

The Significance of Ballroom Culture Today

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Since the first year RuPaul hosted drag queens on television, watching drag performances has become increasingly popular in households around the world. What started out as something that needed to be kept hidden in underground Harlem venues became a public national entertainment phenomenon. While today people love watching drag queens dress up and perform, many do not know the history behind what makes this so significant in today's climate. The culture of drag and Ballroom has existed since the early 20th century but members of the multiracial LGBT community have evolved it during the 1980s and 90s where it gained the most popularity (Bailey, 2011). What was known as the Harlem Renaissance paved the way for the culture of drag balls while at the same time empowering the Black freedom movement of the 1960's (Hart, Roberson, 2021). Since then, Ballroom has given people a space for expression, a home where they are accepted, and a world where they can be anything they want to be. Today, there are still Ballroom scenes in almost every major city in America. In light of recent events impacting the LGBTQ and multiracial communities, Ballroom culture has provided a refuge for anyone who needs it. The history of Ballroom culture is significant in the influence of not only the LGBT community and the expression of gender identity, but also how it has evolved today into a safe, creative outlet for multiracial freedom.

While drag queens and queer culture have certainly gained more exposure over the years, it has been a long road to acceptance. Luckily, that is slowly changing today. The establishment of Balls and Houses gave numerous gay, trans, Black, Latinx, and queer individuals a safe haven in a world that did not accept them. Those involved in Ballroom were a part of Houses in which a prominent woman or man becomes "mother" or "father" to these "children" of the community that were rejected from their biological families. These Houses compete in categories at the Balls

for the best dance moves or the best looks, similar to gang competition on the streets. As Ballroom icon, Dorian Corey mentions in the documentary *Paris is Burning*, “a house is a gay gang” (Bailey, 2011). Ballroom was and is still a supportive environment where LGBTQ members of color can come together to escape the violence and prejudice of the world. Thankfully today, shows like RuPaul’s *Drag Race*, *Pose*, and *Legendary* exist to illustrate the various facets of Ball culture and House structures so that this might be more widely understood and accepted. However, there is so much to overcome regarding issues such as the homophobia and racism that this community still faces.

Looking into the history of Ballroom helps to explain how queer culture and gender expression has evolved into what it is today. There are many pioneers of Ballroom and drag icons of the 80s who have helped shape what has become mainstream in the current media. The notable documentary film, *Paris is Burning* is a real look inside the underground wonderland of Ballroom and the lives that influenced its success. The film tells the stories of Ball legends such as Crystal LaBeija, Venus Xtravaganza, and other countless individuals who contributed to the growth and creativity of this culture. Many might be familiar with Madonna’s hit song *Vogue*, but not be aware of how significant it was to the drag scene. Performers used “voguing” as a physical representation of fighting to see who can throw the best moves. This dance style comes from icon, Willi Ninja and takes inspiration from models’ poses in *Vogue* magazine. When the song came out in 1990, queer performers across America finally felt seen because they had been used to hiding this form of expression. This song was the start of this underground culture being brought to light in mainstream media as something that can finally be appreciated and respected. Therefore, Ballroom was a way for individuals to feel comfortable fully expressing themselves amidst a world that would not allow it.

The various facets of Ballroom culture granted opportunities to so many who otherwise would never get have these experiences. Those who ran the Balls decided on the various categories for which each House would perform in which required dressing and looking a specific part. These categories were named from ideas or personas in the real world, such as “Executive Professional” or “High Class” which would most likely be unattainable for those who participated in Balls. People of color have traditionally had a harder time getting professional jobs, especially if they were gay. Ballroom gave people opportunities to be anything they’ve ever wanted to be; from a Wall Street executive, to a real woman. In the film, *Paris is Burning*, they explain the description of Realness in relation to those portraying women and how it is not satire; it is as realistic as they can look. When individuals are in a Ballroom environment, they are finally able to blend in with everyone else because they are seen as a real woman without the prejudice or judgement of daily life. In the film, one queen explains that “The ballroom tells me I have potential [and] that I am somebody” (Livingston, 1990). For these individuals who have been rejected by family and society and struggle for acceptance of who they want to become, the Ballroom became that space.

Gender played a big part in the development and creativity of Ballroom in allowing members to express themselves fully, regardless of the gender they were born as. Those who participated in Ballroom were expected to believably transform into someone else and if they wanted to be seen as real, they would do anything to make that possible. Ballroom is made up of categories that define identity known as the Gender System, which is perfectly described in Marlon Bailey’s essay, *Gender/Racial Realness: Theorizing the Gender System in Ballroom Culture* (2011). This system goes beyond male and female and explains the difference between butch queens: biologically male but not identifying as only male; femme queens: transgender

women in the process of altering their gender; and anyone else in between. In Ballroom culture, sex categories are malleable and the body can be altered through various means, whether that be makeup, padding, hormone therapy, or reconstructive surgery (Bailey, 2011). The idea of a sex change was debatable because some did not think it was necessary to define themselves while others felt it was the missing piece in their lives. If one could afford it, the surgery would allow them to become a full woman. Of course, today sexual reassignment surgery and hormonal therapy are becoming more attainable for individuals to finally be comfortable in their own bodies. However, Marlon Bailey explains how Ballroom's sex categories exist to give members opportunities of exercising their chosen gender and sexual identities and to lead lives based on their life preferences and experiences (2011).

Ballroom culture has given opportunity for expression and creativity while also providing a safe environment away from prejudice and homophobia that surrounded its members. To fully understand the culture of Houses and how it has evolved today, the origins of Ballroom within the Harlem Renaissance must be explained. The aforementioned Renaissance of the 1920s was a response to a decades-long campaign undertaken by the Black church to rid the New York neighborhood of its LGBTQ residents (Hart & Roberson, 2021). This sparked a quest for creativity and representation amidst the struggle for freedom. Underground Harlem venues in the 1960s and 70s hosted plenty of drag Balls by the prominent members of the time, specifically the House of LaBeija which was one of the first big names in Ballroom (Bailey, 2021). From there, other houses developed on the scene which gave even more people the opportunity to be a part of this community and to feel free to express themselves. This cultivated not only a space for creativity and entertainment but also an uplifting environment without racial prejudice or judgement.

One of the main components of this culture are the Houses, or alternative familial structures that form amidst the Ballroom. In another piece by Marlon Bailey, he explains that houses are the means by which members of the Ballroom community experience cultural belonging and care in ways that are often more supportive and affirming than in their families and communities of origin (2021). Bailey's article, *Structures of Kinship in Ballroom Culture* sheds light on house systems in the Ballroom scene today and how they have continuously given opportunities and safety for LGBTQ members of color. Houses are made up of parents who recruit their children from previous families that rejected them in order to perform and compete successfully in the Balls. Bailey explains this is especially important for LGBTQ people of color because they do not typically have the luxury of a safe, reliable space to socialize and express themselves. Today, there are Ball communities and houses around the country, such as in New York City where it all began and in Detroit where Marlon Bailey has done most of his research.

The Ballroom defines the importance of community among LGBTQ members, people of color, and especially those who identify with both. Marlon Bailey's article on House kinship explains that systemic racism and white supremacy, homophobia, cissexism and transphobia continue to structure the conditions and experiences of Black and Latinx LGBTQ+ communities throughout the world, particularly in the US (2021). This culture was built from sexual liberation and in the face of racial discrimination. The structures and practices help to mitigate the dangers typically faced by those of the community by providing a physical and spiritual home (Bailey, 19, 2021). Those who created this space for community were responding to the ways in which the world treated them, which is what makes Ballroom still so significant today. There are various parallels to current events and issues that express why this culture matters so much.

Ballroom culture has evolved into an outlet for multiracial expression and community across the world but also an acknowledgement of freedom in today's society. The development of Ballroom occurred during the height of the AIDS epidemic which is not unlike the cultural rebirth in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Being that the majority of participants in Balls were LGBTQ members, HIV and AIDS was prominent among the community. At the time, this disease was easily spread and Ballroom had lost many legends to it. The entire world has felt the effects of the recent COVID-19 pandemic, but especially those involved with performing, LGBTQ members, and people of color. Hart and Roberson explain in TIME that in the face of HIV and COVID-19, generations of queer people have been forced to forge their own networks of safety and support in the face of disinvested communities and indifferent governments (2021). The issue is that these people have consistently struggled for protection and support from the government and fought battles against laws that attempt to criminalize them. Luckily, Ballroom has been there for years to give them a safe haven to come together and fight for what they have deserved.

The time period of the Ball scene has similarities to the current times of the Black Lives Matter movement. In an article from TIME Magazine, writers Hart and Roberson explain how "we cannot fully understand the form, fully participate in its power and beauty, without committing to carrying on the struggles of those who've passed it on to us" (2021). In order to properly acknowledge Ball culture and drag performance, it is first necessary to celebrate those who risked everything and pioneered it. The TIME piece goes on to explain the various parallels between the Black Freedom Movement of the 60s and the Black Lives Matter rallies of today, along with the similarities of those who fight for justice. It is important to honor the thousands of trans women of color who established this world and those who continue to make it thrive. The

recent Black Trans Lives Matter rallies have started a louder fight for those who have little representation.

On the whole, the creation of Ballroom has paved the way for so many LGBTQ, gender nonconforming, transsexual, and people of color to have a voice in this world. Exploring the history of Ballroom culture is essential in understanding the queer community and the expression of gender identity today but is also acknowledging its importance in multiracial representation. TIME writers Hart and Roberson explain that Ballroom's influence today is seen as "a new golden age for Black culture and storytelling and a particular "Renaissance" in queer Black art and cultural representation is clear" (2020). Today, Ballroom culture is widely seen, celebrated, and acceptance is growing even though there is still so much to understand. The various facets of Ballroom have given opportunities to people who otherwise might have never see them. The Houses provided a home and a sense of family when they faced rejection from their own. This culture built a community that has developed over the years since its birth that has allowed individuals to feel safe in their own skin to perform as, portray, or even become real women. Even though there is still a lot to accomplish regarding acceptance today, people can more freely express themselves without the confines of a gender or label. LGBT culture is celebrated in the media today, with shows like Queer Eye and icons like RuPaul and more big names are "coming out" than ever before. The parallels between the height of the AIDS epidemic in the 1990s and the COVID-19 pandemic of today are apparent and the ideals of Ballroom culture have acted as a reprieve for many during these times. Additionally, this research has established how important it is now to honor those people of color who have fought for these freedoms despite all the inequity and discrimination they have faced. Amidst all of the racism and harsh history surrounding Black people and those within the LGBTQ community, author Chloe Davis

describes how something beautiful emerged because of it: Black culture, art, language, and identity (2021). So much of what people recognize in media today came from the pioneers of Ballroom. There is hope that the world will come to respect the community that has helped develop such entertainment, innovation, and diversity.

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