Tell gives information that lets the audience know it is Aphrodite from the House of Extravaganza. With a play on the word "Bangkok," Aphrodite tells Pray Tell she went through gender confirmation surgery. As she walks the category and performs her gender, a low-angle-shot shows her at the center of the room, under the Ballroom white light, the same spot Elektra was in a few seconds before. The latter does not stand at the center of the room anymore, but remains on the side of the floor, waiting for Aphrodite's performance to end.

"The Fever" – *00:24:11 – Close-up of Elektra walking the "Femme Queen Realness" category*

"The Fever" – *00:24:44 – Low-angle shot of Aphrodite walking the same category*

Not only does this scene take place right after Elektra was forbidden to go through the surgery, but the viewers also see Aphrodite receiving more acclaim from Pray Tell and the audience, which creates anticipation. By putting in the same category a trans woman who went through the

surgery and one who did not, *Pose* starts to interrogate the place and meaning of such a surgery within Ballroom in terms of femininity. Then, the two contestants go up towards the panel of judges, who begin to "inspect" the bodies of the two women in order to see their femininity. The judges touch the contestants' skin, and look at them through magnifying glasses, as is customary during realness categories in Ballroom.

"The Fever" – *00:25:06 – Close-up of Aphrodite being judged by the panel*

"The Fever" – *00:25:08 – Close-up of Elektra being judged by the panel*

Looking closely at somebody's skin gives information about what is deemed feminine in Ballroom: as those close-ups show the judges looking at the contestants' face, one can conjecture as to what they deem to be feminine: is it a clear skin, the use of makeup or specific visual traits? Such a close analysis of Aphrodite and Elektra's feminine features attests to the space of resistance that is Ballroom in terms of hegemonic gender norms. Rather than embodying a controlling scrutiny regarding their femininity, it encapsulates the necessity for trans women of color to pass as cisgender women in the WSCP as a token of protection against transphobic, homophobic and racist violence. As the category ends, Aphrodite wins first prize and Elektra becomes first runner-up. Again, the fact that Elektra loses the category interrogates *Pose*'s stance on the meaning of femininity within Ballroom. The purpose of gender confirmation surgery, realness and femininity will be clarified in the next scene, as Elektra invites Aphrodite out to dinner. They talk about how they met, and the subject of the surgery is tackled by Aphrodite:

> *Elektra*: For me, I don't feel incomplete. I just feel inconvenienced. My man, he's adamant that I don't have it. He's generous, but not when it comes to this. I know he will leave me in the streets if I have [the surgery]. But I'm tired of living in this in-between for him.
>
> *Aphrodite*: There's nothing, especially a man, no matter how fine or rich, compares to when you look between your legs and see nothing there. [...] You want this, you're being real.
>
> *Elektra*: I really do. I can see what it's done for you, I want that.

> *Aphrodite*: Then go and get it. Dive in every morning and wash away all those fears. How lucky are we? We create ourselves. Shit, we are the real Dreamgirls. (00:26:51)

This dialogue encapsulates several views on transness and the concept of realness within and outside Ballroom. Moreover, it consists of another cultural reference, that of the Broadway musical *Dreamgirls*. A popular musical in the 1980s, it showed the rise to stardom of the eponymous R&B group and the alterations they had to make to their lives to be successful in the music industry—an alteration that is similar to Aphrodite's and Elektra's. Although the latter feels like a woman and performs her gender day after day, her male genitalia still represents the gender that was assigned to her at birth. By saying she does not feel "incomplete," her character and, in a broader sense, the script and scenario of *Pose* do not engage in a hierarchical sorting of trans experiences, where confirmation surgery would make a woman more "real" than another. Instead, the surgery in *Pose* is tackled in a way that it confirms the gender trans characters identify with, without presenting it as a mandatory step towards fulfillment. As Elektra talks about Mr. Ford, the editing shifts the two characters talking to a medium close-up of Elektra hiding—"tucking"—her genitalia with scotch tape with tears on her face, which shows the difficulty of living with a genitalia that does not fit the gender she identifies with.

"The Fever" – *00:27:35 – Close-up of Elektra tucking*

"The Fever" – *00:27:50 – Close-up of Elektra looking at herself in the mirror*

This dialogue also shows the extent of the concept of realness: even though it may rely on heteronormative representations of gender and femininity, it condones Bailey's views on the malleability of the body in order to visually show how trans women feel inside. Thus, Elektra's storyline in "The Fever" epitomizes the performances enacted by trans women of color to act in accordance with the gender they identify with. A strategy that involves a surgical intervention, Elektra's wish to remove her male genitalia attests to her wanting to be seen by others as she sees herself—a cisgender woman. Even though genitalia is not seen by the WSCP, in the case of

Elektra, it still represents a marker of the gender that was assigned to her at birth. Moreover, this scene contrasts with the previous one with Mr. Ford: as I argued that Elektra's fetishized condition resulted in another oppression from the WSCP, this episode will show her progressive search for agency before ultimately embracing her womanhood. Indeed, in *Pose*, gender confirmation surgery simply is another way to perform the female gender.

For Elektra, then, the surgery will allow her to completely pass as a cisgender woman in the WSCP because she will look like she sees herself. Interestingly, even though she transitioned and the link between body and mind had been repaired, Elektra is still part of Ballroom and the queer community in general. Indeed, transitioning is also part of a queer identity in *Pose*, and is something that is celebrated among her peers within the subculture, as indicated by Elektra's support of Aphrodite and her own transition. In the next episode, "Mother's Day" (S01E05), Elektra got out of the hospital and reconciled with her children. For her first performance after her operation, she still enacts the same body gestures as before, along with a black pantsuit and yellow clothing on top of it. Pray Tell praises her performance: "Bitch! She's back! All the way from Thailand. And she's looking rejuvenated, and she's looking refreshed. The legendary Elektra Abundance, looking like a cold glass of lemonade! Giving us daffodil realness, giving us sunflower." (00:48:20) In addition to the validation from Pray Tell (who, again, acts as an authority figure) and the audience, as well as the ongoing link between transitioning and Thailand, the camera operates close-ups of Elektra with a smile on her face, attesting to her subjectivity as a queer subject expressing one's femininity. Yet, the camera also shows her in a medium close-up, in which the audience sees Elektra hiding her crotch.

"Mother's Day" – *00:48:25 – Close-up of Elektra*

"Mother's Day" – *00:48:28 – Medium close-up of Elektra*

By doing this specific body gesture, Elektra makes her gender confirmation surgery visible to the eyes of the audience watching her and seeing her as a cisgender woman, but also as a queer

performing subject. This performance, and Elektra's overall storyline regarding the operation, encapsulates the "unmarking" of queer identities worked on by Bailey. By celebrating her operation within Ballroom, Elektra celebrates her queer identity because she is still part of Ballroom even though she went through the surgery. On the other hand, because her genitalia will now fit the gender she identifies with, Elektra will be able to enact full female performances within the WSCP because her body fits her gender identity. The "unmarking" of queer identities as shown in *Pose* is proof of the subversive performances enacted both within and outside Ballroom. Even though gender performances rely on essentialist rules on gender, the fact that they are used by queer people of color and redefined through spaces of resistance attest to their subversive meaning. Because the trans characters of color in *Pose* appropriate those rules on gender and apply it to themselves, I argue that their performances encapsulate the "subversion through emulation" model I worked on before. By emulating those essentialist norms, trans women of color get to unmark themselves from their transgressive queer identities in the WSCP through gendered strategies. Yet, by celebrating their identities with their queer peers, the trans characters of *Pose* gain agency regarding the way they are seen both within and outside Ballroom.

In this part, I intended to show that in addition to performing class, the concept of realness allowed queer contestants of color to also perform gender. Because they are often marked as transgressive by people from the WSCP, trans women of color were unable to properly express the gender they identify with outside Ballroom. Thus, in a reconciliation of "seeing" and "being seen," I showed one specific strategy that was deployed by Elektra to pass as a cisgender woman both in and outside Ballroom: going through gender confirmation surgery. Following a subverting reading, I argued that the ball events not only allowed trans women of color to fully express their gender within Ballroom, but also gave them the tools to properly express it outside of its realm. Although it may consist of a mere imitation of heteronormative essentialist rules on gender, I demonstrated that such performances consisted in fact of a subversive emulation of those rules that transformed the ball events into a space of resistance. I presented the ball events and the gendered categories as a solution enacted by queer people of color to counteract intersecting oppressions by the WSCP: by properly performing their gender day after day through numerous strategies, trans women of color embodied essentialist visual norms on gender, but secured protection regarding transphobic violence, which consists in a

subversive emulation in and off itself. By reconciling the link between "seeing oneself" and "being seen," the specific case of Elektra attests to the trans characters' ability to make their bodies malleable in a way that it visually transcribes the gender they identify with, a gendered subversion of the meanings of "authenticity" and "realness."

Conclusion

Throughout this Masters' dissertation, I endeavored to explore the strategies developed by the queer characters of color to counteract the intersecting oppressions they faced in *Pose*'s white supremacist capitalist society. In order to do so, I studied the mechanisms of *Pose*'s WSCP and the hegemonic norms it enacts to build a center, corresponding to Audre Lorde's "mythical norm." My point of departure relied on the fact that if a society has a center, it also comprises margins, peripheral metaphorical (and physical) spaces in which the people that stand in Kimberle Crenshaw's "basement" were displaced. By analyzing the tensions between the margins and center of *Pose*'s WSCP, I focused on the various intersecting oppressions of class, homophobia, transphobia and racism that prevents the queer characters of color in *Pose* to access the same opportunities as their white, straight and cisgender counterparts. To do so, I relied on the perception and representation of those queer characters, but also the white characters of the series.

Indeed, I endeavored to analyze these intersecting oppressions through Robyn Wiegman's "visual epistemologies" that marked *Pose*'s queer characters of color as deviant and transgressive. Because I showed that spaces of exclusion and the broken relation between "seeing" and "being seen" are related on multiple levels, I engaged in an interdisciplinary analysis of the WSCP's oppressions through a spatial and social lens. Because queer characters of color are displaced on the physical margins of *Pose*'s WSCP, they cannot be "seen" in a literal way as those spaces are racially concentrated. On the other hand, because the series also show the interactions between its center and margins, I also argued that even though queer characters interacted with white and straight characters, the former were often merely "looked at" through the prism of their transgressive queer and racialized identities rather than truly "seen" as human beings. This oppression takes place on several levels, such as within the biological family in the case of Damon, in opulent spaces discussing whiteness or in intimate relationships in the case of Angel and Elektra. Thus, the first part of this dissertation aimed to demonstrate the multiple ways in which the hegemonic norms enacted by *Pose*'s WSCP worked against its queer characters of color, and how these dynamics of oppressions shaped their lives in socio-economic and spatial terms.

Because this Masters' dissertation searched for solutions for the queer characters of color to counteract these oppressions in *Pose*, this work attests to Ballroom culture's resistant and

subverting aspects. In the second part, I chose to focus on Ballroom's "house system," and how the kinship of those chosen families resulted in a first counteraction of the WSCP's hegemonic norms. As all Ballroom members were estranged from their families in *Pose*, the house system is one of the two main storylines along with its ball events. Indeed, a great emphasis is put on the wish to secure a future and be remembered through Ballroom thanks to the kinship and support of one's chosen family: the best example is that of Blanca, who leaves the House of Abundance in order to create her own house after her ongoing feud with Elektra. As her life intersects with that of Damon's, they both create the House of Evangelista, which gathered more members throughout the show's first season and attests to the "safety nets" and socio-economic support secured for the children. In the case of Damon and Elektra, Blanca aimed at providing a support system that allowed her children to not only fully express their gender identity, but also counteract the lack of educational and economic baggage faced by queer people of color in the United States. Because she reconciled queer identity and opportunity within the realm of her house, Blanca engaged in a subversion of the WSCP's hegemonic norms that displaced queer people of color at the socio-economic and spatial margins of its society. In a first reconciliation of the aforementioned broken relations of the visual realm, Blanca's children were able to be truly "seen" within their chosen families because their queer identities were not seen as transgressive, but rather valid and worthy of celebration, resulting in a first counteraction of the WSCP's hegemonic norms in *Pose*.

Lastly, I wanted to dedicate a part to Ballroom's other subversive dimension, inextricable from its house system: the subculture's ball events. If the house system secured socio-economic and queer security for the house members, the balls worked on the visual epistemologies attached to those institutions and queer dimensions *Pose*'s queer characters of color were prevented from. In the wish to remain in a social and spatial analysis of the series, I argued that the devices and tools enacted during the ball events allowed for its queer members of color to truly be seen by their peers. Following the gazing relations I worked on in the first part, I argued that the ball events worked in contradiction with the characters' geographical and social Othering: as queer contestants walked gendered and socio-economic categories at the center of the room for everyone to see, *Pose*'s ball events allowed its contestants to be seen in a literal way, but also in a metaphorical celebration of those transgressive identities. I then shed light on the various categories that are numerous in the series. I first focused on the contestants enacting

socio-economic classes that were inaccessible to them in the WSCP: those class performances are at the heart of Ballroom's performance system, in which queer contestants of color show that if they can perform a specific social class, they can also gain access to it within the WSCP. In a redefinition of class and social standing, the show's queer contestants of color appropriated the representations of the WSCP only to apply it to themselves, with their own rules of their subculture. By relying on the concept of "realness," they engaged in a paradoxical "subversion through emulation" that relied on the redefinition of the WSCP's hegemonic norms and the shift from transgressive to normative queer identities. If *Pose*'s class performances relied on the visual epistemologies of upscale lifestyles, its gender performances engaged in visual representations and appropriations of femininity in Ballroom. Those categories, which also relied on the concept of realness, allowed *Pose*'s trans characters of color to celebrate the gender they identify with during the ball events. Yet, in the case of gender performances, trans women of color have to deploy numerous strategies in order to "pass" as cisgender women in Ballroom, but also outside of its walls. By appropriating essentialist visual norms on the female gender, the trans characters of the series attested to Ballroom's as a space of resistance, in which a proper gendered performance resulted in a proper "passing" in the WSCP—and a token of protection against transphobic violence. In the same subversive dimension as before, the trans characters of the series engaged in a subversion through emulation that allowed them to be seen as they saw themselves: cisgender women.

In light of such information, I posit *Pose*'s Ballroom culture as a metaphorical and physical space that counteracts and subverts the show's hegemonic and intersecting oppressions day after day. Because Ballroom acts as a safe space of inclusion in which queer characters of color aim at recentering the margins in which they were displaced, those characters are able to appropriate the norms and codes of the show's WSCP to deconstruct them and apply them to their own persona. Throughout its first season, *Pose* aimed at showing the ongoing juxtaposition of its WSCP and Ballroom culture in order for the audience to grasp the intersecting oppressions faced by its queer people of color, and the dynamics of oppressions that take place on a socio-economic and spatial level. Because they could not be seen by the WSCP, Ballroom culture offers a subversive and transformative space that allows its queer members of color to see their peers—and be seen in return.

Because the fields of gender, queer and film studies provide fertile ground to always deconstruct gender and sexualities, there are numerous concepts I chose to keep in light of a future PhD thesis on the subject of *Pose*. Nonetheless, it is worth expanding on multiple ideas that could fit in a more consequent academic work and that would reflect the series' numerous notions, political stances and paradoxical elements which I could not fully explore throughout these pages. Since a PhD thesis has greater length than a Masters thesis, I seek to work on the three seasons of *Pose*: the second season is set in 1991—four years after the first season's diegetic period—and explores how Ballroom gained mainstream acclaim thanks to Madonna's 1991 song, "Vogue." The show's third and final season, which starts in 1994, gives greater meaning to the main characters' socio-economic stability as they all secure employment in the WSCP. The third season also focuses on the wedding of Angel and Lil Papi, which is treated as a symbol of hope regarding queer love. Analyzing the three seasons of *Pose* in a PhD dissertation will allow me to push further the notion of "seeing" and "being seen." More precisely, I want to expand on the notion of the gaze in the context of queerness.

What is the value of the multiple gazes enacted by *Pose*'s characters throughout its three seasons? Because oppressive social interactions and the unbalanced gazing relations it creates are inherently linked to the notion of space in *Pose*, I endeavor to emphasize the paradoxical issues that may take place in the appropriation of space by the characters of the series. Indeed, Ballroom literature draws the link between the queer characters of color's appropriation of spaces that become settings of resistance and their paradoxical ephemeral aspect on a social and geographical level. Although the ball events are transformative spaces, the places in which those events take place were not primarily created for queer people of color, which emphasize their mythical dimension. Because Ballroom members must enact subversive performances away from the WSCP in enclosed spaces, most of the ball events take place in a limited time and must disappear once the balls are over. Thus, I wish to rely on the same Ballroom scholars (notably Marlon M. Bailey and Malcolm Rio) to shed light on the ephemeral dimension of Ballroom culture, which is intrinsically linked with the underground aspect of this community and the intersecting oppressions its members face daily. By relying on the ephemeral and mythical dimension of Ballroom, I will expand on the tension between invisibility and hypervisibility I previously worked on. By exploring this tension and the meanings given to those two notions, I want to qualify the ways queer characters of color in *Pose* may make themselves "visible" or

"invisible" for their own protection. Relying on this ephemeral aspect will also allow me to study the overall concepts of time and place regarding queer identities: because those identities are marginalized by its WSCP, I strive to analyze the ways in which queer people of color negotiate the redistribution of time and place in the margins in which they are displaced in. In order to explore how geographies of exclusion affect queer identities, I wish to rely on authors such as Jack Halberstam (*In a Queer Time and Place*, published in 2005), José Esteban Muñoz (*Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, published in 2009) or Michel Foucault ("Of Other Spaces", published in 1986) and see how the queer characters of color in *Pose* negotiate the meanings given to time and place in marginalized settings, and how those concepts alter their way of seeing the world they live in and the way they contemplate their queer futures.

Indeed, as I worked on queer futurity in the second part of this thesis, analyzing the representations of the HIV/AIDS crisis in the second season of *Pose* will also allow me to expand on the notion of temporal queer gaze, notably how the show's characters negotiate the concept of time during the HIV/AIDS crisis. The second season of the series takes place in 1991—four years after the first season is set—and sheds a broader light on the political actions taken by Ballroom members to raise awareness on the way the U.S. government handles the rising epidemic. By putting the association "ACT UP" at the center of the characters' storylines, *Pose*'s second season attests to its characters finding new ways of negotiating the loss of friends, family and time regarding an epidemic that was still prevalent in the 1990s in the United States. Although I will explore the idea of queer gaze on a broader level regarding queer identities, such theorizations will also allow me to work on the specific mechanisms deployed by the queer characters of color in *Pose* to reappropriate the public space during the epidemic. Shifting from the invisibility of the balls to the hypervisibility of the streets, I will analyze how *Pose*'s characters appropriate the public space and engage in political actions to counteract the dangers of an epidemic that primarily threatens queer people of color. In light of such information, I would like to study specific scenes in which characters rely on visual and provocative actions to denounce the government's silence regarding the crisis. By relying on the works of French scholar and teacher Guillaume Marche (*La militance LGBT aux États-Unis. Sexualité et Subjectivité*, published in 2017), I will draw a link between performance and public political action in the United States regarding subversion and resistance of a WSCP's hegemonic norms. I will also rely on multiple works from the field of performance studies, such as *The Oxford*

Handbook of Politics and Performance (2021), notably the chapter "Protest and Performativity" written by scholars Jorge Cadena-Roa and Cristina Puga or *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (2008) written by Erika Fischer-Lichte.

Since this Masters dissertation already focuses on intersectional theories applied to queer people of color, I seek to explore the paradoxical elements that may take place in *Pose* regarding the link drawn with Kimberle Crenshaw's metaphor of the basement and Lorde's American mythical norm. Indeed, even though I argued that places in the basement were fixed and immutable, there are nonetheless several aspects that need to be qualified in the case of *Pose*. For example, in "Access" (S01E02), emphasis is put on Blanca trying to have a drink in a bar that is predominantly visited by white gay patrons. Throughout the episode, Blanca is systematically prevented from being served by the barman and always mocked by the clients. Such a storyline qualifies my link with Crenshaw's basement: even though people share the same basement, I argue that different levels can also be seen within this space of exclusion. Those different levels attest to the possibility of oppression even within Crenshaw's basement: in other words, people that stand within the basement are also able to socially and spatially oppress those who face multiple discriminations. In the context of this specific storyline, Blanca is socially and spatially oppressed by people that are supposed to share her same community, but who yet engage in transphobic and racist oppression. Resulting in a segregation of gay nightlife in New York City, this storyline may shed light on the more complex dynamics of oppressions that do not always stem from people above Crenshaw's basement, but also within. Being displaced in the same basement as the white gay characters that reject her, Blanca is metaphorically and physically still close to them, which gives her the possibility of watching them from a distance. This geography of oppressions within Crenshaw's basement will also allow me to qualify my notion of the queer gaze and push this concept further by exploring the possibility of a trans gaze of color in *Pose*.

Similarly, I argued that spaces discussing whiteness were often the setting for social and spatial oppression, like Angel who is forced to leave the lavish store on Park Avenue. Even though most of the characters that oppress *Pose*'s queer characters of color are white, other white characters nonetheless also stand in Crenshaw's basement. In the first season of *Pose*, these paradoxical places are embodied by the character of Patti, Stan's wife, who loves her family but is often inconvenienced by a suburban middle-class lifestyle. At the beginning of the episode "Love is The Message" (S01E06), Patti discovered that Angel was the one Stan was cheating on

her with. As they both talk in a diner, Patti says to Angel: “I let him lie. His lies let me keep pretending [...] that all I ever wanted was to be Mrs. Stan Bowes.” (00:02:14) By uttering those words, Patti establishes her disdain for a relationship based on patriarchal ideas. By her search for independence, Patti’s situation may allow me to qualify my link with Crenshaw’s basement: just because some characters of *Pose* are white does not necessarily mean they stand on the same level as their white, male counterparts. Emphasizing these mutually inclusive yet paradoxical identities in a future PhD thesis may allow me to expand on Crenshaw’s basement and shed a new light on the gazes operated in the series, and emit the idea of a female gaze that rejects patriarchal systems of oppression, while not necessarily being linked to queerness.

Another aspect I would work on for a PhD thesis is that of *Pose*’s production and the representations it involves. Even though I argued that the series was revolutionary in multiple ways, it is important to always qualify the outcomes of a given piece of work in research, and I would like to dedicate a few pages to the shortcomings of *Pose* in terms of representation. Even though the series is not supposed to act as a mere reflection of the actual Ballroom culture, it is worth noting that many aspects of the subculture were discarded for the creative and cinematic sake of the series. As I mentioned before, many categories of Ballroom were not used in *Pose*, which created new categories instead. Although those new categories fostered meaningful storylines for the characters, the purpose and meaning of some Ballroom features were overlooked in the series, such as the Ballroom’s gender system that is broader than the one in Pose’s Ballroom, as shown by this figure created by Marlon M. Bailey in “Engendering Space:”

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 3 – The gender system in Ballroom culture (Marlon M. Bailey, "Engendering SpaceBallroom culture and the spatial practice of possibility in Detroit")

Because *Pose* overlooks the six parts of Ballroom's gender system, I argue that the series' idea on queer identity, as progressive as it is, still relies on binary and essentialist views on gender. Even though I argued that these essentialist emulations on gender resulted in Ballroom as a space of resistance and protection, it can be tackled in a new light regarding the production, script, scenario and overall appearance of the trans characters of the series. Indeed, in *Pose*, trans female characters often seem to embody images of a hyper femininity involving makeup, dresses, long hair and high heels. I argue that such a representation of trans people results in a binary representation of the trans community, as it tends to overlook trans people that do not always visually enact the gender they identify with or non-binary people in general. This might be explained by *Pose* being set from the 1980s to the end of the 1990s, in which gender fluidity did not have the same cultural impact as it has nowadays. Can this be related to the production of *Pose*? I will go back to the presence of queer people of color—notably Janet Mock—in the

making of *Pose*, as well as Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk's wish to take a step back from the production, to work on the distribution of voices and points of view given in the making of the series. By analyzing those representations, I intend to qualify my analysis of "seeing" and "being seen" and work on the concept of the gaze, this time in terms of production and reception studies. By exploring the notions of authority and fidelity I mentioned in the introduction, I seek to interrogate the gazes operated by *Pose*'s writers, producers and directors. What roles and responsibilities were taken on while telling the stories of Ballroom members in the series? To what extent can we encapsulate the differences between white, heterosexual workers in contrast to queer workers of color in the production of a piece of entertainment? To provide extensive answers, I will rely on works from the field of aesthetics and film such as *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art. The Analytic Tradition: An Anthology* (2004), edited by Stein Haugom Olsen and Peter Lamarque, or *Authority Matters: Rethinking the Theory and Practice of Authorship* (2008), edited by Stephen Donovan, Danuta Fjellestad and Rolf Lundén. By relying on those works in my PhD dissertation, I will interrogate the gaze as a vector of authority—or, on the contrary, of infidelity—to encompass the strategic tools used to create the narratives seen in the three seasons of *Pose*.

Even though the three seasons of *Pose* provide an opportunity to analyze a WSCP's systems of oppressions through the concept of the gaze, I want to qualify the intersectional theories I worked on and interrogate the role of production in a broader sense. Because the notion of "gazing"—both in a piece of work and its production—will be a central theme in my PhD dissertation, I want to expand on my corpus and work on other pieces of work that indulge in the representations of a society's center and margins while putting queer characters of color at the center of their narratives. By adopting a comparative approach, I seek to explore the extent of the malleability of the theories I used throughout this paper in other geographical contexts. How can we study the power of the gaze in multiple pieces of work which all have specific production methods and narratives?

In order to work on the polysemy of the term "gaze" and expand on the notion of center and margins both in pieces of work and their production, I will first rely on the movie *Moonlight* (Barry Jenkins, 2016). *Moonlight* focuses on the three stages of Chiron's life as a child, a teenager and a grown adult in the outskirts of Liberty City, Florida. A gay Black male, Chiron struggles to express his sexuality in an impoverished area that drastically lowers his chances of

making an honest living. In parallel, the audience watches him grow up with an absent father and a mother struggling with addiction. In spite of a brief sexual experience with a male friend of his, Chiron (now going by the nickname "Black") grows up hiding his homosexuality and becomes an influential drug dealer in Atlanta. The second work, *The Inspection* (Elegance Bratton, 2022), tells the story of Ellis French, a closeted gay Black male who enlists in the Marine Corps in Parris Island, North Carolina. Although he tries to hide his homosexuality for protection against his homophobic peers, all the while seeking the approval of his mother, he is outed and physically assaulted by other soldiers. The third movie, *Pariah* (Dee Rees, 2011) sheds light on Black lesbian identities with the character of Alike, who comes to terms with her identity and sexuality. Living with her family in Brooklyn, New York, her mother does not support her coming out and tries to counteract her Alike's homosexuality by controlling how she dresses and what friends she can see. These choices are motivated by the narratives that find similarities in those of *Pose*, notably the Black biological family formation as a site of homophobia, the tension between public and private space, or the fracture between invisibility and hypervisibility regarding transgressive queerness. Moreover, not only will those three movies allow me to frame queer identities through different locations in the United States, I also intend to compare different forms to push my analysis further regarding the concept of the gaze. Because film and TV series follow different rules when it comes to their production and reception, I will work on the differences, but also similarities, between television and film studies when it comes to authority and fidelity. Thus, by operating a comparative analysis of multiple genres, I will explore the distribution of voices, narratives and experiences throughout my PhD dissertation.

Yet, taking into account the fact that intersectionality finds its roots in American academia, I also seek to push the geographical boundaries of my corpus in my analysis of a society's center and margins. In that sense, what value can be given to intersectionality in other countries, such as the United Kingdom, for example? To what extent can the cinematic representations of center and margins be different—or similar—to U.S. pieces of work? In that instance, I will work on the British TV series *It's A Sin* (Russel T Davies, Channel 4, 2021) as a primary source to explore these notions. Set in London in 1981, the series sheds light on the lives of queer friends that all move to the city with aspirations for a better environment to express their gender identities and sexualities. In similar aspects to *Pose*, *It's A Sin* delves into the meaning of chosen family, queer relationships and the renegotiation of authenticity and oppression through

the expression of their queerness. Being set in 1981, the series also heavily focuses on the HIV/AIDS virus breakout and the multiple reactions of the characters. A comparative analysis of those two main sources would prove to be fruitful to analyze the representations of the fracture between a society's margins and center—this time, in a British cultural, historical and social context. In order to continue focusing on British queer representations, I would also like to work on the series *Sex Education* (Laurie Nunn, Netflix, 2019-2023), which comprises four seasons. Set in the fictional town of Moordale, Wales, the series focuses on its main character, Otis Milburn, a teenager that starts a sex clinic to help his classmates go through puberty and sexuality. A lot of Otis' classmates are queer, and by showing multiple three-dimensional queer identities on screen, *Sex Education* sheds light on valuable queer aspects of British society. Using the series as a secondary source, I would like to focus my study on the character of Eric, a gay Black male coming from a religious Ghanaian-Nigerian family. One of the main characters of the series, the audience gets to witness the ways he openly faces his sexuality all the while living in a family that is not always accepting of his queerness. My study would involve another comparative analysis of the biological family setting and queer identities, similar to my reading of *Pose*'s biological family formation in the first part of this paper, but also that of public spaces and the homophobia that can take effect in such spaces of exclusion.

This dissertation aimed at analyzing the representations of the fractures between a society's margins and center in the first season of *Pose*. Yet, as the fields of gender and queer studies and intersectionality are permanently growing, I want to take the opportunity to use multiple other sources in a comparative analysis. The purpose of this thesis was to interrogate the ways *Pose*'s production and cinematography shed light on intersecting and systemic oppressions, which I want to continue doing in a future PhD dissertation. By framing my corpus within an intersectional and interdisciplinary approach, I seek to investigate the notion of "seeing" and "being seen" and interrogate the notion of the "gaze," be it in front of or behind the camera. By continuing analyzing the representations of margins and center, this time in multiple societies and fictional pieces of work, I intend to give a space and a voice to those fictional identities that nonetheless may act as reflections of the world we live in. The tension between "seeing" and "being seen," then, will present an array of questions and paradoxical elements that will take center stage in my future PhD dissertation as it did in this thesis.

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