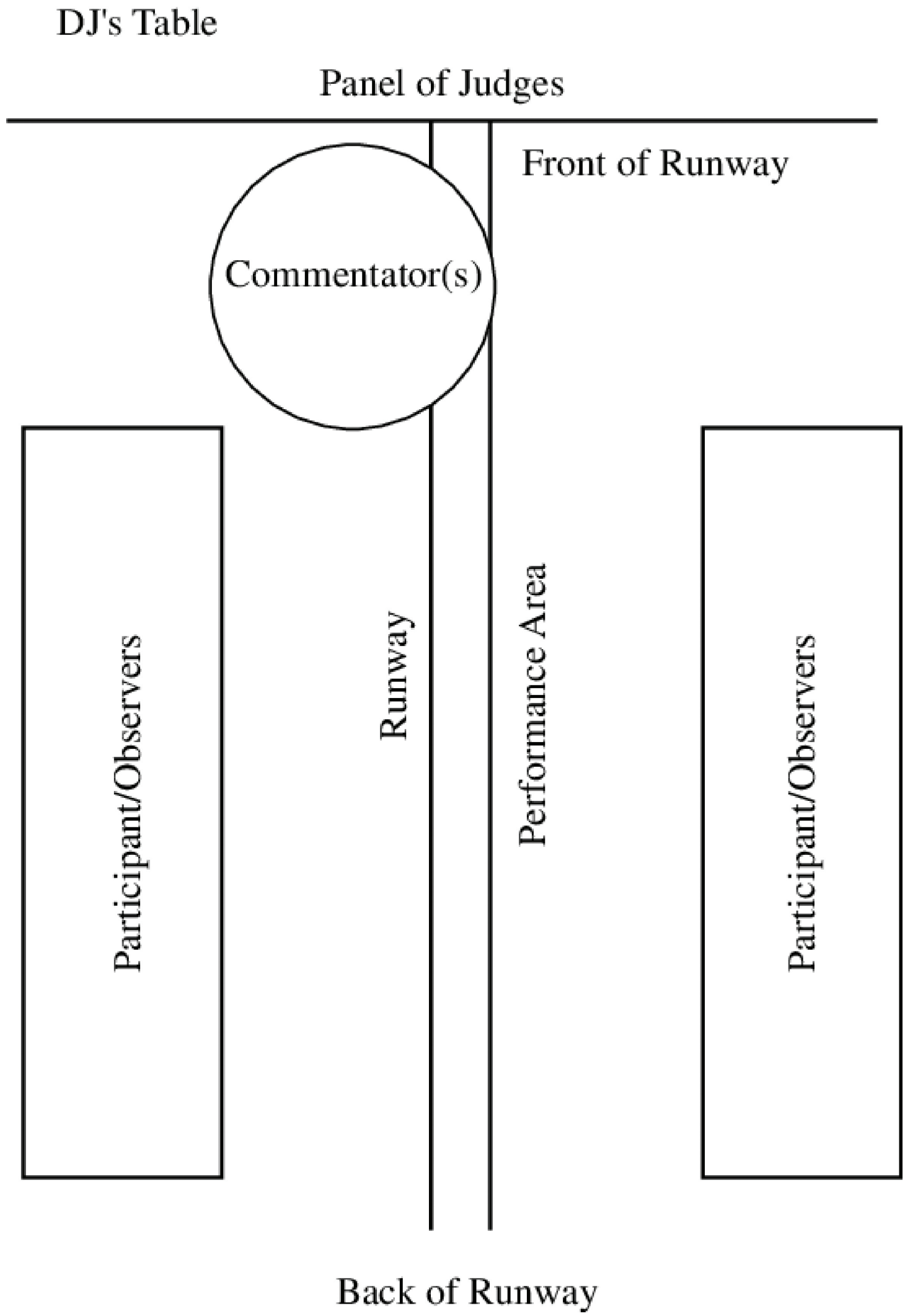
DRAG HINGE MALCOLM JOHN RIO *(RIO ULTRAOMNI)*

BALLROOM'S SPATIAL ORGANIZATION AS DRAWN BY MARLON M. BAILEY



DRAG HINGE: REALNESS AS AN URBAN GEOGRAPHY

MALCOLM JOHN RIO
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LOCATING THE QUEER PERSON OF COLOR (QPOC) IN 1980s NEW YORK

Juan Manuel Rivera was born on August 19, 1957 to mother Olga Rivera and father Juan Rivera in New Haven, Connecticut. As his astrological sign Leo suggests, Juan was sensitive, loving, personable, and the star of any party. He was destined to become "a somebody," and did, though most people have never heard his name or know of his impact on queer art. Juan had been the Pop artist Keith Haring's boyfriend from 1986 to 1990, a period that proved to be "the most frenetically productive years of [Haring's] career."[1] Juan caught Haring's eye during a disco at the Paradise Garage nightclub, also known as "the Gay-rage," a popular spot for "black and Latino gay youth, voguing drag queen divas, straight-identified 'banjee' boys, and homeless and thrown-away kids," while also serving as a vital site that connected the subculture of ballroom to New York's larger queer cultural community.[2] Haring was smitten: "One night, at ... the Paradise Garage, ... I see this incredibly beautiful boy. I look at him and see that he's the man of my dreams. I convince myself that should he look at me ... then that's going to be it! I will have found my new love."[3] Like Haring, and like the many other ballroom children, Juan came to New York City in the late seventies/early eighties to escape their conservative small-town homes and homophobic suburban communities in search of "the values of liberation and personal freedom [as] emblematized by the 1960s, chief among them sexual self-expression." However, like the common experience for many queer people of color, and unlike queers similar to Haring—white, cisgender, middle-class—Juan came to New York City as a runaway:

[Juan] had run away from the then homophobically oppressive, small-town environment of his impoverished New Haven Puerto Rican neighborhood, The Hill, which, like so many other inner-city communities all over the United States, had been devastated by the flight of manufacturing from the cities and towards the suburbs and the state's divestment in inner-city neighborhoods in an attempt to dismantle the legacy of the 1960s and the "welfare state."[4]

Although not a full-fledged child of the ballroom scene until the nineties, Juan was very close with the children and House of Xtravaganza: "I'd always thought of myself as a child of the House of Xtravaganza, 'cause I'd been there with the legendary children of Xtravaganza when the Houses were being formed."[5] His story of coming to and surviving in New York City in the late seventies and eighties, told by Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé in *Hard Tails: Queer Latino Testimonio*, Keith Haring, and Juanito Xtravaganza, is one of the few (official) allegories that offers an insight to the everyday life of queer people of color during the cultural shift of the eighties. Juan decided to run away from his Puerto Rican community in New Haven the day his parents had discovered that their teenage son liked other boys.

... when I got [home] my brother was staring at me, and the was more hate in his face than I'd ever seen before. And without saying a word, he just got up and knocked all of my artwork on the floor. And I could tell he'd just found out, that L[ ] had finally told him I was a faggot. And for the first time in my life I got real mad and hit him. And he punched me back, and I fell to the floor. And as I was getting up, he lunged for my back with a kitchen knife ... And when my parents came in they started yell at me: "Tú eres el mayor! You should know better ... You should ...!" And as my father raised his hand to strike me I grabbed it in midair, and my mother started shaking and crying, and I ran out ... Yeah, it was then I decided to run away to New York.[6]

Upon arriving to the city, Juan was "overwhelmed," poor, and clueless as to how he would survive in his new city, but thought it completely impossible to return home to his family. For the first two months, Juan lived, as he describes, as a "derelict:"

... after the second day in the City, your stomach starts talking to you, and it's like it never dawned on you that you had to eat. And so after a while you end up living like a derelict, going through garbage cans to eat. And if I had only known how to steal, it would've been different, but I didn't ... So pretty soon I felt like a derelict, I was a derelict. And for about two months I slept in [sic] church benches, in alleyways, in city parks.[7]

With the lack of financial support from home, the inherited "legacy of a deficient education" that was commonplace for Black and Latinx people within inner-city and deindustrialized communities, and the demonized phenomenal markers of blackness—race and sexuality—Juan, like many other QPOCs, arrived in New York City "inadvertently trapped in a truly demonic space, the 42nd St. of the late 1970s," where the informal economies of drugs and sex offered a means of immediate economic subsistence.[8] Juan had never heard of the sex trade on 42nd Street; he was scavenging through garbage cans on 42nd Street "when this john stated flashing ten dollars at [Juan]."[9] As Juan puts it, he went "from being a derelict [and] became a hustler."[10]

The early-chapter of the life and times of Juanito Xtravaganza illustrates a common reality many queer people of color, especially queer teenagers of color, experienced in the late seventies, eighties, and early nineties.[11] Similarly, one of *Paris Is Burning*'s star performers, Venus Xtravaganza, discloses, though only partially, her participation in the sex trade. This is the most direct correlation made in *Paris* between the ballroom and the City's sex trade, revealing the kind of labor many transwomen must often undertake as a means of subsistence due to limited employment opportunities. In the film Venus shares her own near-death experiences with a transphobic john as well as her fear of contracting HIV/AIDS which eventually led to her (partial) withdrawal from sex work.[12] Juan too had cruel experiences within the sex trade, beginning with his first time hustling:

[A john] ended up taking me home and doing all kindsa stuff to me. And at one point I was so destroyed, 'cause I didn't want to do what he wanted me to do—I didn't wanna get fucked! And he was trying his damned hardest to fuck me, and I was going, "Stop, Charlie! Charlie, stop! Go to sleep, Charlie! Go to sleep!" but he kept trying all night long. And by the time he was fucking me the second time that night, I was crying, you know, and asking God to give me the strength not to turn around and kill this man, 'cause I was ready to kill him. So I was crying and praying at the same time that this be over with ... Yeah, that was the first time ... And after that, I kinda went back, and did it for twenty, thirty dollars, and made enough money to get an apartment and clothes.[13]

These painful testimonies of violence and desperation reveal an underbelly of the eighties, in which the prosperous images that primetime fare like *Dynasty* and *Dallas* projected, were far from realized for many QPOC. Further, their failed attempts at seeking what would be considered legitimate forms of employment—for Juan it was his inability to read and write due to an inadequate education, for Venus it was workplace transphobia—furthered their reliance on informal economies as a means of subsistence. The sense of the city's triumph over its past flirtation with bankruptcy in 1975 was starkly absent within many of its inner-city neighborhoods, which "remained a devastated war zone of abandoned and burned-out buildings and vacant lots, overrunned by the drug trade and patrolled by an unsympathetic police [state]" that conflated racial color, homelessness, and economic poverty "as the[root] cause, rather than the victims," of the city's lingering socio-economic problems. These socio-economic issues similarly hit the influx of queer youth who arrived in New York City in the late-seventies and eighties, many of whom were estranged or disowned from their biological families and quickly found themselves a part of the city's growing form of contemporary homelessness. The rise of homeless queer youth continued to increase throughout the eighties and nineties, correlating with the decrease in the average age at which many teenagers became aware of their sexual identity during these decades. In the seventies the average age "people realized their lesbian or gay identity was between ages 14 to 16, and they then came out after high school when they were between 19 to 24 years old."[14] However, in the eighties and nineties, "the average age for identity realization dropped between ages 9 and 10, with youth coming out predominately in high school at ages 14 to 16."[15] Without emotional, economic, and social support from the state—the welfare state was waning in the seventies and became severely undermined in the eighties—or their own biological families, queer communities were left to their own devices to self-organize and support the homeless queer youth. This need to support "one's own" led Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, the transvestite and trans-activists pivotal in the Stonewall Inn uprising that set forth the gay liberation movement, to found the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) in 1970, in order to provide shelter, housing, and support to homeless queer youth and sex workers along the Greenwich Village Waterfront.[16] Similarly, the Institute for the Protection of Lesbian and Gay Youth (IPLGY) was founded in 1979 by psychiatrist Dr. Emery S. Hetrick and New York University professor Dr. A. Damien Martin to discuss "at-risk LGBT youth in New York City affected by homophobia, physical abuse, homelessness, chronic truancy and school dropout, and involvement in sex work."[17] Both STAR and IPLGY offer institutional examples of the many ways queer people worked towards helping "their own," especially in regards to urban homelessness and its "increasing[ ] legibl[ity], that embodied intersecting issues of race, gender, sexuality, disability, cleanliness, and bodily comportment that emerged in tandem with (and as a result of) struggles over housing, neighborhood change, rising economic inequality, deinstitutionalization, and fears of crime during the Reagan Era."[18]

Ballroom became a similar support mechanism for QPOCs. Although a significant portion of Juan Rivera's story in the eighties centers on his relationship and the mutual support he received from and gave to Haring, it ends with him returning to the ballroom children and becoming an Xtravaganza. After Keith passed due to AIDS-related complications, Juan, himself infected with AIDS, fell into a deep despair: "I couldn't get a job, had AIDS, and needed to take care of myself." With limited employment opportunities, Juan returned to hustling despite his strong dislike of it.[19] It was also a period marked by myriad deaths of loved ones, including Haring, due to AIDS. Further, the "friends" Juan had come to know and care for during the time of his relationship with Keith had suddenly turned their backs against Juan, spreading narratives that "[h]e and these Puerto Rican gay hustlers had brought down Keith," an intentional move to discredit Juan's romantic relationship with Haring as serious and therefore distance Juan's impact on Haring's work and his postmortem Foundation.[20] Deeply alone, Juan contemplated suicide:

... I'd come to the City to try to outgrow poverty and help my parents, and somehow it seemed that every time I'd done well for myself, something would snatch it right back, and I'd always end up finding myself sliding back into that ... Hustling. And I figured it was like a destiny. And I was thinking I was cursed. 'Cause they say when we die we go to hell, but I was thinking—here I've been living a hell ... I had this real ugly aura hovering over my head. Till I just got up one morning, it was

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a perfectly beautiful morning, and I decided to call it quits … And I took some sleeping pills and angel dust and went out, and ended up in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine … So I figured that would be the spot where I'd chill out, but every time I'd get ready to take the sleeping pills and the dust, I'd hear someone walk up and stop right in front of me … So after a while, I decided it just wasn't gonna happen, and I walked outta the church. And as I was walking outta the church, a cab pulled up, and there was a priest inside, and I walked over to him, 'cause I was very much in need of something spiritual, of some answer, of help. But he looked at me and acted like I was gonna mug him, and ran to the back of the church—like he was being chased … So I sat there looking at those doors thinking how the help I need was behind those doors but I couldn't get to it, how no matter how much I tried to figure it all out it was always over there, on the other side of me, when my body started shaking, and a voice I couldn't recognize at first was crying and out of breath … Till I finally started making out some words, and I got up, dusted myself, and left … I went home … and when I got there there were all these legendary faggots from the House of Xtravaganza I used to hang out with at the Sound Factory inviting me to go to a ball …[21]

Although unique in many ways—not every person can claim to have been the lover and muse of a famous queer artist—Juan's story reflects the everyday grappling with catastrophe QPOCs experienced in the eighties.[22] The rise of New Black/Queer/Feminist films in the nineties portrayed similar stories of the QPOC body. Carlos Aparicio and Susana Aikin's 1990 documentary, *The Salt Mines*, captures the lives of three homeless Latina transgender women—Sara, Gigi, Giovanna—who make homes inside broken-down and discarded city garbage trucks kept at the city's sanitation department near Little West 12th Street and adjacent to the city's salt deposit used to melt the winter snow.[23] These women share their experience of immigrating to America, their community of various other homeless people—Little Man, JR, Bobby, Edwin, Ruby, all of whom are colloquially referred to as "the salt people"—and their desires for a better life. Sara, in particular, shares her experience as a gay person in Cuba and the police violence she was often subjected to. With the hope of living openly, Sara fled to the United States, in particular New York City, where she thought freedom reigned supreme but swiftly and unfortunately discovered that "without money [in the United States], you are nothing":[24]

I had lost everything … house, lover … So I came to the Salt Mine … I used to think the USA was the most beautiful place in the world where you could have anything you wanted. I couldn't wait to come … But now I'm sorry I came. Because here without money you are nothing—I'd go back to Cuba right now … even to prison … but there I don't have the same freedom, this country is marvelous that way … A gay person can never be happy in Cuba—that is the main reason why I came here, because I was always getting arrested.[25]

The film is one of the first to ever document the lives of transwomen, especially those of color, in which its subjects "are at the intersections of multiple forms of socio-politically generated vulnerabilit[ies]."[26] What distinguished *The Salt Mines* from other New Queer Cinema of its time is the film's candid and direct address of Sara, Gigi, and Giovanna's addiction to the drug paradigmatic of the eighties' War on Drugs—crack-cocaine—as well as their participation in the sex trade to support their addiction. However, the film's candid exhibition of drug-use and prostitution is not intended to reinforce the eighties paranoia over Black/Latinx and queer urban culture that was a common feature in cable news and Reagan policies, but rather challenge its assumptions. Laura Horak critiques the film as an act of translatina world-building that does not portray its subjects as powerless victims but as survivors:

… the point of the film is not the spectacularisation of their suffering, evocations of pity, or incitement of donations in the vein of the film Aizura critiques; rather, the film presents the world these women have created for themselves. Though their lives are hard, they have autonomy and are recognised and valued as their feminine selves. They have friends and lovers and seem to have a good time together. They don't seem troubled by their identities. They are not ashamed or guilty. The film does not romanticise their hard-scrabble lives, but it does attend to the value of what they have created together.[27]

Darren Arquero similarly comments that, despite living in a landscape of literal waste and chemical dross, "'in a culture which appears to arrange always and in every way for the annihilation of queers,' … *The Salt Mines* is depicted as a safe haven for outcasts of mainstream society."[28] It is the need to create/produce a safe haven for such outcasts that is a common everyday experience for QPOCs, at least in New York City during the eighties. Marlon Riggs' 1989 semi-autobiographical documentary, *Tongues Untied*, offers yet another illustration of QPOC life in New York City. However, unlike Juan, Sara, Gigi, and Giovanna's grappling with prostitution, AIDS, and drug use, Riggs' film focuses specifically on the "queer black male experience and embraces authentic and radical notions of black gay identity and [HIV] positivity."[29] Unique to Riggs' documentary is its specific attention to homophobia and racism that QPOCs endure from fellow Black and queer people, revealing that even within ethnic- and sexuality-minority communities—communities that form in solidarity due to shared experiences of oppression and marginalization by and from the normative social order—QPOCs find themselves at the margins, experiencing a secondary level of violence and trauma by the very communities meant to support and uplift aspects of their identities:

… a sad, defiant and surprisingly playful reflection on marginalized identity. Throughout this free-form, hour-long personal statement from director Marlon Riggs, the word "silence" persistently resurfaces—a "shield," as Riggs puts it, that protects black gay men like him from harm but also suffocates them over time. As the title suggests, "Tongues Untied" is Riggs's effort to raise his voice and speak about his life, including accounts of his experiences battling the twin prejudices of racism and homophobia and of his yearnings for connection to a subculture that exists in the shadows. Riggs's verbal and visual poetry defy the conventions of the documentary genre, allowing for moments of raw emotional expression and occasional whimsy, like his breakdown of how to translate different "snaps."[30]

These common experiences QPOCs witnessed in the latter half of the twentieth century underlaid the rise of ballroom culture and the motivation to join the subculture's House structure. The above narratives show that at-large in the eighties was an inability to be open and expressive about one's homosexuality within ethnic-minority communities, and a devaluation of Black beauty and joy within queer communities. With limited opportunity to express the fullness of QPOC identity—embodied with multiple identity categories that must negotiate multiple antagonisms—the ballroom became a rare and coveted space that allowed for it: "With us [QPOCs], we can't be whoever we want to be in the regular world because then we are going to get a lot of ridicule and judgment. But, in our world [ballroom] I can—you can come in one day and be the boy and then the next day you can come in and you can be the girl … you aren't being judged unless you look a mess but other than that it's usual."[31] This narrative is so central to the ballroom scene that contemporary recreations, such as Ryan Murphy's *Pose*, often begin their storylines with such tales.[32] In *Pose*'s pilot episode, one of the central character's storyline, Damon Richards, parallels the above histories of Juan Rivera, Sara, Gigi, Giovanna, and Marlon Riggs: a "small-town" Black teenage boy is kicked out of his home for being gay and moves to New York City to pursue a career in dancing only to end up homeless in Union Square park where he is eventually mugged and left without any money or resources. Desperate for food and shelter, Damon begins dancing in Union Square for petty cash but his homeless appearance is dissuading to by-passers, except for an encounter with Blanca, a transwoman who invites Damon to join her House of Evangelista. When Damon asks Blanca what a ball is, she replies:

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 worth 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. [Now] we not gonna be walking the red carpets at the Oscars, but this is our moment to become a star.[33]

LOCATING THE BALLROOM: UNREMARKABLE SPACES OF SPECTACULAR PERFORMANCES

Similar to the search for "black architecture" or "blackness" within architecture, a peculiar problem arises in locating the architecture and spaces of ballroom—the venues that hosted balls and the apartment complexes in which Houses converged: they often lack any formal history and/or an enduring spatial presence. Architectural historian Charles L Davis II notes that the occupation of space is one way in which blackness is architecturally expressed, as opposed to the traditional method of a formal tectonics or physical building, and that the absence of "formal architecture" is a form of architecture.[34] Architectural critic, curator, and author of *Queer Space*, Aaron Betsky encountered the same dilemma in writing a historical reconstruction of the environments of disco era New York; spaces that were "essentially ephemeral, with only oral histories and a few grainy photographs [and] films to document what were complex spaces created by a combination of lighting, architectonic elements, music, and performance … [without] any descriptions that took full account of the complexities of all of these factors."[35] The environments of ballroom prove no different and taking into consideration the numerous forms of violence and oppression QPOCs were witnessing in the late-seventies and eighties, its lack of a paper trail comes as no surprise.

The most difficult spaces to locate are the residential spaces in which Houses congregated. Hilderbrand points out that Livingston's film—and here, I believe so does representations of a House in Murphy's *Pose*—alludes, strongly, that a House is a residence in which House members cohabitate.[36] Although some House mothers and fathers did informally take in children who were either homeless or kicked out of their biological homes, "many ball walkers continue[d] to live with their biological [families]."[37] Cases in which House mothers and/or fathers did shelter other members of their house are circumstantial, without an official record, either due to its inherent informality or because this practice was not technically legal. More commonplace were House children constantly hanging out or around their House's mother or father's house, whether for a few hours, a day, a weekend, where they would socialize with other QPOCs, talk about queer issues given their inability to do so in other spaces, and prepare for balls:

PEPPER LABEIJA: When someone has rejection from their [biological] mother and father, their family, they—when they get out in the world—they search. They search for someone to fill that void. I know this for experience, because I've had kids come to me and latch hold of me like I'm their

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mother or like I'm their father, 'cause they can talk to me and I'm gay and they're gay. And that's where a lot of that "ballness" and—and the mother business comes in. Because their real parents give them such a hard way to go, they look up to me to fill that void ... But a lot of these kids that I meet now, they come from such sad backgrounds, you know—broken homes or no home at all. And then the few that do have families and the family finds that they're gay, they "X" them completely.[38]

FREDDIE XTRAVAGANZA: My mother is Angie Xtravaganza and my father is David Xtravaganza. The House of Xtravaganza has done a lot. It's made me feel like I have a family. We're always together. If we're not together, we always speak on the phone.[39]

ANGIE XTRAVAGANZA: My name is Angie Xtravaganza and I am the mother of the House of Xtravaganza. When there's a ball, I'm always doing something for everybody in my House. I do that one's hair, the other one's makeup. You know, choose their shoes, their accessories. I always offer advice, you know—as far as what I know and what I've been through in gay life, you know. I ran away from my House when I was 14 and I've learned all sorts of things—good and bad—and how to survive in gay world [sic], you know. It's kind of hard.[40]

FREDDIE XTRAVAGANZA: My birthday will come and I'll always get a birthday gift from Angie. Won't get one from my real mother. Like when I got thrown out of my house, Angie let me stay with her until I got myself together and I got working. She always fed me. She can be a pain in the ass sometimes, but I wouldn't trade her in for any other mother.[41]

Thus, Houses "indicated a lack of personal domestic space for some ... but [ ] also indicated a strong sense of community and kinship;"[42] a queer construction of family that offered solidarity and support against the myriad of urban crises—AIDS, homelessness, sex work, drugs, bigotry—that countless QPOCs endured. However, their bond should not be mistaken as a congregation driven by tragedy; rather, it the support and love Houses offer and their ability to remove the proximity of crises from the QPOC's everyday life that is at the root of a House.

Despite the lack of knowledge, at least from an outsider's perspective—the complexes in which Houses were housed, their plan and division of spaces, number of occupants, rental agreements, and their larger network across New York City's geography—what is known is that the majority of Houses were located in Harlem or Brooklyn.[43] This is possibly due to a variety of factors, namely, existing ethnic-minority communities in which many ballroom members grew up in and the lower cost of rent compared to Greenwich Village.[44] And although locating Houses proves difficult, there were nonetheless key spaces in which balls were frequently produced and hosted. These popular venues included the No. 127 Imperial Elk's Lodge, the YMCA, the Roller Rock Skating Rink, the Crystal Ballroom, the Uptown Social Club, and the Golden Terrace Ballroom in Harlem, Club Constellation, the Red Zone nightclub, and Hotel Diplomat/Club Sweatz in Midtown and near Times Square, and Tracks NYC Nightclub, the Paradise Garage nightclub, the Marc Ballroom, and the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center in Greenwich Village.[45] These spaces were typically conventional open floor plans or banquet halls, seemingly ordinary, but easily adaptable and accommodating to large groups and spectacular performances. Unfortunately, many of these venues shut down prior to the new millennium—with the obvious exceptions of the Harlem YMCA and the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center, the former declared a National Historic Landmark in 1976 and the latter a cultural landmark and pivotal site in the founding of queer activist groups, including the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), Senior Action in a Gay Environment (SAGE), and the Gender Identity Project—and redeveloped, failing to leave behind accessible plans or documentation of their spaces. Yet, through the handful of photographic and film documentations on house ballroom by Chantal Regnault (*Voguing and the House Ballroom Scene of New York City 1989-92*, photobook 2011), Gerald Gaskin (*Legendary: Inside the House Ballroom Scene*, photobook 2013), Jennie Livingston (*Paris Is Burning*, film 1991), Wolfgang Busch (*How Do I Look NYC*, film 2006), and Sara Jordenö (*Kiki*, film 2016), and the contemporary drama television series *Pose*, a coherent spatial organization emerges; a spatial pattern Marlon M. Bailey attempts to diagram in his 2014 essay, "Engendering Space: Ballroom Culture and the Spatial Practice of Possibility in Detroit."[46] Bailey's "Ballroom culture ground plan" categorizes the essential components of a ball and distributes them within a common ball configuration: a central, long, and narrow runway/performance area perimetered with areas for participants and spectators to its left, right and back, and capped with a panel of judges at its front.[47] Vacillating between the panel of judges and the middle of the runaway area is a commentator(s) who performers just as much as a walker, maintaining the event's high energy and moderating between the judges' critiques and a walker's reactions:

Fundamental to the spatial transformation is a 'T' formation by which audiences and performances are arranged [ ]. The performer's runway is a narrow area positioned in between the spaces allocated for the audience on both sides. Runways can be constructed in a variety of ways. They can be configured via an elevated platform, a colorful rug, or a design etched onto the floor. This arrangement is intended to resemble the runway that professional models use, which is elevated and runs throughout the audience so that designers and other onlookers can get a full view of the models in their clothing. In Ballroom, the performances on the runway occur in between audience members on either side of the runway, while other audience members are scattered throughout the room. More often than not the spatial arrangement of the audiences changes at various moments during the ball. Members end up surrounding the runway on three sides with the panel of judges at the front end of the runway. The panel of judges, consisting of no less than six prominent members of the Ballroom scene, is positioned at the front of the runway off to one side and allows the judges to directly face the performers. It is worth noting that judges are selected by the housemother and/or the housefather of the house that organizes the ball. These members are usually well known as successful competitors in the Ballroom scene on local or national levels. The seating for the panel of judges is often elevated slightly to give the judges the best visual perspective. All performances occur in the direction of the judges. There are several categories that require the judges to scrutinize a performer's lower body; some categories include floor performance. The table for the DJ is positioned just above the panel of judges, either to the right or to the left of it. Contestants and crowd members stand at the back end of the runway, the area directly facing the panel of judges. All of the space outside of the arrangement of the 'T' is a general area where members of the crowd stand and sit to view the performances. This is also the area from which participants emerge. The affirmation, the status, and the sense of belonging enjoyed in this communal spatial arrangement at ball events are not typically afforded to house members in the outside world. Although people engage in ritual performances in a variety of locales, Ballroom's spatial organization and the labor involved in creating it directly inform the communal nature of this event. The runway is not only a site where recognition and affirmation are conferred, but it is also the space in which vigorous competition and critique occur in the presence of members of the larger community. The runway is the focal point, the place of spectacle, and the nexus of the interrelationship between the onlookers, participants, the commentator, the judges, and the DJ.[48]

Even though Bailey's analysis is derived from his experiences with Detroit's contemporary ballroom scene, the documentary work on late eighties ballroom by Livingston and Regnault relay the configurations Bailey's plan conceives, revealing a consistent spatial logic maintained in ballroom culture likely since its beginnings. Bailey's description of contemporary ballroom's spaces and Livingston and Regnault's documentary work further expose another organizational consistency: the use of easily foldable furniture and simple decorations—folding chairs and tables, streamers, cutting ribbons, metallic curtains. The use of these furnishings afforded swift set-up and disassembly, allowing any venue to be easily and temporarily co-opted into a site of queer fabulousness and subsequently restored to its original ordinariness, doubtlessly a necessity for bypassing the policing of the (hetero)normative social order; a spatial argot that built on the need for QPOC space that ballroom provided. This theory is supported by the fact that in earlier eras, house-balls were held late at night: "balls were held late at night because the rent was cheaper and drag queens were safer than on Harlem streets, where black-nationalist militancy had cramped the quasi tolerance of gay culture common in the neighborhood in prior decades."[49] Cloaked under the aphotic and muted milieu between midnight and twilight, participants were free to commute in their grandiose costumes undetected by the homophobic social order and return home before the rest of the city awoke. These late-hours also accommodated participants' work—both formal and informal—and life/family schedules; not all ballroom participants were homeless, rejected by their families, or involved in informal labor practices, with some even pursuing doctorate degrees, allowing participants engaged with some fraction of the social order—whether their job, their family, their education—separate from ballroom.

Producing a ball required other measures to abate detection of conflict with the social order. Balls relied heavily on the ability to rent affordable spaces from private vendors and property owners who were more than often heterosexual and concerned with maintaining a certain level of community propriety—"the state or quality of conforming to conventionally accepted standards of behavior or morals."[50] American cultural critic and historian Tavia Nyong'o points out that House fathers were often the ones responsible for securing ballroom venues, negotiating leases and contracts, and dealing with other "behind the scene roles;"[51] imitating traditional gender roles and expectations, such as men/fathers engage in the legal matters of the household. Eventually, in the middle to late eighties, balls began to frequent nightclubs such as Tracks NYC and the Paradise Garage in Greenwich village. These balls occurred at more normal hours, taking advantage of the ability to be more openly queer which the Village offered, but, because balls were not only spaces of alterity, black joy, and critical self-reflection, but also serious commercial endeavors, also with the aim of attracting a broader audience of LGBTQ folk. Today, balls endure despite the city's demise of gay nightlife in the nineties under Giuliani's "quality of life" policies.[52] While many venues were forced to close their doors—Danceteria, Tracks NYC, the Paradise Garage, Better Days, the Sound Factory Bar—ballroom's ability to co-opt any space in a simple fashion is what likely allowed ballroom to continue to thrive; a ball is not tied to a specific fixed spatial typology but is a practice of spatial organization. Like QPOCs who must constantly and productively adapt to forced-upon adverse condition, often creatively distorting these conditions towards a means of social change rather than buckle under them—joyous black laughter—ballroom reveals a different approach to architectural production. This form of architectural production is not predicated on fixed relations of programming and space—zoning, landmarking—but instead opportunistically transforms what is available into what is necessary.

Of the sites where balls were hosted, one in particular, the Imperial Elks Lodge, deserves

MAPPING OF PROMINENT SPACES OF QPOCs AND BALLROOM MEMBERS IN THE 1980s and 1990s, BY AUTHOR

CLUBS AND NIGHTLIFE
Paradise Garage
The Sound Factory Bar
The Roxy NYC
The Pyramid Club NYC
Tunnel Nightclub
Tracks NYC Nightclub
Better Days
Stonewall Inn

PARKS AND PUBLIC SPACES
Washington Square Park
Christopher Street Piers
Sheridan Square
Union Square Park

DRAG-BALL VENUES
Imperial Elks Lodge
Harlem YMCA
Marc Ballroom
Staircase Bar
Gay and Lesbian Community
Service Center
Rockland Palace Dance Hall *
Savoy Ballroom in Harlem *
Webster Hall *
Walhalla Hall *
Hamilton Lodge *

* Notable site of
early-era drag-balls

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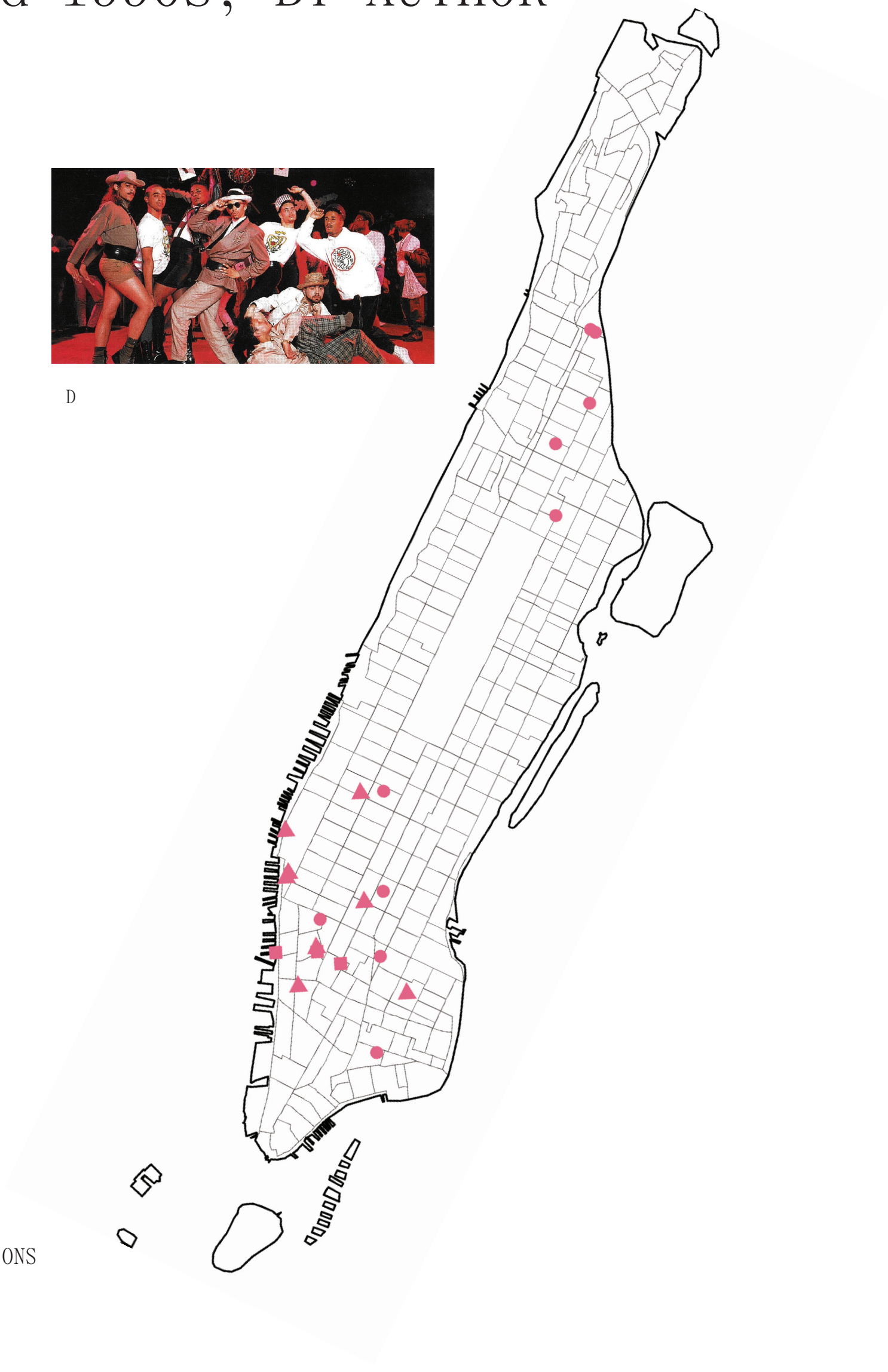

● BALLROOM VENUES AND LOCATIONS
■ PUBLIC SPACES AND PARKS
▲ CLUBS AND NIGHTLIFE

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special attention because of its intersection between QPOC spatial production and other histories of Black resistance and excellence. One Paris Dupree's legendary "Paris Is Burning" ball featured in Livingston's documentary was held at the Imperial Elks Lodge—also referred to as the Imperial Lodge of Elks and the Imperial Lodge No. 127—in Harlem at 160 West 129th Street. The building was constructed in 1924 and designed by Vertner Woodson Tandy, the first registered African-American architect in the state of New York.[53] His creation was home to the Harlem chapter of the Improved Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks of the World (IBPOEW), an African-American fraternal order that appropriated the all-white and all-male Benevolent Protective Order of the Elks (BPOE). The BPOE was a fraternal order for minstrel show performers known as "Jolly Corks" and founded by J.M. Norcross in 1868 "in a boarding house at 188 Elm Street on the northwest corner of what is now the intersection of Broome and Lafayette Streets."[54] This order modeled itself and its secret rituals from the Freemasons, which included strict racial and gender discrimination as outlined in Article VII of the BPOE constitution: "No person shall be accepted as a member of this Order unless he be a white male citizen of the United States of America, of sound mind and body, of good character, not under the age of Twenty-one years, and a believer in God."[55] These customs forbade B. F. Howard and Arthur J. Riggs, two African-American men, the latter born into slavery, admissions into the BPOE, both of whom had sought to obtain membership. Determined to create a fraternal organization for African Americans that paralleled the BPOE's sense of brotherhood, Riggs lifted a copy of their secretive rituals and used them to establish a black version of the Elks in Cincinnati in 1898.[56] Further, when Howard and Riggs had discovered that the BPOE's rituals were not copy-written, the pair "consulted the Register of Copyrights of the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. [and] to avoid the possibility of infringement, Riggs had the ritual copyrighted [with him] being the[ir] proprietor."[57] These actions resulted in a hostile relationship between the African-American appropriation of the Elks and the original Order:

The white Elks heard the rumor that the [Riggs] had "borrowed" an Elk ritual from a traveling [member] in a Pullman car and had set up an Afro-American Lodge in Cincinnati, and they were furious. The National Black Monitor gives an account which states: "Riggs was taken from the train on which he was serving as Pullman porter between Cincinnati and New Orleans, when it reached Birmingham, Alabama. He was threatened with lynching unless he told where he had secured the copy of the Elks' ritual. He agree[d] to bring back the ritual on his next trip; instead he changed places with another porter and never went on that trip again." In 1899, Arthur Riggs had to leave the area, moving to Springfield, Ohio, under an assumed name. Before leaving Cincinnati, Ohio, Arthur Riggs gave the ritual, all the papers and printed material pertaining to the Elks to B. F. Howard, and Covington Kentucky became the headquarters of the lodge.[58]

Despite these racial threats, the IBPOEW was officially chartered in 1899, an act that symbolically (re)claimed the authority Howard and Riggs had previously been denied by the BPOE.[59] Among the brothers of Harlem's chapter was W. E. B. Du Bois. Archived letters between the Imperial Lodge, No. 127 and Du Bois reflect that Du Bois had been an active member for at least nearly two decades, despite his teaching appointment at Atlanta University in Atlanta, Georgia.[60]

The Imperial Elks Lodge, No. 127 not only served as a home to the Harlem chapter of the IPOEW but was also where the first African-American led labor union affiliated with the American Federation of Labor, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, was organized and established in 1925.[61]

Black Elks allowed for the development of working-class solidarity outside the workplace and outside of traditional labor organizations. Cross-class alliances, male–female solidarity, racial unity, and a willingness to join ideologically mixed coalitions and to engage in multiple forms of struggle, especially militant mass mobilization, distinguish Elk labor activism from that of other fraternal orders during the 1930s and 1940s. Whereas in other multiclass organizations workers' goals were minimized, the 472 V. Green IBPOEW evolved into a multiclass fraternal order in which its working-class membership determined its primary objectives and the allocation of resources. In the years prior to World War I, the black Elks had experienced financial instability, internal schism, and legal attacks on their right to exist by the white Elks. However, they achieved internal unification, accommodation with the white Elks, and tremendous growth in the post-World War I context of black migration, urbanization, proletarianization, and labor upheaval.[62]

Thus, the Imperial Elk's Lodge is a site of historical Black excellence and resistance, though a predominantly masculine/male-centered form of Black excellence. This aspect of gender/masculinity increases an understanding of ballroom's practice of social alterity and critique. In *Paris*, viewers can catch glimpses of a taxidermy elk's head on the lacquered red balconies above the ball's runway, making visually apparent a legacy of Black male excellence within a temporal moment of QPOC occupation/co-option. However, rather than regard ballroom as Other than the site's legacy of Black male excellence, one should see this QPOC production of space as within this legacy, as, at the core of ballroom was the celebration of Black men, Black male (queer) joy.

"WHAT I LEARNED IN THE EIGHTIES": *PARIS IS BURNING* AND ITS IMAGE PRODUCTION

Jennie Livingston opens her seminal 1991 documentary, *Paris Is Burning*, with a black and white title card: "NEW YORK 1987." It is "a statement of time and place … presented matter-of-factly before any other *images* or even the film's [own] title."[63] Following this card is a minute-long city symphony of distant urban spaces across New York City at night—Times Square, Harlem, the Christopher Street Piers, the West Village—where Black and brown bodies are cluttered, chattering, dancing, or walking along littered streets.[64] Within this short urban portrait, which is largely focused on the city's lively street-night-life against a backdrop of urban blight, is a peculiar juxtaposition that foreshadows the film's poignant tone: a three-second shot of Times Square centered on a digital marquee that reads, "white supremacist church begins national conference … (emphasis added)."[65] A few seconds later, the camera pans down to reveal that the Black and brown men who were previously captured walking and chattering in the streets and on the piers are affectionately holding hands or embracing, revealing that these Black men are "not" what the audience would assume as the typical sort. Both moves covertly introduce the film's subject matter, bigotry and marginalization, and the film's subjects, Black gay men, though this will later grow to include queer people of color (QPOC) more broadly. The innuendos of these visual cues are made explicit by the film's first instance of interview commentary, in which a disembodied and unattributed voice speaks over continued images of Black gay affection and joy as well as the film's first onscreen depiction of transwomen of color:

I remember my dad used to say, "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 a male, and you're gay—You're gonna have a hard-fucking time." Then he said, "If you're gonna do this, you're gonna have to be stronger than you ever imagined."[66]

Within this cardinal minute of the film, Livingston establishes the socio-political *mise en scène* of New York City and the nation at-large in the late-eighties; a landscape still grappling with the social and economic effects of deindustrialization as well as continued racial and ethnic violence and oppression nearly two decades after the civil rights movement.[67] The film's effectiveness in communicating these complex and intersectional social struggles almost solely through images—the latter commentary only corroborates what was already visually laden—substantiates this disembodied voice's implied problematization of identity-as-image; the audience remains uninformed as to whether the disembodied voice belongs to one of the Black men simultaneously being depicted on-screen or not. The point *is*, is that it does not matter—to affect human understanding and behavior, or, akin to the early understandings of the axiom Ludwig Wittgenstien affords to pictures in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, "the proposition is a picture of reality."[68] The aim of Livingston's introduction is to convince the audience that the images before them *are* New York City in 1987: alive "with the sound of radios, chatter, buzzing neon, and taxi horns," immersed in "the city's primary olfactory signature," garbage, and with nighttime streets filled with jovial Black and brown people who are "part of communities, conversations, and kinships" and absent of whiteness.[69]

The film next abruptly cuts to footage of a drag queen, Pepper LaBeija, engulfed in a billowy golden ensemble of sequin and lamé walking up a Harlem street to the front doors of the Imperial Elk's Lodge. As the doors open, the film transitions to another title card, this time with the addition of red text, that introduces the film's title, "Paris Is Burning." Queer film critic Lucas Hilderbrand notes the intentionality of these editorial decisions:

These intersections, this struggle and tension between the "reality" of the street—presented in the opening shots—and the "fantasy" of the ballroom are articulated immediately afterwards through footage of Pepper Labeija walking across the threshold of the Imperial Elk's Lodge in Harlem and onto the floor at the "Paris Is Burning" ball. So precisely does this brief sequence crystallize the film's tension that the title appears on screen as an interjection between the opening location shot and Pepper's gold lamé entrance. There are no other opening credits, drawing the audience immediately into the film.[70]

Hilderbrand's attention to the film's editing is not only cinematographic, but also extremely architectural. The film's title frame—a rupture between Pepper and the film audience's existence within the "real" world of New York City's streets and their crossing into the "fantasy" world of the ballroom—is a metaphorical hinge between architecture and urbanism. Outside the walls of the Imperial Elks Lodge exists the complex, intersectional social tensions briefly introduced in the film's cold opening; inside the Lodge exists an intimate, tribal, and queer (in its most literal sense) spectacle of which the film's audience has yet to learn.

Paris most closely resembles the cinéma vérité—meaning "film truth"—style of documentary filmmaking. It is a style "which avoid[s] artificiality and artistic effect … generally made with simple equipment" that emerged in the 1960s in order to "shift documentaries from didactic voice-of-God presentations to more immediate and subjective portraits of the contemporary world."[71] Hilderbrand notes that historical framing is often absent within this style of documentary, and

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Paris similarly "refuse[s] to articulate a history by focusing on the present through documentation of events and interviews." In so doing, two effects occur. First, drag's comprehensive history, stemming back to the Elizabethan theatre, is disassociated from House-Ball culture, albeit despite a sprinkling of Dorian Corey's recountments of drag balls in the late-sixties; after all, Livingston is concerned with the production of images which must simultaneously be ahistorical constructions yet pastiches of historicity. Second, it purports a truth-telling in images, in which "the ball children's statements during interviews thus serve as the only explicit narration and primary source for context," veiling the reality that *Paris* is a compendium assembled together through editorial decisions. Accepting this mythology of photographic and cinematic media's "witnessing"—a similar mythology that occurs in eighties cable television—the film's plot can be divided into three major acts: life inside the world of ballroom, life outside the world of ballroom, and life post-ballroom's discovery/mainstreaming—each of which further pixelates into episodic narratives distinguished by their associative intertitles cards introducing major performers, cultural topics, or ballroom keywords. In the first-third of *Paris*, ballroom children and mothers converse with the film's interlocutor, Livingston herself, introducing three fundamental elements of House-Ball culture, beginning with the spectacle of ballroom—announced by its intertitle card "BALLS"—in which the reason and purpose of this subculture is made apparent, and ending with their associative queer-forms of kinship—announced by the intertitle card "HOUSE"—in which the film's subjects divulge personal testimonies of their own difficulties growing up Black, Latinx, homosexual, or transsexual, and their need for alternative families. Bridging these two elements—distinctly directed on their architectural scales (a ball*room*, a *House*)—is discussion, though truly serious, on the political, social, and cultural importance of and anxieties around identity appearance and performance, or, the role of the image. This bridge is made especially prominent by the film's double-address of the topic albeit a variance in architectural scale; first, concentrating on the subculture's creation and continued development of numerous performative identity archetypes—marked by the intertitle "CATEGORIES"—that ballroom children, mothers, and fathers compete, or walk in, as a means of establishing personal and tribal prestige. The performance of these identity archetypes are resituated within the broader socio-political urbanism of New York City—marked by the intertitle "REALNESS"—in which QPOC must perform specific identity archetypes in distinct spaces outside ballrooms and Houses to avoid physical and emotional violence and oppression.

By parsing this bridge into two—between realness in the ballroom and realness in the street—Livingston exposes a hinge between architecture and urbanism of this particular time and place: New York City in the eighties; New York City at its neoliberal turn. Inside the fabulous walls of the ballroom and houses (architecture), realness is the currency that purchases glory, fame, and status through self-reflexive distortions of reality—a performative fantasy—that seek social change. Outside those walls however, on New York's streets and within its urban spaces, laden with the complex social-political struggles introduced in Paris's first minute, realness was a strategy of resistance and survival. In his 1991 book, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, performance studies theorist Jose Esteban Muñoz rationalizes the use of assimilationist identity performance:

Instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere, this 'working on and against' is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change, while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance.[72]

Muñoz also expands on the use of the spectacle through performance to regain social agency:

... the act of performing and theatricalizing queerness in public takes on every multiplying significance ... The importance of such public and semipublic enactments of the hybrid self cannot be undervalued in relation to the formation of counterpublics that contest the hegemonic supremacy of majoritarian sphere. Spectacles such as those that Gomez presents offer the minoritarian subject a space to situate itself in history and thus seize social agency.[73]

DRAG HINGE: REALNESS BETWEEN ARCHITECTURE AND URBANISM

I understand the labor (and it is often, if not always, work) of making identity as a process that takes place at the point of collision of perspectives that some critics and theorists have understood as essentialist and constructivist. This collision is precisely the moment of negotiation when hybrid, racially predicated, and deviantly gendered identities arrive at representation. In doing so, a representational contract is broken; the queen and the colored come into perception and the social order receives a jolt that may reverberate loudly and widely, or in less dramatic, yet locally indispensable, ways.[74]

The concept of realness is first introduced—though, not explicitly stated as such—to *Paris's* audience through its use within the walls of ballroom performance. Realness serves as the barometer in which ballroom judges evaluate the degree to which a competitor convincingly embodies the archetypal traits of another gender, sex, or social class. These identity archetypes are referred to within the ballroom as a category—High Fashion Women's Sportswear, Executive Realness, Town and Country, Banji Boy/Girl—admitting some categories such as Miss Cheesecake/Luscious Body and Face that sentimentalize a walker's physical features. It is through convincing acts of realness, in which the performer's illusion of *being* another gender, sex, or social class is indistinguishable from the *real* thing, that ballroom's spectacle is achieved. Yet, the emphasis on realness is paradoxical; it is a legacy of the mid-century drag culture that Crystal Labeija revolted against. However, within ballroom's subculture, achieving realness is pivotal in deriving self-worth, notoriety/prestige, and community value. Drag's narrowness in the sixties limited what kinds of bodies/peoples could participate in drag performance as well as achieve professional success. As witnessed in Simon's *The Queen*, drag queens of color were required to adhere to a monolithic standard of European beauty that proved fundamentally disadvantaging. Similarly, the desire for *authentic* illusions in mid-century drag—where the audience *knows* the performer before them is biologically male but simultaneously *cannot know* this fact from the performer's visual appearance and mannerism—produced transphobic sentiments within drag culture:

So central was the fact of cross-*dressing that adherence to original biological sex was enforced for some drag performers; in the 1960s, for example, the 82 Club on the Lower East Side in New York fired Harlem-based black performer Angie Stardust for taking female hormones because management didn't want actual women performing; they wanted the wonder of men performing in drag.*[75]

At root of this transphobia is mid-century drag's politics of spectacle which required "a concrete inversion of life" and defaulted to a (hetero)normative understanding and coupling of biology and social relations, or, a gender-to-sex relationship.[76]

The images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream in which the unity of that life can no longer be recovered. Fragmented *views of reality regroup themselves into a new unity as a* separate pseudoworld *that can only be looked at. The specialization of images of the world evolves into a world of autonomized images where even the deceivers are deceived. The spectacle is a concrete inversion of life, an autonomous movement of the nonliving.*[77]

Like the image-culture analyzed by Debord, mid-century drag's image-production of a "real" gender-sex inversion is predicated on a faith in the existence of an authentic, or real, gender-to-sex relationship. Thus, drag's image-inversion, while truly radical in many ways, is also stable within homophobic and heteronormative understandings of biology and social relationships. The spectacle created from a realistic *crossing* between gender and sex relies on the simultaneous knowledge that both sex and gender remain properly in place in the "real" world, while only the image of this crossing is detached from social-life. The spectacle of the transsexual drag queen, then, does not divorce its image from a (hetero)normative coupling of biology and social relations and thus problematizes the static position sex-to-gender holds; for the transsexual drag queen, their gender-crossing is not solely a parody but also a serious endeavor. However, this does not suggest that drag performance is *always* problematic and absent of radical critique. It is a nuanced issue that queer-feminist theorist Judith Butler felt needed to be directly addressed in a revised preface to her 1990 *Gender Trouble*:

The discussion of drag that Gender Trouble *offers to explain the constructed and performative dimension of gender is not precisely an example of subversion. It would be a mistake to take it as the paradigm of subversive action or, indeed, as a model for political agency. The point is rather different. If one thinks that one sees a man dressed as a woman or a woman dressed as a man, then one takes the first term of each of those perceptions as the "reality" of gender: the gender that is introduced through the simile lacks "reality," and is taken to constitute an illusory appearance. In such perceptions in which an ostensible reality is coupled with an unreality, we think we know what the reality is, and take the secondary appearance of gender to be mere artifice, play, falsehood, and illusion. But what is the sense of "gender reality" that founds this perception in this way? Perhaps we think we know what the anatomy of the person is (sometimes we do not, and we certainly have not appreciated the variation that exists at the level of anatomical description). Or we derive that knowledge from the clothes that the person wears, or how the clothes are worn. This is naturalized knowledge, even though it is based on a series of cultural inferences, some of which are highly erroneous. Indeed, if we shift the example from drag to transsexuality, then it is no longer possible to derive a judgment about stable anatomy from the clothes that cover and articulate the body. That body may be preoperative, transitional, or postoperative; even "seeing" the body may not answer the question:* for what are the categories through which one sees? *The moment in which one's staid and usual cultural perceptions fail, when one cannot with surety read the body that one sees, is precisely the moment when one is no longer sure whether the body encountered is that of a man or a woman. The vacillation between the categories itself constitutes the experience of the body in question.*[78]

The limit of mid-century drag's spectacle, then, can be seen to parallel the architectural, political, and urban thinking that led to Battery Park City's redevelopment in the eighties, where the economic and environmental issues that underlaid the city and the nation's difficulties in the seventies were not structurally challenged and redeveloped, but imagined anew through imagistic spectacle. Like the drag queen's reliance on normative couplings between biology and social relations, Pelli's historical reference to ancient civilizations through his recycling of classical forms defaults on a specific Eurocentric framing of history in order to make a claim about Battery

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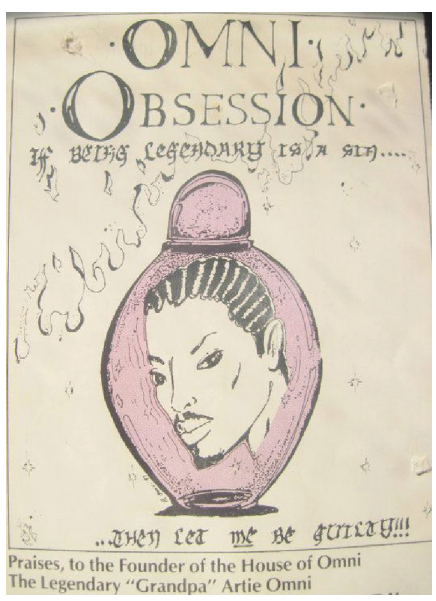

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Park City and the nation's emerging financial and political greatness. Postmodernism's larger aesthetic trend to remix cultural images—whether through formal or material references—similarly relies on stable categories, histories, and faiths that it then purports to subvert; a cunning double action.

The desire for realness within drag's spectacle is carried into the subculture of ballroom, although in a uniquely pluralistic manner. Whereas the understanding and imagination of realness in earlier drag could be described as monolithic, the creation of ballroom categories and its continuous incorporation of diverse identity archetypes—alternating between various masculine/feminine, privileged/non-privileged, traditional/bizarre cultural types—offers an intersectional understanding and realness of the QPOC subject. Simultaneously, the *practice* of realness—authentically walking/performing both offensive racial, cultural, and sexual stereotypes as well as the identity archetypes venerated by mainstream society—denaturalizes and trivializes the majoritarian structural homology between image and socio-cultural position, exposing the *always-already* constructed-ness of race, class, gender/sex, and sexuality.[79] In other words, ballroom's practice of realness calls out the normative assumption that there is an inherent link between *essence* and image as precisely that, an assumption:

DORIAN COREY: 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. That is just [the] pure thing. Black people have a hard time getting anywhere. 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 can look like one. And that is, like, a fulfillment. Your peers, your friends are telling you, "Oh, you'd make a wonderful executive!" (emphases added).[80]

This approach to "realness" pushes the term from an inert, normative qualifier—"the fact or quality of being real; reality, truth"—into speech and performative acts through which political contestation is manifested and in which the adjudication of what constitutes *realness* becomes a means of navigating complex and often conflicting social relationships.[81] In Butler's reading of *Paris* and the ballroom's production of realness, she writes, "'realness'... is a standard that is used to judge any given performance within the established categories. And yet what determines the effects of realness is the ability to compel belief, to produce the naturalized effect ... which no performance fully approximates."[82] In other words, "realness is not a tangible or specific category in itself but rather a slippery and self-contradictory ideal: Realness has been achieved when someone passes so effectively that it is no longer legible as 'realness.'"[83] *Paris'* audience gains this latter understanding through featured quarrel between a ball walker, David Xtravaganza, and a ball's MC, Junior LaBeija, in the film's second act, exposing that realness is not a fixed system but rather in constant arbitration:

JUNIOR LABEIJA: Now—I'll cut the music. Now, I said ... I said, "men's *garment."*
COMMENTARY: He looked *like he had on a man's fox coat.*
JUNIOR: Tell this child, "Where are the men's garments?"
DAVID XTRAVAGANZA: I paid for it, motherfucker—A man bought it! It buttons on the right side!
JUNIOR: The judges say ...
DAVID: It buttons on the right *side!*
COMMENTARY: Someone came up and told the MC...
DAVID: Are you *a judge? (to Junior LaBeija)*
COMMENTARY: ... that it was a woman's coat. I thought it was silly *to nitpick.*
AUDIENCE MEMBER: Oh they're shady! They're throwing shade at him—I can't believe this!
DORIAN COREY: Wait a minute—wait a minute—wait a minute! Wait a minute now. Let's not get loud. Now—David—David—David!
COMMENTARY: That's the one thing I find faulty with the balls—after they've laid down these little categories, then they try to become a stickler for exact interpretation. Merely a point to discredit the contestant. Like, in the Olympics, where the Russian judge brought to the fact that the American coach had stepped onto the floor, and that was a disqualification for the contestant. Just as picky as a ball.
{INTERTITLE: SHADE}
COMMENTARY: So the little flaws like that, that's because that's a part of shade—that's the idea—knock 'em out if you can! Get 'em anyway—hit 'em below the belt.[84]

This feud transitions to a minor episode within the film where methods of verbal play are introduced to the *Paris'* audience, in which this linguistic "art form of insult" adjudicates the definition and image of realness inside and outside the ballroom, a cultural rhetoric within ballroom known as "reading" and "throwing shade." Both are social mechanisms of policing other bodies and operate within varying degrees of playfulness and seriousness. To "read" someone is to "set them 'straight,' to put them in their place, or reveal a secret [or flaw] about someone in front of others."[85] "Throwing shade" is an indirect way of "reading," in which someone "ignore[s] a person altogether, even if the person is in immediate proximity" or only acknowledges that person through cattish mannerisms—rolling one's eyes, smacking or pressing one's lips, glaring, scoffing.[86] Both signifying acts are commonly misunderstood as trivial pettiness or aggression birthed out of personal insecurities or deep-seeded internalizations of homophobia, racism, or classism.[87] However, this black and queer verbal practice of insult and shaming, though malicious at times, is genuinely a strategy for marginalized subjects to (re)claim their political agency. Performance studies scholar E. Patrick Johnson explains that "shade has always been subversive," with "roots in slave culture:"[88]

The threat of being beaten or mutilated was always there if you were to look at a slave master directly in his eye, or if you were to sass, so African-Americans developed these covert ways of communication, which, over time, have morphed into the traditional ways that they interact with one another.[89]

Considering the fact the individuals who construct ballroom's subculture frequently occupied multiple marginalized subject positions—Black/Latinx, homosexual, transgender/femme, low-income/poverty, homeless, urban—it is easy to see why this element within African-American vernacular thrived; "shade was refined by some of the most marginalized people in American society ... each of whom had to find socially acceptable ways to communicate humor *and* aggression (emphasis added)."[90] Cultural rhetoric scholar Seth E. Davis makes similar claims regarding this speech act's survival and liberatory practice, referring to shade and reading as "fierce literacies." Davis argues that these literacies "refashion language, gender performance, sexual identity and appearance, often to subvert meaning, for fun, survival and to subversively communicate in the presence of interlopers."[91] Further, they challenge "static ideas of language and literacy ... in order to navigate a system that regularly oppresses, silences, and erases their knowledge(s), histories, and lived experiences."[92]

Dorian Corey explicitly states that this cultural rhetoric cannot *cross* into the (hetero)normative world during a "metasemantic discussion" with the film's interlocutor:[93]

You get in a smart crack and everyone laughs and "kikis" because you found a flaw and exaggerated it—then you've got a good "read" going ... If it is happening between the gay world and the straight world, it's not really a "read." It's more of an insult—a vicious slur fight ... But it's how [QPOCs] develop a sense of how "to read" ... [Heterosexuals] may call you "a faggot," or "a drag queen." You find something to call them. But then, when you are all of the same thing, *then you have to go to the fine point. In other words, if I'm a Black queen and you're a Black queen, we can't call each other "Black queens," 'cause we're both Black queens. That's not a "read." That's just a* fact. *So then we talk about your ridiculous shape, your saggy face, your tacky clothes ... Then reading became a developed form where it became "shade." "Shade" is, "I don't tell you you're ugly, but I don't* have *to tell you because* you know *you're ugly." And that's "shade."*[94]

It is an important discernment—whether verbal slurs are flung between majoritarian-minoritarian or minoritarian-minoritarian subjects pairs—because it discloses how language and its control over image switches between being oppressive

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and liberatory. It is in the context of ballroom's subculture, where realness is in continuous and pluralized adjudication, where Butler's liberatory accreditation to drag's performance—and here, drag can be broadened to include all of ballroom's performative categories—is most evident:

As much as drag creates a unified picture of "woman" (what its critics often oppose), it also reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency. *Indeed, part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are regularly assumed to be natural and necessary. In the place of the law of heterosexual coherence, we see sex and gender denaturalized by means of a performance which avows their distinctness and dramatizes the cultural mechanism of their fabricated unity.*[95]

The adoption of ostensibly derogatory and heteronormative stereotypes of sexuality, gender/sex, and race as a means to claim political agency is also present within mainstream queer culture. Mainstream queer culture in New York City in the eighties and nineties—criticized for its lack of intersectionality and assimilation to the market economy—relied on the deployment of queer-symbolic visibility in order to make itself as apparent as the epidermis of race and ethnicity. In a similar fashion to "throwing shade" and "reading" in ballroom's subculture, these queer-symbols included offensive, stereotypical caricatures purported by the (hetero)normative social order. In *Fierce Pleasures*, Nyong'o recounts his ethnographic study of Christopher Street in the early-nineties, which spurred feelings of unease and confusion when he encountered white gay men wearing t-shirts that read "Warning Brothers: White Man with Big Dick," heterosexual allies in "defensively-donned shirt[s] that read 'Filthy Hetero,'" and numerous window displays showcasing S/M leather gear and kink/fetish paraphernalia. These tropes, especially the latter, play directly into (hetero) normative social order's characterizations of Black men, queer spite, and sexual perversion.[96]

Although the practice of realness and its associative cultural rhetoric differs in its practice between majoritarian and minoritarian subjects, parallels can nonetheless be seen with New York City's development in the eighties. Similar to the constant adjudication of realness that exposes the always-already constructed-ness of race, class, gender/sex, and sexuality, so too did the zoning and landmarking practices of the eighties reveal the constant adjudication and always-already construction nature of history. Costonis points out that the *image* of the West Side as a collection of "solid, low-rise, low-key, family-type building[s]" —the erection of an East Side architectural species of the tower-plaza threatened to destroy this humble community image—is actually a false historical "construction" of the West Side:[97]

The city's zoning code was modified in 1961 to discourage squat buildings uniformly set out to the street line—until then, the prevalent building format. Desired instead were towers set back from the street by plazas, an alternative that would encourage architectural diversity and allow light and air to flood in at street level. The East Side real estate market was then booming, and developers demolished scores of the squat, pre-1961 corde buildings in the rush to build tower-plaza high rises. The established family unit, a disappearing species on the East Side, became a dwindling share of the market. Its place was taken by lawyers, advertising executives, teachers, and other young professionals who flocked to the efficient and one-bedroom apartments that filled the towers and who gamboled in the bars, boutiques, and quiche-and-Perrier ambience portrayed in Looking for Mr. Goodbar *and other films of the period. Snug in their comfortably shabby buildings and family-centered life on the other side of town, West Siders sniffed at their neighbors to the east. Over time, telltale signs of East Side-ism began to appear ... [These] fears of spreading contagion intensified with the 1979 unveiling of the tower-plaza building proposed for the All Angels' site.*[98]

What Costonis points out is that "the mansion battle demonstrates how, in a particular neighborhood's perception, difference in physical geometry can become linked with fear over imminent changes in social geometry."[99] Similar to the policing of identity that "reading" establishes, Board No. 7's move to landmark the Isaac L. Rice manor was a means to adjudicate what constitutes the "real" West Side. It is no wonder, then, that "virtually lost in the turmoil was a discussion of the architectural quality of the Rice Mansion."[100] At the core of this case for aesthetic coherence was a calculated construction of the West Side's history, which promised a phantasmatic rescue from the social anxieties plaguing New York City in the eighties.

Major zoning modifications might only occur approximately once in a generation, but always present is "the rule of exemption," in which the right to and use of property is in constant negotiation. At the heart of the dispute over Mr. Choi's delicatessen was the ability to pass, or, to present as "real." The residents of Park Avenue were not truly upset about the property's commercial zoning exemption, but rather the delicatessen's inability to perform their version of "Park Avenue" which revealed the exemption in a way that the florist store before it had not. Like a rival drag mother at the ball, Park Avenue's community-watch coalition of 120 "monitors" surveilled the delicatessen day and night for the slightest infringement of "realness." "The rules that regulate and legitimate realness," in this case, zoning and landmarking, "constitute the mechanism by which certain sanctioned fantasies, sanctioned imaginaries, are insidiously elevated as parameters of realness."[101] There is a comic parallel between drag's illusion of gender/sex and Park Avenue's beloved flower shop that served as a front for its "real" commercial practice, dealing heroine. If only the delicatessen had placed flowers in its window display rather than hideous bastard produce! Both situations "dramatize how buildings or neighborhoods function as blotters sopping up varied associations ... because their associations engage thought and feeling, both shaping and confirming the selfhood of those who fought against change."[102]

It is important to note that the practice and adjudication of realness within ballroom is heterotopic. Michel Foucault notes in his *The Order of Things*, that unlike utopias, heterotopias undermine language, shatter or tangle common names, and destroy in advance the syntaxes which constructs sentences and holds together words and things: "heterotopias ... desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences."[103] As such, the specific practice of realness referred to above exists only at architectural scales—within the ballroom, within the House, and within momentary occupations of public spaces like the Christopher Street Piers, Washington Square Park, within queer nightclubs like Better Days or Paradise Garage, or on the streets like those of Times Square at night in *Paris'* cold open. However, since the understanding of realness within ballroom and its constant, plural adjudication relies on realness' relationship with the outside (hetero)normative social order, *Paris* reintroduces and reworks realness at an urban scale, brandishing the hinge in which the QPOC body passes from architecture to urbanism.

DRAG HINGE: REALNESS AS AN URBAN GEOGRAPHY

Livingston artfully introduces the latter part of the first act's bridge, "REALNESS," with Cheryl Lynn's 1978 track, "Got to Be Real."[104] Lynn's ardent vocals *"what you find-ah, what you feel now, what you know-ah, to be real"* repeats over vignettes of urban spaces populated by the (hetero)normative social order—"working girls" approaching the front doors of their Midtown jobs, business executives eating lunch on-the-go in the Financial District, a well-dressed man and woman pondering over a city periodical in a fast-moving sea of shoulder-padded young urban professionals. It is a cinematographic move that suggests "realness" is not a subcultural *sui generis* but rather a ubiquitous condition of social life.

This series of urban vignettes end on a pair of Black individuals joyously chit-chatting outside a gilded window display; they are fittingly (professionally) dressed yet noticeably stand out from the surrounding mass of white urban professionals. Their sexualities are never explicitly stated but it is assumed that the Black pair, while racially different, are sexually homologous (heterosexual) to their white professional "peers." This assumption is substantiated by an immediate cut back into the ballroom and overlaid with interview commentary:

JUNIOR LABEIJA: When you're a [heterosexual] man and a [heterosexual] woman, you can do anything. You can—you can almost have sex on the streets if you want to! The most somebody's gonna say is, "Hey, get a hump for me," you know. But when you're gay, you monitor everything you do. You monitor how you look, how you dress, how you talk, how you act: "Do they see me? What do they think of me?"[105]

This transition reminds the film's audience that social, cultural, historical, and physical forms of discrimination and violence are not homogeneous experiences but intersectionally situated; although the pair of African Americans stand out for their surroundings, racially, they are still able to assimilate in some manner whether by their proper attire or alluded sexual orientations. The abrupt cut from sunny vignettes of Midtown and the Financial District to dimly lit interior of the ballroom visually reinforces the notion of a spatial difference in which realness operates. Though seemingly cheerful, bright, and normal, the juxtaposition is a reminder that ballroom's architectural heterotopia is a space to protect its members from that specific sunny urban exterior layered with hostile, homophobic, transphobic, racist, and classed behaviors.

These urban realities for the QPOC are succinctly made by Dorian's commentary that couples realness with "the outside." Voiced over footage of a young, petite, prepubescent-looking yet maturely dressed transwoman, Venus Xtravaganza—one of the two most-featured transwomen in the film, both of whom are decorated as highly "real"—brushing her blonde hair and putting on makeup, Dorian's words are underlaid with an eerie foreshadow: "When they're undetectable and they can walk out of that ballroom into the sunlight and onto the subway and get home, and still have all their clothes and no blood running off their bodies ... those are the femme realness queens ... and usually it's a category for young queens."[106] This cautioning is made legitimate later in the film when the audience learns of Venus' murder; her corpse was found under a bed in the Duchess Hotel four days after being strangled death.[107] It is a point in the film that exploits the serious reality transwomen of color experience to make it evident that "realness" is not solely a theoretical fantasy used to determine the value of ballroom performance, but "a necessary strategy and a creative response to the dangers of the convergent forms of race, class, gender, and sexual violence."[108]

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4 Cruz-Malavé, *Hard Tails*, 5.
5 Ibid, 55.
6 Ibid, 20.
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8 Photographer Larry Clark documents his own experience working as a teenage hustler in Times Square in his autobiographical book *Teenage Lust*. Ibid.
9 Cruz-Malavé, *Hard Tails*, 21.
10 Ibid.
11 "The Life and Times of Juanito Xtravaganza" is the title of chapter two of Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé's biography of Juan Rivera, *Hard Tails: Queer Latino Testimonio, Keith Haring, and Juanito Xtravaganza*
12 Although Venus Xtravaganza claims in the film that she no longer participates in sex work, she does allude continuing to work as an escort in the film. Her murder during the filming of *Paris Is Burning* was suspected to have been a result of a transphobic john who strangled her to death upon learning that Venus was a transwoman.
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20 Ibid, 53.
21 Ibid, 54.
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40 Ibid, 00:28:20---00:
41 Ibid, 00:29:30---00:30:01.
42 Hilderbrand, *Paris Is Burning*, 61.
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99 Ibid, 6.
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101 Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 89.
102 Costonis, *Icons and Aliens*, 17-8.
103 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 1966), xix.
104 For the full transition in the film, see: *Paris Is Burning*, 00:17:22--00:18:07.
105 *Paris Is Burning*.
106 *Paris Is Burning*.
107 It is widely believed that Venus, who worked as an escort, was murdered by a john who became violent after discovering Venus was a transwoman. Her murder has never been identified or brought to justice.
108 Marlon M. Bailey, "Gender/Racial Realness: Theorizing the Gender System in Ballroom Culture," *Feminist Studies 37* (2011): 380.

DRAG HINGE: REALNESS AS AN URBAN GEOGRAPHY

BY MALCOLM JOHN RIO (RIO ULTRAOMNI)

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IMAGES

COVER TOP TO BOTTOM
"Rachel or Angie Xtravaganza performing at a ball," from Angie Xtravaganza's Facebook page, https://www.facebook.com/AngieXtravaganza/photos/a.120804081254309 8/1484711714876005/?type=3.
"Legendary photo of Venus" from Venus Xtravaganza's Facebook page, https://www.facebook.com/SpoiledRichWhiteGirl/photos/a.221873131309924/221873134643257/?type=3.
Photo by John Simone, from Angie Xtravaganza's Facebook page, https://www.facebook.com/AngieXtravaganza/photos/a.1205216479492198/3213019642045195/?type=3.

INTERIOR
A "Children of the House of Xtravaganza getting ready for a ball on a New York City subway, 1986." From Rebel Circus, https://www.rebelcircus.com/blog/who-killed-venus-the-unsolved-murder-of-the-venus-xtravaganza/5/
B "Legendary photo of Venus" from Venus Xtravaganza's Facebook page, https://www.facebook.com/SpoiledRichWhiteGirl/photos/a.221873131309924/221873134643257/?type=3
C Title card from Paris Is Burning, *directed by Jennie Livingston (1991; Burbank, CA: Miramax Home Video).*
D "Voguers of the House of Xtravaganza photographed on the dance floor of Tracks, 1988." From Tracks NYC's Facebook page, https://www.facebook.com/233156703417671/photos/a.233165843416757/233167246749950/?type=3.
E Title card from Paris Is Burning, *directed by Jennie Livingston (1991; Burbank, CA: Miramax Home Video).*
F Title card from Paris Is Burning, *directed by Jennie Livingston (1991; Burbank, CA: Miramax Home Video).*
G Red, White & Blue Ball Flyer, by Karl Xtravaganza https://rbma.imgix.net/Tracks-RWB.392d4faf.jpg?auto=format&w=700.
H "Venus Xtravaganza walking the S&M Bad Girls vategory, held up by David Xtravaganza, ca. 1986." from V. Xtravaganza's Facebook page, https://www.facebook.com/SpoiledRichWhiteGirl/photos/a.221871624643408/236487076515196/?type=3
I "House of Omni ball at Tracks NYC, 1989." Photo courtesy of Danny Chilsom. From Tracks NYC's Facebook page, https://www.facebook.com/233156703417671/photos/a.233165843416757/233176506749024/?type=3.
J "Angie with a friend at the Xtravaganza Red, White & Blue Ball at Tracks." From Angie Xtravaganza's Facebook page, https://www.facebook.com/AngieXtravaganza/photos/a.120521511282566 8/2938851462795349/?type=3.
K Title card from Paris Is Burning, *directed by Jennie Livingston (1991; Burbank, CA: Miramax Home Video).*